



Sex! Murder! Suicide!

New Revelations about the “Mystery of Minerva”

Jan Todd

The University of Texas

In Volume 1 Number 2 of *Iron Game History*, I published a biographical sketch of the early professional strongwoman known as Minerva.¹ I used the sources available in that pre-internet era, which included a large number of articles on Minerva in *The National Police Gazette*, the articles I was able to find at that time in traditional contemporary newspapers, David Willoughby's *The Super Athletes*, and the various mentions of Minerva's exploits found in *Strength & Health* and *Iron Man*.² Throughout the piece, which I called, “The Mystery of Minerva,” I explained that there were many facts about Minerva's story that were still unknown, and even confusing, and I concluded the piece with a list of questions I hoped to one day answer: “What was her real name? What happened to her championship belt and her loving cup? Did she have children? What were her actual lifts? How was she perceived by the men and women who saw her?”³

Although the article fairly represented what I'd discovered about Minerva up to that time, the loose threads in the Minerva tale always bothered me. For that reason, I was delighted several years ago to receive an email from one of Minerva's great-granddaughters (Yes, Minerva was a mother!), who had found my article online. After she shared with me the small amount of information she and the family had related to Minerva, I decided to begin researching Minerva's life again.⁴ This time, thanks to the several new academic and public search engines, I was also able to search large numbers of digitized newspapers, digitized periodicals, and to examine on-line public records such as census reports, marriage licenses, and death records. The new evidence

I've uncovered about Minerva, her husband Charles Blatt, and their family life paints a picture of the strongwoman that is heretofore unknown in Iron Game literature. Rather than tackling all five of my questions from 1990, this essay focuses primarily on the question of Minerva's origins and her love affair and long term relationship with Charles Blatt. As a caveat to *IGH* readers, my research has been limited to newspaper and periodical sources in British and American newspapers, and to various kinds of American public records and documents. I have not yet attempted, for example, to research Minerva's time as a strength artist in Mexico, South America, or Europe. However, based on the research I've done to date, and with the assistance of Minerva's descendants, I believe this article is a more accurate picture of Minerva's life than has ever been published before.



On 28 March 1891, the following letter appeared in the widely read theatrical and sporting tabloid called *The National Police Gazette*: “Having been informed that Victorina, the female heavy-weight lifter, is eager to compete in feats of strength with any woman in the world, I hereby challenge her to arrange a match to lift heavy-weights and catch cannonballs from 10 pounds to 20 pounds for \$500 to \$1000 a side and the female heavy-weight-lifting championship of the world. The \$100 my backer, Mr. C.P. Blatt, has posted with Richard K. Fox, shows that I mean business.” It is

signed, "Josie Wohlford."⁵ This letter is the first mention of the strongwoman who would soon be known simply as "Minerva" in either the *Gazette* or any other publication from this era I have examined.⁶

I first encountered the letter in a book of reprinted newspaper articles and illustrations from the *National Police Gazette* that I read in the late 1980s.⁷ I was surprised to see the letter signed by Josie Wohlford and not Josephine Blatt, since other things I'd read about Minerva had led me to believe that she'd married Charles P. Blatt early in her career and that he had encouraged her to go on the stage. However, as I discovered while researching my first article on Minerva, there are several conflicting stories about Minerva's origins. One article, published in 1893 in the *Police Gazette*, claimed Minerva was the daughter of the well-to-do, socially prominent physician, Dr. Joseph Schauer, and that Minerva was the only member of the family who was not a "leader in society." Minerva, the *Police Gazette* claimed, had turned to heavy lifting because she "loathed the emptiness of the social world" and is "only happy when juggling with dumbbells."⁸ I dismissed this version of Minerva's origins as the kind of press agency then popular in circuses and vaudeville. In fact, one of the problems with historical research related to circus performers and theater people is that they not only adopt stage names but also create "stage biographies" for themselves as well. Many circus and vaudeville performers also had different acts during different stages of their careers and worked under more than one stage name.⁹

