



IRON GAME HISTORY



THE JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL CULTURE

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A PROGRESS REPORT

Many readers have asked us how we use the collection of materials we have assembled through the years. As a way to reply to these questions, we'd like to offer the following letter, written last month, to the family of the late Roy J. McLean, who helped us establish our collection here at The University of Texas.

Dear McLean Family,

When Roy J. "Mac" McLean and I first began discussing the formation of a center/library for the cultural and historical study of physical culture, I told Mac that Jan and I had two major goals for such a center. Our first goal was to preserve for posterity books, magazines, photographs, personal papers, manuscripts, and other artifacts in the fields of physical fitness, weight training, nutrition, alternative medicine, general health, and other branches of what is most commonly called "physical culture." Our hope was that placing such items at The University would enhance their chances of being preserved over time. Our second goal was to encourage academic scholarship in the field of physical culture by 1) making our collections accessible to researchers, and 2) publishing our quarterly journal, *Iron*

Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture.

We are happy to report that, in a variety of ways, we are meeting these goals. Over the past several years, our collection has been used by a number of scholars working on books related to the field of physical culture. Jan's book, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women 1800-1870*, was released this summer by Mercer University Press. She did

most of her research in our collection and was inspired to write the book by materials donated to the Collection by retired Kinesiology professor Dr. Mary Lou LeCompte. This winter, Penn State Press is releasing Dr. John Fair's *Muscle town USA*, a biography of Bob Hoffman, founder of the York Barbell Company and a leading proponent of resistance training in the early twentieth century. Dr. Fair, who is chairman of the history department at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia, has made a number of trips to Texas to use our Collection. In addition to his new book, he has published several articles—based on materials in our collection—in the *Journal of Sport History* and *Iron Game History*. Finally, Southwestern University sociology professor Maria Lowe used our collection for her 1997 book, *Women of Steel:*



Female Bodybuilders and the Struggle for Self-Definition. Maria was a graduate student of mine while she was here at UT and her book, published by New York University Press, is based on her dissertation.

There are a number of books presently underway based on holdings in the Collection. This summer, Dr. Jack Berryman, a professor in the medical school at the University of Washington in Seattle, spent over a week here in Austin doing research. Dr. Berryman is the official historian of the American College of Sports Medicine and he had two research goals while he was in Austin. One of his goals was to use our collection to complete a timeline he is creating for

the American College of Sports Medicine's Internet web page. His 300+ page time-line tracks the evolution of sports medicine and exercise history from the ancient Greeks to the present. He was also here, however, to begin research on his new book which will examine the impact of sports medicine on American physical education and exercise. Travelling with Dr. Berryman was Professor James C. Whorton, also of the University of Washington's medical school. Dr. Whorton is one of our most distinguished authors in the field of sport and medical history. His *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers* is considered a model for

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intellectual histories while his many journal articles and presentations at national meetings have established him as the world's leading authority on the history of health reform. Dr. Whorton's new project is a book on the history of naturopathic medicine. He told us that he was astonished at the richness of our collection in this area and, like Dr. Berryman, plans to return to Austin later this year to continue his research.

Dr. Sam Dana of the school of journalism at Loyola University in Chicago is working on a biography of Charles Atlas. Dr. Dana, who specializes in the history of advertising, made two trips to Austin this past academic year to research Atlas' life and his ad campaign to sell "Dynamic Tension"—which is, by the way, the longest running ad campaign in American history. Another scholar, Dr. James Woycke, of the history department at the University of Western Ontario in Canada is also working on a book based in part on our Collection. Dr. Woycke is writing a history of the evolution of bodybuilding in Canada. He is particularly interested in the formation of the International Federation of Bodybuilders and the influence of Joe and Ben Weider, its founders, who grew up in Montreal. Dr. Woycke will visit the Collection this fall and plans to come back for an extended visit in the spring.

Jan has also begun two new book projects related to the Collection. The Human Kinetics Publishing Co. has asked her to edit a book of readings on what some academics are beginning to call "body culture." Over the past five years, there has been a tremendous growth of interest in the academic study of the body, bodybuilding and interpretations of the body. In fact, *Lingua Franca*, a journal about academic life, published an article in its October issue about the sudden explosion of courses and scholarship in this field. (Jan and I were interviewed for the article.) Human Kinetics believes that the time is right for an anthology of current and historical articles that could be used as a text in a "body culture" class. She has asked Dr. Berryman to co-edit the volume because he teaches such a class in the medical history program at the University of Washington. Jan's other project is one on which we are collaborating. She is working on a history of exercise in the twentieth century. She spent most of her summer researching this book, helped by grants from The University and the Amateur Athletic Foundation in Los Angeles. By summer's end, she had decided that she wanted to approach this history by focussing on the events surrounding Muscle Beach in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Because many of the individuals involved in Muscle Beach

are people I've known for years, I have agreed to co-author.

We are also assisting several scholars with their book projects by "long-distance." Dr. Frank Zarnowski of Mount St. Mary's University is researching the Scottish track and field athlete Donald Dinnie. We have sent Dr. Zarnowski Xerox copies of magazine and journal articles for his project and he recently contributed a long article for *Iron Game History* in return. We also helped Dr. Allen Guttmann of Amherst College with his latest book, *The Erotic in Sports*, by providing him with photographs and with some manuscript materials. Nicholas Turse, a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers, is also working on a physical culture project. Turse is researching physical fitness at the turn of the century. He is specifically looking at Eugen Sandow's work in India, New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand. We are helping Turse with background material on Sandow's life as well as material on the physical fitness movement at the turn of the century. Finally, several years ago, we assisted Dr. Ron Smith of Penn State University with a history of the National Strength and Conditioning Association that he had been asked to write by that body.

In previous years, Dr. Joan Hult of the University of Maryland visited the Collection for her history of women's basketball; Dr. Horst Uberborst, from Germany visited the Collection in connection with his history of the Turner movement in North America; Dr. Jill Matthews of the University of Western Australia spent a week here researching women's bodybuilding; and Dr. Andy Kosar, a Presidential Scholar at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, researched the physical fitness movement of the 1940s. (*Ed. Note: An article by Kosar will appear in the next issue of IGH.*) Last but by no means least, UT's Dr. John Hoberman, whose most recent book was the widely acclaimed *Darwin's Athletes*, is a frequent visitor.

Several graduate students are currently using the Collection. Josh Buck, a masters' student in performance and theater at the University of Maryland, spent several days at the Collection last spring. Buck, who has asked Jan to be on his masters committee, is analyzing from a performance perspective circus and vaudeville "strongman" acts. Here at the University of Texas, four Ph.D. students are currently using the collection for part of their research. Kim Hewitt [American Studies] is using our extensive collection of books on psychology and psychiatry for her dissertation on America's changing attitudes toward these fields in the 1960s. Carolyn de la Pena, another of Jan's graduate students, [American Studies] is looking at America's fascination with electricity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [The

various electrical athletic devices that began to be used as substitutes for exercise particularly fascinate Ms. de la Pena.] James Harley [Performance and Theater] has asked both me and Jan to serve on his dissertation committee. Harley plans to examine the evolution of sports rules as a function of performance. He believes that many rules come into being in order to make sports interesting to watch rather than to make them more fair and impartial. He will be using our contemporary magazine collection as well as manuscript materials we have from the rules committees of several sports organizations. Alice Checala [American Studies] is writing her dissertation about the connections between masculinity and physical training in the early twentieth century. Finally, Charles Kupfer [American Studies] just completed his dissertation on the influence of the media during World War II. Kupfer, who was my graduate student used the Collection for his section on sports coverage and the use of sport metaphors in battle coverage by American journalists.

Through the years we have also had many visitors to the Collection who are not academics—visitors who are simply fans and followers of the iron game. Many of these visitors are people with national reputations, people like Peary and Mabel Rader, Cory and Jeff Everson, Vic Boff, George Foreman, Joe Roark, Mauro DiPasquale, Joe Puleo, Bill Starr, Steve Reeves, Jim Murray, Joe Assirati, Harold Weiss, Dennis Rogers, Cleve Dean, Bob and Doug Young, Mike Hall, Ellington Darden, Eddie Robinson, Lamar Gant, Judy and Roger Gedney, Steve Neece, Jim Witt, Ricky Crain, Brother Bennett, and Ed Jubinville.

We are also pleased to report that the Collection continues to be used by the media and other outside agencies. The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City is hosting an exhibition in the spring of 2000 called *Picturing the Modern Amazon: Representations of Today's Muscular Women in Art and Photography*. The exhibition will have three parts: a historical display, a section on comic books, and the primary exhibition—original works of art. Jan has been the historical consultant for the show and our collection is one of the major sources of historical images. We have also assisted the History Channel with two two-hour television specials. This past spring we provided images for *Theater of War: A History of Professional Wrestling*. It aired in May. This summer, we spent more than two weeks being interviewed, helping to find images, and fact-checking their new documentary on the history of physical fitness. Jan has been named historical consultant for the show, which will air in February. Over the past several years, we've

provided photographs to *National Geographic*, *Stern* [Germany], *Scientific American*, *Stanford Humanities Review*, *Lingua Franca*, *Sports Illustrated*, and a variety of other publications. Images and films from the Collection were also used in the documentary film: *Fit: Episodes in the History of the Body* [funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities] that appeared on PBS television. This past spring, Jan was asked to deliver the D.B. Dill Historical Address at the American College of Sports Medicine's annual meeting. Her hour-long presentation entitled *Women and Weights: An Illustrated History* was inspired by the richness of our photography collections. Finally, Educational Development Services of California is using one of our photographs (of Texas strongman Stout Jackson) for a poster promoting physical fitness. It will be distributed in the public schools.

As you can see, we've come a long way toward reaching the goals Mac and I believed were important. While Jan and I continue to hope that the day will come when our Collection will have more space and at least one full-time archivist to help with preservation and the growing number of research requests, we like to think Mac and Nell would be proud of what we've been able to do so far. If we can ever be of any service, please let us know.

—Terry Todd





The Search for
Elmer Bitgood:
The Paul Bunyan of New England

John d. Fair, Ph.D.
 Georgia College and State University

In his commentary on the 1973 world powerlifting championships in Harrisburg, Terry Todd noted how “the crowds turn out far better to watch the big men lift—they come to see the living embodiment of their childhood dreams, they come to see the giants. I’ve often wondered about this, about why it is that the Capuchin monkey, the lemur, the ocelot, and the impala receive far less respective attention at the zoo than the gorilla, the rhinoceros, the tiger and the elephant. Or the lesser kudu than the greater kudu.”¹ Creatures of great size and strength, from either the human or animal realms, are not only a source of endless fascination but provide the stuff from which legends are created. So each generation in the twentieth century has witnessed amazing feats from such giants of strength as Louis Cyr, Louis Uni, Eugen Sandow, Henry Steinborn, Hermann Goerner, John Davis, Doug Hepburn, Paul Anderson, Vasily Alexeev, Bill Kazmaier, and Mark Henry.

Countless other strongmen of somewhat lesser repute have successfully promoted themselves by association to the fictional accomplishments of the likes of Apollo (William Bankier), Atlas (Angelo Siciliano), Attila (Louis Durlacher), Hercules (Clevio Massimo), Thor (John Miki), Milo (Luigi Bara), Samson (Alexander Zass), Goliath (Karl Westphal), and Ben Hur (Dick Solomon).² Falling through the cracks in the annals of strength history is a

figure who never aspired to fame and fortune and is virtually unknown outside the “long woods” district of eastern Connecticut where he spent his entire life. Yet in Voluntown, where he is often likened to Paul Bunyan, the strength feats of Elmer Bitgood assumed larger than life proportions. Such stories are easily dismissed by historians who rightly insist that legends should be rooted in verifiable facts. Indeed most of what is known about the life and accomplishments of Bitgood has been based on hearsay. But his inclusion among the modern giants of strength, and not just a local hero, depends on the extent to which sufficient historical grounds can be established to support his awesome reputation.

That a legend has developed around the life of Elmer Bitgood may be attributed to several interrelated factors. First, he was undoubtedly big and strong. According to his brother Paul, a naturopath in New London, Elmer weighed 290 pounds at age 25 and was 5 feet 9 inches in height. His chest measured 52 inches, his waist 50 inches, and his biceps 20 inches. He wore a size 12 shoe and a 7 ½ hat. These dimensions are not extraordinary by present standards, but Bitgood should be assessed by the standards of his own era, not ours. He lived from 1869 to 1938. At the prime of his lifting career in 1894, according to life insurance data, he exceeded the average adult in body-weight (for his height) by 126 pounds with a correspond-

ingly large girth.³ Despite his extraordinary size, surviving photographs convey an image of raw strength rather than obesity.

A further foundation for the Bitgood legend lies in the many stories that abound of his lifting prowess. In the decades following his death, many individuals testified to his prodigious strength. Not surprisingly, these eye-witness accounts have been expanded upon over the years—owing partly to the tricks that memory plays on all of us, the ego charge one sustains from improving upon an already good story, and in the case of Voluntown, a certain (ethnocentric) pride of place that comes from boosting the historical

of one's hometown or region.⁴ An additional enticement for us to believe the Bunyanesque tales associated with Elmer Bitgood comes from a packet of photographs housed in the archives of the Voluntown Historical Society in the basement of the town hall. They show Elmer hoisting various heavy objects, including barrels, globe bells, and hunks of iron. There is also a picture of Elmer and his younger brother Doane standing beside a large table, designed for backlifting, with a pile of boulders on top. To help dispel curiosity about the weight of these devices, such numbers as 500, 120 and 300 appear on them. But the clarity and uniformity of these numbers suggest that they may have been superimposed on an earlier generation of photographs. If so, one wonders who might have done it, when, and above all, *why*. Especially suspicious is a picture of Elmer holding a sphere labeled "500" overhead with one hand with ridiculous ease. Here the number "5" appears flat, though the surface is bent. Another photo shows the strongman posing in overalls with a barrel marked "360" overhead. Not only is his face expressionless, but his arms are bent and his muscles show little sign of flexing. Either we are being hoaxed by some gross misrepresentations or Bitgood did really possess super-human strength. Is seeing really believing?

A final basis for belief in the legend of Elmer Bitgood is artifactual. In the driveway of Arthur and Mary Anne Nieminen off Brown Road lies a collection of solid granite barbells and dumbbells (inserted with bars) that once belonged to the Bitgoods. They were moved from the Bitgood homestead on Wylie School Road where the strongman trained and allegedly performed impromptu feats of strength for visitors. Jan Mallett, the current resident, states that she is constantly digging up pieces of iron when preparing flower beds in her yard. After the last of the Bitgoods died, Arthur Nieminen, as executor of the property, sold it but was allowed to keep the stones and move



Has any human ever been strong enough to lift a freight car? If the legends can be believed, Elmer Bitgood was. This caricature appeared in the *Providence Sunday Journal* in early 1948.

them to their present location. Originally, explains Nieminen, there were many more small items of iron paraphernalia, but they were carried off by thieves over the years. The larger stones, however, defied even the most determined acts of criminal mischief. Nieminen has also resisted offers to sell the stone barbells, the heaviest of which supposedly weighs 1,225 pounds, believing that they should remain a part of the heritage of the county.⁵ (*Ed Note: Using circumferential measurements supplied by the Nieminens, Greg Ernst calculated that the granite bells would weigh between 1520 and 1700 pounds. It is also interesting that the boulders are only 27" apart, which would make it very difficult for a true superheavyweight to take a comfortable deadlift grip.*) But the nagging question remains of why they were assembled and whether anyone, including the Bitgoods, ever used them. Surely no one would go to the trouble and expense of constructing these awkward instruments of exertion if they were never to be employed. Like Stonehenge or the Travis dumbbell that once graced the portal of the York Barbell Club on Ridge Avenue, their mere presence begs an explanation, and logic dictates that someone very strong must have lifted them. Furthermore, they fit perfectly into the rural ambience of eastern Connecticut and into a time in United States history before anyone was manufacturing barbells. Prior to the founding of Milo Barbell Company by Alan Calvert in 1902, and for at least a decade after, improvisation was the rule. The Bitgood apparati were nothing if not improvised. By far the most important impact the boulderbells have had over the past half century has been to provide a tangible reinforcement for the growing legend of the Paul Bunyan of New England.

