

# Center Ring: Katie Sandwina and the Construction of Celebrity

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Kate Carew, an unconventional newspaper-woman, was famous in the early twentieth century for a “New Journalism” approach to the interview, in which she conveyed her own impressions about how it felt to be in the presence of the Progressive Era’s leading celebrities. To be featured by this print version of Barbara Walters meant the interviewee was a person that mattered. Sarah Bernhardt, Ethel Barrymore, Theda Barrow, D.W. Griffith, Mark Twain, Pablo Picasso, Bret Harte, Jack London, Emil Zola, The Wright Brothers, and Teddy Roosevelt, for example, all made space on their calendars so Carew could do an interview and then draw pen and ink caricatures of them to accompany her stories.<sup>1</sup> In early April of 1911, Carew turned in a full-page article and three drawings of New York’s celebrity *du jour*—the professional strongwoman Katie Sandwina, who’d just been promoted to the center-ring in Barnum & Bailey’s Greatest Show on Earth.<sup>2</sup> Carew’s article was an overwhelmingly positive piece that helped ensure Sandwina’s status as a major star. The author’s carefully chosen words and neatly-drawn cartoons created a majestic yet decidedly feminine image of the strongwoman that was reprinted in newspapers across the United States. Further, Carew’s piece provided other journalists with a vocabulary of flattering adjectives and allusions that turned up again and again in articles written about Sandwina in the years that followed.<sup>3</sup>

Although parts of Sandwina’s story have been recounted in newspaper articles, in reminiscence pieces



in muscle magazines, and in several academic publications—including *Iron Game History*—surprisingly little attention has been paid in any of these pieces to Sandwina’s two seasons with the Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1911 and 1912, despite the fact this was clearly the period of her greatest fame in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Weightlifting pundits have spent considerable time debating how much she actually lifted overhead, and whether she deserves the title of “Strongest Woman that Ever Lived”—which Barnum & Bailey’s publicity staff bestowed on her with a full-color promotional poster of her act in 1912.<sup>5</sup> But the story of how Sandwina got to Barnum & Bailey’s center ring and simultaneously emerged as a glamorous beauty despite her “masculine” profession and large stature, is an equally fascinating tale and represents an interesting case study in the construction of identity.

Carew’s article in the *New York American* was, in reality, the capstone of a carefully crafted campaign orchestrated by Robert Fellows, head of publicity for the the Barnum & Bailey circus. How involved Katie and her husband, Max Heymann, were in the decision to promote her in this new way is unknown, although the Sandwinas seemed to embrace their new roles once circus management told them that they no longer wanted an act called “The Sandwinas”—but did want an act called “Katie Sandwina and Troupe.”<sup>6</sup>

It was a delicate balance Fellows, Katie, and Max were trying to achieve—to make people want to see a woman perform strength stunts and at the same time to



make her a celebrity with broad cultural appeal. Carew certainly helped the cause. She opened her article by writing, “Lo! These eyes have beheld the Superwoman. Her head is the head of Juno. Her form is fit for a mother of kings and heroes. She is twenty-five years old, weighs 210 pounds and moves as lightly as a greyhound. . . . She is as majestic as the Sphinx, as pretty as a valentine, as sentimental as a German schoolgirl, and as wholesome as a great big slice of bread and butter.”<sup>7</sup> Throughout the article Carew employed remarkably positive descriptions of Sandwina’s body and general appearance—“Her head is large,” wrote Carew, “and that makes the beauty of her features positively startling. With her curled upper lip and her classic chin, she has the look of some heroic work in marble...Her throat is a column. Her shoulders and back might have been hewn by Michel Angelo [*sic*].” Continuing, Carew explained that Sandwina was not at all masculine and that although Katie’s arms could lift 240 pounds overhead, they were still supple and smooth enough to show off in a ball gown. Sandwina, she proclaimed, had “No horrid lumps of muscle, dears—just a little ripple under the skin, like mice playing in a mattress.”<sup>8</sup>

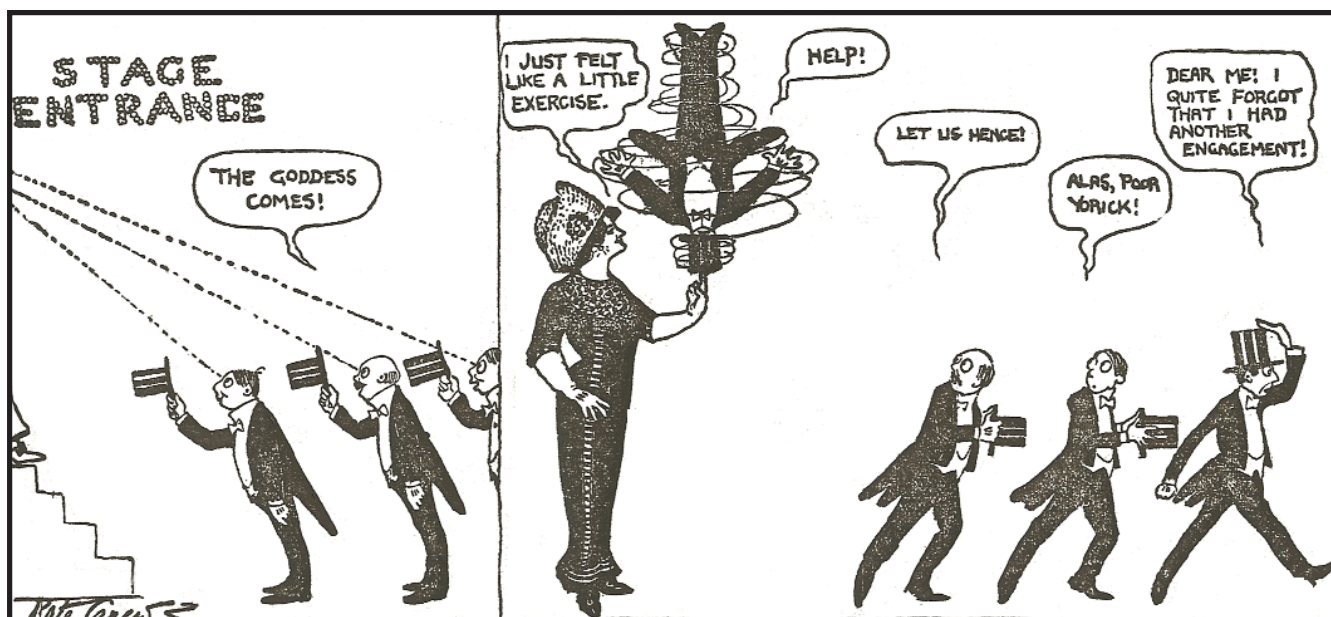
That Carew could wax so rhapsodic about a tall, sturdily-built, strength athlete weighing over two hundred pounds seems amazing given our twenty-first century preference for

