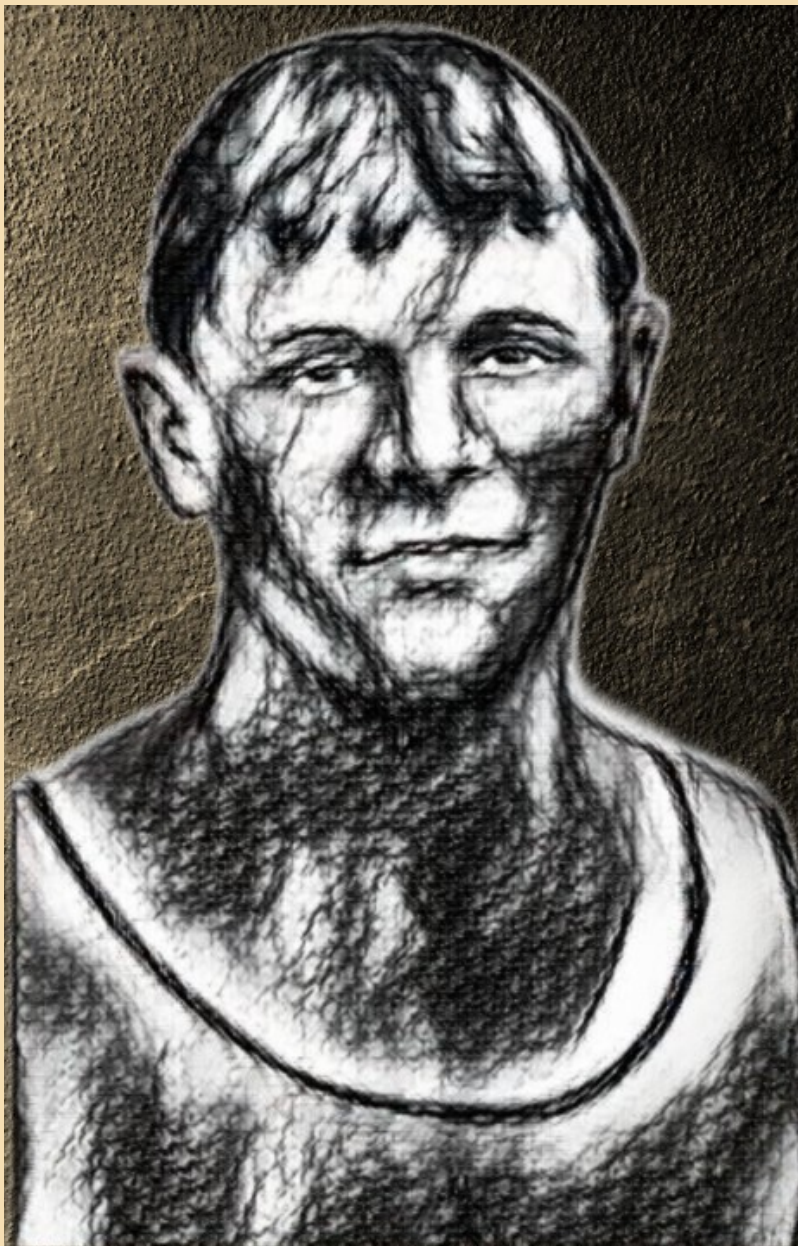


Ron Historyo's
Time Travel
to the

Wrestlers of the
Golden Age

Willie Collins



As you leave Manchester and travel North East you go up Oldham Road. When you get to the outer suburbs of Oldham the name changes to Manchester Road, such is the way of these things so that the reverse journey makes sense. That road and that journey has an irony about it as far as wrestling is concerned. You see Billy Robinson was born on Oldham Road in Ancoats. About halfway between Oldham and Manchester was Failsworth, home of Johnny Saint and then four miles away Oldham where Marty Jones was from. Three world class pro wrestlers.

