

left Galveston as a teenager, several years before the turn of the century, to roam the country.

He traveled a rather aimless course northward, doing all sorts of odd jobs, including stable boy chores at a race track before arriving in Boston, where he took a fancy to a boxer named Joe Walcott. Johnson picked up a lot of boxing savvy helping Walcott train and began his own fight career in 1897, a career that was to flourish for more than two decades.

Called "Lil' Artha" for his full name of John Arthur Johnson during his early professional days, Jack Johnson fought the greatest men of his time — Hank Griffin, Frank Childs, Sam McVey, Joe Jeannette and Sandy Ferguson among others. He began his climb to the top in 1906 when Burns beat Marvin Hart to gain the title which Jeffries had abdicated.

Johnson challenged Burns and followed him to Australia, where they finally met for the title the day after Christmas, 1908. Johnson was a clear-cut winner, stopping Burns in the 14th round.

The following year Johnson got up off the canvas to knock out Stanley Ketchel to trigger the din for a "Great White Hope" across the land. Johnson defied any white man in the world to fight him and his taunts just further stirred the white world's hatred for this swaggering chocolate giant.

Only Jeffries, who had retired seven years before, stepped forward and the colossal July 4 battle at Reno that summer of 1910 was to become what still is regarded as the fight of the century.

After 15 bloody rounds, referee Tex Rickard raised Johnson's black arm and the great crowd filed out, glum and silent.

Johnson held the title five more years before losing to Willard.

After that, Johnson spent several years out of the United States and served a year in prison for a Mann Act conviction when he returned.

The good life deteriorated rapidly, although he still boxed exhibitions into old age, the last in 1945 at the age of 67, just a year before a North Carolina automobile wreck ended his life.

It was years later that a white man's world came to recognize the carefree Galveston black as perhaps the greatest heavyweight of all time. Boxing historian Nat Fleischer called him that and many knowledgeable students of boxing agree.

Walter Robertson