



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Harry Wills collection

1922-1960

Sc MG 191

Summary

Creator: Wills, Harry, 1892-1958

Title: Harry Wills collection

Date: 1922-1960

Size: 2 folders

Source: gift, Vaughan, Lillian, 05/20/1981

Abstract: Professional boxer, and leading heavyweight contender in the 1920's. Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Harry Wills began his boxing career in 1911. He is credited with winning 475 out of 480 bouts, scoring 31 knockouts. At the height of his career in 1920, Wills was the number one heavyweight contender. He was denied the opportunity to challenge Jack Dempsey who had won the heavyweight crown in 1909 as Dempsey refused to fight blacks. Wills, after fighting the same black fighters repeatedly, went to Panama, where race was not a factor. On his return to the United States in 1920, as number one contender, Dempsey still refused him a match. In 1924, the Dempsey-Tunney match was held in Philadelphia because Dempsey was legally bound to fight Wills in New York State. Although Wills was reportedly paid \$50,000 for the forfeit, the Dempsey-Tunney fight proceeds, the largest purse in boxing history at that time, equalled almost two million dollars. Wills' biggest fights were with Luis Firpo at Boyles Thirty Acres, New Jersey in Sept. 1924, and with Charley Weinert, at the Polo Grounds in New York City in 1925. Wills also travelled to Europe--France, Poland and Germany, giving exhibition bouts in Berlin and Karlsbad. After retiring from boxing in 1934, Wills engaged in the real estate business, acquiring holdings including an apartment building in New York City and estates in upstate New York and Dinwoodie County, Virginia. Papers relating to Harry Wills, including photographs, passports, correspondence, clippings, a program of his fight with Luis Firpo in 1924, poster, and two volumes of the Everlast Boxing Record, 1922 and 1925, listing Wills' major matches.

Access: Advance notice required.

Preferred citation: Harry Wills collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Creator History

Professional boxer, and leading heavyweight contender in the 1920's. Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Harry Wills began his boxing career in 1911. He is credited with winning 475 out of 480 bouts, scoring 31 knockouts. At the height of his career in 1920, Wills was the number one heavyweight contender. He was denied the opportunity to challenge Jack Dempsey who had won the heavyweight crown in 1909 as Dempsey refused to fight blacks. Wills, after fighting the same black fighters repeatedly, went to Panama, where race was not a factor. On his return to the United States in 1920, as number one contender, Dempsey still refused him a match. In 1924, the Dempsey-Tunney match was held in Philadelphia because Dempsey was legally bound to fight Wills in New York State. Although Wills was reportedly paid \$50,000 for the forfeit, the Dempsey-Tunney fight proceeds, the largest purse in boxing history at that time, equalled almost two million dollars. Wills' biggest fights were with Luis Firpo at Boyles Thirty Acres, New Jersey in Sept. 1924, and with Charley Weinert, at the Polo Grounds in New York City in 1925. Wills also travelled to Europe--France, Poland and Germany, giving exhibition bouts in Berlin and Karlsbad. After retiring from boxing in 1934, Wills engaged in the real estate business, acquiring holdings including an apartment building in New York City and estates in upstate New York and Dinwoodie County, Virginia.

Scope and Content Note

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Key Terms

Subjects

African American athletes -- Biography
African American boxers
African Americans -- Sports -- United States
African Americans in business
Boxers (Sports) -- United States
Boxing -- United States
Boxing -- United States -- Matches
Businessmen -- New York (State) -- New York
Discrimination in sports -- United States
Race discrimination -- United States

Titles

Schomburg NEH Automated Access to Special Collections Project

Names

Wills, Harry, 1892-1958
Dempsey, Jack, 1895-
Wills, Harry (Harry Coleman), 1892-1958