History, however, relies more on the written than on oral or artifactual tradition, and the search for the real Elmer Bitgood must begin with the earliest possible primary accounts. In lieu of any manuscript sources (letters, diaries, memoirs, etc.) from the period, newspapers provide the most reliable observations of the Bitgoods, and the earliest such account, entitled "Bitgood Brothers, Voluntown's Giants," appeared in the 7 May 1909, issue of the *Norwich Bulletin*. The article, accompanied by a picture of Elmer and Doane beside their backlifting table, asserts that this apparatus held

five stones weighing 2,200 pounds. Elmer then gets underneath, puts his hands on the small stool and raises the table three or four inches with his shoul-

ders, lowering it gently back to place. Then, if the visitor wants to see something more, he has a stone as big as a small automobile, weighing 2,400 pounds, which they roll upon the table, and that is hoisted in the same way. . . . Then he has two stone bar bells, the heaviest 230 pounds, which he will put up over his head, one at a time, and finish up with a one-handed feat in which he holds at arm's length a stone weighing 150 pounds, and will also lift it with his little finger put through a ring in the stone.

In an obvious effort to lend credibility to these claims, Doane assured the reporter that "the weights lifted are guaranteed . . . by a committee of townsmen who weighed them on a pair of new scales and marked the weights, so that there can be no mistake." But the Bitgoods refused to subject their strength to public scrutiny when some performers billed as the Apollo Brothers came to Norwich and issued a sack lift challenge to local strongmen. Although Doane called it a "plaything," he refused to accept the Apollos' challenge out of concern that "he might break up the show for the rest of the week."⁶

Still, in light of feats performed over the next half century by such strongmen as Paul Anderson, Hermann Goerner, Karl Norberg, and countless Olympic lifters in competition, the Bitgood lifts reported by the *Norwich Bulletin* are far from the realm of impossible. Those reported by a 1916 account in the *Providence Sunday Journal* entitled "Voluntown's Modern Samson," however, verge on the unbelievable. This article seems intent upon raising Elmer Bitgood to legendary status. A romantic tone is set at the outset by the author's likening Elmer to such mythical heroes as Canadian strongman Joe La Flamme and Ireland's Tim [Finn] McCool who reputedly built the Giant's Causeway between Ulster and southwest Scotland. But it is Samson, not Hercules, Atlas, or even Paul Bunyan with whom Elmer is compared. Unlike those heroes of yore, however, Bitgood was both real and still alive to claim the distinction of being the "strongest man on earth." His feats of strength included lifting "a 180 pound keg with both hands over the head, lifting 175 pounds of good solid Connecticut rock with one hand straight up above the head; 'muscling out' 51 pounds in each hand with arms at right angles to the body; [and] raising a dumbbell [makeshift barbell] weighing 416



A YOUNG ELMER BITGOOD EASILY HOISTS A BARREL MARKED "360" IN SIMILAR PHOTOGRAPHS, OVERHEAD.
PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FAIR

pounds with both hands over the head." Accompanying this unsigned article are some pictures of Elmer lifting these weights in his bib overalls. While the one-hand overhead lift with a 175 slab and the "muscle-out" with two 51 pound weights are quite believable, it seems highly unlikely that the double barrel barbell he is hoisting weighed 416 pounds, especially since it is clearly marked "200" on one side. Whether Elmer could even have

cleaned such an unwieldy apparatus is the question that would confront most modern iron game authorities, especially considering the thick bar and reversed (curl) grip displayed in the picture!⁷

To provide substance to these reputed claims, the reporter sought first-hand evidence by actually visiting the Voluntown area. He immediately observed that "Bitgood seems to be the most widely known citizen of eastern Connecticut." Indeed he "experienced little difficulty in procuring directions as to how to reach the Bitgood farm, and almost every farmer seemed eager to tell of some wonderful exploit that he had seen his fellow townsman perform. The nearer the reporter approached his destination the more wonderful were the tales, and those related by the soothsayers and oracles of the village itself seemed almost unbelievable." At the first farmhouse across the Rhode Island line, where the reporter sought directions, he was told that Elmer, just to stay trim, "picks up a couple of stone gate posts, weighing 400 or 500 pounds apiece, and carries them around, one in each hand, a great deal easier than a chore boy would a couple of cans of milk." Later, when the reporter's driver got their automobile stuck in the mud of one of rural Connecticut's unpaved roads, a local farmer appeared, expressing regret that Elmer Bitgood, who could extricate the machine "quicker than scat," was not available.

'Pull that machine out of there?' contemptuously asked the driver. 'Why that 36 horse power motor won't even budge it. What we need is a couple of good horses.' 'Makes no difference what you think you need, Elmer could pull it out, and what's more, he has done it,' replied the farmer. 'Last fall after one of those thawing spells, when the roads were a good deal worse than they are now, a fellow with a good deal bigger car than this came along and got stuck. He came down and got my horse, but we couldn't move the car. We were trying to get something under the back wheels by lifting the car with a jack when Elmer happened along.

'He stopped and looked on a minute or two. Then he came over, told us to get the jack and the old boards out of his way. Then he grabbed hold of the rear springs and lifted that car right out

of the ruts up on to solid ground and told the driver to get in and go along. It's too bad he ain't here.'

'Yes, it is too bad,' ejaculated the driver as he viciously jabbed away at the mud with a tire iron. 'I suppose that strong man of yours lives on ox hearts aand fried elephant's ears.'

This facetious remark further aroused the farmer, whereupon he launched into a tirade about Elmer's eating exploits.

'Last winter he hired out with a man over near Jewett City. The man was loading telephone poles on cars and Elmer hired out at so much a month and keep. He told the boss when they made the bargain that he expected a good dinner every day, but was not so particular about his breakfast and supper.'

'That seemed reasonable to the boss and after the bargain had been made he asked Elmer what he considered a good dinner. "Oh," said Elmer, "four or five roast chickens and the usual fixings will do."

'Just for the fun of the thing the boss got four roast chickens ready the first day and Elmer ate every scrap and crumb and licked up the last bit of gravy. What I'm telling you is true as gospel and the four chickens wasn't an over heavy meal, either.'

'I've been told that Elmer and his next door neighbor went down to Plainfield a couple of years ago to get some groceries and among the things they bought was a half-barrel of crackers. On the way back Elmer began to nibble at the crackers. He'd reach into the barrel and take a fist full and eat them while his neighbor drove the horse. He wasn't trying to see how much he could eat, was nibbling the crackers more as a pastime just as he would peanuts, but before he got home every gosh-hanged cracker was gone.'

'Now, understand I wasn't there, but the man that told me the story

has a pretty good reputation in this community, and it's the common talk of the whole town that he can drink eight quarts of milk without taking the can down from his head: so believe it or not.'

Upon reaching Voluntown, the reporter was regaled with similar stories by local citizens gathered at the village store, to the extent that Bitgood "made the famous strong men of the world resemble a collection of weaklings." Additional stories included one about how Elmer would "spell" his horse while plowing—meaning that he would actually relieve the animal periodically by harnessing the plow to himself and pull it around the field several times while Old Dobbin rested! A local lumberjack allegedly saw Bitgood lift a sawmill boiler, with several men standing on it, that it had taken four horses to haul out of the woods.⁸

"Seeing is believing" was the response of the reporter from Providence, but to ensure that "those who were telling these remarkable stories were not endeavoring to make a Hercules out of a Lilliputian," he visited Elmer who was living temporarily with his brother in Plainfield. In what is the only known interview with Bitgood, the reporter describes him as "blushing like a school girl" and admitting that the stories about his ravenous appetite and his lifting the steam boiler were "somewhat exaggerated." But he did confirm that the "big dumbbell made up of two kegs and an iron bar" did weigh "416 pounds. Each keg with the pebbles represents a little more than 200 pounds and the weight of the bar makes up the rest." Furthermore, he explained how he performed a back lift with "2100 pounds of rock" on a platform in his backyard.

Then I have more rocks that I put on until the weight is 4200 pounds. How often do I lift that? O, sometimes three or four times a day and sometimes not for a week. It all depends; if I need exercise I try it and if visitors come along and won't believe I can do it. I just show them.

Two other stunts Bitgood performed to the delight of visitors was pulling a "stone drag" loaded with 1,100 pounds of rock and a wagon with 2,100 pounds, each for 25 yards. Total abstinence from alcohol and tobacco he regarded as part of the reason for his ability to perform such feats.⁹

What the reporter lacked, of course, was absolute verification of Elmer's lifts. With all of his apparatus about ten miles away in Voluntown, Bitgood was unable to demonstrate his exercises or have his weights tested on certified scales. In lieu of such verities there was hearsay. When the reporter "became suspicious that perhaps after all the weights were not as represented," Elmer responded that a group of government forestry workers had recently visited his yard, and even the largest of them could do no more than lift one end of his big dumbbell. Most others as well could barely budge it. "They tell of men who are able to take that weight and put it up with one hand, but I have never met any of them." For further corroboration of his lifts, Bitgood referred the reporter to "Neighbor Brown" who treated him to even more stories, including one about Elmer breaking nine cant hooks in three days while loading telephone poles in Jewett City, and vouchsafed his reputation to no less an authority than Sheriff Bliven of Plainfield, who had witnessed Elmer remove his 6,500 pound touring car from the mud.¹⁰ By this time the stories were beginning to gain a circular quality and a life of their own. Yet it was in these ill-defined circumstances that the Bitgood legend was born.

It was not until April 1934, however, that the next Bitgood article appeared in the press. The *Norwich Sunday Record* reproduced the photograph that appeared with the 1909 article and featured some embellishments and additions to that original piece. Instead of merely holding "at arm's length a stone weighing 150 pounds," the latest version states that he would "hold out" this weight, implying a horizontal rather than a vertical lockout. But the most impressive-sounding new feats credited to Elmer involved steam engines. At a Fourth of July picnic Elmer allegedly lifted the end of a boiler and engine weighing 4,500 pounds with an additional nine men seated on it. On another occasion, the article reports, "he stopped a steam engine running under 85 pounds pressure . . . for a full minute."¹¹ The curious aspect of these prodigious feats of strength is that they appeared to have just been done and that Elmer could easily repeat them at will. He was, in fact, 65 years old and would die only four years later of heart disease.

By far the most consequential account in spreading the Bitgood story was G. Y. Loveridge's "Strong Elmer Bitgood, The Man and the Legend," which appeared in *The Providence Sunday Journal* eight years after Elmer's death. Like his 1916 precursor, Loveridge went on a fact-finding odyssey to eastern Connecticut. Truth in this instance proved more elusive inasmuch as it was no longer possible to witness Bitgood perform. His lifts were now the exclusive preserve of the memories of his friends and relatives. Loveridge himself, recognizing the fleeting

nature of his evidence, admits that "memories already are becoming indistinct, the old homestead has vanished, and the time is setting in when Elmer will be forgotten, only to arise years later, perhaps, reincarnated in myth." Loveridge first learned of Elmer's exploits from a friend of a friend in Providence named Ray Millar who related how the strongman had once gone to Danielson and on a bet lifted the front end of a freight car off its tracks and then wanted another \$25 to put it back. "But maybe that's just a story," he suspected. Another informant was Tom Lewis, 78, of Moosup who told Loveridge that he had seen Bitgood

lift a hundred-pound anvil by the horn with one hand and carry it same's you might carry a stick. . . . Carry it over there and come back and set it down again. There was a steam boiler at a lumber mill where he worked, and I've seen him put a railroad tie in the firebox and four or five men climb onto the boiler and Elmer put his back under the tie and lift the whole business.

Then Loveridge visited Voluntown to see the stone weights, some of which still remained at the site where only a foundation remained of the Bitgood homestead. His conclusion after seeing not only the big barbells but the smaller stones with iron rings used for finger lifting was one of conjecture and amazement. "If these were what Elmer had exercised with, he must indeed have been a man powerful beyond easy belief."¹²

In Voluntown, Loveridge also talked with a frail old man and his son Lloyd. The former could not remember much about Elmer except that he was "tremendously powerful and big." Yet he "could run a hundred yards as fast as any man." Lloyd recalled that he was visiting the Bitgood house at age seven and wanted some pears from a tree whose branches he could not reach. Whereupon Elmer walked over to a rail fence and "took the top rail in one hand as though it was a stick and knocked off some pears for me." Mrs. George Dawley, also of Voluntown, remembered Bitgood as a gentle giant. "I never heard a bad thing about him. . . . He was always good-natured, never harmed anybody. Doane was very stout too, a very stout fellow. They were all big, portly men." Albert T. Sisson of Providence concurred that Elmer was "a big, good-natured, fair complexioned man with red cheeks." When amused, he would "put back his head and laugh in that deep voice of his and his belly would shake. There wasn't a bit of meanness in him. He was a placid sort of man, always ready to laugh." Sisson also testified to witnessing Bitgood



ELMER AND DOANE BITGOOD WITH THEIR BACKLIFT APPARATUS AT THEIR HOME ON WYLIE SCHOOL ROAD IN VOLUNTOWN, CONNECTICUT.

PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FAIR

backlift his platform with stones and seeing him move the stone-sled he had improvised.¹³

Revelations of a more extreme nature, no less laden with memories, were supplied by a distant relative, Dr. Ellsworth Marshall Bitgood, a retired veterinarian in Middletown. That Elmer “could snap the hickory handle of a cant hook [used for log rolling] as though it were a mmatch” was common knowledge. He had seen Elmer lift the boiler and also the end of a wagon full of railway ties, but he admitted that he liked to amuse friends with a Paul Bunyanesque story that when Elmer approached a closed gate with a wagon and team of horses, he would simply lift them over it. Likewise Elmer’s great size lent itself to stories of his huge appetite. So Dr. Bitgood would “cheerfully relate how when Elmer was thirsty he would place one hand on each end of a keg of cider and drink the contents.” Ellsworth’s version of the cracker barrel

episode now differed substantially from the one from 1916. It now included Doane rather than a neighbor, took place on the way from Norwich, not Plainfield, and consisted of a full barrel, rather than a half barrel, of crackers.¹⁴ How wonderfully accommodating oral tradition can be to changing versions of reality.

