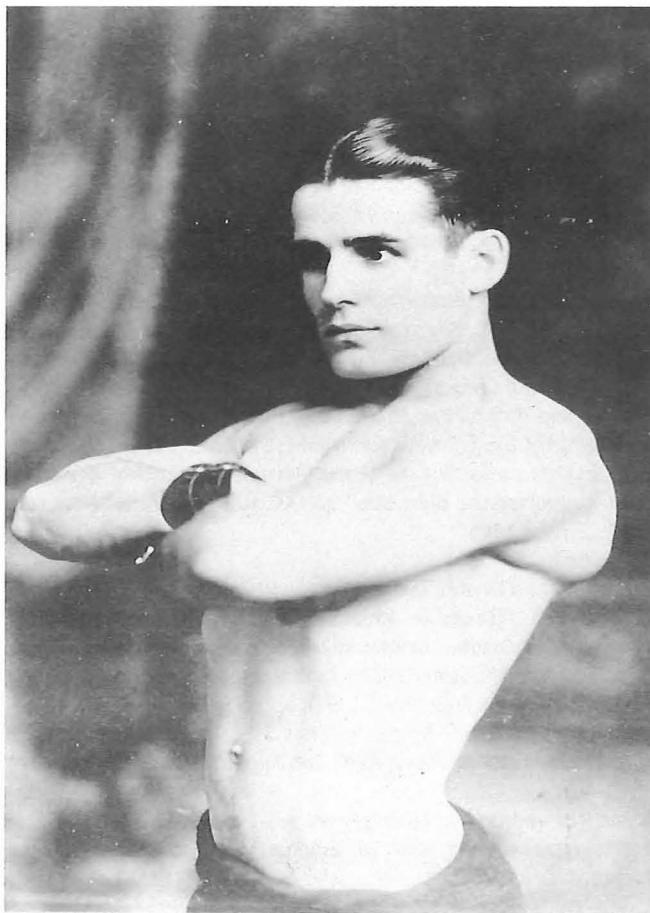


## Gregory Paradise: The Original Pocket Hercules

Alton Eliason

My venture into the land of Paradise, (Nashua, New Hampshire) in September 1941 to visit a man who was possibly, or even probably, the strongest man on record, pound-for-pound, was an occasion that stands out as the epitome in a lifetime of wonderful memories of strongmen. Since I am, I believe, the oldest living being to have known and witnessed Gregory Paradise in action I feel obliged to relate this experience since his modesty has denied him the accolades and the place in the history of strongmen that he deserves. *[Ed. Note: Actually, Joe "The Great" Rollino, who is now 103 years old and possessed of an exceptional memory, met Paradise in about 1930. Rollino, only a few years younger than Paradise and almost as small, reports that Paradise was a very legitimate strongman.]* So humble and reluctant to display his prowess was Paradise that Leo Gaudreau's book, *Anvils, Horseshoes and Cannons*, only mentions Greg as a sort of afterthought in his chapter about Earle Liederman—who operated one of the most successful mail-order muscle builder instruction courses ever. Gaudreau's omission is doubly mysterious in that Greg and Leo lived not too far apart, were friends, and visited together on occasion. Leo must have witnessed Greg's physical prowess in person since he relates in his book that Greg was "one of the most remarkable and sensational athletes I have ever known," and he mentions that Greg could bent press any 23-strand commercial cable sold for exercise and also stretch 10 strands in front of his body with only his thumbs hooked in the handles. Even though this is strong praise, it is still befuddling that Gaudreau failed to give Greg the full measure of honor—a chapter all to himself, like those given to the many other strongmen in the book.