hyper-slender women. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, there were several competing ideals of feminine beauty, according to historian Valerie Steele, and one of the most popular types was the large, robust woman referred to by historian Thomas Beer as a “titaness.” It was a type, wrote Steele, in which simple prettiness “had given way to height, grandeur and sturdiness.”<sup>9</sup> There was, however, apparently something



During her second season with the Barnum & Bailey Circus, this full-page photograph of Katie Sandwina appeared on Saturday, 8 June 1912 as a special “supplement” to the *National Police Gazette*. It was a photo designed to be saved and framed, and few athletes were granted such treatment by the *Gazette* unless they were true celebrities or beautiful women. In 1912, Katie was considered to be both.

truly unique about Katie Sandwina. Patricia Galli, who married Sandwina’s second son Alfred in 1944, described her as “beautiful . . . close to six feet tall, with black, Spanish eyes and very soft spoken.” Galli also recalled that Katie—who by then, of course, was over 60 years old—“didn’t show much muscling, just firm curves. Galli also said that Sandwina “painted her finger and toe nails and although you may find this surprising, I believe Katie was the most feminine woman I’ve ever known.”<sup>10</sup> And professional strongman Ottley Coulter, who saw Sandwina perform several times, could not deny Katie’s beauty even though he doubted she was as strong as Barnum & Bailey’s press agents claimed. Wrote Coulter in a letter to David P. Willoughby, “I doubt that Cyr or Travis could equal Sandwina for public appeal. . . . I saw Katie perform several times and consider that she was a wonder. She was billed as Europe’s Queen of Strength & Beauty. I must say she appeared beautiful



Kate Carew helped glamorize Sandwina with this two-panel cartoon showing a group of suitors waiting to see the “Goddess.” The text accompanying this caricature reads: “The Lady Hercules receives many attentions from stage door “Johnnies,” but her husband declares that she deals with the problem in a masterly fashion.” This cartoon appeared with Carew’s interview on 16 April 1911 in the *New York American*.

to me...”<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Jack Kent, Coulter Coulter similarly observed, “She had everything, even sex appeal.”<sup>12</sup>

Even if Sandwina was a *nonpareil* among titanesses, physical appearance alone doesn’t explain why she connected so powerfully with the American press in 1911 and 1912. The Carew interview, for example, linked Sandwina with many of the important social movements of the day—particularly eugenics, suffrage, physical culture, and “New Womanhood.”<sup>13</sup> However, Sandwina was also identified with certain elements of “separate sphere” ideology—the Victorian view that women’s greatest influence was to be found through homemaking and childcare—and in Carew’s article and many other pieces Sandwina emphasized her maternal nature during her time with Barnum & Bailey, a fact which confirmed her sexuality in the public’s mind and made her seem less threatening.

Unlike other strongwomen working at the turn of the century, Katie was never considered masculine, too-large or unattractive during the early years of her career.<sup>14</sup> Even William Inglis’ light-hearted piece in *Harper’s Weekly* warning men of this new challenge to male hegemony describes Sandwina as possessing, “as pretty a face, as sweet a smile and as fine a head of silky brown curls as a man could ask to see.”<sup>15</sup> In other newspaper articles from these years, Katie is called a goddess, beautiful, majestic, feminine, and completely

charming. And in 1912, when Barnum’s publicity staff cooked up a beauty contest pitting circus women against Broadway show-girls, Sandwina’s name was at the top of the list to uphold the circus’ reputation.<sup>16</sup> New York newspaperman Franklin Fyles saw the Barnum & Bailey Circus in early April of 1911, for example, and remarked upon the large number of women playing starring roles in that year’s show. While Fyles did not care for the Japanese wire walker’s brand of beauty, describing her as a “chubby Jap girl with stubby legs, knotted and gnarled muscles, like an old-time ballet premiere’s,” he found Sandwina to be “positively the most commanding beauty I have seen staged in years. Katie is a full six feet in height . . . with no suggestion of either soft fat or hard muscle. . . . She stood forth like Venus in something like what sculptors call heroic size, feminine in aspect and extra-gentle of visage; yet she did all the acrobatic things common to the best men in the circus and bounced her husband about like a rubber ball.”<sup>17</sup> And Margaret Mooers Marshall, who interviewed Sandwina backstage, provocatively reported: “Mrs. Sandwina had received me in her own apartments, and under a thin dressing gown, her supple, beautiful figure bent and curved as she brushed her long brown hair and talked. She was an unconsciously perfect illustration of her text that beauty is strength, strength beauty.”<sup>18</sup> Near the end of Barnum & Bailey’s run at Madison Square Garden, Charles Eldot

summed up the fourth-estate's nearly unanimous opinion: "In an entertainment where there are 1000 persons taking part it is a difficult thing to single out individuals for mention in detail but the press of New York . . . have selected Katie Sandwina, the strong woman, as the most perfect specimen of womanhood that has ever been seen and are exploiting her as the greatest single attraction the circus has offered in many years."<sup>19</sup>