In very late 1886 Willie Collins was born in Failsworth to Irish parents, Peter and Ann from Dublin. Peter Collins at the time was a coal miner but went on to find easier work in the Cotton Industry. It was the usual big family and in particular Willie had a slightly older brother Jimmy or James. The two of them were pugilists.

In 1908 Ogdens Cigarette cards ran a series of 50 Pugilists and

Wrestlers and a further 25 set in 1909. Both brothers were included. What seemed mainly a set of wrestlers to me up until now had me thinking, Why call them Pugilists as well? When I researched Willie Collins I finally now realize the answer, some guys just liked to fight.

Over the years the family moved up the Oldham Road out of Failsworth into Hollinwood which may or may not be part of Chadderton, but in any case Oldham. As fighters for the most part the Collins Boys were billed from Hollinwood or Oldham.

In 1902 at fifteen years of age Willie Collins won £25 wrestling at Oldham Coliseum. At that time he was seven stones and ten pounds. In 1903 he and brother Jimmy did Waverley Market. This time they boxed each other as 7 stones 2 pounds and 7stones 6 pounds champions of England.

By the time Willie was 21 he was about nine stones and Five Feet Five and a half and had won 22 boxing matches. In those days they could go as many as 20 rounds.

Boxing was not all one way traffic though, as in 1905 Collins was stopped in four rounds in Liverpool. In 1906 Collins was knocked out at the Grand Theatre in Manchester. But after 14 rounds it must have been nip and tuck at 8 stones 6 pounds

Also in 1906 Collins wrestled at the Borough grounds in Oldham and won 40 Guineas. It was a Championship cup and was defended through 1907 by draws with Bob Summerville, Harry Mort of Oldham and beating Frank Tongue. I believe the weight class was 125 pounds.

The weight was the reason why I missed Willie Collins out in my earlier pieces of research mainly about Alhambra Pioneers. Finally I noticed that Willie Collins was at the Alhambra in 1908. This was the year Lord Lonsdale offered the first trophy and in 1909 and 1910 was changed to championship belts. The problem for Willie was that they only did Heavy, Middle and Lightweight and it was a big ask to be going in with the likes of Jack Carroll, Peter Gotz and others at ten stones.

In January 1908 Willie Collins and Harry Mort fought for 37 minutes in cold weather in Lancashire to a draw with Collins still 125 lb Champion. To get a real big title it was time to look further afield.

From there on later in January 1908 William Collins entered the lightweights at the Alhambra. First round he beat George Boyle of Camberwell in thirty seconds.

There was also one change to the advertised origin of Collins and that was he was billed from New Springs. More about that later. In the second round Collins had a 25 minute tussle with P.C.Olsen of Newcastle and after a few warnings he was disqualified for using holds that were deemed to be too brutal to sit within the rules of the competition. One report seemed to be describing a head scissors.

Thus Willie Collins ended his Alhambra experience.

Collins had been much fancied and another Lancashire competitor right at the end of a great career had gone out in the first round. This was Tommy Jones of Wigan. Jones was known as Burgy Ben and really had been one of the very best, but the Alhambra Era came too late.

However this was where the New Springs connection came from as it is a place in or near Aspull. Burgy Ben was the trainer of Willie Collins who moved for a short time to Wigan for this big push in wrestling over boxing. I did not cover Tommy Jones in the pioneer series because one of his family had already done a great bio of his life. He is easy to find on the web, and ironically there is a picture of him with his pupil Collins that can be almost certainly dated 1908. As far as the smallest of wrestlers go, Willie Collins was trained by one of the very best.

By now there was a suspicion that Music Halls were not the best place for real hard fought wrestling. There was the glamour of Yukio Tani and Tarro Miyaki who were so busy and sought after in the Halls that it was hard to catch them for a real shoot.

By April there was an even bigger gathering than that at the Alhambra.

This was Henglers Circus and the show run by Apollo William Bankier who had also had a hand in the Alhambra shows. There were more competitors and at Henglers they did Featherweight. There were to be about 35 entries even at heavyweight from all over the world although I think maybe Bankier already knew the art of artistic license.

