

19th Century Basilicata Emigration: A Fratellanza & Sorellanza Based Society

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Part 6 of 6: How Three 19th Century Men of Basilicata Heritage Broke Barriers While Changing American Professional Boxing

Introduction: Migration to the U.S. from Basilicata

As examined in previous articles, mass migration to the U.S. began earlier from Basilicata than recorded from other parts of southern Italy. This was directly related to two major earthquake events. These earthquakes occurred in 1851 and 1857 and devastated much of the northern part of the Province of Basilicata, specifically the area surrounding the Capitol city of Potenza.

The inadequate governmental response to the devastation led to thirty years of civil unrest and strife in the region. Those conditions encouraged migration by a regional population decimated in the aftermath of the natural and civil upheavals. A fraction of the migration reached the Americas, including New York City, as early as the late 1850's. For those early emigres from Basilicata, New York City became the principal port of entry to the U.S. Once they arrived, they clustered in the New York neighborhood known as the "Five Points".

The early Basilicata emigres often arrived stripped of most possessions by the ravages of natural disaster and war. In desperation they sought out the poorer quarters of American urban life. In New York City this meant settling in the "Five Points" neighborhood of lower Manhattan. In the 1850's this neighborhood's population consisted of the poorest of the urban poor of America, and the poorest of the arriving immigrants. Most of the 1850's immigrants arrived primarily from Ireland and Germany. The neighborhood only offered the poor the barest of housing. The dilapidated housing was infested with vermin, fed by uncollected garbage, and undisposed human and animal waste. Added to these serious health hazards was the fact that the local water supply was badly polluted by seepage from industrial waste runoff of local early 19th century tanning operations. Those conditions exposed the vulnerable population to a variety of illnesses and the highest infant mortality rate in the country.

To put the area in visual perspective for the modern reader, we can look to two recent movies which used the mid and late 19th century neighborhood as visual backdrops in their storylines. The first movie depicted the neighborhood as it appeared in the 1850's-1860's. That movie is titled "Gangs of New York" and the scenes depicted would have been the environment that the earliest of the Basilicata emigres would have encountered upon their arrival. The second movie is the recently released "Cabrini" movie which retells the story of Mother Cabrini's arrival in the U.S. in 1889, specifically depicting her initial posting in the predominately Basilicata parish of St. Joachim's in the "Five Points".

Both movies confirm that this was an extremely difficult environment for the young Basilicata emigres to settle. It was also a very difficult environment to raise families. Most of the adult Basilicata emigres arriving in the U.S. between 1850 and 1890 had either personally experienced the devastation of the earthquakes, or they experienced the political/civil strife that followed the Italian Unification. The civil strife left over 100,000 civilian dead at the hands of a suppressive federal government. The Basilicata emigres were well acquainted with enduring the hardships of an environment which stretched resources to the brink of collapse. Their migration was a testament to their spirit of perseverance and determination to survive.

As for the three 19th century men that form the focus of this article, the above conditions formed the background of their families' emigration story.

The Common Emigrant Heritage and Background of the Three Men

The cultural heritage and familial history of the three men under discussion originates in three separate small mountain top villages in Basilicata. All three villages are located within fifteen miles of the Basilicata epicenter of the Great earthquake of 1857. Therefore, all three families shared in the tragic consequences of the 1850's earthquakes and the subsequent suppressive thirty years of civil unrest that followed. The three families were among the earliest of the Basilicata emigres to the U.S. They arrived when Italian emigres were not numerous. All three families settled into American communities which were generally unwelcoming and at times hostile to their presence.

The oldest of the three men is also the one to first arrive in America as a child. He represents the originator, influencer and principal player in the events surrounding this coordinated story. This individual was christened with the name "Paolo". He was born in Basilicata in 1876. He emigrated to the U.S., with his parents, somewhere between 1880 and 1882. From biographical accounts it is believed that the family emigrated in stages, first the father and later the mother and children. The staggered arrival has resulted in some confusion and the offer of a range of dates for Paolo's childhood arrival in the U.S. Like many Basilicata emigres of this era the family settled directly in the "Five Points" neighborhood. Young "Paolo" would have been between the ages of 4 and 6 at the time of emigration. Using the movie reference from above, Paolo would have "grown-up" and acclimated to life in New York's Five Points in the 1880's.