The historian Janet Davis argues that circus owners particularly sought out female performers in the era just before World War I in order to capitalize on the public's interest and confusion about the emergence of a new kind of womanhood. Writes Davis, "In an era when a majority of women's roles were still circumscribed by Victorian ideals of domesticity and feminine propriety, circus women's performances celebrated female power, thereby representing a startling alternative to contemporary social norms."<sup>20</sup> Sandwina's performances were certainly about power—she physically dominated her husband, Max Heymann, lifting him overhead as if he were a light barbell—and the evidence of her physical size and superior strength led to a certain sexual *frisson* in the audience as they watched the pair go through their act. Carew in fact, told Sandwina, "Oh, I would give anything to be able to bat a man around like that."<sup>21</sup> All the reporters remarked on the size disparity between Katie—who stood in various reports anywhere from 5'9" to 6'1" tall at a bodyweight of 200-220 pounds—and her husband Max, who was 5'6", 156-165 pounds.<sup>22</sup> While Max's size was important given the fact that he often constituted the "weight" she lifted in her daily routine, circus patrons no doubt also indulged in quiet speculation about marital relations between the physically mismatched pair.<sup>23</sup> The anomaly of the woman being both larger and stronger than her male partner was not just unconventional; it was radical, and more than one reporter suggested that Sandwina was

proof that suffrage could work, that "the 'female Hercules,' was a living argument in favor of equal franchise."<sup>24</sup> One reporter even warned his readers, "The anti-suffragists who go to the Barnum & Bailey Circus at Madison Square Garden, and see Sandwina, the German strong woman, lift her husband and two-year-old son with one arm, tremble for the future of the anti-cause. When all women are able to rule their homes by such simple and primitive methods they will get the vote—or take it."<sup>25</sup> Sandwina did not discourage the connection. A supporter of the women's suffrage movement, she became vice-president of the suffrage group that formed within the Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1912. Some reporters even began referring to her as "Sandwina the Suffragette."<sup>26</sup>

So, while Sandwina may have had feminist leanings, she nonetheless didn't overlook the opportunity to use the birth of her first son, Theodore Roosevelt Martin Beck Sandwina, to confirm herself in the public's mind as a "true woman" who saw motherhood and domesticity as important aspects of her selfhood.<sup>27</sup> Teddy, as he was called, was born in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1909, and according to press clippings, Katie took almost no time off from her vaudeville obligations at the Orpheum Theater, even doing two shows with all her normal stunts on the evening before his birth.<sup>28</sup>

The New York press was fascinated by these maternal aspects of Sandwina's life. The fact that Teddy—who was quickly dubbed "Superbaby" by the press—weighed fifty pounds at age two, and could "pick up a twenty-five pound dumbbell and run around and play with it like it was nothing," prompted Carew and other interviewers to include Sandwina's advice on child-rearing and the feeding of children in their articles so that other children might also become large and strong.<sup>29</sup> While "Superbaby" was paraded in front of reporters during several important interviews in New York in



Kate Carew captioned this caricature of Sandwina with: "The Queen of Strength, Beauty, Etc., Picked Me Up and Extended Me at Arm's Length As If I Had Been a Feather." In the drawing, "Aunt Kate," as Carew called her cartoon self, warns Sandwina, "For the Love of Mike, Woman, Be Careful!"

While "Superbaby" was paraded in front of reporters during several important interviews in New York in

1911, he did not travel with the circus for the rest of the summer but, rather, was left behind at a boarding pre-school in Westchester.<sup>30</sup>

Teddy's unusual vigor—and Katie's own size and strength—were also perceived, however, as validation of the Progressive Era theory of eugenics.<sup>31</sup> Carew focused on this aspect of the Sandwina story, concluding, "In fact, for a couple centuries or more, the mighty-muscled people of Bavaria have been intermarrying and turning out large families of great athletes, culminating in the gigantic and beautiful young creature who now twirls her lord and master over her head twice a day in Madison Square Garden."<sup>32</sup>

Katie's strength and physique were undoubtedly influenced by her genetic heritage. She was born in the back of a circus wagon belonging to Philippe and Johanna Nock Brumbach on 6 May 1884 either in, or just outside Vienna, Austria.<sup>33</sup> Her father, Philippe, who stood 6'6" tall and weighed approximately 260

pounds, was one of the strongest man in Germany during the 1890s and could reportedly lift more than 500 pounds with one finger.<sup>34</sup> Katie's mother, Johanna, whose measurements were reportedly close to Katie's own, was, like Phillippe, also descended from a long line of circus performers; and when she wasn't overwhelmed by child care, she performed as a strongwoman.<sup>35</sup> There were eventually 15 or 16 Brumbach children; Katie was born second, and was the eldest daughter. Three of her sisters, Barbara, Marie, and Eugennia also became professional strongwomen. Another sister appeared as Wilma Morelly in an acrobatic act.<sup>36</sup>

When Katie began actually performing outside her family's circus is not clear. She began doing handbalancing with her father at a very young age (some papers suggest that she did handstands on her father's arm at age two), and probably began lifting light dumb-