Another Bitgood who assisted in the transmission of Elmer lore was the youngest Bitgood brother, Jessie Paul, a naturopath from New London. At first he had difficulty recalling Elmer’s feats for the Providence reporter. What brought them to mind was the relation of Elmer’s lifestyle to his own medical practice. Hence his was a message with a moral. Elmer allegedly lived a simple life, drank only milk and water, and never married. He was a devout Baptist who preferred reading the Bible to attending dances. Then he learned about Samson and allegedly concluded that great strength came from living

right. “Brother had a red Devonshire bull calf once. He used to take it into his lap like a pet even when it weighed two or three hundred pounds.” Consequently, defying the natural disposition of adult bulls, this animal, ‘when it was full grown . . . was gentle as a kitten.” Dr. Bitgood also claimed that his brother had had some training from noted physical culturist Bernarr Macfadden and had gone on stage for awhile, but he did not want to be a professional strong-man. “Sandow and men like that were weaklings compared to brother,” he asserted. “We often had strong men come to the farm, but they couldn’t lift the weights. One of them was associated with Louis Cyr, the Canadian strong man.” On a visit to Norwich, “this man came to the farm and he just looked at the weights and they were beyond him.” Dr. Bitgood estimated that Elmer reached his prime at age 25 (circa 1895), fully fifty years earlier.¹⁵ Loveridge seems skeptical at times but he, no more than the 1916 reporter, could halt the march of a legend.

It is not surprising that Jessie Paul, whose testimony to Loveridge strained credibility, was responsible for the next stage of the legend’s growth. An aura of historical fiction permeates a 1953 article in the *Hartford Times* where Bitgood leads reporters to a rock with a giant “V” carved in it, located 200 yards west of the house on Beach Pond Road where the doctor was born. The house, he alleges, was built by a pirate named John Hunter and the “V” was a clue to a spot nearby where Hunter buried his treasure in the seventeenth century. Dr. Bitgood insists that his great, great grandfather, Samuel Bitgood, who migrated from England, was the first to see the “V-Rock of Voluntown” in 1790. But where was the pirate’s gold? “Has he ever dug for it?” a reporter asked. “‘No,’ the doctor replied. ‘Where would you dig?’ Five yards from the rock? Five rods? Five miles?’ Nor does the local legend specify whether the ‘V’ represents the roman numeral or the letter.”¹⁶ The pirate story appears to be a classic case of making something out of nothing.

Not content to spin just one spurious yarn, Bitgood uses this opportunity to improve upon the story of his late brother’s strength. Whereas Elmer had admitted to backlifting 4,200 pounds, now it was 4,600, and “the great physical culture exponents of the day, Bernarr Macfadden, Lewis Sears [sic] of Canada, and the Great Sandow” were making “pilgrimages to Voluntown to witness his feats of strength.” But the most far-fetched pieces of new information claim that Elmer “tossed the 625-pound bell over his head” and that he “thought nothing of lifting a 1,225-pounder waist [not thigh] high and walking around the yard with it.” This seems remarkable inasmuch as no modern weightlifter or powerlifter, with the benefit of steroids, revolving sleeves, perfectly balanced bars and bells, and scientific training techniques has exceeded a 600

pound clean and jerk. Nor has any modern powerlifter done more than a 925 pound deadlift, much less bring it all the way up to his waist and walk around the yard with it. Finally, the good doctor drew upon his medical knowledge, long since dismissed by the medical profession as myths, to explain his brother’s death. It was “a result of his feats of strength, and complications brought on by an overworked heart,” he explained. “He was too powerful for his own good. Like a rich man he squandered his substance.” Either to draw attention to himself, his family, or his community, Dr. Bitgood felt compelled to expand upon the truth.¹⁷

Over the next fifteen years the stock of stories about Elmer Bitgood continued to grow-to the extent that fact blended easily into fiction and the name Bitgood became synonymous with Bunyan. Richard L. Champlin, commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Elmer’s death in *Yankee* magazine, makes this connection. “When Paul Bunyan left New England’s logging camps for the Great Lakes country, his departure created a strongman vacuum. Will the legend of Elmer Bitgood fill that vacuum?” Champlin, blending Loveridge’s stories with some of his own, appears determined to do just that. He tells about how “one of the old model cars” got stuck in the mud near Elmer’s home. “It bogged down in its own ruts, wouldn’t go forward or back. Elmer to the rescue.” He brought out a harness, hitched himself to the car, and “hailed it up hill with the passengers still inside.” Then there was the story of the fellow who “wanted to cut the trees in his maple swamp” one winter and brought in a pair of oxen to do it. “However, the beasts did little but thrash about. They couldn’t move the logs. ‘Better get the Bitgoods,’ someone suggested.” Elmer and Doane “marched out of the swamp easily. Trouble was, the weight of those logs upon their shoulders just pushed their legs into the frozen ground up to their knees.” Champlin enhances his account with photographs of Elmer. One of them shows him holding aloft two huge barrels connected by a pole, larger than the ones shown in the 1916 article but again featuring the reversed (curl) grip. The caption reads: “500 lbs. in each hand doesn’t bother Elmer (or are those barrels hollow?).” Further reason to think that Champlin might not believe quite everything he writes comes from his inclusion of testimony from a Miss Annie Bitgood of Oneco who doubted that Elmer ever lifted a freight car off its tracks. She assured him that “this story has gotten out of hand. Not everything they tell about Elmer happened just that way. ‘Why, you know how stories grow. . . . You start with a feather in the mawnin’, and by night it’s a feather bed.’”¹⁸

Nevertheless Champlin persisted not only with his tales of Elmer’s strength but equally amazing ones of his

great appetite. Elmer allegedly ate so much that his mother had to cook his meals in a washtub. Once Elmer went to a farmer and asked for some milk. "The farmer pointed to a 10-quart milk can and told him to help himself." Minutes later, after quaffing the entire two and a half gallons, he was back asking for more. Churches sponsoring fund-raising dinners were wary of the Bitgood bboys' possible attendance. "So when the word got around that there'd be a bean supper Saturday night, the clause was added, 'and don't tell the Bitgoods.' Nevertheless Doane and Elmer did show up, and one time they) paid for five meals. They emptied every platter in sight, including the six-quart bean pot." Champlin's final story borders on the miraculous. It features

our hero hoisting bales of wool up to the third story loft of a woolen mill. . . . He stood there near the edge, too near the edge, too near at one point, for he unbalanced himself and tumbled. On the way down, realizing that this would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, he glimpsed an open door on the first floor and some wool lying around, so he changed course in mid-air, sailed through the door and came to rest on a pile of springy wool. Lucky for him—and the legend.

And so, Paul Bunyan move over.¹⁹

That he could use his strength to defy the laws of gravity in air as well as on terra firma clearly added a new dimension to the Elmer legend. For iron game buffs, it does not get any better than this!

Not surprisingly, Champlin's account, reprinted in a volume entitled *Mad and Magnificent Yankees*, stimulated even greater interest in Elmer Bitgood.²⁰ What's more, it coincided with the 250th anniversary of the founding of Voluntown in 1721. It provided an opportunity for expression of civic pride. To local historians, the Bitgood legend proved irresistible—with all its trimmings. In her "Compilation of Facts and Not So Factual Happenings," the commemorative history of Voluntown, Judy Harpin faithfully recounts the yarns handed down by Loveridge and Champlin. Stories about the freight car at Danielson, the sawmill boiler, the 625 pound overhead lift, the 1,225 deadlift/yard walk, the six quart bean pot and ten quart milk pail, and Elmer's miraculous flight from the top of a

woolen mill are all there. Even "Lewis Sears" shows up, epitomizing the weak knowledge base for this account.²¹ Harpin's portrayal is believable only to those who also think there really was a Paul Bunyan.

Somewhat more credible is Prentice Phillips, whose distant memories of Elmer appeared in a March 1970 issue of the *Providence Journal*. Phillips got to know Bitgood in 1916 and learned that he had briefly been featured as a strongman with Barnum and Bailey's Circus. (Ed Note: *The Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin*



ELMER BITGOOD IN AN UNCHARACTERISTIC "STRONGMAN" POSE, AS HE MIGHT HAVE APPEARED AT THE TIME OF HIS PERFORMANCE AT THE BABCOCK THEATER IN VOLUNTOWN. PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FAIR

sin, can find no record of Bitgood with the B&B show.) But Elmer was too shy and certainly no showman. When he refused to perform in a leopard skin his contract was terminated. It was against that background that Phillips, an apprentice projectionist at the Babcock Theater, Volun-town's only movie house, suggested to his boss that an appearance by Elmer might be a good way to counteract sagging summer attendance. The theater manager, Lou Wilcox, liked the idea, but he could not convince Elmer to perform his feats of strength in a public hall. Finally, Phillips decided to try.

At first, my efforts met with refusal, his excuse being that he had no weights and would have to use rocks. When I assured him that rocks would be acceptable, he added, 'And I ain't going to wear any fancy get-up neither. I come just as I am or not at all!'

In spite of my pleas that under-shirt and overalls was hardly the costume for a stage appearance, he was adamant, saying, 'I'll go on one time, just to please you! That's final; take it or leave it.' Without thought, I accepted.

An amazed and somewhat disconcerted Lou Wilcox accepted the terms of our agreement, and posters announcing the appearance of 'ELMER the GREAT,' former Strong Man with Barnum & Bailey's Circus, at Babcock's Theater the following Saturday night were soon on display.

Saturday night, in spite of the oppressive heat, we opened to a packed house. After the showing of the feature picture, followed by an episode of *The Perils of Pauline*, starring Pearl White, the curtains parted and Elmer faced a receptive audience.

By his side was a large table holding various sized boulders delivered by truck that morning. Whether they weighed 2,400 pounds as advertised, I don't know. But he did raise the table several inches from the floor.

Next, while the enthusiastic audience, with whistling and foot stamping, roared approval, Elmer held a huge boul-

der at arm's length and let it fall with a resounding crash to the floor.

This brought down the house in more ways than one.

The theater was located over Dearnly & Clark's Store, and as I watched from the wings, I became aware of an echoing crash coming from below. Not the sound of falling rocks but the crash of tin ware, breaking glass and crockery. Much too late, I remembered that the store's crockery department was located under the stage.

How much it cost for Elmer Bitgood's one-night appearance, plus the payment for the broken crockery, I didn't dare ask. But it must have been plenty.²²

Unlike many other so-called "eyewitness" accounts, Phillips's has a ring of reality—that Elmer Bitgood was a very strong man for his time but hardly of mythical proportions. Furthermore, while virtually all of the other feats he performed were in the casual setting of his front yard (and thus more prone to exaggeration), this was a public performance, perhaps the only one of his entire lifting career. What will never be known is the exact poundages of the weights he hoisted and dropped above the Dearnly & Clark Store on that hot summer evening.

Meanwhile, in 1971 a folklorist named David E. Philips at the University of Eastern Connecticut assigned one of his students to collect more information on Elmer Bitgood from local elders. The student taped and transcribed interviews with a retired sawmill worker, who remembered stories told by his father, and a teacher, who had heard stories from the "Gas House Gang" at Cliffs Gas Station in Plainfield.²³ These episodes, incorporating some of the taller tales related by Champlin, along with some new and original accretions to the Bitgood legend, form the basis for a chapter on Elmer in Philips's popular *Legendary Connecticut, Traditional Tales from the Nutmeg State*, published in 1984. Again the emphasis is on yarns that feature size as well as strength. Elmer was so big, according to the sawmill worker, that he bought the largest overalls available.

Then he'd get his mother to split them in the seams and put a big 'v' in it . . . and he'd take another pair of suspenders and put on the back and the bib of his overalls

would just about reach his bellybutton. . . . All he wore was a blue shirt and a pair of overalls. That's all he wore, and he worked in the woods barefooted right in the briars, anywhere. Barefooted, Never wore shoes. Just in the snow, they took their shoes off until the snow come again. Went barefooted all the time.²⁴

Another anecdote by the teacher pits Elmer against an ordinary strongman.

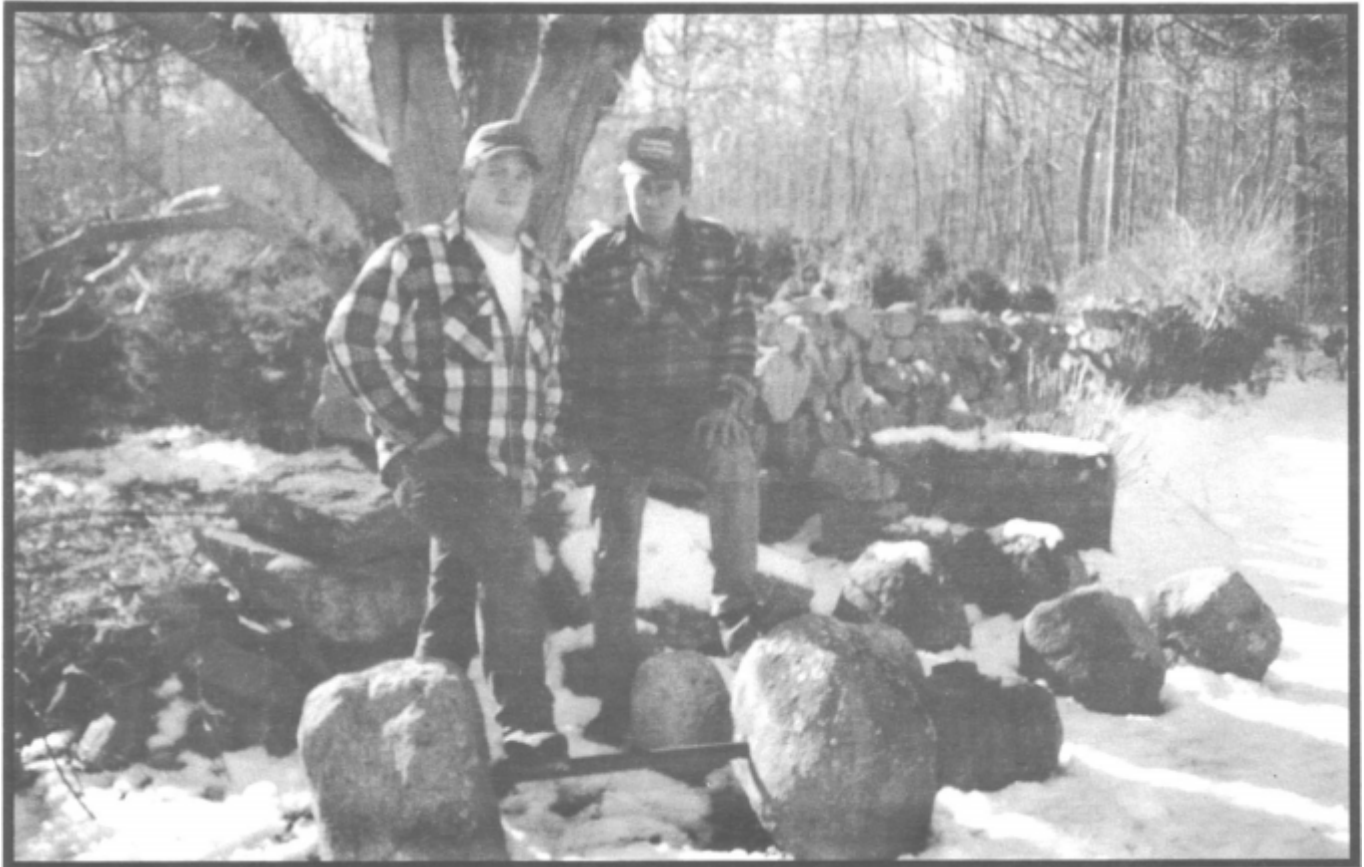
Plainfield was a pretty good size town, and they used to have these traveling shows come in. . . . One time they had this wrestler there and offered \$50 for anybody that would get in the ring with him for three minutes, you know? And naturally everybody was afraid to get in there with this big wrestler. He was about 6' 2" according to the old timers. And they finally coached old Elmer to get up there and he didn't want to go in there. They finally got him up there and the promoter says to Elmer, 'Don't worry, he won't hurt you.' Elmer says, 'Okay, I won't hurt him.' But anyway, something went wrong. I guess the guy tried to throw Elmer down, you know because he had to pin him in three minutes, or lose \$50 and in those days \$50 was quite a bit of money. I guess he tried to throw Elmer down and maybe hurt Elmer a little bit or something because what I heard from the old timers Elmer just got a little p. o'd and picked this old guy up and bounced him off the floor and then sat on him for the rest of the time which was about 2 ½ minutes. Just sat there, 350 lbs. or better sitting on the guy and the guy couldn't move. So the promoter was a little perturbed because he lost \$50 and Elmer was \$50 richer.²⁵

