



Bob's brother, Jack Hoffman, at age 17.

Photo courtesy John Fair

NEW LIGHT ON BOB HOFFMAN'S GEORGIA ROOTS

John Fair

Warm as the sun that seeks its land,
Boundless as all its wealth may be
Open as its extended hand,
Is Southern hospitality.¹

-- B. H. King, 1894

A certain degree of mystery has always surrounded the early life of Bob Hoffman. Notwithstanding the fact that his identity is firmly fixed in Pennsylvania, and especially the "Dutch" country of York County, one must wonder how the so-called "Father of American Weightlifting" came to spend his first years in Irwin (now Tift) County, Georgia. This fascination with native origins was never expressed by Hoffman himself who never seemed very interested in forebears or family lore. "Bob was not interested in history," recalled his brother Jack. "His disinterest was noticeable as his obituary made no mention of his parents or brothers and sisters. One without knowledge might think he was illegitimate."² There is also the curious circumstance that Bob bore no physical resemblance to his brothers and that there is no record of his birth at the Tift County Health Department. Indeed he experienced serious problems in securing a passport for international travel with his weightlifting teams in later years because he could not prove his citizenship. But evidence of Bob's Southern birth is by no means lacking. In addition to his own occasional references to it in *Strength & Health* over the years and his military service record, his brother provides ample oral and written testimony that he and Bob were born in south Georgia, while their other brother and sisters were born in Wilkensburg, Pennsylvania.³ But what were Bob's parents doing in Tifton, Georgia, and what significance, if any, did it have to his later career as

a weightlifting promoter? This question is addressed in various local history sources that shed some new light on the circumstances surrounding the Hoffman family sojourn to the South and about rural development in *fin de siècle* America.

Tifton is actually one of the newer cities of Georgia, founded in 1872 when Captain Henry Harding Tift, a downeast Yankee from Mystic, Connecticut, decided to build a sawmill along the newly completed stretch of the Brunswick and Western Railway that connected Albany with the coast. Over the next several decades, Tift's mill, eventually expanding into turpentine and barrel-making operations, exploited the vast resources of 4,900 acres of virgin timberland adjacent to the railway that the owner had purchased from his uncles.⁴ The settlement of Tifton grew up around the sawmill on the highest ground south of the fall line at Macon. It consisted first of Tift's employees, then various service enterprises, and eventually a marketing center for such agricultural products as cotton, corn, livestock, fruit, tobacco, pecans, and even sweet potatoes. The latter was made possible by Tift's willingness to rent and sell much of his vast acreage after the timber had been harvested.

At first the town's growth was slow, but when the Georgia Southern and Florida Railway intersected the Brunswick and Western at Tift's mill in November 1888 the settlement, now connected with Atlanta and all

parts north, became a boom town. Tift promoted this enterprise by establishing a model farm just north of the town on which he raised a wide variety of crops and even experimented with oranges. Then he donated a large acreage to the railroad for an agricultural experiment station. It was called Cycloneta, after a tornado that had recently swept through the spot, and eventually led to the development of the Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College and the Georgia Coastal Plain Experiment Station in Tifton. So great was its growth and prosperity that Tifton was incorporated as a town in 1891 and became the county seat when Tift County was carved out of three neighboring counties in 1905.⁵

It was this agricultural boom town that served as such a lure for Addison Frederick Hoffman, Bob's father. But there were also powerful economic forces repelling him from western Pennsylvania where his family had resided for several generations. In contrast to the phenomenal growth that was taking place in the Southern outback throughout the 1890s a depression, sparked by the so-called Panic of 1893, gripped America's heartlands where industrial expansion had been occurring at a feverish pace during the previous decade. Within six months there were eight thousand businesses, four hundred banks, and 156 railways that went out of business. The economic slump, world-wide in scope, lasted for four long years.⁶ Deeply effected, though not devastated, was the Carnegie Steel Corporation of Pittsburgh where Addison was a general manager at the Duquesne mill. But the hard times did force the elder Hoffman to seek other employment possibilities.⁷