One clue is Leo's lament that whenever he questioned Greg about his strength feats Greg always managed to change the subject or to tell tales of strongmen



**Diminutive yet mighty, Gregory Paradise in his prime was thought by some experts to be the strongest man pound-for-pound who ever lived.**

he had known in Canada. On the other hand, Greg and his wife, Ida, welcomed my wife, Marge, and I very graciously, and he performed willingly on my first visit. Perhaps this was because he knew I was coming specifically to see him in action, but the most likely reason was the respect Greg had for Ray Van Cleef, who had trained with Greg in the mid-Thirties. Once Greg knew that Ray and I were good friends, he was very open to all of my questions. Greg knew of Ray's credentials as an indisputable authority on strength—and that Ray believed Greg to be the strongest man, pound-for-pound, he had ever seen. Ray was a noted strongman in his own right in those days, but he was also known for his personal relationships and close friendships with virtually all the strongmen, circus performers (a career he once entertained), vaudeville stars, and athletes of every persuasion. He was also known for the way in which he turned those visits and friendships into dozens of articles in strength and physical culture publications all over the

world. His reputation for honest and factual information endeared him to his subjects and readers alike, and Greg Paradise was no exception.

Ray went on in later years to become the managing editor of *Strength & Health* magazine for about six years and after that he operated his own gym in San Jose, California until his untimely death. During his many years at the center of the Iron Game he had the opportunity to witness and train with the world's strongest men—athletes such as George Hackenschmidt, Milo Steinborn, Sig Klein, Paul Anderson, Norb Schemansky, and almost every other weightlifter and strongman of note. He treated them all with respect, and this respect often developed into warm friendships that led a great many men to confide to Ray's wife, Virginia, after his death, "He was the best friend I ever had."

If I may be forgiven this personal note, I was one of those men. I often wonder why fate engineered our meeting in 1939 and turned it into a life-long friendship, because to him I owe my many friendships in the strength world with people I would otherwise never have had the privilege to know. I still cherish Ray and my weekly and sometimes even more frequent letters—letters that now rest in the archives of the Stark Center at the University of Texas preserved for posterity. I have taken these lines to convince *IGH* readers of Ray's unquestionable integrity and vast experience among lifters because Ray—to his death—held the firm and significant conviction that Gregory Paradise was the strongest man, pound-for-pound, he ever knew.

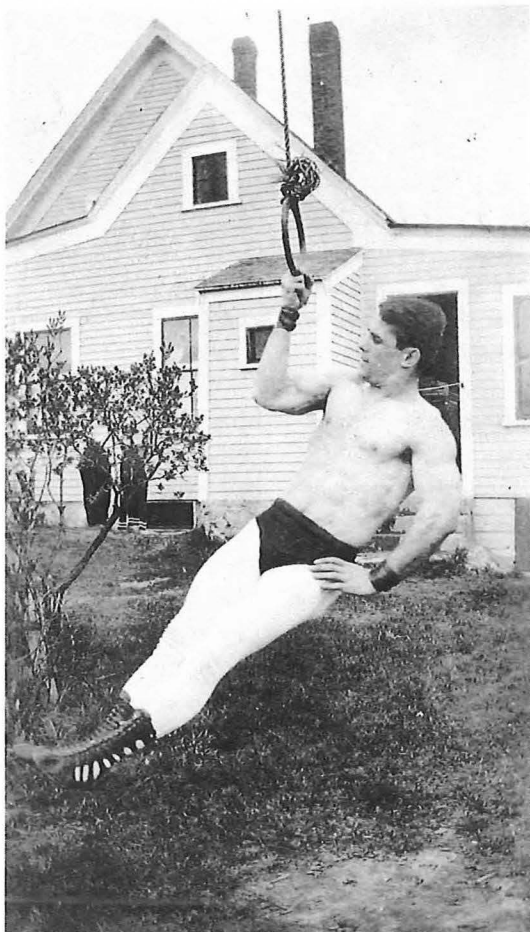
In the late 1930s Ray told me about Greg's super-human feats, and he suggested that, since I had a gym in New Haven, Connecticut, and lived close by, Marge and I should make an effort to visit Greg. Before we could do so, however, I promoted the "Great Strength and Physical

Culture Display," which included a "Mr. New England" contest on Saturday, 9 March 1940. That afternoon Greg walked up and introduced himself as the early arrivals were gathering at my gym, the Palace Academy of Health. Bob Hoffman, Tony Terlazzo, and Johnny Terpak were already there and stripped to their lifting togs, and they most graciously did some lifting and answered questions from their fans.