This story could have been true, but the sawmill worker's contention that Elmer and Doane had barbells that weighed 1,700 or 1,800 pounds and that they would put one that weighed 1,000 pounds "over their heads" hardly induces confidence in the Bitgood legend.²⁶ Most

remarkably, however, Philips outdoes the storytellers by stating that "Elmer used to warm up with a 1275 pound 'barbarrel,' 'lift it right over his head,' before moving to the more challenging 1700-1800 pound apparatus." How much Philips really knew about weightlifting or believed the stories he recounted is uncertain, but the folklorist did believe that Elmer Bitgood was exactly the kind of "real creature" from whom legends are made. "In Connecticut, anyway, who needs Paul Bunyan?"²⁷

The most recent renditions of the Bitgood legend repeat familiar stories of a half century earlier. By this time, Elmer had increased appreciably in size, possibly to help rationalize his incredible feats of strength. An anonymous typescript labelled "History of Voluntown" states that he was not only a "big man," but "it is said that his arms reached past his knees and were like legs of mutton." Photographs indicate, however, that these assertions are simply untrue. It also states that "in his prime year, Elmer weighed 350 pounds and was about six foot eight." This would make him about sixty pounds heavier and a foot taller than he was in the earlier accounts. Again the photographs do not support these claims. Finally, it was no ordinary cracker barrel that Elmer and Doane emptied on their return from Norwich. It was "about a 55 gallon barrel."²⁸ A 1994 account, authored by Linda Christensen, a teacher at Voluntown Elementary School, estimates that Elmer weighed 340 pounds at 5' 8" height, which would have given him a Paul Anderson type physique which definitely does not coincide with his photographs. Two further features stand out. The hundred pound anvil that Elmer allegedly carried like a stick by its horn in Loveridge's 1946 account now weighs 250 pounds and the strongman is holding it "straight out with one hand." Additionally a drawing appears of Elmer dressed in a collared shirt and tie. Given Elmer's strong preference for country attire (undershirt and overalls), this portrayal might be just as remarkable as his overblown feats of strength.²⁹

Finally, in 1996 Russell James produced *The Making of a Connecticut Town* in commemoration of the 275th anniversary of the founding of Voluntown. James goes back to the more conservative versions of the Bitgood story related by G. Y. Loveridge and Jesse Paul Bitgood and avoids all mention of specific poundages lifted. Indeed far more emphasis is placed on how the Bitgood legend has been embellished over the years. "Stories abound about Elmer," writes James, "but reliable sources report having seen Elmer load stone onto a platform he built under the trees in his front yard, get under it on his hands and knees,



DAVID AND ARTHUR NIEMINEN WITH WHAT REMAINS OF ELMER BITGOOD'S STONE BELLS OUTSIDE THEIR HOME ON BROWN ROAD IN VOLUNTOWN. PHOTO TAKEN IN DECEMBER 1997.

and lift unbelievable loads of heavy stones with his back.”³⁰ However laudable this somewhat terse and sanitized version might be for not stretching the truth, it lacks the vitality and romance of most previous accounts. Just as we prefer the rhinoceros over the Capuchin monkey, there is an instinctive human weakness for fabrications over truth. As William McNeill, former president of the American Historical Association, once observed, “an appropriately idealized version of the past may . . . allow a group of human beings to come closer to living up to its noblest ideals.”³¹ The potential of events that are larger than life, even untrue ones, to inspire civic pride and happiness should not be taken lightly.

On the other hand, the serious historian has an equally important obligation to communicate some sense of reality, no matter how unpalatable to popular tastes for heroes. While it is easy to dismiss many of the outlandish reports of Elmer’s feats and to doubt the poundages reported over a century ago under unregulated conditions,

James’ conclusion that “this man was endowed with extraordinary strength” has much to recommend it.³² Collective evidence, by way of artifacts, photographs, and stories galore, indicates that there was in Voluntown a strongman of extraordinary repute who became a legend, and that the real Elmer Bitgood was hardly a hoax. New evidence unearthed largely from early eyewitness reports lends considerable credence to this belief.

Furthermore, any estimation of Bitgood’s ultimate worth as a strongman must be reckoned according to the context of the times in which he lived. In light of current weightlifters and bodybuilders, Bitgood would probably be judged as mediocre, but for his era he may have been bigger and stronger than Davis, Kazmaier, or even the redoubtable Anderson were for their respective eras. Admittedly Louis Cyr (or Lewis Sears) might be another matter. It should be remembered that virtually all of Bitgood’s feats were performed on make-shift apparatus and in a non-competitive and non-commercial environ-

ment. Unlike modern strongmen, he performed manual labor for a living and did not have the opportunity to spend four hours a day training in the gym. High protein food supplements and supersuits were unknown in his era. He ate plain foods, such as roasted chicken and baked beans, and lifted in his overalls. Incomprehensible in his time were such chemical inducements as steroids. He gained no advantages from any special equipment, expert coaches, or even from the adrenalin rush that one experiences in head to head competition with other lifters. Still he performed feats of strength that would be considered remarkable even today. The growth of the legend, it could be argued, has simply allowed Bitgood to compensate for the advantages accrued by succeeding generations. Obscurity in time (a century ago) and place (rural Connecticut) dictates that Elmer Bitgood will remain an enigma and that the search for the man behind the legend will be unending. But it is a mystique, rather than reality, and the desire for an embodiment of our childhood dreams, that provides so much appeal to the legend of Elmer Bitgood. Far more perhaps than the truth itself, it expands our appreciation of human potential. Most importantly, such tales are fun to contemplate and add immensely to the rich lore of the iron game.

Notes

1. Terry Todd, "Meanwhile, Back At The Mosque . . . Highlights of the World Power Meet, Part II--The Heavies," *Muscular Development*, 11 (April 1974): 40.
2. See David Webster, *Sons of Samson, Vol. I, Profiles* (Irvine, Scotland, 1993).
3. *The World Almanac and Encyclopaedia, 1894* (New York, 1894), 207.
4. Local historian Nan Chapman relates that for many years local inhabitants believed that Voluntown was a movie-making center of New England in silent picture days. The story, upon close investigation, turned out to be untrue.
5. Interviews with Bruce and Jan Mallett and Arthur and Mary Anne Nieminen, 23 June 1996.
6. *Norwich Bulletin*, 7 May 1909; reprinted 21 February 1928.
7. "Voluntown's Modern Samson," *Providence Sunday Journal*, 14 May 1916.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Norwich Sunday Record*, 29 April 1934.
12. G. Y. Loveridge, "Strong Elmer Bitgood, The Man and the Legend," *The Providence Sunday Journal*, 24 February 1946. Bitgood himself allegedly recorded his strength feats on the ceiling of the attic in his house on Wylie Road. Unfortunately that record disappeared when the house was demolished to make way for a new structure. Interview with the Nieminens.
13. Loveridge, "Strong Elmer Bitgood."
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. "Voluntown's Cryptic Treasure Clue," *Hartford Times*, 24 July 1953.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Richard L. Champlin, "L'il Elmer Bitgood: The Facts and the Legend," *Yankee* (June 1968): 87 & 34-37.
19. *Ibid.*
20. See Richard L. Champlin, "Move Over, Paul Bunyan," in Clarissa M. Stilten, *Mad and Magnificent Yankees*, (Dublin, New Hampshire, 1973), 75-78.
21. Judy Harpin, *A Compilation of Facts and Not So Factual Happenings Concerning Voluntown, Connecticut* (Voluntown, 1971), 44-45.
22. Prentice Phillips, "No leopard skin for Elmer," *The Providence Journal*, 1 March 1970. For additional information on the setting (including a picture) of Elmer's public performance, see James, *Making of a Connecticut Town* (Voluntown, 1996), 36 & 41.
23. See J. Saari, "The Legend of Elmer and the Lil Legend of Doane Bitgood" and "Legends of the Bitgoods," student essay and transcription of interviews with Al Dawley and John Kivela on deposit at the Center for Connecticut Studies, Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic. I am grateful for the assistance of Dr. Barbara Tucker in retrieving these documents.
24. Interview with Dawley, *ibid.*
25. Interview with Kivela, *ibid.*
26. Interview with Dawley, *ibid.*
27. David E. Philips, *Legendary Connecticut, Traditional Tales from the Nutmeg State* (Willimantic, 1984), 65 & 70.
28. "History of Voluntown, Connecticut," typescript in author's possession. For another 1980s account see Charles Vacca, "They left a mark that's here to stay," *Norwich Bulletin*, 20 January 1982.
29. Linda Christensen, *Voluntown History* (Voluntown, 1994), 20.
30. Russell H. James, *The Making of a Connecticut Town* (Voluntown, 1996), 29.
31. William H. McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians," *American Historical Review*, 91 (February 1986), 6.
32. James, *Making of a Connecticut Town*, 29.



Reconsidering Donald Dinnie

**A Response to Frank Zarnowski's
"The Amazing Donald Dinnie" published in
IGH Vol. 5, No. 1.**

David P. Webster

Frank Zarnowski's recent interesting article has stimulated most welcome discussion on the amazing Donald Dinnie, truly the nineteenth century's greatest athlete, as the title of the article proclaimed. Knowing of my extensive Highland Games research over the years, our esteemed editors and a couple of others have asked me to respond to the article, probably feeling I might wish to challenge a few of the statements on the number of Dinnie's hammer wins and on two dates. They may also have thought I would react to the fact that Mr. Zarnowski described the great Donald as being avaricious and riding roughshod over officials while "Webster, for example, goes overboard to maintain that Dinnie was a first rate sportsman, that is, an inspiration to all who met him."

Frankly, I enjoyed every word of the well researched article and agreed with almost all of it. My response therefore is mainly to set the record straight on some of these points. Personally I thought Mr. Zarnowski quite lenient, as my books from which he quoted were about Scottish Highland Games in their entirety and not about Donald Dinnie exclusively, and I was unable to go into more detail about his life and character. This situation has now been rectified by the completion of a new book which has much more information and covers the complete life story of Dinnie and his amazing relatives. I have done

this in conjunction with Gordon Dinnie, who has a marvelous collection of documents about his distant relative.

Most important at this stage is to clarify the phenomenal number of prizes and victories won by Donald Dinnie. Frank Zarnowski states that I took the ten thousand Dinnie victories from a 1913 life history in *Health and Strength* magazine. Back in the 1950s when I wrote my book, *Scottish Highland Games*, for Collins Publishing, I did not have the magazines he mentioned and amongst my sources was a much earlier one. I got the specific 10,000 statistic and other similar information from Donald Dinnie's wonderful championship belt, which was assayed in 1899—almost 100 years ago.

This silver belt by far surpasses in beauty and value other comparable sporting awards. Whereas many championship belts have medallions mounted on a leather strap this one links together ten lovely molded and engraved plaques depicting Dinnie's greatest achievements. The moldings in relief and combined with the informative summaries provide a most illuminating testimony to this wonderful athlete. An extremely important aspect of this award is that Dinnie's best efforts quoted on the plaques were recognized by his contemporaries. The award was endorsed by first class professional athletes including George Davidson and Charles McHardy, as well as by "The

Gentlemen Amateurs.” This is significant as some Scottish athletes resented Dinnie’s successes and the press adulation he received. Their discomfort is easy to understand when one reads papers such as the *Aberdeen Herald* reporting on the Speyside Gathering in 1878. “The most popular athletes of the day were present, topped by the redoubtable Donald Dinnie, with whom all competitors at feats of strength appeared as pygmies.” As pygmies indeed! Can you imagine how a six-foot-plus strongman weighing a muscular 270 lbs. would feel being described as a pygmy? Others say: “There was amongst the competitors one Scottish Giant, Donald Dinnie, whose performance was worth all the money to witness. It seemed also child’s play to Donald to do things the others strove so hard to do.”¹

While Dinnie was appearing at the Folly, in Manchester in 1881, the *Manchester Echo* enthused: “Donald Dinnie’s performance is certainly wonderful and bonnie Scotland can pride herself on having produced THE MAN OF THE CENTURY. Compared with other strongmen, the Lion Athlete for instance at Mayer’s circus, Donald Dinnie is as a mastiff contrasted to a half starved terrier.”²

Any records claimed for, or by, Dinnie, which could not be substantiated, would rapidly be denounced by the athletes subjected to derogatory comparisons in newspapers, yet the authenticity of specific distances and weights detailed on the champions belt and widely published in the press at that time, does not seem to have been a source of controversy. As a young man I would often go with Alex Thomson, my training mate and well known to many readers, to see and enjoy this magnificent belt, so I saw and studied, many times, original contemporary material. Charles McHardy, who was one of those endorsing the award was a police chief of great integrity. I feel I had valid information for the statistics which gave most concern. Dinnie had his detractors, particularly his brother-in-law William McCombie Smith, a mediocre Highland Games heavy athlete and prolific writer on the subject. Smith never missed an opportunity to criticize Donald and he would most certainly have challenged any claims that could not be substantiated.

I can well understand a reluctance to accent the number of victories but I thought Frank Zarnowski’s article went a long way in explaining the nature of Highland Games and the very professional way in which Dinnie

maximized the situation. I can perhaps add to this. There are currently some 135 Highland Games in Scotland every year. At the height of the season a professional can compete in a different Highland Games every day of the week. At many of these Games there are events specifically for local athletes and others which are open to all. Some of the greatest Games were, and still are, in North-east Scotland where Dinnie was born and bred and there were a great many more Games there then than there are today. He could compete in these, doing local events in the morning and open events in the afternoon. He did not confine himself to the heavy events but also competed in several of the light events and has even been known to take prizes in Highland dancing.

Usually he would compete in 16 lb. and 22 lb. stones, 16 lb. and 22 lb. hammer, 28 and 56 lb. weight for distance, 56 lb. weight for height, the caber toss, the pole vault, the high jump, the sprints, the long jump, the triple jump (often a hop, hop and jump) and novelty events such as obstacle races. A little simple arithmetic, adding local and open events, will begin to gain acceptance of the extraordinary sporting statistics rightly attributed to Donald Dinnie. He once took twenty prizes in one day at a Highland Games.

In his younger days Donald would often compete in two events at the same time, throwing and jumping alternately. At Luss Games one year Dinnie had two consecutive failures in the high leap and a third would have meant elimination from the competition. For his final attempt he whipped off his kilt and this time cleared the bar with ease. There was a mixture of cheers and laughter, many being amused at the briefness of his tartan underpants. I well remember how surprised I was in my first participation in a Highland Games when at Banchory I entered the pillow fight, sitting on a caber supported between stands. I found myself facing some of the most formidable top heavies who soon made short work of me! Many of these professionals entered each and every athletic event with a cash prize. Such novelty competitions are rarely mentioned in official results or newspapers. Dinnie was a workaholic, competing all the year round. He toured in other countries and, totally unlike most of the strongmen of that era, he thrived on challenges, reveling in all-round competition. The other, often overlooked aspect, is the length and breadth of his competitive career. He won his first cash prize in 1850 and on 10 Aug. 1910 he was

still included in the Naim Highland Games prize list at 73 years of age!