For reference, Paolo would have been about 13 years old and had already resided with his family in America for about decade by the time of Cabrini's 1889 arrival. In terms of statistics Paolo and his family's 1880 arrival would have placed the family among the first 1.5% of what would be 4.5 million Italian immigrant arrivals by 1930.

The second oldest of the three, was "Donato", also born in a small mountain top village in Basilicata in 1882. So, by age comparison he was six years younger than Paolo. Donato emigrated to the U.S. with his recently widowed mother. The family's arrival in the U.S is recorded by biographers as 1884. The 1884 date would have made Donato about two years old at

the time he passed thru the Castle Garden emigration center. Donato's family also settled in the Basilicata cluster within the "Five Points" probably to reside with maternal relatives.

The third individual subject of this article is "Vito", whose family emigration pattern was slightly different. Vito's father, Gaetano had emigrated to the U.S. at age twelve in 1872, but returned to Basilicata and married in 1880. Vito's parents then emigrated to the U.S. as a couple in 1882. In America the young couple joined extended family already living in Trenton, N.J. Vito was born in 1886, and he is the youngest and only American-born of the three men. Although raised in Trenton, Vito was born in New York's Five Points as there were no Italian speaking doctors or midwives in Trenton at the time of his birth. This difference in birth location, versus where he was raised, has caused some confusion among his biographers. As discussed in an earlier article it was common for Basilicata émigré women living in Trenton to travel to New York City to have their children delivered by Basilicata emigrant midwives in the early 1880's.

During the 1880's and 1890's Trenton's Basilicata/Italian population was very small and lived primarily in south Trenton. At the time of Vito's birth there were fewer than 200 Italian immigrants living in Trenton among a general population of about 45,000. Vito was among the first of an Italian American-born generation settling in Trenton in the 1880's. Vito's childhood was spent growing up in south Trenton, not the Five Points.

While South Trenton did not present the contaminated background, or congested housing stock of the Five Points, the Italian emigres residing there represented a very small part of the overall population of the city. South Trenton was a poor working-class neighborhood. The principal employers were the Roebling and American Bridge steel mills. The ethnic majority of the neighborhood were a combination of poor Americans mixed with poor Irish and German immigrants much like the Five Points. Italians were viewed as competition for available work, and ethnic tension was quite pronounced. As the number of Italian immigrants began to increase in the community so did the ethnic tension.

As far as my research regarding the three men, although they were of Basilicata heritage, I could not find any familial connection among the three. So, their eventual connection was purely of regional heritage, Italian American community environment, and an eventual interest in the entrepreneurship of professional boxing. I also could not find any indication in their biographies that the three ever met in their childhoods. I suspect however, that the two younger men would have become aware of the oldest based on his notoriety and activities in the Basilicata-American community of the 1890's.

Before I get into the career paths that brought the three men together, I should discuss American professional boxing to set the stage for some of the career choices and opportunities available to these three men during their youth.

19th Century American Professional Boxing

Boxing or Prizefighting as it was known, has been around since antiquity. In the first half of 19th century America, boxing was not a popular activity. To the extent that prizefighting existed in the U.S., contestants fought bare-knuckle in local unregulated bouts without restrictions of any sort. The contests were brutal, combatants engaged, without rules, time limits or weight classes. Serious injury including fatalities were common. In America, most States banned or made illegal the activity. Participants and those promoting the contests could face criminal misdemeanor charges, fines, and possibly jail time.

