Book Review

Smith, Toby. *Crazy Fourth: How Jack Johnson Kept His Heavyweight Title and Put Las Vegas, New Mexico, on the Map*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020. 200 pgs. $24.95

Reviewed by Dr. Daniel Taradish

For many native New Mexicans (including the author of this review), one of the most amusing yet puzzling things to explain to people outside of the southwest and western United States is exactly what New Mexico is and is not. Though the image has shifted somewhat in recent years with the success of television shows like *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, New Mexico has struggled with an identity crisis even before statehood in 1912 that continues to the present day. From the violence and lawlessness wrought by Billy the Kid during the Lincoln County War in the late 1870s and early 1880s, to my own experiences having to explain to people in the east that no, New Mexico is no longer part of Mexico, and yes, you can drink the water, the state and its people have a long history of asserting their identity to the rest of the United States, with varying degrees of success.

It is this push for identity and recognition that makes Toby Smith’s *Crazy Fourth* such an interesting, informative, and amusing work. Set against the backdrop of then heavyweight champion’s Jack Johnson’s 1912 title defense against “Fireman” Jim Flynn, *Crazy* *Fourth* chronicles the saga of how this small New Mexico town was able to successfully secure and stage a contest for the heavyweight championship of the world. Smith’s primary source research, which includes newspapers from the **Albuquerque** **Evening Herald** to the African American owned and operated **Chicago Defender** to the world-renowned **New York Times** to the **Shreveport News** offer the reader a glimpse into the phenomenon that Johnson created as the first black heavyweight champion in American history. The reader is often given a window into the intense, often times rabid, fascination that much of white America had with finding a white fighter who had even the slightest hope of beating Johnson and restoring glory and honor to the white race. When Flynn agreed to the fight, only half the problem was solved. Where would this resurrection of white American manhood take place? Why, Las Vegas, New Mexico, of course. So begins Toby Smith’s retelling of the wild, improbable, and often bizarre saga of how this little town that had once been frequented by outlaws like Jesse James, Doc Holliday and the colorfully named “Handsome Harry the Dancehall Rustler” found itself hosting a racially charged boxing match for the heavyweight championship of the world.

Some of the most enjoyable and illustrative components of Smith’s research come in his descriptions of the citizens and civic leaders of Las Vegas as they attempted to not only prepare the town for the flood of outsiders who promoters believed were sure to flood the city (they did not) but also to craft an image of themselves that was distinct from the lawlessness and violence that Americans from other parts of the country still assumed were part of daily New Mexican existence. As Smith writes, Las Vegas sought to recreate itself from the bottom up, leaving no stone unturned. Though Mayor Robert Taupert’s order to crack down on price gouging hotels was the most publicized declaration of law and order, it was by no means his last. Card sharks, hustlers, and thieves of all stripes found themselves closely monitored, harassed and jailed by the Las Vegas police, while idlers, “[V]agrants, drunks, and hobos were either jailed or encouraged to leave the city.” City officials not only punished litterers and those who kept unclean stables, but they even made it their mission to clean every alleyway and to pull and remove as many weeds and nuisance grasses from the city streets as possible. Even houses of gambling and prostitution were sacrificed on the altar of civic respectability. Gambling dens were ordered closed until after the match, while information on the location of brothels was kept as secret as possible. Las Vegas had exchanged the wild west for common decency. At least on the surface

Smith’s presentation of the various schemes, machinations and questionable deals that brought the heavyweight championship of the world to a tiny town between Albuquerque and Denver is effective because of the readily accessible nature of his research and the narratives that give it life. For those interested in New Mexico history, it offers a glimpse into the daily lives, politics and powerbroking that defined New Mexico in the earliest days of statehood. For fans of boxing history, Smith has provided rich insight and access into the trials and tribulations that dogged fighters, managers, and promoters as they struggled to not only arrange and stage professional prizefights, but also to lend an air of legitimacy and respectability to the sport while attempting to distance itself from its historically unsavory reputation. For those interested in studying Johnson’s life and career, we see a champion who was just as physically dominant, confident, self-assured, friendly, and at ease in the bucolic mesas and mountains of New Mexico as he was in the high-profile metropolitan cities of New York, Chicago or Paris.

In the end, the Johnson-Flynn battle in Las Vegas was a dismal failure on multiple fronts. Lackluster attendance, an awful fight (referee Ed Smith remarked that Flynn’s constant head butting and fouls throughout the fight “disgraced everybody”) and over-confident promoters turned the bout into a forgettable farce, with the memories of it largely revolving around the staggering amounts of money that had been lost in its production. But for a brief moment on July 4th, 1910, little Las Vegas would be ground zero in a number of battles that extended far beyond the ring. For Johnson, he fought not only for the title, but for the hopes and dreams of African Americans across the country who found special, often personal meanings in his victory. For Flynn, it was a quest to restore honor and glory to white America, who collectively reeled every time Johnson knocked out the latest “white hope.” For the people of Las Vegas, the fight opportunity to show the rest of the nation that this little town was ready, willing and able to punch above its weight. A crazy fourth? Absolutely.