As a strongman he appeared at the London Aquarian, the Mecca for professional strongmen such as Samson, Sandow and Louis Cyr. Dinnie appeared there long before these legendary figures and his standard lifts, such as a 168 lb. one hand snatch and lifting two dumbbells overhead, with 128 and 112 lb. (and 132 and 102) simultaneously beat all professional lifters of the time including McCann, conqueror of Sandow. As a weightlifter Donald Dinnie was unbeaten at his own specialty. Nobody has ever equaled him in holding for time a 56 lb. weight at arm's length in line with the shoulder. In 1884 at Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, he won a gold medal for a single hand hold out. Fifty-six pounds was placed on the palm of his hand and he then held it with arm parallel to the floor for 45 seconds. This was probably his most outstanding single feat. He used this as a regular challenge to all weightlifters and strongmen and although this oft quoted record in 1884 is his best, many other exceptional times were recorded.

Dinnie was the inspiration of the very first World Weightlifting Champion, E. Lawrence Levy, who more than once expressed his admiration for Dinnie's weightlifting abilities. He had seen the Scot topping the bill in Myers Circus some time before Sandow made his British debut and Dinnie was still appearing as a strongman in London music halls long after the Blonde Teuton's stage career was over. Donald was also a fighter of great repute although he won more honor than medals with his fists. On one occasion, at a show in Stonehaven, he fought and beat the noted champion boxer, Jem Mace. The Dinnie brothers were all handy with their fists if the occasion demanded and when a railroad was being built in northeast Scotland the rough, tough laborers one day descended on the village of Aboyne looking for trouble. The terrified locals sent immediately for the Dinnies who put an abrupt end to the hooligans. After that the village was given a wide berth by the railroad workers.

Donald was a very outspoken character, some times clashing with Highland Games officials and amateur committees. Usually local games committees did, and still do, only one game a year. With ever-changing, though well-intentioned volunteers, the level of expertise could often have been improved. If equipment or condi-

tions were not good for athletes Dinnie was the spokesman. This explains some of his complaints to organizers. It seems to me unfair to accuse him of trying to "run rough shod over games committees," and to be specific about his reluctance to use the hammers of the Caledonian Club. It should be remembered that a proper wooden shafted throwing hammer would go some 20 feet further than a short thick shafted sledgehammer. If a newspaper published a result showing Dinnie had won with a hammer throw of only 90 feet it would impair his reputation, for the throwing implement would not be described. Most athletes today would take Dinnie's side in all the incidents related, including the incident where he asked to be paid for tossing the caber before Royalty. The committee could well afford the expenditure on such a royal occasion and *they* should be criticized for putting him in a difficult position, resulting in him having to go unrewarded for tossing the caber when all others had failed.

Dinnie came from a culture where participants hated to be "ripped off" on the field or in daily life and Dinnie's associates relished the stories about this aspect of his character. Dinnie arrived in London about two o'clock one morning for an eight o'clock meeting with a colleague. London's horse drawn cab owners were as notorious for overcharging then as some taxi drivers are today but that did not trouble Donald Dinnie. He asked the cabby to take him to his destination, Euston Station, and settled down comfortably in the coach and was soon sound asleep. Noting the snoring, the cabby thought he could put one over on this Scottish hick from the sticks and he too had a cat-nap before continuing on his journey. As dawn broke the journey was resumed and the cabby eventually awoke Donald at Euston, asking for a fare to cover the several hours taken. Donald did not flinch, he simply called to a nearby policeman and asked how much it should cost for a cab between the two railway stations. On being informed, he carefully handed over the exact amount plus a tip. The gloomy cabby took in Dinnie's athletic appearance and the nearby police presence and realized that on this occasion he had come off worst.

Dinnie's success in wrestling has been somewhat overlooked. He won the *Police Gazette* title of World Champion Wrestler and took on all comers including the best that America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Britain had to offer. He beat nearly all of them. Dinnie recognized that there were a great many styles of wrestling

and he could not be champion in all so he challenged all-comers to *mixed wrestling*. He would match them in their favorite style providing they would accept another style in addition. Dinnie's match with William Muldoon, who is sometimes referred to as the Father of American Wrestling, took place in the evening after Dinnie's participation in a very busy and successful day of competition in the Caledonian Club of San Francisco's Highland Games (which still flourish today and attract crowds upwards of 50,000).

Although even a superman like Dinnie must have been tired after such a strenuous day he actually won most of the rounds in his match with Muldoon, the "Solid Man," but in spite of this he lost the bout! In any "level playing field" match Dinnie would have been an easy victor. The terms, which Donald willingly accepted, called for him to throw Muldoon within a time limit *twice as often* as the falls taken by the American champion.

For around two decades Dinnie traveled widely with his own team of professional athletes and wrestlers. For many years he did one night stands, taking on all local and national champions. While he was overseas and earning large sums he had been exceptionally generous over many years in sending money to his relatives in Scotland. This does not sound to me like the avaricious man depicted in the article. With regard to dates, while agreeing there has been much confusion on the dates of Dinnie's American tours, I did correctly state that "In 1870 the wanderlust finally got the better of the Aberdeenshire professional. His first short trip was to America where he was feted and honored like a king." This quote was on page 97 of the first publication of *Scottish Highland Games*, which I wrote in 1957, and I have used similar statements elsewhere. I have now been able to document Dinnie's travels in much more detail and they were considerably more extensive and adventurous than most of us had ever imagined.

As the years went on Dinnie, through no fault of his own, found himself in difficult circumstances. The savings of a lifetime were lost in building and railway investments during a land and property crisis in Australia, but he regained some of this through hard work long after the time when many would have retired. By the time he reached the age of 75 he had been driven to the verge of poverty by a series of misfortunes. Never unwilling to work hard, Dinnie obtained bookings in London music

halls, doing a strongman act. Still tremendously athletic for his age, in part of his act he supported a platform made from a large table and on this two Highlanders danced a Fling! Another of his favorite feats was to hold a 56 lb. weight sideways at arm's length. London County Councilors in 1912, noting that Donald was now in his 76th year, were concerned about the potential damage to the sturdy veteran's health and refused further permission for him to appear on stage with his act. This ruling, albeit humane, put an end to Donald Dinnie working on the stage but he did continue in the field of sport adding to his tremendous collection of medals, many of which I have personally studied. All this has given me an undying admiration of Donald Dinnie, for which I make no apology.

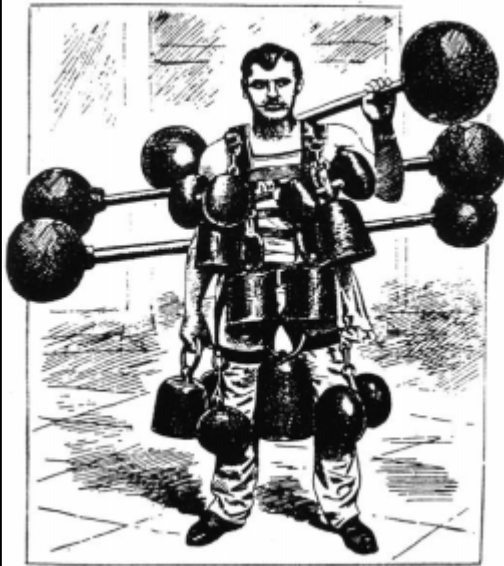
There is no doubt that Frank Zarnowski has presented the facts fairly and has shown some justification for his minor criticisms. He is fully entitled to his opinions and I congratulate him on a most entertaining, and well-researched article.

One final note: Frank states in his article that some sport historians have claimed that perhaps the *English* pedestrian, Captain Barclay and Deerfoot . . . were the sport's premier performers of the nineteenth century. Well, that really did get to me. The so-called Captain Barclay (Robert Barclay Allardice) was certainly not English. Barclay, Dinnie and I were born only miles apart. He was born about half-way between my birthplace and that of Donald Dinnie. Had we been alive at the same time as the peripatetic Captain, he would have had no difficulty in walking to either of our homes and back again before his breakfast. To call any of us English and pass unnoticed would be as likely as King Herod being nominated "Baby Sitter of the Year," and does about as much for Anglo/American relations as the Charge of the Light Brigade did for recruiting.

(Editors' Note: We should have caught the error, especially as we published an article in IGH Vol. 1, Nos. 4 & 5 detailing Barclay's career.)

¹ This quote appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1873. Clipping in the collection of David P. Webster, Irvine, Scotland.

² *Manchester Echo*, 1881, Clipping in the collection of David P. Webster, Irvine, Scotland.



IRONCLAD

THE IMPENDING DISCONNECT

An Opinion/Prediction

Joe Roark

Ed Note: We are delighted to welcome Joe Roark back to the pages of *Iron Game History* with his new column

IRONCLAD

John Grimek knows the feel of being given false credit. Asked by an acquaintance if John remembered freeing him from jail by bending the bars for the man to slip through, John knows it did not happen, but he also knows this man is convinced it did. If that man were a writer with access to some of the current muscle/strength publications, one wonders if that story would see print as true . . . And if John endorsed the tale? Legions of his loyal fans would rush to second his motion, and anyone hinting at doubt would be branded a heretic. When John, and Vic Boff and the few others who span the first-hand-knowledge-bridge between old and new strength tales are no longer with us, the bars captivating correct literature may be bent, and many yarns may be woven into the current fabric of our sport.

Will it become folly without filters? As newer versions of older situations are written, unless researched thoroughly, the iron game's record keeping may fizzle. And as these newer versions become the only record that modern readers can acquire, errors will compound, with even newer versions being based upon them. It is time someone challenged the inaccuracies that are sprinkled among the literature in our field. In my *Flex* magazine column *Factoids*, some errors have appeared, and readers are quick to point these out to me. A photo purportedly of Larry Pacifico, was not Larry; on another occasion I had an incorrect zip code in my column. To those correcting, thank you. Proofreading your own work is arduous, because you are re-reading with assumptions. When Dorian Yates won the Mr. Olympia in Helsinki, *Factoids* told you it was in Atlanta. I knew better! I don't like the taste of

crow, but I like the feel of attentive readers. My response was not anger at being corrected; my response was triple checking what was submitted to *Flex*.

So Jan and Terry accepted my idea for a column to be called "Ironclad," which would become a watchdog for mistakes. An error is an error, whether from me or from you. So let's not take being corrected as a personal affront—unless you think you are perfect! Being a watchdog is not a popular role; it implies a superior position, perhaps arrogance. It is a role I have resisted for three years, but the accumulation of mistakes must not remain unchallenged by those who truly appreciate our history and those wonderful participants who deserve to be accurately remembered. And keep in mind, the true arrogance lies with those who further the lies by allowing the historic record to be altered.

There are two ingredients to maintaining historical continuity: 1. Understanding original terms and maintaining the definitions used, 2. Knowledge of comparative strength among the various lifts. This is of supreme importance.

Original terms: The noun 'press' begs for a modifier: bent press, military press, bench press, one arm press, etc. Originally the military press, for example, was performed with heels together and weight pressed overhead following the pace of the judge's hand rising. This method thwarted back-bending since the rising hand could not be seen if you were leaning back. So to compare those early military presses with modern presses starts with immediate error. Of course, the disintegration of the military style into a completely different lit? caused its elimination from

competition.

Comparative Strength Knowledge: January 17, 1983 will always remain a dark day for me. David P. Willoughby died exactly two months short of becoming age 83. (I had written three months short, then I checked my files.) With him died his attention to detail. Willoughby should be the first iron historian in every related Hall of Fame. But there is one practice David followed which, in those days when red and white muscle fiber activity was not understood, allowed for some wrong assumptions. Just as one would not predict that because a sprinter can run 100 meters in ten seconds it follows that he can maintain that pace for a mile run, so David's fondness for transcribing single rep lifts into predicted multi-rep lifts, did not and does not follow. If you can bench press 400 pounds one rep, it does not mean you can bench press 300 for any predictable number of reps. Indeed, if you gather a dozen lifters whose one rep max is 400, do you believe all of them will conclude with the same number of reps with 300? Why not? The picture is more out of focus when transcending lifts: comparing the bench press to the military press for example. However, comparative lifting knowledge can be helpful.

Comparative anthropometric knowledge can be helpful, too. This knowledge would go far to eradicate the most glaring errors in bodypart measurements. I have written about this through the years, as have others. It almost seems as if exaggerated measurements are simply a staple of bodybuilding magazines, something expected. How many times have you read that a 5'10", 210 pound man—whose arms do not appear to be particularly large—has a biceps measurement of over 20"? One of the most frustrating aspects of this whole business is that more often than not the writer of the article in which the inflated measurement is given does not challenge the measurement. In fact, the writer usually just lists the measurement, not even covering himself by stating that the measurement has been given to him by the bodybuilder.

Through the years, certain famous bogus measurements continue to turn up in the oddest places. In a recent *Milo* magazine, for example, an article by Eric Murray gives Louis Cyr credit for a 28" calf. Twenty-eight inches! Murray had taken a trip to Quebec to view various pieces of Cyr memorabilia, and the article is accompanied by a photo of Murray standing beside a slightly larger than lifesize statue of Cyr. While Cyr's fame as one of the all-time marvels of the iron game—fame for both his strength and his prodigious body—his calf was not 28" in circumference. Not close. Murray also gives Cyr credit for a 350 pound one hand press, a 24" upper arm, and a 36" thigh. None of these figures is correct; all are significantly exaggerated. But not one of the three comes close to the preposterous 28" calf. But

where did such a measurement arise? Those familiar with George F. Jowett's book on Cyr will perhaps remember being amused therein by the claim of a 28" calf for Cyr. More recently, Ben Weider's book about Cyr continues the error. But what a breath of fresh air it would be if, in an article such as Murray's, which was very interesting and informative, would simply take note of the inflated measurements. But the story of the 28" calf helps to make my point. And unless people who are interested in accuracy are wary of accepting obviously bogus claims on face value we will continue to see assertions that do no one any good.

Deliberate deception continues to be a problem. Too many wraps in powerlifting, weights that are not officially weighed, weights that are brought with the lifter and not allowed to be touched by anyone else. No reason for suspicion there! Imagine Mark McGwire bringing a special bat to a baseball game and refusing to allow it to be examined! Do you think any hits or homers he achieved that day would be part of the stat book? And the divisions: in powerlifting, so many acronyms, so much acrimony, in bodybuilding, drugs vs natural. Women's competitions—physique, figure, fitness. While categories are needed for specification of competition, subdivision in those categories seems to divide us. Our sport is more fragmented than a teacup in the hands of John Brookfield.

It amazes me—and amazes is the correct word—that even those in positions of power and influence in our field do not read their competitors' publications. One must know the product line of a competitor to better field one's own product. Certainly these key players have the facilities to read the other magazines—unlike the average reader who may only be able to afford one or two mags each month. Indeed there seems to be an arrogance against the "glossies," as the nationally distributed muscle magazines are called. So, truth appears on only cheap paper? Those same critics praise Randy Strossen's *Milo* publication, which is printed on "glossy" paper. Indeed, some of the newsletters are now reprinting old muscle mag articles from Weider's former magazines—that's okay, I guess, because in those days, Joe couldn't afford glossy paper. What kind of paper is used by the *Star* and the *National Inquirer*? Or the *New York Times*? The medium is *not* the message!