Things began to change in the way prizefighting was conducted in the mid- 19th century when, the Marquess of Queensbury Ring Rules were introduced in England, in 1867. Later in the century padded gloves were “invented” and encouraged for use. Later still, the concept of weight classes was encouraged to make the contests fairer. Weight classes were also felt to make the contests more interesting for spectators and more challenging for betting. However, the contests remained illegal in most States and enforcement of ring rules remained discretionary and self-regulated.

For example, the longest championship bout in professional boxing history was a light-heavyweight “championship” bout held in New Orleans in 1893. The bout lasted 110 rounds or about seven hours. The fight ended in a draw with the participants splitting the \$2,500 prize. It was reported that the participants were so exhausted by the end of the bout that neither had been able to throw a punch for the final three rounds of the fight before the contest was halted.

Because the contests were illegal, in the mid-19th century, they were usually set up in out-of-the-way locations, such as, alleys, men’s clubs and backrooms of bars. This kept the activity beyond the view of the public. Illegal revenue from the contests encouraged the corruption of local officials who increasingly looked the other way. The willingness of officials to look the other way for their own payday in turn, slowly brought the matches out of the shadows and into public view.

Several of the better known and more proficient of the local boxers became celebrities in the later 19th century. among them was John L. Sullivan. He is uniquely recognized in boxing history as both a bare-knuckle and “Gloved” heavyweight champion. This distinction sets him apart as it spans two eras of the sport. The increasing popularity of the bouts led to a brief period in the 1890’s where boxing in New York State was legalized. The official reason for the legalization was to permit the government to “tax” the revenue. However, by 1900 the legalization was rescinded, and the sport was again illegal in New York for the next decade.

At the beginning of the 20th century New York State was at the center of the American professional boxing world. As an activity, legislation of the period reflects society’s struggle with the sport even as its popularity grew. From 1900 thru 1911 it was largely illegal in the State, from 1911 to 1917 it was again legal but governed by an oversight commission, then illegal briefly

again, until 1920. From 1920 on, the sport became permanently legal and adopted many of the rules and oversight functions that we would recognize today.

Because the contests were self-regulated and generally sponsored by local entities/promoters pre-1920, it was common that they could be easily manipulated. Contestant access and frequently contest outcomes were “controlled”. Often local or specific ethnic “favorites” were positioned to win contests to attract larger local crowds or larger betting pools. This often led to ethnic and racial minorities being barred or not getting opportunities to fight in the larger venues for larger prizes. Since the contests were set up “privately” it guaranteed that most minorities were excluded from “championship” bouts.

It is into this American 19th century boxing context that we place the first and most critical of our three Basilicata subjects.

Francesco “Paolo” Antonio Vaccarelli (1876-1936)

“Paolo” was born in the Basilicata town of Pietrapertosa in 1876. He emigrated to the United States with his parents between 1880 and 1882. “Paolo” as he was known, appears to have been between four and six when he arrived and settled in the “Five Points”. At the time Paolo was growing up, the Five Points had a growing Italian population, but the neighborhood was still a predominantly non-Italian, diverse community. Political, establishment, and sub-culture resources within the Five Points were controlled by Tammany Hall which in turn was made up of mostly Irish politicians.

Growing up in what was under the best of circumstances a very difficult environment, Paolo faced several additional disadvantages. He was a “foreign” born Italian, Catholic, poor, and physically of very slight stature. In some circles of the community Italians were also considered “racial” minorities, a “mulatto” race. Despite all the disadvantages that might suggest he would have trouble surviving, let alone thriving, his story is quite remarkable for the opposite outcome. Review of his early accomplishments can only suggest that he must have been a brilliant, determined, organized, disciplined and athletic young individual. His intelligence is something that even his most critical biographers have to concede.

Those biographers confirm that in his youth, despite little formal education, Paolo became fluent in Italian, English, French, Spanish as well as Gaelic. He seems to have acquired these language skills by simply interacting with the diverse population of the Lower East Side. His willingness to engage with different community elements in their native languages would later endear him to the many elements of the community including the Irish establishment and Tammany Hall.

