

David Norwood

The Legend of **Louis Cyr**

David Norwood earned his master's degree in Human Kinetics from the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada in 1971. His master's thesis was *The Sport Hero Concept and Louis Cyr*. What follows is an excerpt from that thesis.

On November 10, 1912, at the age of 49, Louis Cyr died. Lengthy illnesses from asthma and heart ailments had left him weak and officially he died of Bright's disease. The latter part of his life had consisted of a diet solely of yogurt and all his nights were spent in a Morris chair. The funeral for Louis Cyr was conducted at St. Peter's church in Montreal and vast crowds turned out to pay their last respects.¹

In steps to honor Louis Cyr since his death, the city of Montreal and the surrounding area has officially named the following after him: Louis Cyr Park, Louis Cyr Street and Louis Cyr School. In addition, a full bust monument of Cyr was erected in the City of Montreal. At a later date, a one-half hour film was produced on Louis Cyr, the French-Canadian strongman. It appears the French-Canadian people are not ready or willing to forget Louis Cyr.

Originally, Cyr's reputation spread quickly in Quebec because strength and power were highly respected. By word of mouth, the name Cyr became synonymous with strength and power. Classic in its example is the poem "Little Bateese" by Henry Drummond:

*But see heem now lyin' dere in bed,
Look at de arm onderneat' hees head;
If he grew lak dat till he's twenty year
I bet he'll be stronger than Louis Cyr²*

As is often the case with famous strongmen, there appears to be substantial discrepancy between many of the sources of data available upon Cyr, his life and career. In some instance these discrepancies are minor in nature and consequence, while others have considerable significance. Probably the most logical and common reason for discrepancy lies in error in communicating information from a primary to a secondary source. Inherent, at least to some degree, in this process is the possibility of conscious exaggeration of the facts. Also a likely candidate is the error accompanying transcription of primary and/or secondary information.

The remainder of this analysis will endeavor to deal point by point with various discrepancies raised in this study. Wherever possible, solutions or logical conclusions will be provided for each situation.

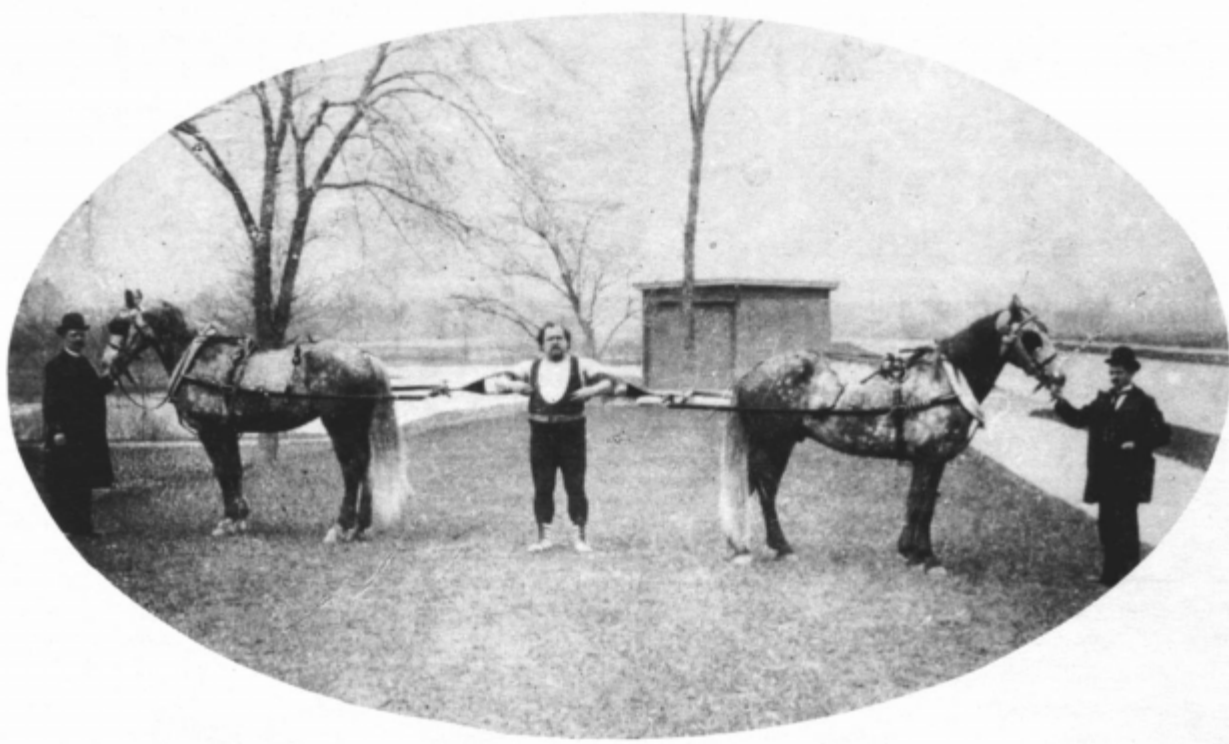
The first situation which presents us with a discrepancy is, unlikely as it may seem, the date of Cyr's birth. It is generally accepted by most secondary sources as well as by Dr. Gerald Aumont, Cyr's grandson, that Cyr was born on October 10, 1863. George Jowett, however, states quite specifically in

his book that Cyr was born on the "eleventh of October, 1863."³ Initially, one would attribute this error to an editorial or printing slip. The fact, however, that the day of birth was written in long form would tend to indicate a more concerted effort by Jowett in establishing this day as being fact. Little can be said on this discrepancy other than to note the true date as the 10th.