Most of the publications I read in the iron field contain small merit. Most of them I continue to read simply to follow the trace placed on certain subjects in my personal investigations. Readers are invited to submit examples of what are perceived to be errors. Let's get a dialogue going, and the record bent back to straight.

Write Joe Roark about errors you've seen in the muscle magazines at: Joe Roark, P.O. Box 320, St. Joseph, IL, 61873.

Email him at: JXROARK@msmail.oandm.uiuc.edu.



Dear IGH:

On Wednesday the 9th of September, 1998, strength journalist David Gentle and I set off to the London Borough of Walworth to meet one of the last true old-time strongmen: Joe Assirati. Joe is from the old school, in which strength and health were of equal importance. He was a trainee at Al Murray's famous gym, and later he was an instructor there. He was also a member of the Camberwell Weightlifting Club in the 1920s. There, he trained with some of the great all-round lifters of that period, men like Alan P. Mead, C. V. Wheeler, the great wizard of weightlifting W.A. Pullum, and even Herman Goerner.

At the age of 92, Joe is still healthy and active. He works out twice a week, performing mobility exercises and light stretching movements to keep himself fit. Joe comes from a large Italian family, all of whom were fit and strong. His cousin Bert Assirati was one of the most feared men to ever enter a wrestling ring as well as one of the strongest men in the world. Joe's father was also a very strong man. Joe told us on our visit of a time when he, his father, and Bert went to a vaudeville performance to see "The Amazing Samson," Alexander Zass. During the show, Zass passed around through the audience a short steel bar so that anyone could inspect it and try to bend it. Many tried in vain, but when Papa Assirati got his powerful hands on it he put a considerable bend in the bar before returning it to Zass, who was not at all pleased to have a big part of his show backfire on him.

Joe was also a fine all-round lifter, and held many records in the very popular 42 lifts in which the British Amateur Weightlifting Association kept records. Some of his records were made in such lifts as the rectangular fix and the pullover and press. Joe had the good fortune to know many of the top men in the game, men like George Hackenschmidt and Edward Aston, and he remembers seeing each of these men make a one arm snatch with 170 pounds without removing their coats or warming up. He saw these lifts at the famous Milo Brinn Gym in Tottenham Court Road in London.

After visiting with Joe at his home and looking at his strength memorabilia, we took him out to dinner, and as

we walked to a local pub it was a workout in itself just to keep up with him. He walked proudly, with big strides, what he calls "walking at my tallest and-broadest," and he would stop every now and then to do some deep knee bends and gentle stretching. He certainly is in marvelous shape for his years.

Joe also loves to read and write poetry as a way to keep his mind sharp and active. He is full of wisdom and knowledge about the iron game, of course, but also about life in general. He believes that if you have good food, a nice place to live, and people around you—especially family—who care for you, then you are rich indeed. He also believes that you should try your very best to help your fellow man. All in all it was a great day, and I feel much richer for having met this gentle, strong man.

**Lee Morrison
Southampton, England**

[Editors' Note: Joe Assirati is, indeed, one of the truly wise and good men in our game. We still cherish our visits with him at his home and here in Texas. There follows now a recent letter from Joe himself which reinforces our high opinion of him.]



Dear IGH,

I have been forced to change my address because Ede [Joe's wife] can no longer climb stairs. She fell twice, damaging her knee and forcing her to walk slowly with a walking stick. We waited for one and a half years for an operation, only to be told that owing to her angina an operation would be too dangerous. Then she fell again, shattering her left thigh and suffering terrible pain.

Our daughter Jean and her husband Michael retired and moved back here from California to help look after us. They have been so wonderful. I am still walking tall and broad, exercising, and eating moderately of English, Italian, and Chinese food. I pray for strength to look after my wife and family, now 21 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. I look on Ede as Queen of the *Famiglia Assirati* and everything I do for her is also for the

whole family. It is a great incentive to be happy in everything I do for her sake and for the sake of the family.

It was wonderful to receive the last *Iron Game History*, and I look forward to the next edition. Ede and I send our love to you and hope that you are both well and happy.

Sempre Avanti,

Joe Assirati

London, England



Dear IGH,

I read with great interest the article about Mark Henry's dilemma. I well remember visiting Leo Murdock at his Brooklyn home and him telling me with excitement in his voice, "Professor Todd is training a guy named Mark Henry who has a good chance of winning a place on the winners' platform at the Olympics. This guy is massive in size with plenty of power to spare. All he has to do is tune his lifting skills. Maybe he can rekindle interest in weightlifting again."

In the months that followed, Leo would give me updates on this mystery man's progress. Ever since Bob Hoffman deserted the weightlifting world for softball, lifting was a lost sport. Without Hoffman's influence, power, and pocketbook, weightlifting no longer got a line in a newspaper and very little if any space in the newstand barbell magazines.

This time I looked forward to the Olympics and hoped America again would be picking up a few medals! Work or no work I planned to stay up each night hoping to pick up a few minutes of weightlifting. Night after night I sat through hours of TV, but not a sign of iron being lifted. At last near the end of the week, weightlifting! But what is this, a German lifter makes his lift and is jumping around thinking he won the gold! But the Russian, Chemerkin, was to then outlift him and take the gold right out of his hands.

In less than five minutes the lifting was gone! The announcer had mentioned in hushed tones that the U.S. entrant had finished 16th or some such number. As I turned off the TV I was thinking to myself, he must have

hurt himself, maybe he started too high, or did he miss a lift or two because he was nervous? As I went off to bed it never dawned on me that Mark was lifting against steroid freaks!

Swimmers, like weightlifters, had to face the drug-muscle wonders and like Mark came out on the wrong side of the win ledger. A short time ago the TV program *20/20* interviewed American Olympic swimmers who wanted the Olympic bigwigs to award them the medals given to East German swimmers who had "won it all" in a past Games. The U.S. girls reasoned that the East German girls had used steroids to get an unfair advantage.

At the moment the program was aired, the German doctors who had given the swimmers the steroids were on trial for administering dangerous drugs. Just as in lifting, top sports officials when asked about this used the old political dodge, "we have to look into it, we have to check the facts and appoint a committee to investigate." You have to admire a guy like Mark Henry for they are few and far between to say no to drugs and give up an Olympic medal and the fame that goes with it along with potential monetary rewards.

As for his contract with the WWF, I hope he is as strong a businessman as he is a strongman. He has entered waters full of sharks and barracudas. Having been good friends with Walter Podolak, training at his gym, and going to the beach on weekends with him and our mutual friend, Leo Murdock, I heard many stories about Walter's adventures as "The Golden Superman." A year ago I came across an excellent book about pro wrestling called *Hooker*, an "authentic wrestler's adventure inside the bizarre world of pro wrestling," by Lou Thesz. Thesz, who was billed as the heavyweight champion during most of his long career, gives his life story. In the past year friends have asked me how to get a copy, but it never pushed me to get the answer. Reading about Mark Henry's WWF contract gave me the push to find the answer. I talked with Lou Thesz and he said, "Sure, the book is still in print. Anyone can get a copy by writing Lou Thesz Book, 7647 Gramby St. Suite 22, Norfolk, Virginia 23505. The cost is \$25.00 postpaid."

Lou went on to say, "I'm 82 years of age and in good health. Wrestling has been good to this fun-loving gypsy. I have clothed, fed, and supported three wives, three sons, made a lot of good friends and had a heck of a good time along the way. I have traveled the world and with all that who could ask for more? Like your Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen Association, I have been the president of the 'Cauliflower Alley Club' that brings together

boxers, wrestlers and movie industry people who get together annually for a banquet.”

In years past barbells and wrestling were tied together. Training with weights was the way to fame and fortune or so said some of the ads and articles in the barbell magazines. Maybe it was for men like Lou Thesz. May Mark Henry have the same good fortune.

Fred Howell
Mine Hill, NJ



Dear IGH,

I'd like to make two corrections to my article in the last issue of IGH. (Ed note: See "Some Lesser Known Strongmen of the Fifties and Sixties," IGH Vol. 5 No. 1.)

The first correction is to note that Oliver Sacks reportedly weighed 280 rather than 290 in his squatting contest with Lee Phillips. The second is to add some information about Houston Ridge which was inadvertently left out.

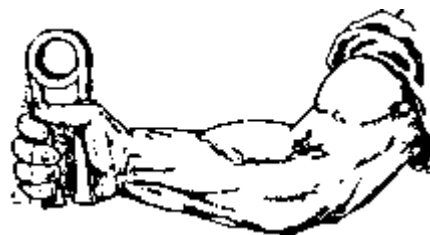
Ridge played pro football for the San Diego Chargers from 1966 through 1969, when an injury ended his career. I first heard about him from Maylen Wiltse, who was the strength coach of the Chargers. I was living in Santa Monica, but my family lived in the San Diego area and when I was down to visit my family I would go to see Maylen.

One day in the summer of 1969 Maylen took me out to their camp to watch a workout. He had told me that he had spotted Houston doing a 530 bench with a slight arch and that he had also seen him do a rock bottom, narrow-stance squat with 540. My interest was piqued. At the time they were doing two-a-day practices and then training with weights. We arrived as they were concluding their afternoon practice. As I didn't see them in pads I imagine it was not full contact, but I'm sure it was grueling nonetheless. After a brief rest they headed for the weight stations. Most were not putting out any great effort, which was understandable. Houston took some extra time until there was less traffic in the area and then went over to the squat rack and took 395 off and did four easy reps rock bottom in picture perfect form. I would have to think he could have done eight or ten had he wished. He was wearing nothing but football pants and a jersey, but it couldn't hide a physique that was both graceful and at the

same time massively muscled. He was 6'4" and according to Maylen had been weighed at 268. His bodyfat would have been under ten percent, possibly as low as eight percent. His was a combination athlete/bodybuilder physique. He then went up to the bench press and after two or three warm-up sets placed a folded towel on his chest and took 475 off without a spot for a double with a hip raise of less than three inches. I was impressed. He put it back and walked off without comment. Based on what I saw I have to believe he was good for a touch and go hips down 500 fresh. If his 540 squat was done as he squatted that day, no belt/wraps, he would have been in the 600 plus range with minimal gear and a modification of stance. He did perfect Olympic style squats.

What little background I have on him is courtesy of Maylen. Houston was raised in a small town in the San Joaquin valley area of central California and began weight training at age 12. He went to San Diego State on a track scholarship, throwing the shot and discus. He did not play football until he was in college. He set school records in the shot and discus. Soon after the day of my visit, in the third game of the regular season, he suffered an injury that was to end his career. They tried to bring him back too soon and his hip was permanently crippled. He filed a lawsuit against the Chargers and in 1973 won a settlement of more than a million dollars, the largest ever against any pro sports team at the time. Among the substances mentioned in the trial as rehab tools were steroids and painkillers. Houston Ridge walks with a cane today and the last I heard was a successful life insurance salesman in San Diego. Had he chosen a path other than pro football he might have been an Olympic athlete in the shot or discus or an elite performer in either bodybuilding or powerlifting or possibly Olympic lifting as he had athletic ability.

Steve Neece
Los Angeles, CA



Dear IGH,

Twenty years ago, a 14 year-old, fledgling weightlifter thumbed through the pages of Schwarzenegger's *Education of a Bodybuilder* trying to visualize the path his

newfound passion would lead him. Something was missing. A few days later, a friend lent him a copy of *Inside Powerlifting*. . . the boy was never the same.

Fifteen years down the path, in preparing for his first trip to Scotland, the lad came across Serafini's *The Muscle Book*, whose cover boasts a photo of you lifting the Inver Stone—paradigm shift number two.

Please find enclosed a long overdue subscription to *Iron Game History* and an equally belated, yet earnest "Thank you" for all the inspiration you've provided this fledgling weightlifter through the years.

Steven G. Jeck
Winston-Salem, NC

Such kind words from such a distinguished strength athlete and author mean a great deal. Jeck is one of the few men in the world to lift the Inver Stone, one of the great challenge rocks of Scotland IGH readers might enjoy his new book: Of Stones and Strength, co-authored by Peter Martin.



Dear IGH,

I am sorry to report that Harry L. Good died Wednesday, July 22, 1998. Harry was 95 years of age, had been married for 62 years, and had battled a heart problem for the past few years.

Harry, the oldest of the Good Brothers, started to train with weights in 1924. After training for two years, Harry gained so much strength and muscle his younger brothers Walter and Bill joined him in lifting the iron. With hard training in primitive conditions, it wasn't long before the Good Brothers, led by Harry, became household names in the barbell world. Between 1929 and World War II they were featured in all the barbell magazines of the day in both articles and photos. Photos of them were also used in Mark Berry's book, *Physical Training Simplified*.

In 1930, Harry was offered a job as a Coney Island strongman, which he turned down. In 1934 he began to be known as the world's strongest professional strongman. At the same time, his brother Bill became known as the amateur world's strongest man. When Warren L. Travis put some of his lifting equipment up for sale, the Good Brothers bought his 2,150 pound barbell. Adding human weight to the bell, Harry lifted 3000 pounds in the harness lift three times without stopping. He also lifted 2500

pounds 25 times in 15 seconds. During their long careers, Harry and his brothers held numerous weightlifting records.

Harry worked for Bob Hoffman for three and a half years and then went on his own and opened the Good Barbell Company. At a disadvantage without a house organ magazine of his own, Harry put his ads in the *Mechanix* magazines, *Physical Culture* and the old *Iron Man*. Always a rolling stone, Harry ran his barbell company from Reading; West Reading; Saginaw, Missouri; Siloam Springs, Arkansas; and Hendersonville, North Carolina. He ran the company for 37 years, retiring in 1974.

He is survived by his wife, a daughter, a sister and his two brothers. He belonged to the Seventh-day Adventist church

Fred Howell
Mine Hill, NJ



We were delighted to play host to Mabel Rader and her niece Ellen Shackelford several weeks ago here at the Collection. Mabel and Peary ran Iron Man magazine for more than fifty years and following Peary's death, Mabel bequeathed their papers to us for our collection. What's less well known about Mabel, however, is that she was a true pioneer in the field of women's lifting. Mabel was the first (and is probably still the only) woman to hold a referee's card in bodybuilding, weightlifting, and powerlifting. She was also the person who first pushed the US Weightlifting Federation to allow women to compete. And, when women were finally admitted, Mabel served as the first chairperson for women's lifting in the US. When we watch the 2000 Olympics and see the first female weightlifters to ever compete in the Olympics, we should all say a word of thanks to Mabel Rader for getting women's weightlifting off the ground. Watch IGH in future issues for the full story of the early days of women's weightlifting.



Copies of Jan Todd's new book, Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women 1800-1870 may be ordered from Mercer University Press, 6316 Peake Road Macon, Georgia, 31210. Email orders may be sent to: www.mupress.org. The price is \$39.95. ISBN: 0-86554-561-8.

Excerpts from:

Strength Athletics and Swedish Gymnastics

(Athlétisme et Gymnastique Suédoise)

By Georges Le Roy (Paris: Pierre Lafitte, 1913)

Translated by David Chapman

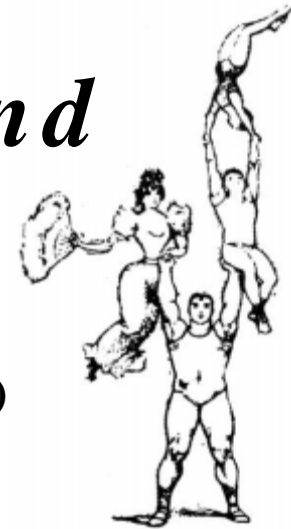
I. Introduction by David Chapman

In 1911 Edmond Desbonnet published his seminal history of professional strongmen, *The Kings of Strength*, and ever since it has remained the most reliable source on the lore and craft of the theatrical Hercules that has ever been produced. In fact, until recently, it was thought that this was the only contemporary book to chronicle circus and vaudeville strongmen. Fortunately, another work from that same era has come to light which also deals with the subject, but from a slightly different point of perspective.