Although, having to go to work on the docks to help support his family at a young age, he tried to improve himself. Throughout his life he was thought of as well read, well-mannered and to have a strong appreciation of classical music and art. By sixteen he also demonstrated skills that gained him employment as a bank teller in an Italian bank in the community. It is clear that the young Paolo was willing to put in the time, hard work, and hustle to maximize his opportunities.

In 1892 at the age of sixteen and recognizing limited opportunities for financial success, Paolo determined to seek supplemental income in the somewhat underground venue of prizefighting. The fact that he would consider this as a viable opportunity confirms that in addition to his many talents, he had experienced some familiarity with defending himself on the tough streets of the Five Points. Once engaged in this pursuit at just 16 years of age, he quickly demonstrated an aptitude for boxing as a 105-pound bantamweight. Initially he engaged in the club circuit of the Five Points. He also quickly discovered that the larger purses and better fights were not opened to him as a young Italian American boxer. Most of the better purses and larger venues were available only to ethnic English, German and Irish fighters thru promoters of like ethnicity in the more upscale venues. Since Paolo was a very personable young fellow, fluent in English and Gaelic it apparently made sense to him to reinvent himself as an Irish American boxer. Paolo Vaccarelli became the Irish American bantamweight boxer Paul Kelly.

Over the course of a professional career that spanned just six years, 1892-1898, he set an impressive record. Newspaper reports evaluated him as a very fast, competitive, skilled and clean fighter. Although he did not get an opportunity to fight for a championship it appears that he had a successful career and became a celebrity of sorts within the Italian community of the 1890's Five Points. All of this was accomplished at a time before the arrival of 80% of future Italian emigres.

It appears that he was also able to amass a sizeable amount of winnings, both in purses and from betting outcomes during his brief career. It is here that Paolo probably showed his real genius. His personal discipline allowed him to forgo spending his winnings. Instead, he carefully and successfully "invested" what he won, as he won it. This allowed him to retire from boxing after six years, and to concentrate solely on his growing business investment interests.

Among his many skills, Paolo appears to have had was an instinct for evaluating the character of people and the opportunity that his environment presented. Paolo recognized that many of the young Italian emigrants who surrounded him in the Five Points entertained the same serious work ethic and ambition that he possessed. These emigrants possessed a great entrepreneurial spirit but lacked the collateral resources to realize their ambitions. Banks would not lend to emigrants and money was in short supply. Paolo invested in the community, especially in enterprises that had low overhead, substantial cash return and low risk. He invested his capital in people. Who in turn used that capital to set up bars, brothels, gambling venues, tenement real estate, grocery stores, etc. He organized his ventures, sometimes as strict cash loans, sometimes as venture partnerships, and developed managerial talent from within the community to help him oversee smooth transactional operation. As many of the ventures were not legal, he developed relationships within Tammany Hall and law enforcement for establishment protection. In turn he organized labor and votes at election time. This allowed him the opportunity to forge a successful symbiotic relationship with the powers that controlled the politics of the city. He also organized labor, especially at the docks which in turn provided "muscle" to intimidate rivals within the Five Points.

As his business empire grew and expanded into numerous east side neighborhoods, he rose in social status. In certain circles his Italian ethnicity held back his business access, as it had in his initial boxing career. Again, as he had in boxing, he decided to legally change his name. In 1903 Paolo Vaccarelli legally became Paul Kelly.

Most of the biographies written about him focus primarily on Paul's illegal activities, labelling him as a racketeer. They also acknowledge that as a "racketeer" he established the most successful and diverse racketeering empire to come out of the Five Points era. Many of the biographers note that his ability to reach into the diverse ethnic mix of Manhattan and to work with other ethnicities made him one of the first "modern" gangsters of the early 20th century.

For purposes of this article, I am taking a different view and limiting that view to his involvement in professional boxing.