The under nine stone division had more than 40 competitors. Tommy Jones was still hanging in there and also a certain Billy Charnock. The gladiators were paraded before the audience and the very first bout on opening night was William Collins v G Britten of London. It took Willie just three minutes to prevail. The referee was Charlie Green.

The field was indeed tasty with Hirano of Japan and Harry Mort of Oldham eating up the rounds impressively. By May 1st the competition had been going over three weeks and Willie Collins even had to defeat his own brother Jimmy whilst Hirano and Mort also looked strong.

Finally Hirano went down to Collins and after one month Willie had won Nine and lost none and Mort was undefeated on eight. Jimmy Collins won seven out of eight and Hirano had lost two.

Ultimately the 8th of May came and Collins and Mort were to meet in the final for £50 and seeing as the competition had been the biggest ever and open to all the world, the title would be Featherweight Champion of the world.

There is a famous sketch by F Matania depicting the match and illustrating the atmosphere in those surroundings showing the two wrestlers and referee Charlie Green and possibly Bankier or another patron spectating. Mort and Collins had met many times in the fields and often drew. Indeed in February 1907 they had met at the Borough grounds Oldham and fought no score over one hour and forty minutes. Collins as champion retained his Forty Guineas Challenge Cup. This time it was Collins, at the peak of his powers after his

time in New Springs under Tommy Jones. Alec Bain declared Collins to be the most scientific wrestler he had ever seen. Oldham had a hero and Mort also of Oldham second, even Jimmy Collins placed third in the rankings.

Going one down it took Collins about forty minutes to win 2-1. As a wrestler that was to be William Collins's moment of great glory. You would wonder at the reasoning but it was hard to find him ever wrestling after that. In 1909 back residing in Hollinwood, he was on at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, hard work going fifteen rounds boxing with Bob Kendrick and losing on points. Still young Collins was scarce in the newspapers and yet in 1914 I found him in a twenty round fight at the Empire, Barnsley boxing with Charlie Hardcastle for £50. This time he was knocked stone cold after four rounds.

Thus far I think we must take our hat off to a great wrestler and celebrate this son of Oldham. I am forced to take at face value all that I have written and from here on I cannot give you any more facts. Like Joe and Jack Carroll I cannot be sure what became of Willie Collins and I have no wish to besmirch his great achievements and place in history.

I have some more to tell you about another possible two William Collins's of Oldham that may or may not be our man. You see after Willie had been born in 1886/87 I had no problem finding him on that Oldham/Manchester Road area with his family in 1891 and 1901 and the family were still there in 1911, but not William. So he seems to be missing on the 1911 census and there is that gap 1909-1914 in the papers following his pugilism. What I did find in 1911 was a prison register with a William Collins of Oldham of the same age persistently offending, Shop breaking, larceny, receiving stolen property and disorderly, police assault, drunkenness and sleeping out 18 times in Oldham district and imprisoned on and off for at least a total of two years in the period late 1909-1914.

After that I don't know and we also had the first world war. This could be the story of another William Collins. Going back though to Oldham in 1891 and 1901 I don't seem to be able to find this second William Collins. I just can't prove anything one way or the other.

And also in 1939 I have another scene on the main Road in Hollinwood. Number 117 Manchester Road. What looks like to me a mixture of Terraced houses and shops we have a Fruitier, a Shoemaker, a Newsagent and in between the last two a Beer House with the Licensee a William Collins born 8th December 1886 living with his wife Mary.

Could that be my man? Looks a strong bet, but on Heritage we have a history of family members coming on to tell us more as in the case of Lauritz Neilson. So just maybe I have three William Collins of Oldham all about the same age or maybe two or maybe just the one. Will we ever know?

At least we know about William Bankier and his Henglers Circus and the Panache that he brought to wrestling and continued to bring for another forty years, doing more than most to build it in the North West. A man who had the Savvy to come North and use the great talent that was evident in Lancashire. Not quite the wrestling we know today or even in the Golden Age but it did Blaze the Trail.

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