In 1990, I actually put more faith in the story Minerva told a reporter for *The Mirror*, in Manchester, New Hampshire, in which she claimed that she was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1865, and that like many young Germans she had begun doing exercise in the local *turnverein*, or gymnasium. According to the report in *The Mirror*, she "took a fancy for lifting" at age seven and by the time she was 11, was lifting 50- and 75-pound dumbbells overhead. She claimed in that interview to have been 15 when she became an instructor at the gymnasium and that she then taught gymnastics exercises to children for the next three years. According to that account, she supposedly met Charles P. Blatt when he toured Germany as a professional strongman. She said, "when he saw me he offered to take me to America. My parents objected at the thought of my going into show business, but they got over their prejudice and I came here six

years ago." Minerva went on to claim that once in America she soon had "engagements enough" and had visited nearly every state in the Union by 1893.¹⁰ In 1892, in an article for the *San Antonio Daily Light*, she tells a similar version of this tale, claiming to have begun lifting at age 12 when she juggled seven six-pound flat irons for a total weight of 42 pounds "as though they weighed nothing."¹¹

When I began researching Minerva's life again, one of the first things I did was to request a copy of her death certificate from the State of New Jersey. I have not been able to locate any sort of birth certificate for her, however, which is not unusual for the nineteenth century. In any case, according to her death certificate, Josephine Blatt (no middle name) died on 1 August 1923 from a "carcinoma of [the] stomach." The certificate states that she was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, on 2 January 1863, making her 60 years and 7 months old at the time of her death. Her father is listed as Joseph Schauer, originally from Germany, and her mother, also a native German, was named Louisa Hetener.¹² There is no mention of Wohlford anywhere. This puzzled me because in 1931, *National Police Gazette* author Harry Shelland also referred to "Josie Wohlford" in a reminiscence he wrote about meeting the young Minerva in the late 1880s before she made her stage debut. According to Shelland, Minerva weighed about 165 pounds at that time and was living in Elizabeth, New Jersey. She had come to Blatt's attention because she was famous in her neighborhood for her natural strength. Locals even claimed she had carried a barrel of potatoes up two flights of stairs.¹³ So, while the death certificate can probably allow us to put to rest the question of Minerva's maiden name, it doesn't tell us why she was using "Wohlford" when she wrote that letter in the *Police Gazette*. The answer to that question, it turns out, is that Minerva was apparently married not just once—but twice—before she married Charles P. Blatt.

On 12 June 1893, Judge David McAdam of the Superior Court of New York presided over one of the most sensational divorce trials of his career. Appearing before him in court that day was a Brooklyn "pork packer," named Christian Wohlforth, who was suing for divorce from the woman known on-stage as Minerva. According to the *New York Times* report which appeared the following day, Mr. Wohlforth (not Wohlford) had filed for divorce from "Catharine Wohlforth" who is described in the article as a "museum freak . . . known to

fame as ‘Minerva, the strongest woman on earth.’”¹⁴ (Other newspaper accounts of the divorce proceedings refer to Minerva as “Johanna Wohlfoth” or, in one case, “Johanna Wolfarth,” adding to the general confusion about her early life and real name.¹⁵) Except for the spelling of Minerva’s name, however, all of the newspaper reports tell the same basic story about how Minerva, Blatt, and her two earlier husbands ended up in court.