Two years after Desbonnet's work appeared, Georges Le Roy (described simply as "a writer and sportsman") published his little book, *Athlétisme et Gymnastique Suédoise* [Strength Athletics and Swedish Gymnastics].¹ The book was primarily intended to be an exercise manual for budding strength fanatics. In it the author attempted to improve French musculature by the two most common and effective methods of his day: weight training and Swedish gymnastics. Many similar works had been published at this time, all of which promised to strengthen the physique and put a spring in one's step, and this part of the book is not very remarkable.

Before Le Roy turned to his stated task, however, he allowed himself a brief but important digression. The author decided to give his readers some background information on the phenomenon of strongmen and their attempts to make a living. In addition to writing this historical introduction Le Roy wished to show his readers that many of the self-proclaimed strongmen of the stage were nothing of the sort. The author wanted to deflate the myths surrounding theatrical strongman prior to inflating the muscles of his prospective pupils.

Despite his many admonitions against muscular



humbugs, the author nevertheless wants the reader to appreciate and to be aware of the birth of strength sports. The professional strongman, as Le Roy tells us, first appeared along the Franco-German frontier around 1800. Naturally, there had always been those who showed off their strength by performing feats of power and agility, but it was in this region that the strongmen first began making a living by showing off their muscles and their ability to lift things.

The post-Napoleonic world was ripe for physical display. The Ancien Régime in France was linked in the popular mind with softness, luxury, and femininity. The French revolution brought back the traditionally masculine virtues of strength, power, and courage, and it was only natural that artists would begin to represent these qualities in terms of the male physique. This rebirth of interest in virility manifested itself in the male nudes of David and Ingres which became very popular at this time. The strong, taut muscles of republican youth became the ideal against which all young men measured themselves.²

Germany, too, was beginning to awaken physically and politically after the Napoleonic debacles it experienced when the Grande Armée smashed through the confederation. Friedrich Jahn was in the process of starting his Turnverein, the gymnastics movement that gradually gathered strength. "There were," as one mid-century wrestling impressario proclaimed, "muscles in the air."³ This is the story that Georges Le Roy tells in his brief introduction. Jean Broyasse and Stücker, Wolff, and the others all represent the beginnings of a movement that had been brewing for several years.

Despite his avowed purpose of deflating the false and championing the true, Le Roy appears to have been misled in much of his research. I have indicated the disputed facts when I was able. In the end, Desbonnet is

still the most reliable source since he had made a long and detailed study of these same men. Desbonnet is also a more competent prose stylist. Le Roy's attempt at rhetorical elegance often succeeds merely in obscuring an otherwise straightforward account. I have attempted to render that strained elegance of style as best I could.

By 1913 when his book was published, the professional strongman was no longer a novelty or a thing of wonder. The tricks that were generally used were well known by then and the various charlatans who were active on Parisian street corners and public squares were more to be pitied than admired. *Strength Athletics and Swedish Gymnastics*, however, attempts to show that it was not always thus.

II. "The Game of Weights and its Origins," from: *Strength Athletics and Swedish Gymnastics* by G. Le Roy.

Every sort of fictional fantasy has been given free reign when it comes to the singularly arduous sport of weightlifting. For this, one must have truly exceptional muscularity which is made subject to a tenacity and willpower that can be stimulated only by the athlete's most intimate aspirations. What of stories about "the world of strongmen"? There are enough of these to fill a book—both true and false accounts (naturally, more false than true).

The old-timers, those who have known this sport from its beginnings, have discovered while rummaging around thoroughly in the inmost depths of their memories outrageous and fantastic stories in which it is very difficult to discern which parts are legend and which are truth.

Moreover, since we have no precise documents which allow us to negate the fantastic stories of "the oldest of the old," and so as not to be their accomplices in these lies, the best course is to sort out everything carefully which seems to be within the domain of absurd exaggeration. It is not easy to determine what is true and what is false in the midst of this "impi" of athletic anecdotes which are rampant in places where strongmen congregate.⁴ The choice, however, can be settled by taking that which has the appearance of truth.

In fact, we have a few notes that have been fairly carefully gathered on the lives of the first strongmen, and thanks to these it is possible to establish a rather precise

history of the sport of professional weightlifting. After all, the old legends that are told in specialized gymnasiums and in athletic taverns balance their doubtful authenticity with a certain flavor which agrees well with the world of strength acrobats. Let us accept them without excessive examination, and we will remain skeptical without adopting an attitude that might discourage gullible collectors of athletic anecdotes, or likewise diminish the athletic abilities of the earliest days, which (we might mention in passing) certainly constituted the golden age of the profession.

For the "feats" are more worthless today than they were in the past; that was a time when performing "in public" which is to say, the public square, really meant something. Ah, the public square: in it many have been deceived! A century ago—perhaps a bit less—the strongman considered public performances as a source of inexhaustible wealth. After several years of regular operation, the happy days were over: early strongmen began to be surrounded by a host of bothersome imitators who did not scruple to compromise their honesty. Performances lost their elegance, and phony weights invaded the square. And since the public was solicited at every street corner, they began to pass by even faster. The receipts diminished, the wandering performers were worn out by "the same old thing" and grew indifferent; strongmen did not collect more than a tenth part of the sums which they had been accustomed to obtaining from the "distinguished audience" which surrounded them. For "distinguished audiences" decreased quickly enough, and all too soon became what they are today: a wee bit defiant. Their hands soon appeared to have forgotten the way to their pockets.

In order to capture the public's attention, strongmen (if we can, moreover, call them that) devised ways of striking the fancy of the passersby with suits of clothing in which the ludicrous contended with the pompous so that one could not tell which of the two would overcome the other. At any rate, they formed the most hilarious combinations which it might be possible to recount. These are the exaggerations which ended by discrediting the sport of weightlifting in the eyes of the public. They did tremendous damage to amateur athletics. In France, for a long time—a very long time—this form of athletics was considered inferior and unworthy of youthful intelligence. Even today it is wrongly accorded only mediocre esteem.

The transfer of "the weight game" from the street to the stage did not have much better results. In France, what was tired of quickly is that to which the foreigner still cleaves. Then, the public squares have become modern-

ized. Today, the open-air strongman leaves us with an impression of poverty and destitution and makes us melancholy; he infuses us with a kind of sadness which increases that which we normally get from the sights of daily life. It's the same old organ ground by the eternally weary hand, the worn carpet piece used until a stubborn hole is eaten away pitilessly. All this reeks of the harshness of a life demanded of a thankless profession: the patched, threadbare tights that were once pink and no longer have a recognizable color, the shabby and worn "kit," the jersey (another old rag) on which are pinned several tarnished medals--worthless trophies of an illusory glory which cannot shield their owners from misery.

Those who see only this side of weightlifting do not suspect that there is another deserving a different reputation from the one that they want to give it to. Only amateur participants of weight training know otherwise. It is they who redeem physical exercise which has a rather bad reputation in a certain world. Amateurism is essentially the sporting side of the question. In an opus on weightlifting, it is this side which interests us most directly.

We shall therefore explain *training advice* with the precision that it deserves and—O, linguistic anomaly—the *practical theory* that will permit youthful amateurs who wish to work out *individually*—whether it is because they do not have an instructor at their disposal or for any other reason—to become familiar with its reasons and *effectiveness*, that is to say with the certainty of making progress—and thus be able to ascertain its importance.

And we might quickly add that it is, in fact, extremely simple: if you want to put forth effort, you will receive results (as we will later explain).

But for the moment let us return to the origin of this and follow the chronological story of facts starting with the era from which date the first memories of strength athletics.

III. Performing in Public Squares

The first man who had the idea of performing weightlifting feats in public was named Jean Broyasse, and he was born in Lyon in 1798. Jean Broyasse did not then work (at least at the start) with weights that were as perfected as those whose shapes have become classic today.

His materials were obtained from a German named Stücker who since the age of twenty had (for reasons which we do not know and which, moreover, do not interest us) lived in France. Let us note in passing, that

it was claimed that after his sudden and unexplained death that he had obtained the greater part of his income from espionage. Stücker enjoyed physical exercise very much and loved feats of strength. He met Jean Broyasse in a Lyon tavern. At this time Broyasse was a newly poor man, or more precisely, he was in the process of becoming a pauper. He was not a brigand—he could even be called an intellectual since he was studying law.

Nature had endowed him with great muscularity. When Stücker returned to Germany, he left to his friend Broyasse his weights composed of roughly cast masses of iron which were riveted with chains and handles to assure a good grip. The remainder of the bars was just as roughly put together. Jean Broyasse could not resist his bohemian nature, so he abandoned his studies there and put his athletic abilities to a professional use. First, he joined a traveling circus, but later he became enamored of absolute freedom, and he decided to work on his own by performing in public squares. He did not make a fortune, but he lived the way he wanted to.

Broyasse was still performing when there appeared in Paris a certain Wolff who modestly called himself "the Rock of Luxemburg." Naturally, he was not the Rock of anything; he was an extremely mediocre strongman. However, he had a very practical sense when it came to the husbanding of his physical strength: he did not like to get tired. He also worked with phony weights (it was he who imported this sort of thing to France). All of his weights were fakes; not a single piece of his equipment was genuine, not even the cannon which he carried on his shoulder and with which he walked around the crowd, with his moneybag in his hand. In addition, the public, which was not as informed as it is today, granted him its credulity . . . and its money. Wolff looked like he could lift mountains, but in reality he could not lift much at all; he performed his feats with such ease that everyone was amazed.

As one might imagine, almost at once Wolff had his imitators, and thus a number of specialists in street performances began to develop, their work becoming more and more suspicious. Quite some time ago the first foundry for faked weights and barbells was opened in Paris. Strongmen had adopted a sort of vague drapery as a costume, something like a short tunic which made vague references to antiquity.

It was around 1814 that Laroche appeared. To the act of weightlifting he added that of the human burden. His act consisted of getting under a cart filled with fifteen men, then buttressing himself with his knees and his

hands, lifting the load as high as his waist. An assistant had the duty of turning the wheels to prove beyond doubt that the cart had left the ground. This was a rather happy time for Laroche. In his later days he abandoned strength feats for prestidigitation, and he sported frightening costumes of a demented design, with crimson velvets made more garish by gold embroidery. And to those who stood dumbfounded in front of this flamboyant apparition, Laroche, who was quite satisfied with himself, announced to his spectators, "Formerly, I amazed them with what was underneath; today, I amaze them with what is overhead." The "human burden" feat was taken up again several years later by someone named Paris.⁵

Felice Giordanino, who was a contemporary of Laroche, established a career in Paris under the name of Felice Napoli.⁶ He hailed from Naples. He started out by lifting weights which, incidentally, he was particularly good at, especially "juggling." But since he gradually grew stronger and stronger, he added several sensational feats to his first exercises, for example, the one that involved breaking stones on his chest. He earned a great success with this. The turn consisted of the following: Napoli lay down on his back, and a stone measuring about 50 centimeters wide and 10 centimeters thick was placed on his chest. A man broke the stone in two with a blow from a mallet.

His "bar trick" was also wildly successful. It involved taking an iron bar of one centimeter in diameter and bending it in the middle by striking it on his forearm. After two or three blows, the bar curved in at the middle. Several contemporaries of Napoli attempted the same feat with no other result but that they were seriously bruised. In the end the hoax was revealed: the two extremities of the bar were iron, but the middle part was lead and completely hollow!

"Samson's March," also devised by Napoli, saw its appearance on the weightlifting scene. To perform this feat Felice was decorated with 20-kilogram weights; he had them all around his waist, on his shoulders, a string of them across his chest, below his knees, at the base of his thighs, and his shoes had lead soles. Then, thus accoutered and after being loaded with solid iron bars across the back of the neck, he walked about the distinguished audience.

With Gérard of Lyon, who dates from the same time, we emerge into what we can call "classic weightlifting performances." Gérard was neither an eccentric nor a "character"; he was an extremely strong man who did very correct lifts. It was he who became enraged during a performance in a circus, and grabbed his manager who was

costumed as a gendarme, ready to play his role in the pantomime. After picking up the man and carrying him at arms' length to police headquarters, he found a magistrate who was astounded by this hilarious scene. Gérard asked if he could rule that this minor Barnum might pay his employees the emoluments that were greatly in arrears. The director settled with Gérard, even reimbursing him, and then invited him to disappear from the troupe on the double quick.

Then there is Vigneron, the Cannon Man. With him, weightlifting performances were graced with a sensational feat. He had a cannon weighing around 180 kilos in which was a strong charge of powder. He placed the cannon on his right shoulder, then touched the light to the fuse. The difficulty consisted (aside from the strength needed to lift and support such a weight) in bending the body forward at the correct moment in order to compensate in advance for the recoil of the piece.

Vigneron, who had performed this feat more than 800 times was its victim in Boulogne-sur-Mer under very tragic circumstances. He had lifted his cannon onto his shoulder, and as usual waited for the moment when the flame would light the fuse. The cannon did not fire. Growing impatient, Vigneron began to put the cannon on the ground, and balanced it on his shoulder with the barrel facing toward his chest. At the instant when the breech touched the ground, the shot fired, and the strongman was killed instantly. As a cannon man, Vigneron had numerous imitators. The most famous was Mr. Vuillod, an amateur, who today is a senator from the Department of l'Est.

Alfred Ferrand and Vincent "the Iron Man" were two amazing strongmen. They always performed together, and one man's story is intimately linked to the other's. The queerness of their character was the cause of some hilarious adventures such as the one that happened to them in Monaco where luck was not favorable to them—something they could not admit without starting a revolution. Accordingly, they revolted willingly enough against the established prince who did not agree with their personal ideas. They had a high opinion of their athletic prowess, and truly their strength justified their pretensions.

Vincent and Ferrand attempted to recover their expenses by taking a trip to London (without guaranteed reward) in order to challenge a German strongman who proclaimed himself the finest in the world. Vincent had great difficulty in concluding a match with this rival whom he convinced himself he was certain of dominating, but finally, it came to pass. Not only did Ferrand and Vincent

easily perform all the feats of the German, but they even performed others which their rival was incapable of doing when his turn came. The fame of the two Frenchmen became prodigious in London, and the entire population of the English capital flocked to applaud them at the Aquarium.

Robert “the Man Seller” was a mediocrity compared to nearly anyone else. There are several cock-and-bull stories attached to his name that he obligingly allowed to be put abroad and which added nothing to his reputation (which was overrated even during his own time). Consequently, his time on the public squares was of short duration.

A group performing on the Place Louvois one day produced a plowman from the Nivernais named Jean-Pierre de Montastruc. He was a freak of nature: hunch-backed, deformed, with huge arms and incredible ham-like hands; but despite everything, he was very strong (clumsier than he was strong, however). Feats have been attributed to him whose authenticity seems to be equivocal. Consider the following: he still worked the soil when one day he encountered a cart driver on the road whose wagon was loaded with wheat and was stuck in a rut. Jean-Pierre, it is said, got under the vehicle, lifted it on his back, pulled it from the rut and placed it back thus in the middle of the road. This often-told legend, presented for the consideration of a credulous public, does not inspire confidence. Here is another: He was plowing. A passerby approached and asked directions, and Jean-Pierre picked up his plow with two hands, and bending his arms in order to point out the path which stretched out before him, put the errant traveler back on the right track.⁷ Once more, this one is extreme fantasy.