It is remarkable that by 1903 at age 27 Paul was able to survive and transition from being a pawn in the brutal sport of 19th century boxing to become a successful entrepreneur. Generally boxing was an activity that left most participants poor, broken and crippled for life. It was an activity, especially pre-1920's, largely dependent for success on the prejudices and perceptions of promoters. By becoming a successful businessman, his wealth opened the door to become a promoter of others. He had the resources to create the venue and purses necessary to put on



"private" fights. He became one of the first Italians to create access and secure venues for Italian and other ethnic fighters. I think it important to acknowledge this important early developmental step in tearing down ethnic barriers, which had previously almost universally existed in the sport.

Photograph One of Paolo Vaccarelli a.k.a. Paul Kelly

At this point, I will backstep to lay out and introduce the second of the three men.

Donato Torrio (1882-1957)

Donato Torrio was born in Montepeloso, Basilicata, Italy in 1882. As previously noted, Donato emigrated to the U.S. with his mother in 1884. The family settled within the Basilicata cluster of the Five points community. Although he never formally changed his name, he became better known by the name Johnny Torrio. Most biographers agree that Donato became associated with the business affairs of Paolo Vaccarelli, in the Five Points neighborhood, when Donato was in his early teens.

I do not believe that Donato ever engaged as a boxer himself. Instead, he became known to Paolo, working for him along with other youth in the community. Paolo was known to support youth gangs including the Five Points Gang. Donato stood out among his peers, for his intelligence and organizational skills. Those skills, when brought to the attention of Paolo, and quickly allowed young Donato to rise in Paolo's organizational ranks. Donato was considered a reliable and capable "earner" initiating many legitimate and illegitimate enterprises on his own. Most biographers agree that Paolo became a mentor to Donato, who in turn emulated Paolo's entrepreneurship. By 1903, Donato was managing several of Paolo's bars and other enterprises and had begun to promote private boxing matches and betting parlors which were illegal in New York at the time.



Torrio in 1903

(Note: For those interested Torrio was not recruited to the Chicago scene until 1909, which is after the dates of concern in this article.)

Of principle concern for this article is the year 1903. It is the pivotal year where the path of the third man in the story crosses with that of the other two on the rough and tumble streets of the Five Points.



Torrio in 1939

Vito (Peter) Frascella (1886-1963)

Vito was born in the Five Points in 1886, the son of Gaetano (Tommy) Frascella and the grandson of Vito Frascella who was the first Basilicata émigré to settle in Trenton in 1862. (Note: As a matter of disclosure, young Vito and my grandfather were first cousins, although separated in age by about twelve years. They shared elder Vito Frascella, as a grandfather.)

Young Vito grew up on the streets of south Trenton at a time when there few Italians living in Trenton. The streets of south Trenton were not kind to the children of Italians at the time. Young Vito shared many of the disadvantages that young Paolo faced growing up in the Five Points. Both were considered foreigners, although Vito was born in America, were Catholic, considered non-white or mulatto and of slight stature and weight.

The way family stories were told, his disadvantages led to frequent street fights, sometimes several times a week, from an early age. Like many things, if you do something often enough you get good at it. Somewhere around the age of 14 or 15, Vito, (Peter) became aware of “prize fighting”, getting paid to fight. He began to box in Trenton professionally at age 14. Some biographies place the start of his professional career as early as 1898 which would have made him 12. In the beginning of his career, he weighed between 100 and 105 pounds and stood about 5’1”. So, when he fought, if promoters choose to enforce weight limits, he would have fought in the lightest weight classification of the time, a “paperweight”. He very quickly found success in his initial Trenton club fights.

At the time he began fighting in Trenton, as someone of Basilicata heritage, he would have heard of the professional career and successes of Paul Kelly. First because Paul Kelly was a celebrity in the New York Basilicata community and the Trenton community had close ties to New York. Second, both Paul Kelly, and Vito were in the same weight class as fighters and so would have had obvious parallels in the sport.