Minerva’s first husband, Christian Wohlforth, claimed that they were married on 2 October 1881, and that they had three children together. If she was born in 1863 as her death certificate indicates, Minerva would have been 18 at the time and Wohlforth was probably about 29.¹⁶ According to the report in the *New York Sun*, which was reprinted in the *San Antonio Daily Light* about a week after the trial, Minerva became tired of “brooms and washboards and the earnings of her husband were meager.” The article indicated that because of her size and strength she decided to try to find work as a professional strongwoman and so left her family and “has since been travelling about the country as Minerva.”¹⁷

Newspaper reports of the divorce proceedings suggest that Minerva met Blatt after she had decided to begin exhibiting her strength in dime museums. According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Blatt fell in love with her, asked her to join him on the road, and the two “eloped” in 1888.¹⁸ No evidence was introduced in the



This rare photograph of the professional strongwoman Minerva shows her as she looked in approximately 1892. According to her descendants, the cannon in the picture is the one used in Minerva and Blatt’s act, which included catching cannon balls. Although we tried enhancing the poster shown leaning against the cannon using the software Photoshop, the only words we can clearly make out are the name “Minerva” and “One Week Only.” Note her Cyr-like legs.

—Photo courtesy June Stephens

trial that they had actually married, only that they began travelling together and were believed to be in a romantic relationship. Wohlforth’s attorney, August P. Wagener, cited Blatt in the divorce proceedings as a “co-respondent,” a term indicating that Blatt was being charged for adultery with Minerva.¹⁹ However, to Judge McAdam’s



Minerva's parents, Joseph and Louisa Schauer, were born in Germany, and then immigrated to America. In 1880, they were living in Hoboken with their nine children. One of Minerva's descendants wrote along the side of this picture, "He was one of the great old time strong men. It was well known no one would ever shake hands with him a second time when once he exerted even part of the force in his vise-like grasp. It is said strong fathers begat strong sons, and to this can be added strong daughters."

—Photo Courtesy June Stephens

and the press corps' surprise, Wohlforth's attorney also introduced evidence to the court, and to the avid reporters in the audience, demonstrating that in addition to living in an adulterous relationship with Blatt, Minerva had recently married a well-to-do accountant named Henry Bercaw (13 May 1893) in Washington, D.C. On that marriage license, Minerva used the name Josephine Wolford (no "h") and claimed that her hometown was Hoboken, New Jersey.²⁰ Apparently, Minerva had met the considerably older Bercaw in Easton, Pennsylvania,

just a month before she married him, and following the ceremony Bercaw took her to his home in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, to live.²¹

Although it is difficult to piece together all of their history, Blatt was a fairly well-regarded strongman working in dime museums and in variety theater and circuses when he and Minerva decided to join forces. An 1891 article in the *Washington Post*, for example, included Blatt in an article called "Hercules of Our Day" that compared the top strongmen in the world at that time—Eugen Sandow, Charles Sampson, Louis Cyr, Sebastian Miller, YMCA advocate Robert J. Roberts, and Blatt. Blatt is described in that article as having an arm larger than that of boxing champion John L. Sullivan, but also as a "far from a well-formed man" because his legs were not proportionate to his upper body. His biceps reportedly measured 17 inches, and his chest 42 inches. He was "naturally gifted with strength," wrote the author, who cited his principal feat of strength as "pulling apart horseshoes."²² We know that Blatt was working as a strongman at least as early as May of 1889 because his cannonball-catching act is described in the *New York Clipper*, the theatrical paper that covered vaudeville and variety entertainers as well as legitimate theater.²³ An article from Davenport, Iowa, in 1892, reported that Blatt had set a new record for breaking horseshoes with his bare hands by doing 18 in one hour. The article noted that he had hoped to do 20 in the hour's time but that one of the steel shoes was especially hard and that it took 15 minutes "before he rendered it in twain."²⁴

It is possible that Shelland's claim that Minerva met Blatt because of her New Jersey roots could be true, since a Charles P. Blatt is listed in the city directories for Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1886, 1887, 1890 and 1891.²⁵ Whether this is Charles P. Blatt the strongman—or his father—is not clear, however, since they have identical names and there are no ages listed in the directories.²⁶

Even if it was the father and not the son, it is within reason that the younger Blatt could have stayed for periods of time with his father in Elizabeth, and that he would have become aware of Minerva's unusual strength because of the proximity of Elizabeth to Hoboken. This is even more likely if, as Shelland claims, she was somewhat famous for her strength among her neighbors at a young age.²⁷

