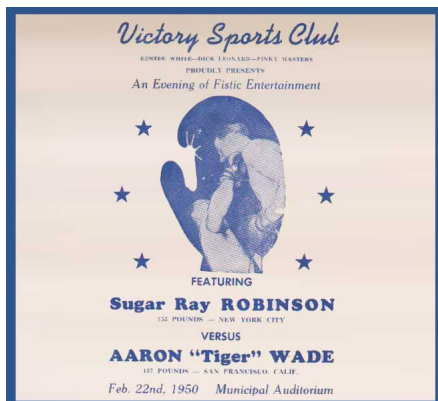


## Battle Hymn - Part 7: Sugar On The Sidewalk

Written by Springs Toledo

Wednesday, 09 April 2014 19:55

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Chuck Burroughs' sixty years in the Peoria, Illinois boxing scene began in the crowded backseat of Jack Beaty's reo. A Golden Gloves champion who later became a referee, ring announcer, corner man, journalist, author, and local historian, Burroughs kept tabs on his old teammates long after their fighting days ended. When he died, several of his scrapbooks were donated to the Peoria Public Library. I tracked them down, hoping to unearth more about the Little Tiger. Burroughs didn't disappoint.

He had chronicled Peoria's Golden Gloves history and devoted a long paragraph to "Peoria's first Negro Golden Glove Champ" Aaron Wade. There is a curious scrap of information midway through it that says Wade was "chief sparring partner for Sugar Ray when he was welterweight champ." Robinson, of course, was a Harlemit. I knew Wade had been living in New York since 1945. After the embarrassing loss to Wylie Burns in 1947, Wade had no income and one marketable skill; Burroughs' detail shines a light on where he wandered off to after that loss.

Robinson was scheduled to face Steve Belloise on December 9, 1948. His workouts were held at the Uptown Gymnasium at 252 W. 116<sup>th</sup> Street and Wade was a sparring partner. On the morning of the fight, national newspapers announced that the bout was cancelled "due to an injury Robinson is reported to have suffered in training." The write-ups were heavy on details, but neither the Belloise camp nor the boxing beat was buying it.

Already lauded as perhaps "the greatest boxer in history," Robinson was also despised by many insiders for what they saw as imperiousness. He had a history of mistreating sparring partners. He ran out on contracts. He postponed bouts. The Belloise bout had already been postponed from its original date and ticket sales were lagging when Robinson's injury was announced. The event, said the *New York Herald-Tribune*, cost \$40,000 though "less than \$15,000 was in the till." It was suspicious enough to force a public explanation from the champion: "It happened in the last minute of my three-round workout with Tiger Wade here on Monday," Robinson said. "Wade's a 170-pounder. He hit me with a right uppercut down here. I felt like he stabbed me

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with a knife.”

Doctors were marched out to reassure a doubting press that Robinson had indeed suffered a separation between the sixth and seventh ribs. Reporters were invited to feel the egg-sized lump under his heart for further proof. Many did, and the fact of his injury had to be accepted. Given the fact that the sparring partner who did it was a once-feared puncher, Robinson's explanation of how he was injured was likewise accepted.

But Robinson was lying.

Two years ago, boxing historian J.J. Johnston told me about a rumor he had heard. The rumor said that the Little Tiger had once knocked down Robinson outside of a Boston gym. I spent weeks sifting for more leads only to find that the past had pulled the shade. I filed the rumor away. About a month ago I was flipping through pages of Burroughs' Peoria scrapbook and my eyes darted to a glittering sentence: *“Whipped Sugar Ray in a street fight over some money Sugar owed him.”* Now that's independent corroboration, which makes a rumor more than a rumor. However, it still wasn't enough to justify publishing it—Robinson's name is like thunder in the boxing world, even today. I needed confirmation, and found it on microfilm at the Boston Public Library.

*The Boston Post* folded in 1956. Its circulation was in a free-fall in the forties, though it still had at least one shoe-leather reporter in Gerry Hern. As news of Robinson's so-called sparring injury and the fight cancellation hit the stands, Hern was turning up primary sources. One of them was unnamed but was almost certainly Little Tiger Wade, and Wade had a tale to tell.

“There was nothing accidental about Robinson's rib separation,” Hern revealed in an article published Friday, December 10, 1948. “It was the result of trying to shave the overhead a little bit, his own personal overhead, for the fight.” Here's what happened: Robinson and Wade sparred the previous Tuesday at the Uptown Gymnasium. Robinson, feeling the pinch of the lagging ticket sales for his fight Thursday, told Wade that he would have to accept less money than promised. Wade objected at first, then relented. “What can I do about it,” he said. “You're the boss. I've got to take it.”

