

introduction

Out of the black, into the blue

IT WAS MIDNIGHT when eighteen-year-old Archie Moore jumped off a freight train at Poplar Bluff, Missouri. He ran four blocks to catch a truck that was to bring him back to Civilian Conservation Corps camp 3760. It was the summer of 1935 and the CCC, which provided work for underprivileged young men, was one of Roosevelt's most popular Depression era programs.

"I missed the truck," recalled Moore. "I saw its taillight disappear over a hill." The camp was located ten miles northwest from the station and he had to walk those miles in pitch darkness. "There were no lights, no traffic, no moon or stars. When I hit a loose gravel stretch five miles out, I welcomed the noisy crunch of my shoes," he said. "Then I became aware of other steps, say a hundred yards ahead." Moore stopped, thinking it was an animal, but the steps stopped too, only to resume when he did. This went on for a while and Moore realized someone was playing with him. Then "a wild, weird laugh" pierced the darkness and whoever it was struck a match and lit a cigarette. Moore, by then thoroughly unnerved, considered going after him. "He began walking again and soon the sounds died away," he said. "I plodded on."

Images from that experience flickered in his subconscious—the disappearing taillight, the long dark road, the mocking laugh. “The details never vary,” he said. “I have that dream so often because I associate it with my life.”

Later that summer, he was plucked from a crowd at a prize fight to answer a challenge from the ring. He had to borrow boxing shoes and fought without a protective cup, but scored a knockout in the second round and was carried around on the shoulders of friends from the CCC camp. Despite a folkloric debut, he soon joined the ranks of poverty-stricken journeymen whose complexion barred them from big money and the championships. He became a master strategist with a punch that could empty shoes and leave eyebrows dangling in midair, but it didn’t matter; he was a nomad with no place to rest his head, a desperado willing to face anyone, anywhere, to scratch out a living.

He wasn’t alone. Eight fighters traveled that long dark road with him and they were just as black and at least as desperate as he was. He met them eighteen times between 1941 and 1950. The first of them was the dreaded Eddie Booker who fought him to a draw twice, stopped him once, and was forced into retirement with an eye injury. The last was a southpaw calling himself Bert Lytell, who proved to be Moore’s equal at the Sports Arena in Toledo before he was blackballed by corrupt managers. Crowded between them were Charley Burley, Lloyd Marshall, Holman Williams, Cocoa Kid, Jack Chase, and Aaron “Little Tiger” Wade.

When they weren’t going after Moore, they went after each other—sixty-two times. It was a frenzy, a free-for-all, a battle royal from the bad old days. In one ten-month span, Wade defeated Cocoa Kid but was himself defeated by Burley, Williams, and twice by Chase, who lost a chess match to Cocoa Kid and a thriller to Marshall after getting knocked out and then stopped by Burley and losing four in a row to Williams, who was defeated by Booker and twice by Marshall, but fought Cocoa Kid to a draw in the eleventh of what would be a thirteen-fight feud.

THE RING’s top ten was teeming with them in the 1940s. In the first six issues of 1943, six appeared together. Despite that and Jim Murray’s observation that they “put on better fights in tank towns than champions did in Yankee Stadium” they were subsisting on what seemed like coins tossed by local promoters.

“There’s a common feeling between all fighters, especially between those who fight one another,” Moore said. “It’s a common sympathy, unorganized.” As scar tissue expanded exponentially around their eyes, several of them staged a wordless protest, what Barney Nagler called “a gesture of contempt for others less capable who were getting all the good breaks.” Burley, Williams, and Marshall joined Moore and grew “a wisp of an imperial,” a goatee, to separate themselves as they pursued lights disappearing over the next hill.

“I was never going to get a shot at the title. I was never going to be a champion, except in my heart,” Moore said in despair. “That voice was going to have the last laugh.”

That voice would have the last laugh for the eight who tried him—by Christmastime 1951, all of them had melted back into obscurity. But Moore fought on. Seventeen years and one hundred seventy fights into his career, his opportunity came. It was Christmastime 1952, and at thirty-six, he dominated the light heavyweight champion—a well-connected white man—over fifteen rounds. When they announced Moore the winner, he refused to celebrate. “There’s nothing to get excited about,” he told his corner men. “I could’ve won this thing twelve years ago if I’d had the chance.”

Moore’s reign remains the longest in the division’s history and with a tally of at least one hundred and thirty-two knockouts, he holds a record that will never be broken. He may also have been the most sentimental champion we’ve ever encountered. He told columnists and interviewers again and again about those “black-dark miles” behind him and his eyes would get misty when he did. He kept the imperial as a reminder. When a writer mistook it as a symbol for his fondness for bebop jazz, he scoffed—“He’s so wrong he ain’t funny. It means something to me.”

“I’m thinking about some guys most of the TV fans never heard of. Maybe you never heard of them either. These fellows are the champions that should have been but weren’t,” he said in 1956. “I consider myself a standard-bearer for the underprivileged fighters who never got a chance.”

He began mentioning their names in interviews as if his singular achievement was a shared one. When reporters stuck a microphone in his face and brought up his legendary stand against Rocky Marciano to boost circulation, Moore wouldn’t always oblige. *Burley*, he said. *Booker*.

He and they were known as “the killing row,” he said. Budd Schulberg was listening. “I went with Moore all the way back to the California days when he was in there with names unknown to the East but very rugged characters,” he wrote in *Esquire* in 1962. “That murderer’s row of Negro middleweights carefully avoided by the titleholders.” Jim Murray was listening too. “The most exclusive men’s club the ring has ever known,” he wrote in 1964. “So good they had to have a tournament of their own.”

The members of this club varied from writer to writer and in Moore’s own mind at different times. Elmer “Violent” Ray, Curtis “Hatchetman” Sheppard, Jimmy Bivins, and Ezzard Charles got mentions; as have Oakland Billy Smith, Joe Carter, and Charley “Doc” Williams. In fact, Schulberg’s “murderer’s row” would not become a proper noun popularly consumed until 2002, when Harry Otty resurrected the term to include in the title of his biography about Charley Burley. Otty used it as a catchall for Burley’s best rivals, though he stopped short of fixing the ranks.

What exactly is Murderers’ Row? We can continue on where Otty left off and conceptualize the term with some finality.

Answering the question begins and ends, appropriately, with Archie Moore, who named names and gave us a decade to sift through. Facing Moore was a rite of passage, as was facing one another, several times, in and around the middleweight division during the 1940s. They fought on even terms or better against Moore and/or Burley, the first among them, and though none of them ever got a shot at a world title, they defeated a dozen future and former champions from featherweight to heavyweight no less than seventeen times.

The eight contenders spotlighted in this book emerge like fingers opening out of fists. They are identifiable by their records, which mirror and at times exceed the first half of Moore’s career, and in AP fight reports, though not much else can be gleaned from black and white. Who were they? Where did they come from, what kind of hardship and deprivation produced them? What happened in their lives after such ill-fated and especially brutal boxing careers?

Murderers’ Row has long been a place of secrets. Myths, mystery, and misinformation litter the miles separating us from them. Consider me

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something of a private investigator inspired by the memories of Archie Moore and hired by ghosts.

So jump off the train and leave that cell phone behind. No time for chattering.

Hear that? Those are footsteps, coming to meet us, out of the darkness. And we've got miles to go.

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