It was fortuitous that only a week after the nation's gold reserves dropped below the \$100,000,000 mark, thereby instigating the Great Panic, that an appeal for "more people" appeared in *The Tifton Gazette*. "The surest and quickest way to develop our state's resources, as they can and ought to be, is to multiply her population, and thereby fill up the waste places." It was "Georgia's Greatest Need."⁸ That this development could best be brought about by attracting outsiders was made clear in another editorial several months later. "There are immense tracts of land in every county of the state susceptible of the highest development and capable of adding untold millions to her wealth, and it would be done if people abroad were made acquainted with them." It was only through the intelligence and energy of "strangers" that Georgia could maximize its potential.⁹ Tifton itself, dubbed "the queen of all the lovely villages" situated along the line that connected Atlanta with the Sewanee River region of north Florida, was recognized as especially attractive to such settlers. In fact,

"four Pennsylvania gentlemen with their families" moved to Tifton in December 1893 to raise fruit on a five hundred acre plot, and an additional party of forty Ohioans and members of the Ohio Press Association were planning a visit in January. Local promoters rhapsodized about the virtues of their community and how fruit and vegetable growing, rather than cotton, would inaugurate a new age of prosperity on Henry Tift's recently cleared timberlands. "When her matchless pine forests are no more, south Georgia will not be a desert waste, but will be one vast garden, hardly less fair than Eden, and with a population much more numerous and contented, and Tifton will be the fairest and proudest of the beautiful cities of the bright future."¹⁰ Such were the rosy prospects that were held out to Northerners who wished to escape the ravages and uncertainties of the depression that was sweeping the more developed areas of the country.

It is almost certain that Addison Hoffman's family was included in the initial party of Pennsylvanians, inasmuch as he commenced farming operations on a 200 acre plot north of Tifton on January 1, 1894.¹¹ The family at that time included Bob's mother Bertha (Leone), his older sister Florence who would have been a toddler at this time, and his older brother Charles (Chuck), still an infant. Accompanying Bob's immediate family was his forty-nine year-old grandfather John L. Hoffman, a Civil War veteran who had also worked for Carnegie Steel. In fact, the elder Hoffman not only paid (between \$6 and \$10 per acre) for Addison's land but purchased an additional hundred acres for himself. Jack, though still unborn, attempts to recreate the conditions on the Hoffman homestead. "A house was built, a siding next to the Railway was built. cabins were built for the blacks who were hired with a black overseer, six hundred acres of trees and brush was cleared, trees were cut and stumps pulled with large white mules."¹² Along with their pioneer-style existence on the land, the Hoffmans might have encountered still some of the rude features of a frontier town in Tifton. As recently as 1892 a municipal ordinance made it "unlawful for any bull, boar or bitch to run at large upon the streets of said city."¹³ Also, perhaps a natural accompaniment of Tifton's frenzied growth, was the appearance of a certain lawless element, resulting in a shootout and some acts of arson.¹⁴

All contemporary accounts agree, however, that the character and conduct of the new Northern immigrants was beyond reproach. So numerous and concentrated were the properties of those from the Keystone State, about five miles north of Tifton, that the settlement was dubbed "Little Pennsylvania." It was situated in

Irwin County, where Jefferson Davis had surrendered in 1865, and it was near a smaller colony called "Little Ohio" in neighboring Worth County. As successive waves of Pennsylvanians arrived, they were greeted with paeans of welcome from Tiftonites who were convinced, notwithstanding the recent economic downturn, that they would infuse in Georgia wiregrass country the same kind of work ethic that had brought so much prosperity to the industrial cities of the North.¹⁵ "They are enterprising, energetic, economical, and the very best class of citizens," observed a local journalist. "And some of them can draw their check for a million! Altogether, near ten thousand acres will be growing fruit and truck tributary to this place during the present year."¹⁶ In early 1895, reported the *Macon Telegraph*, "a party of sixteen arrived from Pittsburg Thursday afternoon, the coldest day in years. While they suffered some from cold, they seemed delighted when the sun shone out Friday morning, and said it was much better than the blinding snowstorms they left in Pittsburg. About two thousand acres in small farms have been sold to these progressive people, and they are going right ahead planting fruit farms."¹⁷ Another undertaking was the Keystone Fruit Company, a joint marketing venture underwritten by several wealthy gentlemen from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, which included not only peach orchards but a nursery and vineyard.¹⁸ But the most important of these immigrant enterprises was Little Pennsylvania, which consisted of forty families "who have within two years worked a revolution in the land."¹⁹