Realizing that there were limited opportunities in boxing in Trenton, Vito decided to try to establish himself on the larger stage of New York. At 17 he moved to New York’s Basilicata community in the Five Points. This was not a radical move as he had relatives living in the Five Points with whom he could stay.

He quickly found that boxing opportunities were controlled in New York by other ethnicities. Larger purse venues were not readily available to young Italian boxers. Ultimately this put him in contact with a young Italian American boxing promoter by the name of Donato (Johnny) Torrio in 1903. I would note that as Vito was only 17, Donato (Johnny) Torrio was just four years his senior at 21. Both Donato and Vito were very young men. Donato was still being mentored by Paul Kelly another Basilicatan who was all of 27 at the time.

Apparently both Torrio and Kelly liked the talent they saw in Young Vito. However, neither thought that Vito’s Italian heritage would help his progress on the larger American scene, as a professional boxer in the early 1900’s. This led the two to suggest a professional name change. In

1903 Vito (Peter) Frascella became the young Irish boxer “Kid Murphy” fighting out of New York’s Five Points. To repeat an earlier statement, in 1903 and for most of that decade, professional boxing was illegal in New York. Fights were staged in “private” venues not public arenas. The fights were still unregulated and often without limitation as to rounds.

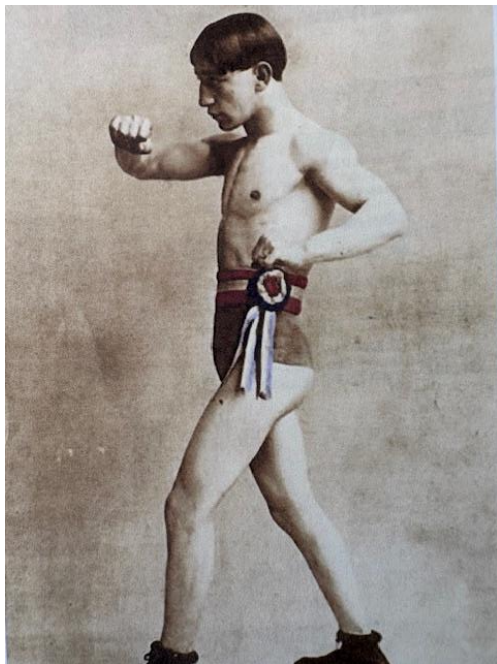
Trenton’s First World Boxing Champion

Without getting into the ups and downs of the dozens of fights in “Kid Murphy’s” early club fighting career under the promotion of Johnny Torrio, I will go directly to the highlights of that career. According to the Boxing Encyclopedia, in 1906 at the age of 20, “Kid Murphy” defeated Willie Schumacher, for a piece of the American 105 pound “Paperweight” Championship in 23 rounds. The fight took place in Westchester New York, as a “private” fight. Technically, as there was no boxing governing commission the championship titles were informal in that era. Nevertheless, boxing histories do recognize the Championship title as legitimate and Kid Murphy as a title holder.

In winning that fight, Vito Frascella, (Kid Murphy) became the first Trenton fighter to win a recognized boxing championship. He also, according to the Italian American Boxing Hall of Fame, in which Vito “Kid Murphy” Frascella is an inductee, became the first Italian American and the first American of Italian descent to win a recognized professional American boxing championship.

Six months later in a rematch with Willie Schumacher in the same “private” venue, Kid Murphy lost the title in a contest that went 25 rounds.

The following year 1907, no longer a “paperweight” “Kid Murphy” fought for and won a piece of the American 110-pound division bantamweight championship. This made him the first Italian American to win two titles in two different weight classes.