This photograph of Sandwina with her husband, Max Heymann, gives a good idea of the size difference between the two and also allows one to see that underneath her tights, Katie's legs were shapely and muscular. Note the heels she's wearing to accentuate her height.

ells while still a small child; by her mid-teens she had grown into a large and powerful young woman.<sup>37</sup> In newspaper accounts published in 1911, Katie dismisses the idea that she did any special training as a child, stating in one article: "I never trained myself to be strong...My mother had fifteen children and she was too busy keeping us going to pay any attention to training us. I was just born strong and big, that's all."<sup>38</sup> Dr. H.L. Lepworth of Chicago, Illinois, however, who claimed in *Physical Culture* to have known Sandwina, stated that she began exercising at age five and was fourteen when she began more systematic training in tumbling, artistic dance, apparatus work, and "light and heavy dumbbell work." By the time she was seventeen, Katie was stronger than most young men and, according to Lepworth, her natural strength brought her to the attention of "Professor August Schwore, who began to teach her weight-lifting, and fifteen months later she broke two records, held in Germany by women."<sup>39</sup> According to Max Heymann, when he met Katie—in Zwickau, Saxony—she was sixteen years old and had become the star of her father's circus. Max recalled that as the finale of her act Katie would take on any man or woman who wanted to try to best her in a wrestling match. Max, who was then nineteen, had not been successful in trying to build his own acrobatic career and so decided to try to win the 100 marks offered to anyone who could pin her.<sup>40</sup> In an article written just a year after her death in 1952, Max claimed that when Katie quickly threw him to the ground in their match, they realized they loved each other and decided that very same day to run away and get married over the protests of her family.<sup>41</sup> This story, the veracity of which has been questioned by several weightlifting historians, does not appear in any of the press clippings from Katie's time with Barnum & Bailey.<sup>42</sup> It also doesn't match up with

the information the Heymann family reported to the U.S. Census Bureau in 1930, which included a question about their respective ages at the time of their marriage. According to that form, Katie was nineteen and Max was twenty-one.<sup>43</sup>

What we know definitively is that by 1905 Katie and Max were performing with at least one and possibly two other men in an act known as “The Sandwinas.” Whether the other man was one of her brothers, and when and how she and Max separated from her father’s circus, is unclear. Although it is a common perception that the Sandwinas came to America to work in vaudeville and became overnight sensations, the historical record tells a different story. Research indicates that the Sandwinas worked primarily in Europe during the first seven years of the twentieth century. A German poster of the Sandwinas by the artist Adolph Friedlander from 1905, for example, shows Katie holding up three men and a bicycle.<sup>44</sup> In 1906 Edmund Desbonnet published an article on the *two* Sandwinas in his magazine *La Culture Physique* when they were playing in Paris. A historian of strength, Desbonnet describes in detail the 242-pound overhead lift he witnessed.<sup>45</sup> Rather than focusing on Katie’s appearance, however, Desbonnet wrote, “It is unnecessary to add that she shouldered this weight in the German style, that is to say by rolling the bar on her belly and chest.” Even so, he continued, “for a ‘weak’ woman, we are certainly of the opinion that this represents a rare performance!”<sup>46</sup>

Although the Heymann’s stated on the 1930 U.S. Census that they had immigrated to the United States in 1905, the earliest newspaper mention that has been found in any American paper is not until March of 1908 when “The Sandwinas” show up in *very* small print in an ad for Chase’s Polite Vaudeville, in Washington, D.C.<sup>47</sup> They are clearly not the stars of the show. Nor are they the stars in May 1908 when they performed in Syracuse, New York, or in the ad from July 1908 for Sheedy’s Theater in Newport, Rhode Island.<sup>48</sup> In 1909, however, the Sandwinas returned to the United States for an extended tour with Benjamin Keith’s more prestigious Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit. In January and February they were playing in Sioux City, Iowa, where Teddy was born (25 January 1909), and in March they appeared in Anaconda, Montana; in May they stayed for several weeks in Oakland, California, and later that summer they were in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Although the Orpheum Circuit was considered a step up professional-

ly from the small, individually-owned theaters like Chase’s and Sheedy’s, Katie and Max were no higher in terms of their overall billing than they’d been in the smaller houses. At Cedar Rapids, for example, they were billed well down on the show’s list of performers as “The Sandwinas—The European Acrobats Extraordinary”<sup>49</sup>

After this extensive run in the United States, the Sandwinas returned to Europe where they turned up in Paris in 1910 appearing at the Olympia Theater, where the finale of the act involved Katie holding three men overhead with one hand.<sup>50</sup> Watching their performance one evening was circus magnate John Ringling, who owned at that time both the circus that bore his family name and the Barnum & Bailey Circus, which he’d purchased in 1907.<sup>51</sup> Starring at that time in the Ringling Circus was the impressive German troupe known as The Saxon Brothers.<sup>52</sup> When Ringling saw the The Sandwinas perform he was interested because he already knew that the American public enjoyed strength acts. What he could not have predicted, however, was just how popular Katie Sandwina would become once her talents were properly packaged by publicists and once she stepped out from behind the shadow of her partners to become the central focus of the act.