County historian Ida Belle Williams contends that this thriving pioneer community "was the result of the success of two Pennsylvanians in this section, U. S. Louther and A. F. Hoffman."²⁰ It is evident too that Bob's father was active in local society. On 26 April 1895, *The Tifton Gazette* reports that the young people of Tifton were treated to "a pleasant evening" at the Hoffman residence in Little Pennsylvania. As the paper reported, "on the return trip to the city, the horses hitched to one of the vehicles took a notion to have some fun on their own account by running away and there was a narrow escape from a serious accident. Several panels of fence were wrecked and the wagon considerably damaged."²¹

Resulting in a more positive outcome was Addison Hoffman's role as superintendent of the Garden Products Department for the Empire Garden Midsummer Fair in 1895.²² This annual event literally began on a dining room table at Henry Tift's residence in 1893 where samples of fruit grown on local farms were dis-

played. In the following year a special 80' x 80' building was erected to house the fair which attracted a thousand entries. Additional expansion ensued in succeeding years, and by 1897 there were five thousand visitors viewing the exhibits.²³ With regard to the 1894 Midsummer Fair, the *Atlanta Journal* observed that "a more complete success in every way has never been chronicled in this whole southern country."²⁴ For that same year Williams contends that "Tifton's peach market exceeded that of Fort Valley," traditionally regarded as the center of Georgia's peach industry.²⁵ Although the fairgrounds had to be sold in 1900, by this time the Tifton area had become recognized as the Empire Garden of the so-called Empire State of the South.

Addison Hoffman, with a spread of six thousand peach trees, three thousand plum trees, five hundred pear trees, and four thousand grape vines in 1896, could feel proud that he was playing an integral part in this development.²⁶ One must assume, especially with its immediate proximity to the railroad, that profitability was high in these years. *Farm and Fireside*, a popular agricultural digest of the time, estimated that a two hundred acre peach orchard could earn as much as \$50,000 or \$250 an acre per year. "One grower, with an orchard of less than eight acres, sold his crop on the trees for \$2,500, or more than \$300 per acre." That was a lot of money in the 1890s.²⁷ Yet one searches in vain for any mention of A. F. Hoffman, or even Little Pennsylvania, in any of the local history sources after 1896. And in 1903 his name first appears in the Pittsburg city directory as a U.S. inspector at the Government Building in Wilkesburg.²⁸

The question remains of why the Hoffmans, particularly in light of the prosperity associated with fruit growing in the Empire Garden, returned so soon to their native state. Jack suggests that it had something to do with xenophobic attitudes of Southerners lingering from the Civil War. Their ripened peaches were "shipped in refrigerated cars that were supposed to be re-iced at Atlanta but they were not and arrived in Pittsburg in sad condition. There was considerable bitterness amongst Confederates who had lost the Civil War and Yankees did not always fare too well." This description, however, hardly accords with the overwhelming evidence that Pennsylvanians in particular and outsiders in general were enthusiastically welcomed for the spirit of enterprise they brought to this undeveloped area. A more believable scenario is that Bob's mother was disenchanted with the rusticity of pioneer living and longed to return to the refinements of big city life. Although, according to Jack, she adjusted to "the necessities of

living under greatly changed conditions,” she was “a trained piano and organ player who loved music.” She was “a lady.”²⁹ Hardships in south Georgia might also have contributed to the later separation and divorce of Bob’s parents. Another factor could have been that Addison got tired of farming or perhaps was not doing very well at it. Furthermore, by the end of the decade the Depression lifted, and a greater abundance of employment opportunities beckoned once again in the North. At any rate, the Hoffman’s settlement at Little Pennsylvania quickly lost its uniqueness as Minnesotans, Wisconsinites, Indianans, and even Swedes descended on Tifton and were eventually absorbed in the melting pot of city/county progress.³⁰