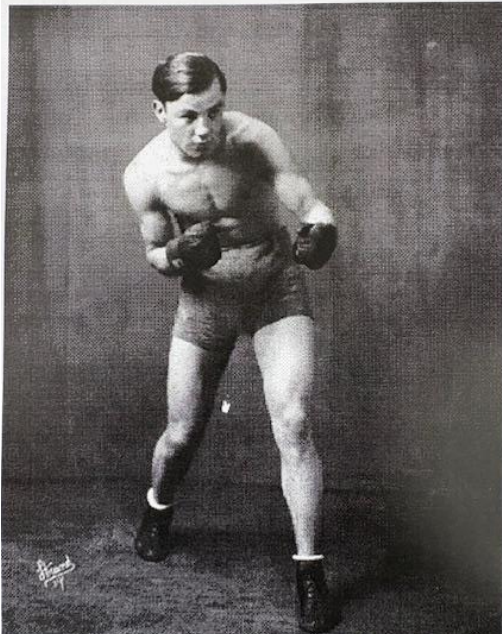
Kid Murphy would lose that title in 1908 in a ten-round decision in favor of Johnny Coulon. That fight was held in a private venue in Peoria, Illinois. A rematch of that contest was held just one month later and again the decision went to Johnny Coulon in ten rounds. (Note: all of Kid Murphy’s championship bouts occurred prior to legalization and were not subject to boxing commission oversight).

Kid Murphy continued to box professionally until his retirement in 1918 but never again fought for a boxing championship. During his career he is credited with 54 recognized professional bouts but probably boxed twice that many contests in side exhibitions. Several boxers of his era retired just as professional boxing was legalized. Once boxing became legal its popularity soared in the 1920's and 1930's. For many immigrant poor it became a gateway to success and fame. It is interesting that the popularity of the sport led to a second career in boxing for a few earlier era boxers.

By way of example, Johnny Coulon and Kid Murphy were two earlier era fighters who met twice in the ring in 1908 for the bantamweight title. After retirement from the ring both men eventually established boxing gyms for the training of young fighters. Coulon, who was known as the "Chicago spider" ran his boxing gym in Chicago. There he trained many well-known boxers over several decades. Kid Murphy opened and operated for many decades "Murphy's Gym" on Ferry Street in Trenton, N.J. Again, many very good professional fighters got their start and early training under the watchful eye of the veteran boxer.

It was once explained to me that, the old championship caliber boxers from the lighter weight divisions of the pre-1920 era made the best trainers. These men had to train themselves for endurance as the bouts they fought had no round limitation. In addition, as many of them did not have overwhelming knockout power they had to rely on boxing skill. In training, they emphasized strategy as well as offensive and defensive skills. The skills they acquired in the unregulated era were adapted to modern boxing. They were very good at passing on their hard-earned lessons to the many talented young fighter coming up.

Tommy (Kid) Murphy



I should mention that among the many talented fighter that Kid Murphy trained was his son. His son fought under the boxing name "Tommy Kid Murphy" and was a middleweight contender.

In 1974 "Kid Murphy" was inducted, posthumously, into the New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame. The following year, 1975 his son "Tommy Kid Murphy" was also inducted into the New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame making them the first father-son duo inducted. I read in an old newspaper clipping that in the 1974 induction ceremony they were expecting the Master of Cermonies to be a well-known boxing fan and former New Jersey amateur boxer from Hoboken named Sinatra. I don't know if that is how it played out or was only anticipated.

(Note: I have never had an opportunity in my research to confirm how many of the early Italian-American

boxers with Basilicata heritage became world champions. However, it was pointed out to me that at least three from the list of inductees of the Italian American Boxing Hall of Fame are; Guiseppe “Young Zulu Kid” DeMelfi, Flyweight Champion 1915, Rocco “Rocky Kansas Tozzo , Lightweight Champion, 1925-1926, and Tommy “Tommy Paul” Paula, featherweight champion 1932-1933.



YOUNG ZULU KID
(Guiseppe DiMelfi)
Born April 22, 1897
Potenza, Italy
Flyweight Champ 1915



ROCKY KANSAS
(Rocco Tozzo)
Born April 21, 1895
Buffalo, New York
Lightweight Champ 1925-26



TOMMY PAUL
(Thomas Paula)
Born March 4, 1909
Buffalo, New York
Featherweight Champ 1932-33