Katie was not a center ring attraction and she did not receive top billing when she and Max joined the Barnum & Bailey Circus in March of 1911. They began their run in Madison Square Garden as one of five acts performing simultaneously, all vying for recognition. After several newspapermen wanted to know more about the strongwoman, however, a decision was made to move Katie into the spotlight, and a special press event was organized for 2 April 1911 at Madison Square Garden to introduce her. When the reporters assembled that afternoon, they discovered that Fellows had arranged to have more than a dozen physicians from medical colleges and universities in and around New York City there, and the reporters then watched this group of distinguished physicians examine, weigh, and measure Sandwina. Their conclusion, as reported by Dr. Peter Anderson, was that “In every way, according to her measurements, she is a perfect woman by all the accepted standards.” The physicians reported that Katie stood 5 feet 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches tall, weighed 210 pounds, and had a 44  $\frac{1}{10}$  inch chest measurement when expanded, a 29 inch waist, 43 inch hips, a 16  $\frac{1}{10}$  inch calf, and her flexed right biceps measured 14 inches.<sup>53</sup> This public taking of

MATTINES 10:20-30	<b>MATS DAILY</b> <b>GRAND</b> <b>KEITH'S VAUDEVILLE</b> ALWAYS A GOOD SHOW	EVENINGS 25:35-50:75
<b>CONCERT TO-NIGHT</b>		<b>WEEK MAY 4</b>
<b>12 BIG 12 NUMBERS</b>		
<b>THE 4 HUNTINGS</b> ORIGINAL FAMILY OF ECCENTRIC ENTERTAINERS		
<b>Mr. and Mrs. ALFRED KELCY</b> Presenting a Domestic One Act Farce, "A Tale of a Turkey"		
<b>THE QUARTETTE</b> 4 Great Blested Voices	<b>LEW HAWKINS</b> The Famous Minstrel Man	
<b>LAWRENCE CRANE</b> THE MARVELOUS IRISH WIZARD		
<b>GIRL BEHIND DRUM</b> A Real Musical Novelty	<b>THE SANDWINAS</b> European Wonders of Strength	
<b>FRANKLIN &amp; GREEN</b> HER SONGS ALL HITS—MUSIC THAT CHARMS		

This ad appeared in the *Syracuse Herald* on 3 May 1908. As can be seen, "The Sandwinas—European Wonders of Strength," are not the headliners of Keith's vaudeville show and Katie is not recognized individually. In other ads from this early era The Sandwinas are described as "European Acrobats Extraordinary," and "European Athletes."

measurements was not unprecedented. In a remarkably similar circumstance, Harvard professor Dudley Allen Sargent had declared the strongman Eugen Sandow to be the "most wonderful specimen of man I have ever seen."<sup>54</sup> Sargent was a pioneer in the science of physical anthropometry and believed that a person's health and general well-being could be ascertained by comparing their measurements to that of an ideal. After measuring Sandow, Sargent used Sandow as his "ideal" male. Sargent had even created an elaborate charting system that allowed people to see how they compared to the ideal.<sup>55</sup> Katie's measurements, although larger than those of the average woman's, revealed that she had an "hour-glass" figure that was proportionate. And, as was hoped, the reporters left that afternoon, went back to their typewriters, and wrote sentences like this one from the *New York World*, "The feminine Hercules has a wonderful figure, full of symmetry, and not marred by a display of muscles"; and headlines like this one from the *New York Herald*, "Frau Sandwina, Circus Marvel. Physically Perfect, Experts Find."<sup>56</sup> Katie then treated the journalists and photographers to an impromptu show, lifting Max overhead several times with one hand, and then, while

holding him aloft, lowered herself to the ground and rose again to a standing position. For her finale, she lifted both Max and her massive son, Teddy, supporting their more than 200 pounds of total weight with only one arm.<sup>57</sup>

The publicity bandwagon was off and running once Katie had been declared perfect. In subsequent weeks the papers never failed to mention her perfect measurements, and as the season wore on she was increasingly referred to as the perfect woman.<sup>58</sup> The physical culture community saw in Sandwina a living example of the benefits of exercise and that, too, was exploited by the smoothly-running Sandwina publicity machine. Bernarr Macfadden featured her in *Physical Culture* magazine, for example, explaining that the ease of Teddy's birth was because Sandwina followed a physical culture life-style, ate sparingly, avoided meat, and, theoretically, followed his principles.<sup>59</sup> Yet in other interviews, Sandwina told reporters that she never watched what she ate, never dieted, and "I take beer with my lunches, two or three times a day."<sup>60</sup> When the opera star Mary Garden, a practicing physical culturist, attended the circus in 1912, she made a special trip back stage to get exercise advice from Sandwina, because she was so interested in Sandwina's "perfect form."<sup>61</sup>

In earlier press reports, of course, Katie had told reporters she never trained systematically and did only a little light dumbbell work in the mornings to keep herself supple. Whatever the truth was—and circus press agents, like pro wrestling promoters, are not averse to stretching the truth—by the end of the 1911 season, a combination of Barnum & Bailey's publicity machine and Katie's unique gifts had turned her into a bona fide star. In the press clipping book kept by Barnum & Bailey for the 1911 season, her presence in the show was remarked upon repeatedly, and was cited as one of the main reasons the circus sold out in city after city that summer. Katie and Max were brought back for the 1912 season, and a full-color poster was commissioned—a poster with text clearly written by a publicist. Katie was 28 in 1912, not 23 as the poster suggests; and if we're to believe Dr. Anderson and his colleagues she was at most 5'10" and not 6'1" as the poster claims.<sup>62</sup>

The focus of this piece is narrow because the story of Katie Sandwina is still being "unpacked." Her best lifts are not listed, for example, because there is such controversy over what she actually lifted and the manner in which she lifted it. Nor does this piece exam-

ine the story of her death from cancer in 1952; the café/tavern she ran in Queens, New York, in the late 1940s; her work in the WPA circus during the 1930s; or the birth of her second son, Alfred in 1918—a birth her descendants say occurred during a civil disturbance in Istanbul that forced her to crawl under barbed wire fences to reach a hospital only to learn that the hospital was full, whereupon she gave birth on the floor.<sup>63</sup>