I can find no record of a Schauer family in Elizabeth during the late 1880s or early 1890s but I do find a Joseph Schauer and his family living at various addresses in Hoboken between 1880 and 1893, and the distance between Hoboken and Elizabeth is less than 15 miles.²⁸ In the city directory for 1886-1887, Joseph Schauer—the man I, and Minerva's descendants, believe to be her father—was living in Hoboken at 96 Jefferson Street and is described as a laborer.²⁹ However, in 1887-1888 he listed himself in that year's directory as a salesman, then as a peddler in 1891, and finally as a seller of patent medicines in a business called Joseph Schauer and Son in 1892 and 1893.³⁰ As a seller of patent medicines it is not inconceivable that he began calling himself Dr. Schauer to give more credence to the products he was peddling.³¹ This could in part explain the claim made in the *Police Gazette* that her father was a doctor, although there are no references in any of the city directories of a Dr. Schauer, which there undoubtedly would have been had he been as socially prominent as was claimed.³²

In any case, we may never know how Minerva and Blatt actually met, and whether she met him before or after she had decided to leave Christian Wohlforth and the children.

Although the newspaper reports of the divorce case suggest that Minerva had begun performing by 1889, I find no records for any performances—with or without Blatt—prior to 1891 when her challenge letter to Victorina was published in the *Police Gazette*.³³ In fact, Minerva and Blatt seem almost to disappear from American newspapers until 12 August 1892 when an article on the front page of the *San Antonio Daily Light* reported that the “world-famed Minerva, who is the strongest woman known on earth,” had just arrived in San Antonio following a highly successful tour in Mexico.³⁴ Minerva is described in the article as being 5'8" tall, weighing 185

pounds, and is said to be “under the management of Prof. C.P. Blatt, who also trains her and is her teacher.” The article goes on to explain that Minerva wrestles, spars, swings clubs, and can lift 500 pounds with her teeth while standing on two chairs. She also reportedly broke chains and horseshoes, bent iron, and caught a 24-pound cannonball shot from a cannon.³⁵

Blatt and Minerva apparently liked San Antonio and decided to make it their headquarters.³⁶ In the 1890s, before the San Antonio River was straightened to help with flooding, it made a large bend in the downtown area that created a peninsula of land known as Central Park or Bowen's Island. The area served as both a public park and an amusement center, and in 1882 it was the scene of the first German Turner gathering held in Texas.³⁷ At some point, Blatt took over the management of Central Park and he placed a notice in the *San Antonio Daily Light* on 26 August 1892 announcing himself as the new proprietor and advertising that there would be nightly entertainment fit for families. The ad particularly urged patrons to come

AMUSEMENTS.

Central Park

C. P. BLATT, Proprietor.

OPEN EVERY NIGHT.



POPULAR FAMILY RESORT now open
under a new management. Don't
fail to see the great

∴ MINERVA ∴

THE STRONGEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD.
Dumb Bells have arrived.
Don't fail to see the new attractions next
week.

Don't fail to see the great Selemann who
lifts a 500 pound rock with one finger at
Central Park, Monday.

This ad, taken from an old issue of the *San Antonio Daily Light* shows the “Great Selemann” lifting what's claimed to be a 500-pound rock with one finger while shooting off his pistol like a true Texan. Selemann was probably Blatt.