Wade left the gym, but changed his mind and waited for the champion on the sidewalk. When

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Robinson came out, Wade confronted him. “I want all the dough or none,” he said. “I’m just a punk in this business but I want my money.” Robinson, said Hern, starting telling “his broken-down sparring partner that he would be lucky to get anything—but he didn’t finish. Wade fired his Sunday punch that knocked Robinson to the sidewalk and then gave him a brisk going-over.”

The spectacle of a member of Murderers’ Row finally closing the distance on Robinson and punishing him is startling. Is it poetic justice? Robinson later wrote an article for *Ebony* magazine defending his business acumen. “A broke fighter is a pitiful sight,” he said. “I’ve seen too many of them not to have learned a lesson or two. Great boxing skill is no sure guarantee that a fighter won’t end up hungry and raggedy. Most fighters end up broke.” Then he offered a little advice. “A fighter these days must express himself, must speak up when he thinks he’s being shoved around.”

It could be said that Wade ‘expressed himself’ on behalf of many; on behalf of many on Murderers’ Row.

The pair would have another ill-fated encounter in February 1950. Robinson was scheduled for a main event in Savannah, Georgia, when his scheduled opponent got shot in New Orleans. The local promoter, Buster White, was desperate to find a substitute; a black substitute, to be precise, because southern law prohibited fair fights between the races. Robinson’s manager remembered that Aaron Wade always needed a buck. For all intents and purposes, Wade had been retired for 793 days; he needed a few bucks.

The doors to the Municipal Auditorium opened at 8:30pm on February 15. “Ladies and gentleman, tonight you will see one of the greatest champions of all time,” the program said. “Robinson could easily become a triple champion if given the opportunity to fight for the middleweight and light-heavyweight titles.” Two thousand black and white citizens streamed in by separate entrances. The blacks were seated in the balcony, the whites around the ring. During the main event, they were booing together.

“Ray battered his stocky, keg-like foe savagely,” said the *Savannah Morning News*. “Mostly he put on a beautiful combination of foot-work and body weaving which left the Tiger shadow boxing.” Robinson’s “favorite stunt” was to grab the rope with his right glove and leave his left free to “tantalize and punish Wade by smearing that hand all over the Tiger’s face and body.” It was an artistic display. It seemed a little

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*too*

artistic. Wade fell five times in the second round. The first time seemed more like a slip. The second time saw him “dumped on his rear end through the ropes.” The third time Wade went down, “it looked for certain that the glove missed Wade’s face altogether and caught him in the shoulder instead. At any rate, he went down again.”

The crowd was wild between the second and third round, more “at Wade’s taste for canvas than in appreciation for Ray’s aptitude.” Before the bell, Robinson stood up and gestured that he would bring the fiasco to a conclusion. When the third round began, he set out to do so and, reads the article, “Wade seemed willing to cooperate.”

The *Savannah Evening Press* was also suspicious. “The Tiger—let’s call him Aaron—,” it said, “began hitting the canvas for apparently no reason at all. As Robinson moved within firing range the husky Wade repeatedly fell to the canvas.” Waldo Spence, sports editor for the *Press*, got right to the point: “Robinson never during the evening hit Wade with a solid punch.”

Years later, Wade privately confirmed what many thought they saw that night. He told his son he had taken a dive. When Alan told me, a shadow crossed my mind. I had to ask “—did Robinson know?” It turns out that he had asked his father that very question. His father shook his head. “Robinson had nothing to do with it.”

“Who approached your father?” I asked Alan. “It was the promoters,” he said. “They told him to go down in three rounds for a few hundred dollars.”

Alan had one other detail he could recall. Wade, he said, had asked the promoters if he could go “five or six rounds.” It was, I suppose, an attempt to salvage whatever scrap of pride he had left. But they turned him down. “Three,” they said.

I found it a little sad.

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“Why I’m the Bad Boy of Boxing,” by Sugar Ray Robinson (*Ebony*, November 1950); *Savannah Morning News*  
2/22, 23/50;  
*New York Times*  
2/23/50;  
*Savannah Evening Press*,  
2/23/1950;  
*Behind the Moss Curtain*  
by Murray Silver (2002), pp. 238-239.

Special thanks to J.J. Johnston.

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### **Radam G says:**

I knew it! And I always have known it. The Sugarman was superb. But a lot of pugs didn't do their best against him, because they were in on dat fix.

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I salutes super bad TSS Scribe S-To again. He's such a great investigative pug journalist that he could tell you what a long-gone yesteryear pug ate a few hours before the bout. Holla!