What is most fascinating about Sandwina, besides the colorful life she led, is how this performer—who'd been working for nearly a decade—suddenly created a new identity. Her metamorphosis into a goddess of beauty who regularly sold out the Barnum & Bailey Circus was the most important transformation of her life. But it was not to be her last. Janet Davis and other historians have demonstrated that popular amusements matter and that the circus and vaudeville were powerful

transmitters of culture which helped to assimilate immigrants into the American experience. It also seems clear that the circus empowered people, helped to challenge the prevailing social mores and conventions, and opened people's eyes to new possibilities. Kate Carew certainly believed that to be the case. In closing her article on Sandwina she admonished all women: "If there's a moral to the story of Katie Sandwina, it's that the rest of womankind—ye wives of wealth and fashion—should try to emulate this goddess of the sawdust, this fearless mother, this beautiful friend."<sup>64</sup>

#### Notes:

1. Born Mary Williams in Oakland, California, in 1869, she took the name of Kate Carew when she began work at the *San Francisco Examiner*. She joined the staff of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* in 1890 and later worked for *The Tatler* in London and the *New York Tribune*. She died in 1960. For additional information on Carew see: [www.twainquotes.com/interviews/confessions.html](http://www.twainquotes.com/interviews/confessions.html).

2. Kate Carew, "Barnum & Bailey's 'Strong Woman' Tells Kate Carew—This Young Goddess of the Tan Bark, Who Tosses Her Husband About as She Would a Feather, Explains How She Came By Her Strength," *New York American*, 16 April 1911, 2-M.

3. See, for example, "This Woman Has Strength of Ten Men," *The Fresno Morning Republican*, 10 September 1912, n.p at: [www.newspaperarchives.com](http://www.newspaperarchives.com). See also: "Fyles Letter," *Montreal Star*, April 4, 1911, Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida; and Charles Eldot, "Last Week of the Circus," *North Side News*, 4-18, Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.

4. David P. Willoughby, "The Muscular Strength of Women as Compared with Men...With Special Reference to the Feats of Katie Sandwina," *Skill* No. 69 (December 1967): 4-5; John D. Fair, "Katie Sandwina: Hercules Can Be A Lady," *Iron Game History* 9(December 2005): 4-7; Jan Todd, "Bring on the Amazons: An Evolutionary History," *Picturing the Modern Amazon* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999): 48-61. In 1960, *Skill* magazine published short pieces on Sandwina from Leo Gaudreau, Siegmund Klein, Tromp Van Diggelen, Gerard Nisivoccia, and Peary Rader in an article entitled, "Katie Sandwina: The World's Strongest Woman?? *Skill's* Search for the Truth," *Skill* (n.m.; 1960) pg. 13-17; Partially-dated clipping, Coulter Strongwoman File, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin. See also Robert J. Devany, "Stars of the Big Top: Katie Sandwina," *Muscle Power* 3(July 1947): 16-17; Ernest Edwin Coffin, "A Feminine Hercules," *New Physical Culture* (March 1948): 24-25, 69; and Robert Nealy, "The Feminine Sandow: Katie Sandwina," *Iron Man* (January 1961): 20-21, 46.

5. The best examples of the debate over Sandwina's strength can be seen in Willoughby, "Muscular Strength of Women," and in Gaudreau, et. al., "Katie Sandwina: The World's Strongest Woman," see above. An original copy of Sandwina's Barnum & Bailey poster can be seen at the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

6. In her article, Carew states that her interview was set up by a Mr.



In 1912, when Katie returned for her second season with the Barnum & Bailey Circus, copies of a full-color, large-size poster from the Strobbridge Lithography Company were commissioned to advertise: "Miss Katie Sandwina & Troupe: Germany's Beautiful Herculean Venus, Possessing the Most Perfect Female Figure. Strongest Woman That Ever Lived." The poster's claims that she was 6'1" and only twenty-three years old were inaccurate.