The second area of discrepancy surrounds the procurement of Louis' first job at the age of 12. Two different stories predominate. In one case, Cyr finds a neighboring farmer in the woods with a severe injury and proceeds to carry the man either to his wagon or to his farm depending on which version one hears. In the second instance, the young Cyr comes across a farmer in an over-loaded wagon stuck in the mud. Getting under the back end of the wagon Cyr lifted it onto dry ground and was rewarded with a job. In neither instance are primary sources available to substantiate the facts. The second case is supported by Jowett in his book as being fact.⁴ Ben Weider, in his book *The Strongest Man in History :Louis Cyr "Amazing Canadian,"* contends that Cyr received his first job as a result of the version related in case one.⁵ Weider goes on to say that the version related in case two occurred at the age of 15 when Cyr was living in Lowell, Mass.⁶ Since both versions tend to be supportive of Weider's relating of the incident, there is a strong inclination to believe his accounting of the facts.

The third area of discrepancy involves the fact that on November 11, 1912, the Montreal newspaper, *Le Devoir*, in giving a somewhat detailed account of Cyr's life upon his death, recounted that Cyr toured Moncton, New Brunswick in 1883 and put on performances.⁷ In surveying seven newspapers from New Brunswick, three newspapers from Newfoundland, two from Prince Edward Island and one from Nova Scotia for the year 1883, no reference could be found for this tour. It is likely, since only one secondary source has ever mentioned this date and incident, that either it did not happen or if it did an error exists in the date. It is possible, although highly unlikely, that the incident occurred and was not carried in any of the newspapers surveyed or mentioned in any of the secondary sources relating Cyr's exploits.

A major discrepancy involves Cyr and his work as a Montreal policeman. In the year 1885, he joined the Montreal Police Force and was used for the express purpose of helping to clean up the tough Sainte-Cunigonde district. On the evening of September 23 an incident occurred while Louis was on patrol, the publicity from which supposedly caught the attention and interest of R. K. Fox, the editor of *The National Police Gazette*. Several different discrepancies, in fact, surround this one incident. It is Weider's contention that two



Louis Cyr at Sohmer Park, Montreal, 1891

incidents took place with the second and more serious incident occurring on September 23. In the first incident, according to Weider, Cyr was used as a decoy by the police to entrap the criminal element. The brawl that ensued is purported to have seen Cyr subdue “a dozen of them single-handed.”⁸ The second incident saw Officer Proulx being struck on the head with an axe and eventually dying. Cyr, while cut on the arm with a knife, was able to grab one assailant by the waist and one by the collar and use them as battering rams against the remaining toughs.⁹ In Joweu’s version, Cyr, by himself, broke up a fight between two men and ended up taking both men to the police station, one tucked under each arm. One further modification is made in this incident by Frayne and Gzowski. In their rendition, Cyr arrested three, not two, toughs and escorted them to the police station by “taking one under each arm and carrying the other in a vice-like grip in front of him...with all three prisoners off the ground.”¹⁰ What makes the variations especially interesting is that upon surveying four newspapers which carried news of the incident at that time, very little similarity can be found with the later versions. All four newspapers appear to be very similar in their versions. As related by *the Montreal Daily Star*,¹¹ *Ottawa Citizen*,¹² *La Patrie* (Montreal)¹³, and *La Presse* (Montreal)¹⁴, constables Cyr and Proulx were assaulted in the Sainte-Cunegonde district of Montreal. It was reported that Constable Proulx was hit on the head with an axe and subsequently died, and that Constable Cyr was hit in the temple with a stone and then was

struck twice. After being struck, Constable Cyr said he thought he was going to die.¹⁵ Very little coverage was afforded the incident at this time, certainly not enough to attract the attention of the *Police Gazette* editor Fox. Because of the similarity of the newspaper coverage and the dissimilarity of the book and magazine coverage, a logical conclusion is drawn in support of the newspaper as fact. All other reports of the incident, while based on a real incident, appear to be exaggeration of the details in one way or another. The effect of this exaggeration is to heighten the myth surrounding Louis Cyr.

¹ “Louis Cyr est Mort” *Le Devoir* (Montreal), 11 November 1912.

² William Henry Drummond, *Habitant Poems*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1926). p. 20.

³ George F. Jowett, *Louis Cyr “The Strongest Man That Ever Lived”* (Philadelphia, P.A.: Milo Publishing Co., 1927), p. 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15-16

⁵ Ben Weider, *Strongest Man in History: Louis Cyr “Amazing Canadian”* p. 60-61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27-28.

⁷ “Louis Cyr est Mort,” *Le Devoir* (Montreal), 11 November 1912.

⁸ Weider, *Strongest Man in History: Louis Cyr “Amazing Canadian,”* p. 60-61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁰ Trent Frayne and P. Gzowski, *Great Canadian Sports Stories*, (Toronto: Canadian Centennial Publishing Co., 1965). p. 108.

¹¹ “Another Constable Assaulted”, *Montreal Daily Star* 23 September 1885, p. 4.

¹² “Struck With An Axe” *Ottawa Citizen*, 24 September 1885, p. 4.

¹³ “*La Patrie* (Montreal), 25 September 1885, p. 4.

¹⁴ “L’Affaire De Sainte-Cunegonde” *La Presse* (Montreal), 24 September 1885, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.