

Gouging ^[1]

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Gouging

by Jim L. Sumner, 2006

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Gouging, also known as "no-holds-barred" or "rough-and-tumble" fighting, was an especially violent form of fighting popular in the antebellum southern backcountry. A mixture of boxing, wrestling, and brawling, gouging prohibited only the use of weapons. A match ended when one of the participants gave up or was unable to continue. Although there are accounts of gouged-out eyeballs littering the ground, most historians think that the loss of an eye or other body part was rare. Still, there is little doubt that a serious gouging contest presented a real possibility of broken bones, scarring, maiming, or even death.

North Carolina was considered a stronghold of gougers. In 1746 [Governor Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[3] criticized the "barbarous and inhuman manner of boxing which so much prevails among the lower sort of people." Although legislators responded by making it illegal to cut out tongues, pull out eyes, or bite off noses or fingers, North Carolina's gougers persevered.

Travelers' accounts up to the time of the [Civil War](#) ^[4] confirm North Carolina's reputation for producing effective gougers. Some told of gougers who sharpened their nails and filed their teeth. A witness named Charles Janson described one match in 1807, when the two combatants were "fast clinched by the hair, and their thumbs endeavoring to force a passage into each other's eyes, while several of the bystanders were betting upon the first eye to be turned out of its socket. At length they fell to the ground and in an instant the uppermost sprung up with his antagonist's eye in his hand! The savage crowd applauded, while, sick with horror, we galloped away from the infernal scene."

Gouging gradually disappeared following the Civil War as backcountry culture absorbed the civilizing influences of towns, schools, churches, and the market economy.

References:

Elliott J. Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review* 90 (February 1985).

Thomas C. Parramore, "Gouging in North Carolina," *North Carolina Folklore* 22 (May 1974).

Additional Resources:

Gouging: Tar Hell sport not for the faint-hearted, *Tar Hell Miscellany*:
<http://www.lib.unc.edu/blogs/ncm/index.php/2010/10/16/gouging-tar-heel-sport-not-for-faint-hearted/> ^[5]

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