- Fellows, who escorted her behind stage, introduced her to the Sandwinas, and then took her to a special box seat to watch the show. Carew, "Barnum & Bailey's 'Strong Woman.'" 7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 96. See also: Thomas Beer, *The Mauve Decade: American Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century*, (New York, Carol & Graf, 1997 [1926]).
10. Interview by the author with Patricia Galli, 6 June 1999. Galli separated from Alfred in 1952, the year of Katie's death. He worked as a stage and film actor under the names Al Sander(s).
11. Ottley Coulter to David Willoughby, undated letter, Coulter Papers, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.
12. Ottley Coulter to Jack Kent, 30 October 1956, Coulter Papers, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.
13. See: Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press: 2005), for an excellent discussion of the New Woman in early twentieth century America.
14. The most famous strongwoman working in America prior to Sandwina was Josephine Blatt, who appeared under the stage name Minerva. See: Jan Todd, "The Mystery of Minerva," *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture*, 1(April 1990): 14-17.
15. William Inglis, "Here's the Circus," *Harper's Weekly*, April 1911. Clipping, Todd-Sandwina File, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.
16. "Circus Boasts its Beauties," N.P. 1912. Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.
17. Franklin Fyles, "Gotham's Spring Season Brings Novelties," 3 April 1911. Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.
18. Margaret Mooers Marshall, "Katie Sandwina, Her Husband and Baby," Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.
19. Charles Eldot, "Last Week of Circus," *North Side News*, 18 April 1912, Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.
20. Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 83. See also: Marcy Murray, "Strong Women and Cross-Dressed Men: Representations of Gender by Circus Performers During the Golden Age of the American Circus, 1860-1930," *Bandwagon* 48(3) (May-June 2004): 18-23.
21. Carew, "Barnum & Bailey's 'Strongwoman.'" 22. Although the Barnum & Bailey poster showing Katie's act lists her height at 6'1" and her weight at 220, Katie was formally weighed and measured by a team of physicians and physical culturists shortly after she opened at the Garden and found to be 5'9 3/4" in height. Edmund Desbonnet lists her height in *Les Rois de la Force*, as 1meter, 80 centimeters which converts to 5' 9.5." See: "Frau Sandwina and Her Muscles," *Telegraph*, 9 April 1911. Barnum & Bailey Scrapbook at Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida for more information on her measurements in 1911. Katie always performed in tightly laced boots with two-inch heels and piled her thick hair on the top of her head to accentuate her height. Max claimed in his reminiscence of his life with Katie (written after her death) that he was 5'10" tall. Max Heymann, "I Married the World's Strongest Woman," *American Weekly*, 5 July 1943. Daughter-in-law Patricia Galli, who knew him when he was in his late sixties, remembers Max as no more than 5'3".
23. Janet Davis argues that the circus capitalized on the audience's natural curiosity about the bodily logistics of sexual activities between mismatched performers. It was common for press agents to report the "marriage" of skeleton men with fat women or dwarves paired with giants as a way to hype the gate. Davis, *Circus Age*, 120. See also: Murray, "Strong Women and Cross-Dressed Men," 18-23. Additional insights on the lives of circus performers can be found in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
24. "Circus Performers Dance While Executing Dexterous Ring Feats," *New York Evening Journal*, 29 March 1912.
25. "Happy Family Ruled by Giantess Makes Anti-Suffragists Tremble," *American*, 10 April 1911. Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.
26. It is possible that Sandwina and her circus friends involved themselves in the Suffrage Movement purely for publicity purposes, attempting to strike a chord with yet another group of possible ticket buyers. One bit of evidence to argue against this having the sanction of Barnum & Bailey's management, however, is that in 1911 one of the most talked about features of the show was the clowns' routine in which suffragettes were arrested by police and wrestled into small paddy wagons. "Circus Dropped for Today," *Press*, 3 April 1911. Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.
27. For a discussion of "true womanhood" see: Francis B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989): 4-9; and Barbara Welter's classic work which introduced the term "true woman" to feminist studies, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976).
28. Although Max Heymann claimed that Katie returned to work just four days after giving birth, in his 1953 *American Weekly* tribute to her: "I Married the World's Strongest Woman," earlier articles suggest she waited two weeks after Teddy's birth before she began to do her strength act again. See, for example. "This Woman is a Sandow," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, 12 July 1911.
29. Carew, "Barnum & Bailey's 'Strong Woman.'" According to Sandwina, Teddy ate an orange, two eggs, three rolls and several glasses of milk at breakfast and then would "holler for more." As an adult, Teddy became the heavyweight boxing champion of Europe and had 68 professional fights. He won 46—38 by knockouts—had 16 losses, five draws and one "no decision." See: <http://www.jewsinsports.org/profile.asp?sport=boxing&ID=275>.
30. Carew, "Barnum & Bailey's 'Strong Woman,'" 2-M.
31. See Patricia A. Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Exercise and Doctors in the Late Nineteenth Century*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 149-156, for an excellent discussion of the role of eugenics in early-twentieth-century women's lives.
32. Carew, "Barnum & Bailey's 'Strongwoman.'" 33. The story of Katie's early life (with differing details) can be found in: Carew, "Barnum & Bailey's 'Strongwoman'"; Ernest Edwin Coffin, "Strongest Woman on Earth: A Biographical Sketch of Katie Sandwina," *Your Physique* 2(5) (August-September 1942): 11; Robert J. Devenney, "Stars of the Big Top: Katie Sandwina," *Muscle Power* 3(July 1947): 16-17; Barbara Ray, "Sandwina: The Strong Name," 1(2) (May 1990): 1-4; and in Edmund Desbonnet, "Brumbach Family," *Les Rois de la Force* (Paris: Librairie Berger-Levrault/Librairie Athletique, 1911), 227-8. The reference to her mother's maiden name is from her obituary in *Variety* on 23 January 1952.
34. Katie claimed she had only fourteen siblings in: "She Tosses Husband About Like Biscuit, Frau Sandwina is a Giantess in Strength," undated clipping in Sandwina clipping file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin. Barbara Ray who has done a genealogical study of the family believes Katie was born second, and was the eldest daughter. Most news-

paper accounts, such as Carew's, credit Johanna with sixteen children. See also: "Strong Woman Has Figure of Gladiator," *World*, 3 April 1911. Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.

35. "Frau Sandwina, Circus Marvel, Physically Perfect, Experts Find," *Herald*, 3 April 1911. Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.

36. Katie's sister Barbara (Babette) Brumbach, who appeared with Marie Brumbach in an act called the Braselley Duo, was reportedly stronger than Katie—but being shorter at approximately the same weight—had a less pleasing physique. Desbonnet, "Une Famille d'Athletes," *La Culture Physique*, 7(126) (1 April 1910): 197-199. [Special thanks to David Chapman for translation assistance.] See also: *Femme Musclevania No. 10, From the Orrin J. Heller Collection* (Privately published anthology), p. 22-23. Todd Sandwina file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports; and: "The Sister to Sandwina," *Skill*, (undated clipping in: *Femme Musclevania No. 10, From the Orrin J. Heller Collection* (Privately published anthology): 42.

37. H.L. Lepworth, "Letter to the Editor: A Famous Woman Physical Culture Exponent," Clipping from *Physical Culture*, no date. Coulter Strongwoman scrapbook, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.

