

## THE PUGILIST MAYOR OF MT. VERNON

Can you believe that any Mt. Vernon mayor would engage in a fight on the public square? John A. Koons did just that in 1923.

First here is some background information on the mayor. Born about 1862 in Missouri, John Koons came to Moore's Prairie in Jefferson County in the late 1880s or early 1890s. In 1893 he moved to Mt. Vernon where he had a furniture store on South Ninth Street. Also, he and his brother, Robert, co-owned a hardware store in Mt. Vernon.

About 1908 -1910 John Koons suffered some personal and business losses. In 1900 he had a wife, Elderado Koons, but by 1910 he was a widower living with his brother. On February 8, 1909, Koons found out that his store in Jonesboro, Arkansas, had been robbed. On June 27, 1909, the Koons Brothers hardware store in Mt. Vernon burned.

### The First Fight

The first fight occurred long before John Koons became mayor, but it shows his aggressive nature. The June 1, 1911, *Mt. Vernon Daily News* ran a story titled "Was a Knockout Blow." Koons was "having some trouble" with a well-known Mt. Vernon physician named Dr. C. J. Poole over some land in Arkansas. About noon on Ninth Street Koons became so incensed at Poole, thinking that Poole was sneering at him, that he punched him hard enough to drop him with a single blow. More damage might have been done to the doctor if two men had not pulled Koons off Poole.

The newspaper described Koons as a powerful man who had completely lost his temper. The next day Dr. Poole was said to be pretty badly injured about the head and showing "little if any improvement." Koons plead guilty to assault and battery and was fined the "usual amount."

### The Second Fight

John A. Koons became mayor of Mt. Vernon in 1923 and again had a very public fight, this time on the north side of the square. One of the front page stories of the August 24, 1923, *Mt. Vernon Register News* was called "Heavy-Weights in Lively Bout Here Last Night," and described an encounter between Mayor Koons and Oscar Kimmel of 610 South Twentieth Street.

The story described both men as heavy-weights with Kimmel slightly heavier but with Koons having a decided advantage in height, reach, and aggressiveness. Koons knocked Kimmel down and was "pounding the tar out of him" when Sheriff Grant Holcomb arrived and stopped the fisticuffs.



The reason for the fight is somewhat murky. The article, written very much tongue-in-cheek, said that the mayor was on the way to a peace meeting with the members of the city council and had a dove of peace on his shoulder, which was smashed "flatter than a pan cake" during the bout. Since Kimmel was the editor of the *Mt. Vernon Herald*, it seems likely that Mayor Koons was angry about something he had written about the mayor's feud with the city council. The mayor plead guilty and paid a fine of \$13.40.

### The Mayor's Good Side

Although the mayor certainly seemed to have a prickly personality, the two public fights are not the whole picture. In 1916 when the high school basketball team was having a difficult time finding a place to play, John Koons showed a generous side of his

nature by donating a gym on Ninth Street for their use. The *Daily Register* said that it was the best gym in this end of the state and that many basketball tournaments would be brought to Mt. Vernon as a result.

And in 1923 while he was the mayor, Koons showed courage and decisiveness by refusing to allow the local Ku Klux Klan to parade with masks on through Mt. Vernon. During that same time period the Klan was allowed to march through the streets of Washington D. C., and gained many followers in Southern Illinois. But the mayor said “no” here and the Klan did not become powerful in Jefferson County.

Sources:

1. U. S. Census of 1900, 1910, 1920, & 1930
2. *Mt. Vernon Weekly Register* August 9, 1893
3. *Mt. Vernon Daily Register* January 29, 1910, (Review of the Year 1909)
4. *Mt. Vernon Daily News* June 1, 1911
5. *Mt. Vernon Daily Register* December 1, 1916
6. *Mt. Vernon Register News* August 24, 1923