Although he was very strong, he was above all a phenomenon who attracted attention by his deformity. When he was seated in the middle of a train seat and he extended his two arms laterally, the tips of his fingers touched the walls of the car.

Another product of the province was the miller of Darnétal who came to Paris to “do weights” but who never made a very lasting impression and is remembered only vaguely. It was he, who in Darnétal where he worked, lifted to arms’ length and transported a ladder a few meters farther on which a man had climbed carrying a 100-kilo sack of flour.

Louis the Mechanic was endowed with huge hands and specialized in lifting block weights by the rim. When he extended his fingers, his thumb touched the base of a liter bottle and his little finger touched the tip of the

neck. He also had a special barbell that was terrifying because of its uncommon dimensions, but this selfsame weight which looked as if it weighed twice that of others, in reality weighed less than half.

Weightlifting met its Beau Brummel in the person of Henri Joigneret who (along with Alphonse Grasse) was a perfect model of correctness and elegance in the presentation of feats. Joigneret and Grasse were all the rage in Paris. The former was one of the founders of the earliest weight training gymnasiums in Paris. After having established himself in the Rue Mazagran, he moved to the Avenue des Tilleuls and a little afterwards passed the torch to the famous Paul Pons.

As for Alphonse Grasse, he was incomparable from the point of view of the elegance of the feats. He had a very personal “style” and “manner.” Obviously, there are stronger men than he, but probably no better when it came to the way he lifted.

Jules and Justin Barrois were from Joigneret’s school. No trickery here, just good work: no “spectacular feats,” nothing but arm extensions, snatches, jerks, and a bit of acrobatics because the public demanded it.

Two men whose names should be mentioned are François Vilher and Dubois, even though they did not lift professionally except for a very brief appearance. Ah! How those two seriously discredited performing in the public squares! When their colleagues saw them leave, it was with great relief. They later moved on to wrestling. It was claimed that they were the inventors of “chicanery,” but it was inept fakery: deception on the lowest scale, approaching the clumsiest duping of the public ever known. At any rate, it would appear that it was they whom we must thank for “counter-chicanery,” that is to say, the presence of a paid accomplice in the anonymous crowd listening with mouths agape to the barker’s patter. He was the “shill” who played the unexpected amateur who challenges the professionals.

Like others in the history of old-time strongmen, Faouët, the “Beast of the Jungles” and the “Muscular Apollo,” was primarily a wrestler, whose names are mentioned here but not remembered.

Professionals were not and never had been a uniquely French specialty, as we have seen from the start with Wolff, the Rock of Luxemburg. Around the time which interests us, foreigners produced several people who lifted weights better than most; they were without well established principles since no rules existed which imposed a single and unified manner of performing the movements. In a general way, the diversity of the French and foreign

schools have been maintained up to the present. It has only been about fifteen years since the codification of weightlifting has been definitively standardized. But now we digress from our subject.

Foreigners had their professionals as well for whom weightlifting was merely a prelude to bizarre feats well designed to strike the public's fancy. The sporting character of their exhibitions was certainly the least thing that concerned them; the theatrical side of the question interested them much more since their first desire just as well was to make sure of box office receipts.

Germany and Austria have produced quantities of professionals and particularly that sort of specialist known as "chain breakers." As for legitimate weightlifting, one can count among the obscure unknowns more interesting subjects than among the famous circus performers. Among those whose names have come to us and who are considered interesting men are Hans Beck and Carl Abs.

Hans Beck of Achdorf in Bavaria was a butcher boy when he abandoned his profession to become a strongman. The muscles which he possessed were of a very real quality. He trained in a Munich club and came to be very strong. His specialty was the globe barbell which he lifted in three movements; unfortunately, the first movement was assisted by a resting point on his abdomen which is not allowed in France where the shouldering must be done in one move.⁸ Along with Stangelmeier, Beck founded one of the most famous clubs in Bavaria.

Cari Abs of Mecklenburg approached Joigneret a bit when it came to the elegance of his lifting. Otto Kohler was of German extraction, and he performed for a long time under the direction of his father, Frederic Kohler, who coached a weight training club in Mount-Clemmons. He was quite strong, but he always professed a certain penchant for wrestling and met several times with William Buldon [*sic.* this should read Muldoon] and Louis the Strangler.

Austria has produced a man whom the entire athletic world agrees in recognizing as a strongman of the highest quality: Wilhelm Turck, who was born in Vienna in 1859. Unfortunately, Wilhelm Turck has not escaped criticism from us. His lifting is not done in the purest style—not by a long shot. It is not that his weights are phony (far from it), but his lifting performance was so lax, so innocent of any methodology that he drew several justified cautions. Wilhelm Turck's principles can be summed up thus: lift the weight any way you can just so long as you lift it. Using this process, he was able to shoulder extraordinary poundages without worrying about

the contortions with which he was obliged to put himself through to attain those results. It is a way of doing things that the French school does not wish to accept, and in this it is absolutely correct.

Modern Russia has furnished some interesting subjects. Doctor Krajewski, who was president of the St. Petersburg Athletic Club and director of physical exercise at this club, is very busy there. One can cite among the long list of best men in this elite circle Yousoff, de Ianslew, William Moor Znamenski of St. Petersburg; Schmelling, who is especially good at wrestling, and more recently Elliseieff, who came to Paris several years ago.

England has not exactly been poor in weightlifting specialists. Montgomery of London is one of the finest names to cite.⁹ He is more elegant in his lifting than he is really strong; he was, however, still a vaudeville strongman. Sanderson the Swede lifted without Clan but was endowed with an amazing natural strength.

The Japanese physique does not (to say the least) lend itself to weightlifting. That is why Japan has primarily produced acrobats, wrestlers, and jujitsu fighters in the realm of professional performers. The only man performing feats of physical strength and who has left a name in this specialized area is a certain Matsada Sora Kichi, who first saw the light of day in 1847 in a little village near Yeddo.¹⁰

Like all the men of his race, Sora Kichi was very small, but he was astoundingly muscular. He specialized in lifting beer barrels, and he was able to do feats with these massive casks that stronger men than he have never been able to do. He has never been seen in France; he works regularly in the music halls of the United States.

Sora Kichi—this name was certainly borrowed—was of high pedigree. He was an errant nobleman of Japanese society. By the time he was twenty years of age, he had gotten into many scrapes, and his family, despairing of his ever making something of himself, broke off relations with him. One would never imagine that this person would be capable of the athletic feats which he accomplishes.

Sora Kichi was forced to leave Japan after an incident which nearly cost him his life. He had requested an audience with the Mikado, but this went unanswered. He sought an explanation for the man's silence and not finding a plausible one in his reasoning faculties, he resolved to get to the bottom of things.

He positioned himself on the Mikado's route, and when the ruler arrived in a carriage traveling at a slight trot, Sora Kichi broke through the crowd, evaded the

bodyguard's notice, seized the landau by the rear springs, and stopped it in just a few meters before the police were even able to intervene. [Editors' note: Clearly impossible, of course.] Surrounded by guards, he engaged in a Homeric struggle in the course of which he seriously wounded two or three of them. He was like a Barnum in New York.

Modern strongmen have redeemed the errors of the unscrupulous lifters of the past: men like Joseph Bonnes of Narbonne, Louis Uni ("Apollon") of Marsiliargues, Robert of Paris, Jean-François the Breton, Victorius, Noël Rouverrolis ("The Gaul"), Émile Deriaz, Robert, Vasseur, Maspoli, and Lancoud. The best lifter, the man who seems to us "the most all-around" in the first world championship organized several years ago was, without a doubt, Bonnes, who was given the title of world champion.¹¹

Notes:

1. J. Joseph Renaud, Preface to *Strength Athletics and Swedish Gymnastics*, ii.
2. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (NY: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 51.
3. Rossignol-Rollin (pseud. of Nestor Roqueplan) as quoted in Edmond Desbonnet, *Les Rois de la Force* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1911), 95.
4. An *impi* is a Zulu regiment. It was the closest term I could come up with that might be appropriately exotic and yet still reasonably familiar to English speakers. The original word used by Le Roy is *harka*, a regiment of North African native soldiers who were attached to the French regular army.
5. Probably "Paris, l'Homme à la Chaloupe" or Paris the Boat Man (1850-1909).
6. According to Edmond Desbonnet, Napoli's real name was "Prades." Le Roy seems to be describing another athlete whom Desbonnet calls "The False Napoli" to distinguish him from the original strongman.
7. Desbonnet attributes this unlikely feat to Rouselle, the Northern Hercules.
8. This is the "Continental" form which was frowned upon by the French and English lifters. See Bob Hoffman, *Weight Lifting*, (York: Strength & Health, 1939), 194.
9. Irving Montgomery, known as "Sandowe" or the False Sandow, was a very mediocre strongman. His inclusion here certainly casts doubts on Le Roy's judgement and knowledge.
10. Yeddo was the former name given to Tokyo.
11. Pierre (not John) Bonnes (b. 1867) appeared in several photographic plates in *Strength Athletics* in order to illustrate several exercises. A more complete biography appears in Georges Dubois *Comment on devient Champion de la Force* [How to Become a Champion of Strength] (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1909).

Book Reviews

Moore, Pamela L., ed., *Building Bodies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Reviewed by Nicholas Turse
Rutgers University

Bringing together some of the foremost authors in the academic study of bodybuilding, Pamela Moore's *Building Bodies* marks the first collection, from a scholarly press, to deal specifically with bodybuilding. With contributions from: Anne Bolin, Susan Bordo, Leslee Fisher, Jonathan Goldberg, Lynda Goldstein, Leslie Heywood, Christine Anne Holmlund, Pamela Moore, Novid Parisi and Laurie Schulze, *Building Bodies* focuses on conceptualizations of the "body built." In *Building Bodies*, the authors delve into issues of gender, race, homoeroticism, and media interpretations (to name a few) surrounding the sport of bodybuilding. Some of the authors also address representations of the muscular body outside of the realm of athletic endeavor.

Representing various academic disciplines—philosophy, gender studies, sociology, media studies, and literary criticism—*Building Bodies* provides an eye-opening, interdisciplinary view of the muscular body as more than a mere mass of flesh and sinew. The "built body" is examined as a political and cultural symbol.

Of Moore's selections, perhaps the most illuminating is Susan Bordo's, "Reading the Male Body." First published in 1993, this essay is an illuminating view of the masculine body through lenses of gender, race, sexuality, and cultural iconography. Bordo's text is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of a number of well-chosen illustrations of common conceptualizations of muscular masculinity in American popular culture. From Charles Atlas to a Bally's Health Club advertisement, Bordo interweaves her complex tale of embattled gender configurations through both picture and prose. In doing so, she provides the most fascinating of all the book's selections.

While *Building Bodies* offers a fine "intellectual" portrait of "bodies built," the text is distinctly lacking in what I can only term the "gym atmosphere of bodybuilding." Despite articles which have a very intimate understanding of bodybuilding culture and weight-training in general (most notably Anne Bolin's and Laurie Schulze's

pieces), many articles fall short of engaging the weightlifting or bodybuilding fan.

A prime example of this is the treatment of the venerable bodybuilding movie *Pumping Iron*. While a number of articles in the text point out that the authors have scrutinized *Pumping Iron*, none impart the “flavor” of the film. The authors often seem content to deal in abstractions and make tenuous theoretical leaps, leaving the reader to wonder if the film the scholars speak of is the same Schwarzenegger movie the reader may have seen ten times. Sadly, this is not an isolated incident, but is endemic to the entire text. Those unacquainted with bodybuilding who read this work may come away with a distorted view of bodybuilding (which among the uninitiated is often skewed to begin with).

Building Bodies, while utilizing well-written and intellectually stimulating pieces, neglects to offer a true depiction of the culture surrounding the “body built.” Even so, for those who would wade through the jargon and (sometimes) over-analysis, Pamela Moore’s text offers eye-opening insights and a great impetus for scholarly study and self-analysis as a “lifter.”

The aspect of *Building Bodies* that offers the most fascinating insights to the non-academic devotee of the “strength game” may be the interpretations of the bodybuilding and weightlifting subcultures from a scholarly perspective. While some of the academics in the text profess to be, and write as if they are, well acquainted with weight training, most articles read as if they are written by “outsiders,” and thus offer a fresh perspective.

All told, the text is a valiant effort. It falls short of expectations, but nonetheless offers intriguing selections to anyone seriously interested in the academic study of “building bodies.”

Way is a must read for you.

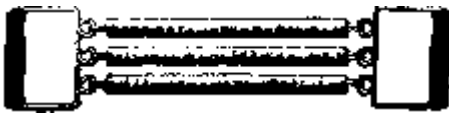
Mr. America, Mr. World, Mr. Universe and the original Hercules of the movies explains in his new book, *Building the Classic Physique—The Natural Way* how to build a strong and muscular body without using illegal, health-sapping drugs. Reeve's book is divided into four sections: (1) his life in bodybuilding, (2) the science of bodybuilding (3) additional training considerations and (4) a bodybuilding seminar. It also has seven appendices that are filled with details regarding the achievements and bodybuilding principles of the man some consider to be the "greatest physical culturist of all time." In addition, the book is jam packed with awe-inspiring photos of Reeve's classic physique.

Although Reeves' biography is well known to many readers of *Iron Game History*, there is still much to be learned from Part One of *Building the Classic Physique*. Reeve's rise to super stardom began with his victory in the 1947 Mr. America. The following year he took home the Mr. World crown and in 1950 he was also named Mr. Universe. Like Sandow at the turn of the century, however, Reeves soon transcended mere bodybuilding. In the movies Steve played in a number of Hercules films and several westerns. By the end of the 1950s, he was one of the most popular film stars in the world, especially in Europe.

Part Two contains the essence of Reeve's philosophy of bodybuilding. He argues that one should be a "thinking bodybuilder." As such, "you create a picture in your mind of how you want your physique to look when you reach your genetic potential. Then you train to achieve that image." Reeves contends that the best results are achieved when you work the major muscles of the upper body before you work the muscles of the lower body. He recommends a "top-down" workout routine in this section and with plenty of pictures of Hercules to inspire the reader, even a 97-pound weakling can become a perfectly developed man.

Part Three contains advice for advanced bodybuilders, athletes, executives and seniors. It also contains a brief synopsis of Steve's earlier book, *Power-Walking*, in which he described how to use brisk walking and light weights to maximize aerobic fitness. This third section also covers the value of good nutrition in building and maintaining a healthy and muscular body. In Part Four, Reeves answers the kind of questions usually posed to him at bodybuilding seminars about supplements, nutrition, drugs and so forth.

Although Reeves' book is sold in many bookstores, you can also order an autographed copy directly from him by sending \$29.95 for the soft cover and \$39.95 for the hardback edition to: Steve Reeves, P.O. Box 807, Valley Center, CA, 92082. Prices quoted include postage.



Steve Reeves, *Building the Classic Physique—The Natural Way, 2nd Edition*
(Calabasas, CA: Little-Wolff Group, 1995).

Reviewed by Grover L. Porter, Ph.D.
University of Alabama, Huntsville.

Do you want a strong, muscular and healthy body? Do you want to win a gold medal in your chosen sport? Do you want to be the best you can be? If "yes," Steve Reeve's *Building the Classic Physique—The Natural*