Tony was the 1936 Olympic 132-pound champ and Johnny was then king of the 165 pounders. I introduced Greg to Bob—the editor of *Strength & Health* and owner of the York Barbell Company—and told him that Ray Van Cleef thought Greg was the strongest man in the world, pound-for-pound. Bob, in typical Hoffman fashion promptly replied, "No he isn't. Tony is." Greg just smiled. During that afternoon lifting demonstration, Bob broke a chain across his chest and then bent pressed

a globe barbell with a 2 inch thick handle weighing 160 pounds. Bob was 6'3" and weighed about 250. As he pressed the bar, Greg said softly to me, "I can press that and toss it from one hand to the other overhead." Two or three friends who had accompanied Greg tried to get him to lift the same barbell, but Greg said he would never upstage anyone. That night, at the show, when Bob bent pressed the 160-pound bell Greg's friends tried valiantly to force him up on the stage, but he again refused. I have always been grateful for Bob's support of my contests, but to this day I can't help thinking about how his ego would have deflated if Greg—this little mite barely five feet tall and weighing 124 pounds had bent pressed that bar and tossed it from hand to hand.

Now, I'd like to provide more information about Greg—from Leo Gaudreau's chapter about Earle Leiderman, Ray Van Cleef's personal experiences with Greg, and my own visits with Greg—since sources of this mod-



**A one-handed chin is a difficult feat of strength, but Paradise was able, as is shown in the photo, to chin using only his middle finger, a phenomenal feat of grip strength.**

est man's accomplishment are so limited. His "real" name was Gregoire Paradis, and he was born in Quebec, Canada—often called the "Cradle of Strongmen." He performed as a strongman in Canada, probably as part of a vaudeville troupe, and it was at that time that he bent-pressed 250 pounds—the first man to lift double his body weight in that way. I should add here that although Ray Van Cleef did not see Greg do this on either of the two occasions on which this poundage was mastered, Ray had researched it and learned that these lifts were done in front of witnesses and verified. To me, if it was good enough for Ray, it was good enough.

Greg later moved to the States, anglicized his name to Gregory Paradise, and made a big splash when he was chosen first among 25,000 of Liederman's pupils in a contest held in 1925. Greg was a perfect subject for Liederman's publicity promotion since he was amazingly powerful with cables—the system of training Liederman sold. It goes without saying, of course, that both Greg and Liederman were products of weight training and owed their physical prowess to the weights. To Liederman's credit, he actually paid Greg the \$1000.00 first prize, along with a week as a celebrity in New York City with a chauffeur-driven limousine, and tickets to all the shows. Because Liederman's avenues of publicity were international, Greg's picture displaying his amazing muscularity made him instantly known in the physical culture world. One of the most famous pictures of Greg depicts him holding quarters between the ridges of his abdominal muscles. Later, Greg lost Liederman's support when he won another \$1,000.00 in a 1928 contest promoted by Prof. Titus, another mail order operator. Greg could hardly be blamed since a thousand dollars was a very substantial sum in those days, and Greg had a very hard job in a shoe-manufacturing factory.



Although quite short, Paradise possessed a fine physique and was exceptionally strong in overhead lifting.

As for my own observations of this physical marvel, it was in September 1941 that my wife and I took a trip to "Paradise" that in every respect was worthy of its name. Greg was very gracious and related some of his experiences with other strongmen, but he also took me to a small room where his weights were resting. Without any warming up at all he took a barbell that weighed 200 pounds and bent pressed it with little apparent effort. It was so easy, in fact, that to be sure the weight was legitimate I deadlifted it—and became a believer. What I was next to witness was one of the greatest feats of pure strength I was ever to see. Taking two 100-pound dumbbells, clearly marked as such, Greg easily cleaned them and alternately pressed them in strict, upright fashion very slowly three times with each arm. He pressed them slowly just to show how light the bells were to him—not because it was difficult for