38. "She Tosses Husband About Like Biscuit, Frau Sandwina is a Giantess in Strength," undated clipping in Sandwina clipping file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.

39. Her obituary reports that she developed into a "child acrobat and trapeze artist with the Sandwina Circus," operated by her father. "Katie Sandwina, 68, Circus Performer," Obituary, 1952. Sandwina clipping file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin. No information on the lifting records mentioned by Lepworth has been found.

40. The improbable tale that he and Katie fell in love and eloped on the day they met is told in: Jack Ross, "The Strongest Woman Who Ever Lived," *Man to Man* (May 1953):48; and in Max Heymann with William Asher, "I Married the World's Strongest Woman," *American Weekly*, 5 July 1953.

41. Heymann, "I Married the World's Strongest Woman."

42. Leo Gaudreau, "Katie Sandwina: The World's Strongest Woman?? *Skill's* Search for the Truth," *Skill* (March & April 1961): 13. The story is told, however, in an article originally published in 1947 by Sidney Fields, "Hercules Can Be a Lady," *New York Mirror*, 15 December 1947. That article was reprinted with an introduction by John Fair in *Iron Game History* 9(December 2005): 4-7.

43. 1930 United States Federal Census, available at [www.Ancestry.com](http://www.Ancestry.com).

44. This poster, by Friedlander, is located in the Library of Congress.

45. The author would like to thank David Chapman for his assistance in translating this article. Serrano (pseud. for Edmund Desbonnet), "The Sandwinas," *La Culture Physique*, 3(April 1906): 445-6.

46. Ibid. At that time some French lifters "cleaned" the barbell to their shoulders in one quick motion, while most German lifters raised the bar to the shoulders by pulling it to the waistline and then either rolling or "hitching" the bar to the shoulders.

47. "Chase's Polite Vaudeville," Advertisement, *The Washington Post*, 1 March 1908, p. 3. See also: "Chase's Polite Vaudeville," Advertisement, *The Washington Post*, 7 March 1908, p. 4; Advertisement, *The Post Standard*, 2 May 1908; and "The Grand, Keith's Vaudeville," Advertisement, *Syracuse*

*Herald*, 3 May 1908, p. 15. All retrieved from: [www.newspaperarchive.com](http://www.newspaperarchive.com). 48. "Sheedy's Theater," Advertisement, *The News—Newport, Rhode Island*, 27 July 1908. Retrieved from: [www.newspaperarchive.com](http://www.newspaperarchive.com).

49. "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement, *The Anaconda Standard*, 11 March, 1909, p. 11; "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement, *Oakland Tribune*, 25 April, 1909, p. 7; "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement, *Oakland Tribune*, 26 April 1909, p. 16; "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement, *Oakland Tribune*, 2 May 1909, p. 4; "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement, *Oakland Tribune*, 7 May, 1909, n.p. See "Large Crowds Enjoy Circus," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, 21 July 1911, p. 7 for the description of Teddy's birth in February of 1909. All retrieved from: [www.newspaperarchive.com](http://www.newspaperarchive.com).

50. Leon See, "Une Famille d'Athletes," *La Culture Physique*, 7(126) (1 April, 1910): 197-199. See also: "Hercules Can be a Lady," *Iron Game History*: 9(December 2005): 4-7.

51. Freeman Hubbard, *Great Days of the American Circus* (New York: *American Heritage*, Harper and Row): 71.

52. "Strong Men at the Circus: The Saxon Brothers Show Athletes Feats in Weight Lifting," *New York Times*, 12 April 1909.

53. "Frau Sandwina Perfect Woman," *Telegraph*, 3 April 1911; "Frau Sandwina Circus Marvel, Physically Perfect, Experts Find," *New York Herald*, 3 April 1911. "Lifts Husband and Son: Sandwina of the Circus Does it With One Hand," *New York Tribune*, 3 April 1911.

54. Quoted in G. Mercer Adam, ed, *Sandow's System of Physical Training* (New York, G. Selwin Tate, 1894), 121.

55. For more information on Sargent and his ideas see: Carolyn de la Pena, "Dudley Allen Sargent, Health Machines and the Energized Male Body," *Iron Game History*, 8(October 2003), 3-19.

56. "Strong Woman Has Figure of a Gladiator," *New York World*, 3 April 1911; and "Frau Sandwina, Circus Marvel. Physically Perfect, Experts Find," *New York Herald*, 3 April 1911.

57. "Frau Sandwina, Circus Marvel." Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.

58. "Frau Sandwina Perfect Woman: Exhibition of Form Divine," *Telegraph*, 3 April, 1911 and: "Frau Sandwina and Her Muscles: Strong Woman of the Circus Proves One of

the Most Sensational and Interesting Features," *Telegraph*, 9 April 1911, in Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.

59. "A Remarkable Mother," *Physical Culture* magazine clipping, Coulter Strongwoman Scrapbook, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.

60. "Frau Sandwina Circus Marvel" and "She Tosses Husband About Like Biscuit, Frau Sandwina is a Giantess in Strength." Undated clipping, Coulter Strongwoman Scrapbook, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.

61. "Miss Garden Sees Her First Circus: Diva Deeply Interested in All She Sees on Visit to Madison Square Garden," *New York Herald*, 28 March 1912. Barnum & Bailey Route & Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Florida.

62. Black and white copies of the poster have appeared frequently in muscle magazine coverage of Sandwina. It can also be seen on page in David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1970), 533. An original copy can be seen at the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

63. Katie's bar was in the Ridgewood neighborhood of Queens, close to the Brooklyn/Queens border. Interview with Patricia Galli, 6 June 1999.

64. Carew, "Barnum & Bailey's 'Strong Woman.'"

