

THE DISNEY TREE FIGHT, PRECURSOR TO THEATRICALS

The dates were set, July 2nd, 3rd and 4th, 1940 and the surroundings were ideal for what was advertised as the first “tree fight” in history to be held adjacent to the new Pensacola Dam in Disney, Oklahoma! The objective of this altercation was to determine which opponent could knock the other out of a tree. Wild Red Berry, who would win the World Light Heavyweight Wrestling Championship nine times between 1937 and 1947, was the featured contestant. His opponent, a local resident, billed as Tarzan the Disney Tree Man, stood six foot five inches tall and weighed 250 pounds. According to the advertisement, Tarzan dared any man to stay in the tree with him for five minutes. Also advertised, tours of the recently completed dam would be available and, of course, a huge fireworks display was featured. The supporting wrestling card for the event featured Paul Orth, the Tarzan of the Mat, who would face Rubber Man Carr, who couldn’t be hurt. An additional feature was a five round boxing mat and a “Battle Royal” between five husky Negroes. All of this plus free street acts, dancing and music could be included for an admission of just \$1.10. An added incentive, also mentioned in the flyer, was that visitors could tour Disney, Oklahoma’s sensational new boom town.

Wrestling, as a national sport was in its heyday and contestants like Berry, who usually played the villain during matches, were celebrities of the era. Wrestling had become a popular sport because it only required strong bodies, initiative and modest overhead for equipment. Interest in the sport was particularly popular in rural states because many of the most successful American wrestlers were farm boys who saw an opportunity to capitalize on their rugged upbringing. In fact, the first recognized American champion had been Martin “Farmer” Burns, who won the middleweight title in 1895.

Wrestling was a world-wide sport and early champions were identified by country. But in 1905, European champion George Hackenschmidt defeated American Champion Tom Jenkins to become the first undisputed World Heavyweight Wrestling Champion. Hackenschmidt, who wrestled more than 3000 times competitively during his career, saw his reign last until 1908 when Frank Gotch, an Iowa farm boy, won the title after nearly two hours of combat. Entrepreneurs of the sport took note that the bout had received considerable attention from the media and fans, and when a re-match occurred with Gotch again prevailing, over 30,000 fans paid to watch at Comisky Park in Chicago. Promoters stepped in, a new American spectator sport was born and wrestling matches became increasingly more profitable. However, the fundamental problem with wrestling as a spectator sport soon became obvious because it primarily involved strength and endurance. Matches frequently lasted two hours or more and at least one, involving Evan “Strangler” Lewis and Joe Stecher, continued for over five, ending in a draw. Consequently, as the sport evolved, more theatricals were developed to capture the audience’s attention. At first, promotion focused on technique. “Strangler” Lewis developed his famous “Sleeper Hold,” by slipping a wrist beneath the opponents ear and over the carotid artery, thus shutting off the blood supply and “putting his opponent to sleep.” Jim Browning, who had extremely strong legs and was dubbed the “Scissors King,” wrapped a leg around his opponent, lifting him into the air, and then beating him against the mat. But soon, technique was not

enough and the public was demanding even more entertainment, the Disney Tree Fight, knocking someone out of a tree, being one example.

As the early decades of the twentieth century passed, athletes who were successful in other sports occasionally used their celebrity to turn to wrestling. Mayes McLain, Pryor native, a high school and college football star during the 1930s, later, played professionally for Chicago and Detroit. A talented athlete, McLain then turned to wrestling defeating Ed “Strangler” Lewis, holding the world championship title for seven months before losing to Jim Browning, the “Turnover Scissors King.”

Following World War II, and with the advent of television, the public demand for promotional gimmicks like tree fighting became even greater and a new era began. George Raymond Wagner AKA Gorgeous George, an accomplished champion at several weight levels, rolled wrestling and showmanship into one. Gorgeous George with his long blond hair, feminine clothes, heightened his entrance by spraying the ring with perfume and disinfectants to “purify the ring.” His advertised motto “Win if you can, lose if you must, but always cheat,” introduced a new level of theatrics into the profession that continue today.

History does not record who won the Disney Tree Fight between Tarzan and Red Berry although it must have been an interesting affair to witness. Would a similar contest draw a crowd today? Probably not, today’s theatrics require so much more.