him. At the completion of the third press he lowered the bell in his left hand to the floor, while holding the other one overhead throughout. He then dropped the remaining bell from full arm's length above, sort of bounced it off his right biceps, and caught it before it hit the floor. Mac Batchelor, in the November 1961 issue of *Muscle Power* reports that Greg could alternately press two 100-pound dumbbells 10 times with each arm—a report that I accept since Ray Van Cleef reported the same feat in a June 1939 issue of *Superman* magazine. What's more, Ray also told me he had seen Greg do it. It's important to remember that these feats were performed approximately 15 years after Greg had won Liederman's contest. By that time he was close to 40 years of age, and he had worked for over 10 years at a physically demanding job. It's also important to remember that he still weighed just under 125. One final thing on this subject—Ray once saw Greg bent press a 208-pound dumbbell just after returning home from a full day of work.



After Greg had done his presses for me, we joined our wives and walked to the back yard where a chain hung from the branch of a tree. The chain had what looked to be one-inch links, and Greg jumped up, grasped the end of the chain with one hand, and did chins from a dead hang to fully-flexed arm very slowly and deliberately. He did 12 chins with each arm, and it was not his limit. It was unbelievable. He also did several repetitions using just the middle finger of each hand.

We then returned to the front porch to sit on the steps, and when he asked me if I had a couple of quarters I realized he had something else to show me—something which left an indelible imprint on my mind. Taking one of the two quarters I gave him and clamping approximately one-third of it between his jaw-teeth, he placed his right thumb under the larger, exposed portion of the quarter and instantly, seemingly without effort, bent the quarter by pushing upward. Handing me the bent coin he took the other one and not only bent it in the same way, but placed it back in his teeth so that the bend went downward, got his thumb under it, and pushed upward until it broke in two. A few years ago, with age creeping up and seeking a safe depository for these precious items, I gave them to my friend Osmo Kiiha.

Ray Van Cleef told me that one of Greg's methods of adding to his income was to visit taverns and ask if anyone could bend a quarter. The usual attempts by

the patrons to bend one with their fingers were, of course, futile. However, upon seeing little Greg place one in his teeth and bend it so easily they were certain they could do it themselves—and more quarters were produced—all of which only Greg could bend. Finally, the patrons became so fascinated by this feat that they stopped trying and gave him quarter after quarter just to see him bend them. As he bent them, Greg deposited each quarter into a pail he conveniently carried. He often went home with a pail half-full of bent coins, and the next morning he would sit on his concrete porch and straighten them with a hammer so he could deposit them in the bank.

Greg told me that part of his ability to bend quarters so easily was due to his right thumb, which from years of working in a shoe factory where he pushed heavy leather shoes through a sewing machine had become almost twice the size of the left and was heavily callused. Since Greg was on "piece-work," the more he pushed the faster the sole was sewed and the more he earned. His superiority over the other workers was so dramatic that he earned over twice as much as the next-fastest person.

World War II started in December of the same year that I visited Greg in Nashua, and with gas rationing, working nights at the Winchester factory making guns, and running the gym during the day further visits with Greg were put on hold. I did meet him one more time—near the end of the War—and he told me he had been working for the past few years at Pratt and Whitney Aircraft in Hartford—just 35 miles from where I lived. I remember that he told me he had been challenged to a deadlift contest by one of his fellow workers, adding that he was confident he could win since he could still deadlift 535 pounds. I was sorry to learn that he had been living so near to me as I would assuredly have had many more visits with this phenomenon. Before we parted I asked Greg to what he attributed his great strength, and he touched his head and said, "All strength comes from here."

Unfortunately, Greg developed a brain tumor and died during an operation to remove it on 27 November 1952. He was only 50 years old. I have lived 56 years since his death, and I have never seen anyone who was his equal, let alone his superior. I will never forget Greg Paradise, and I am happy to have the chance to share my memories of this remarkable little man.



Osmo Kiiha kindly provided us with this photo of the quarters Gregory Paradise bent and broke for Alton Eliason. The photo reveals what a small portion of the quarter Paradise held in his jaw-teeth as he bent it with his thumb.