

Awful Coffee

By Dennis Payton Knight

This is a short sketch of Joe “Awful” Coffee, who operated his famous Ringside Lounge on Seventeenth Street in downtown Denver, right where the Westin Hotel now stands. My dad was somewhat acquainted with him because their Colorado boxing careers coincided in the 1920’s.

Pueblo was a rough and tumble steel town, and a hideaway for the Chicago mafia, Ku Kluxers and racketeers. The twelve-year-old Joe Rutkofsky arrived there in about 1917 with his Jewish family from Minsk, Russia, by way of New York City. He quickly staked his claim as a newsboy on the busy corner at Fourth and Main, but only after winning the territory with his fists, a proficiency that soon found him in the boxing ring.

Rutkofsky had billed himself in amateur fights as the “Newsboy Kid”, and planned to keep the moniker for his first professional bout against Kid Plank. But Jack Carberry, a Pueblo sportswriter and later *Denver Post* sports editor, told the ring announcer to introduce him as “Awful Coffee.”

Joe recollected, “I was scared to death. I was backing away from him. Well, at the end of the second round, Big Dan Taylor, who put on the fight, came over to me with a whiskey bottle in his hand and told me that if I didn’t get in that ring and fight, he was going to hit me over the head with that bottle. So I went back in there. The guy was making mistakes. I wasn’t making any mistakes. I think I knocked him out that time. And I became a hero. ‘Awful Coffee! A new sensation! Knocks out Kid Plank, the state champion!’ That Jack Carberry put my name all over the papers.”

Mrs. Rutkofsky strongly disapproved and would intervene when she knew her son was boxing. Once she stepped into the ring after he had been announced, and told Joe she wasn’t going to let him fight. The promotor jumped in, offering Coffee even more than the \$250 he was promised. Mrs. Rutkofsky said, “Oh no, I’ll give him \$200 more if he doesn’t fight.” Of course she didn’t have that kind of money, but the bidding got up to \$700 and she was relentless. When the promotor finally backed down, everybody cheered, “Bravo! Bravo for Mrs. Rutkofsky!” One reporter said, “Greatest fight I ever saw.”

Joe, to his mother’s pride, got a scholarship to Denver University, and while there he boxed, coached and helped start boxing clubs for orphaned boys all over Denver. He graduated from DU in 1930 with a degree in economics and business, and later earned a graduate degree.

After college, Coffee went to work for the May Company in Denver. In 1943, when he couldn’t get a raise, he went to a café to get a soft drink and think about quitting. The fellow behind the counter said, “You don’t know anybody who wants to buy this joint, do you?” Joe got a thousand dollar check from the bank, and he was in the restaurant business.

The story of Joe “Awful” Coffee is one of tough survival and battling the Klan as a child in Pueblo; teaching and being a role model to countless Denver orphans; training with Jack Dempsey; and once entertaining General Dwight Eisenhower in his restaurant. His Ringside

Lounge was legendary, and as a sportsman he entered Colorado's Sports Hall of Fame in 1976. He was a legend as a father and as a person, too.

In short, there was simply nothing awful about this good Joe. Not even his coffee.