and see, "the great Minerva, the strongest woman in the world," and even announced that the "Dumb Bells have Arrived."³⁸ The crowds apparently came in large numbers. At first the park opened only on Saturday and Sunday nights and, according to the *San Antonio Daily Light*, they had between two and three thousand people in attendance at most shows and more than half of them were women and children.³⁹ In addition to Minerva and Blatt, there were also musicians in the show, and other guest performers show up in the advertisements. The Nelson Family (four in number) appeared at Central Park in August, as did "Seleman, The Strongest Man on Earth," who would attempt to lift a 450-pound rock with one finger. Aiming his advertising at his Texas audience, Blatt included a drawing of "Seleman" on 26 August 1892 that shows him standing on two chairs, lifting the weight between his legs with one finger, and firing off a pistol with his free hand.⁴⁰ It is likely, of course, that "Seleman" was actually Blatt working under a different name. One of the more interesting stories of their time at Central Park is the tale of the wrestling match Minerva had with Edward Nelson. The *San Antonio Daily News* covered the event and reported that Nelson failed to throw Minerva during the 25-minute time limit and that "when time was called, Minerva had the half Nelson on her opponent and would probably have thrown him in a few more minutes."⁴¹

After the long tour Minerva and Blatt had spent with the Orrin Brothers Circus in Mexico during 1891 and early 1892, the idea of staying in one city for a time must have been enormously appealing. However, Minerva wasn't trying to stay out of the limelight. Shortly after she arrived in San Antonio, the *Police Gazette* reprinted a *San Antonio Light* article announcing to America that Minerva was back from Mexico and that she stood by her offer to give \$1,000 to any woman who could best her in an open contest.⁴² Over the next several months, numerous reports related to Minerva's exploits in San Antonio appeared in the *Police Gazette* as its editors tried to whip up enthusiasm for a challenge match between Minerva and the other reigning American strongwoman of the 1890s, Fannie Gorman, who performed as "Yucca."⁴³ (Kati Sandwina was only eight years old in 1892, and because of this was never in contention with Minerva for the title of "World's Strongest Woman."⁴⁴) With Yucca appearing at Huber's Museum in New York City, however, and Minerva hundreds of miles away in San Antonio, the question of who should

be regarded as the world's strongest woman, the *Gazette* pointed out, "is an open question and will never be decided until the rival Amazons meet in open competition."⁴⁵ Pushing the matter further, the *Gazette* observed on 19 November 1892 that "there appears to be something intervening between the two rivals which prevents the match from being arranged. It would be in order for the owner of some large hall or garden to hang up a big purse and have these rival champions compete against each other, and thus put a stop to the controversy."⁴⁶

By January, however, Minerva and Blatt had left San Antonio to return to the Northeast and new appearances. On 14 January 1893 Minerva opened in Philadelphia and reportedly created a "furor by her wonderful feats of strength." Her act consisted of lifting with her teeth a cannon and running gear weighing 400 pounds, lifting a horse reportedly weighing 1420 pounds with one finger, and lifting a rock weighing 400 pounds.⁴⁷ The article concluded with a statement of her hope to soon meet Yucca and settle once and for all the matter of who was truly the strongest woman in the world. In early March, Blatt and Minerva appeared in Manchester, New Hampshire, where Minerva "created quite the sensation."⁴⁸ On 2 April 1893, the now well-known pair dropped in at the *Police Gazette* offices to post money for a formal challenge to Yucca, who it turns out was then in Mexico with the Orrin Brothers Circus.⁴⁹

In mid-April of 1893 Minerva and Blatt checked into the Gerber Hotel in Easton, Pennsylvania, just across the border from New Jersey. Shortly after their arrival, Blatt left to return to San Antonio, leaving Minerva behind. According to the divorce proceedings, Blatt returned to San Antonio to see about his "museum," a statement that is borne out by an advertisement in the 1 May 1893 edition of the *San Antonio Daily Light* announcing the "Grand Re-Opening at Central Park of Minerva's Talented Specialty Co. and Band Concert."⁵⁰

Meanwhile, back in Easton, Minerva quickly become friends, and then far more than friends, with a 49-year old widower, Henry Bercaw, who lived in nearby Phillipsburg, New Jersey.⁵¹ Bercaw, a prosperous businessman, fought in the Civil War and then served in the U.S. Cavalry in California and Arizona for five years. After his return to Phillipsburg he began working for the Tippet and Woods Company, a firm that specialized in making boilers and was considered to be "one of the most solid mercantile concerns" in the vicinity.⁵² Bercaw began as a bookkeeper at the firm in the mid