The extent to which Bob Hoffman’s birth and early life in south Georgia influenced his later rise to fame and fortune as a physical culturist would be difficult to determine. Certainly no direct connection can be drawn. The only possible premonition comes from an advertisement headed “Strength and Health” that ran regularly for several years in the Tifton newspaper. It featured a local snake oil concoction called “Electric Bitters” that supposedly provided relief for the “weak and weary” by aiding the liver, stomach, and kidneys to perform their functions.³¹ Bob too, as a promoter par excellence, was often accused of selling snake oil! But this is mere historical happenstance. On a more serious level, Bob’s Georgia roots cannot be so easily dismissed as whimsy or as useless bits of recondite lore. While it is the poundages lifted, records set, contests won, the ecstasy of victory and agony of defeat, that most excites our interest in iron game personalities, no real understanding is possible without an investigation of the whole picture, including one’s cultural context. Indeed this is the point behind Josef Svub’s recent revelations on “The Ancestry of John Grimek.”³² No lifter, body-builder, or promoter emerged in a vacuum. However much training routine, diet, and drug intake appear to be critical to an iron game athlete’s development, such less obvious factors as home life, ethnicity, religion, economic status, sexuality, education, career aspirations, psychological stability, and even ancestry likely have an even greater bearing. Though perhaps deserving no more than a footnote in the grand scheme of things, Bob’s early and brief Southern exposure must be considered part of the cultural baggage he carried with him en route to becoming weightlifting’s greatest promoter. Of all the honors Bob Hoffman received in his later years, “Distinguished Pennsylvanian” is no doubt one of which he was most proud; but his life actually began in “Little

Pennsylvania,” for which he also deserves the distinction of being recognized as a son of the South.

Notes:

- ¹ *Tifton Gazette*, 23 February 1894.
- ² Typescript by John L. Hoffman, December, 1987.
- ³ Interview with John L. Hoffman, Parker, Pennsylvania. 1 January 1988, and Hoffman Service Records, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg.
- ⁴ Sarah Cochran Atwater, *Tifton Centennial Commemorative Booklet* (Tifton, 1972) and “Tifton’s Founder: Henry Harding Tift,” typescript in the Genealogy Collection, Tifton-Tift County Public Library.
- ⁵ “From Pine Forest to Empire Garden,” *The Daily Tifton Gazette*, 26 September 1972.
- ⁶ John D. Hicks, *The American Nation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 231.
- ⁷ Typescript by Hoffman.
- ⁸ *Tifton Gazette*, 28 April 1893.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 21 April 1893.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15 December 1893.
- ¹¹ *Tifton Gazette*, 8 February 1895.
- ¹² Typescript by Hoffman.
- ¹³ *Tifton Gazette*, 11 March 1892.
- ¹⁴ “A Shootout, Railroad, Bride and New Town,” *Daily Tifton Gazette*, 26 September 1972.
- ¹⁵ *Tifton Gazette*, 14 December 1894; 11 January 1895; and 18 January 1895.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 March 1895.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15 February 1895.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12 July 1895.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3 May 1895.
- ²⁰ Ida Belle Williams, *History of Tift County* (Macon, 1948), 39-40.
- ²¹ *Tifton Gazette*, 26 April 1895.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 3 May 1895.
- ²³ “Growth Phenomenal During the 1890s” *Daily Tifton Gazette*, 26 September 1972.
- ²⁴ *Tifton Gazette*, 20 July 1894.
- ²⁵ Williams, *History of Tift County*, 39.
- ²⁶ *Tifton Gazette*, 10 July 1896.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28 August 1896.
- ²⁸ R. L. Polk & Co.’s Pittsburgh City Directory (1903) Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Jack Hoffman suggests, from an early anecdote of his brother at age 3, that the family was back in Wilkensburg by 1901. Typescript by Hoffman.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Tifton Gazette*, 22 January 1897.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 31 March 1893.
- ³² Josef Svub, “The Ancestors of John C. Grimek,” *Milo* 9(December 2001), 80-82.