

Lou Boedecker: Law & Order, Railroads and Throwing a Punch

Lou Boedecker was born in Kansas the year Montana became a state. He grew up strong and tall, and went to work in Colorado for a few years as a steelworker. Moving to live in Deer Lodge, he worked as a brakeman on the Milwaukee line, starting in 1909.

He was also interested in boxing, and at 6'6" and 210 pounds, the boxing promoters were interested in him as well. He started boxing with some informal bouts in the Butte

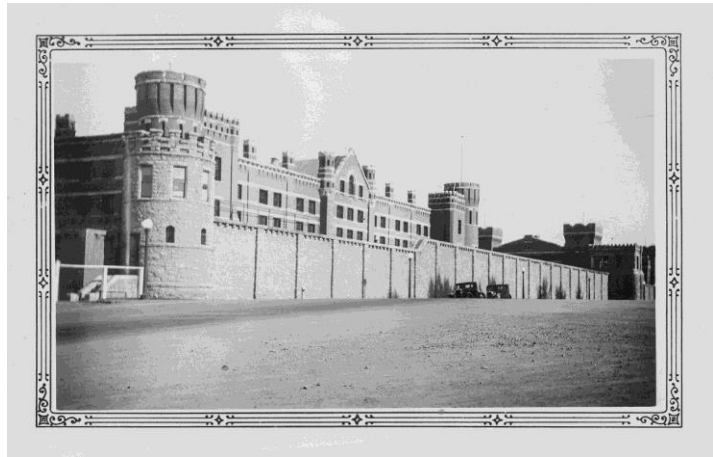
area under the name Lou Bodie at the age of 21, and won his first real heavyweight match against another debut boxer in 1911. A local sportswriter described him as a "good-natured, pleasant mannered fellow, with a grin that is a joy to meet on a cloudy day. And he's a regular Montana boy." He continued boxing through 1917, with an 8-5-1 record, with six of his wins coming through knockouts.

He continued working with the railroads, becoming a conductor on the Deer Lodge to Spokane run. But he also grew interested in law enforcement, and his first elected position was as the sheriff of Powell County in 1928, a position he held for six years.

In the 1930s, the growth of automobile ownership and the long stretches of highways crossing the state were seeing increasing issues with accidents. Local police and county sheriffs weren't able to deal with the issue easily. It was determined that a law enforcement agency should be created for that purpose. Montana saw a 74 percent increase in highway fatalities in 1933-34, the worst record in the nation. Governor Frank H. Cooney appointed Boedecker to create and head the Montana Highway Patrol. He selected 24 candidates for the first Highway Patrol Recruit Academy. In May 1935, the first Highway Patrol officers began safeguarding Montana's highways. The officers were authorized to enforce traffic laws, of which there were only eleven at that time. Their primary goal was to assist and educate Montana drivers. In that first year of officers patrolling, the number of fatalities decreased 25 percent. Boedecker remained at the head of the Highway Patrol through 1941.

Boedecker went back to working for the railroad, but ran in the Democratic primary for Lieutenant Governor – then elected separately from the Governor – in 1944, losing by a narrow margin.

In 1949, Governor John W. Bonner appointed him as warden of the Montana State Prison. He served at Deer Lodge in that capacity until 1953, returning once again to work for the railroads. In 1956, he ran for the Montana Railroad Commission, winning



Old Montana State Prison, Deer Lodge

the election that November. Unfortunately, he was unable to take office. In December, his wife was in the hospital for a heart ailment in Helena, and Boedecker went to visit her there. He collapsed with a heart attack and died. Former Montana Supreme Court Justice Leif Erickson said of him at his death: "He was big in size, big in heart and big in his loyalty to his ideals."

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