1880s and eventually became a partner and stockholder. He was also apparently a fan of strongwomen, for within a few weeks Minerva and Bercaw travelled to Washington, D.C. and were married there on 13 May 1893. On the wedding license she used the name Josie Wolford.⁵³

Someone, perhaps even Minerva herself, informed Blatt of the marriage. In any event, introduced into the court record were two letters Blatt sent her within days of the ceremony.⁵⁴ The first was posted on May 15th and in it Blatt wrote:

My Dear Loving Wife, Josie: My Dear Pet—

I am so sick and troubled with my head. My dear wife, what in the world do you mean? My heart is broke to think that you could leave me. It is the last thing in the world I ever dreamt of. How can your heart turn so sudden toward me? My dear, loving Josie, you will have to excuse me. I can't write any more. I wish you were here and could see what I have done for you my dear pet. God bless you my dear wife. From your ever true husband,

Charles P. Blatt.⁵⁵

The next day, having recovered a bit more from the shock of Minerva's desertion and marriage, Blatt wrote again:

My Dear, Loving Wife, Josie: My Dear Pet—

Excuse me in the way I head my dear letter to you. What in the world have I ever done for you to treat me so? I am true to you, my dear Josie, as the day I left you. Oh! Do you remember the morning I left you, do you my pet? Oh! Can it be you have lost your love for me so soon? I would any day give up my life for you, and you know it in your heart. I am proud of you and love you. I can't help it. Do you remember the first Monday we met? Don't forget that day, my dear pet. I will give my right hand for you today just the same as the first day I met you.

Your heart-broken,
Charlie, til death.

[P.S.] If you have no money I will send it to you. I will have a divorce from the one I hate. I don't want to mention her name. My lawyer is getting out the papers.⁵⁶

This is the only mention I have found of Blatt's having had a wife before Minerva. Who she was, and how long the marriage lasted is not known.⁵⁷ However, it is worth noting that in the newspaper reports of Minerva and Blatt in San Antonio and in the *Police Gazette* up to the time of Minerva's divorce trial in 1893, Blatt is never referred to as her husband.

After their wedding, the newlyweds returned to Phillipsburg where, on 3 June 1893 Blatt showed up unexpectedly at Bercaw's front door. Speaking to Minerva in German, which Bercaw could not understand, Blatt accused her of being unfaithful and told her that if she had only come to San Antonio he would have met her with a fancy carriage and a brass band when she arrived at the train station.⁵⁸ Bercaw's nephew, who was standing where he could hear the conversation between Minerva and Blatt, translated the conversation for his uncle. Bercaw then confronted Blatt, and as tempers heated, Blatt drew a pistol and pointed it at Bercaw in "true Western style" according to one of the newspaper accounts.⁵⁹ Blatt had to be subdued by Bercaw and his nephew and then was forced to leave. One account of the fight over Minerva claimed that the ex-soldier drew on Blatt and ordered him to leave.⁶⁰ Regardless of who drew on whom, after Blatt's visit Bercaw told Minerva to get her things and get out, that the marriage was over. She reportedly left the following day on the train to New York, where she went into hiding for a time; Blatt reportedly followed her. Bercaw later claimed in the court records that she had stolen a diamond ring valued at \$280.00, a gold watch and chain, and a lot of letters from him, but no charges were filed for the supposed theft, or for committing bigamy.⁶¹

Following the testimony of the desk clerk at the Gerber Hotel in Easton, and Wohlforth's presentation of the Bercaws' marriage certificate from Washington, D.C. proving that Minerva was a bigamist, Judge McAdams quickly granted Wohlforth his divorce. Minerva did not mount any defense in the case and did not appear in court.⁶²

After the scandal of the divorce case, Minerva and Blatt disappeared from public view for a time. An

article about Yucca in the *New York Times* on 7 July 1893 claimed that Minerva was “hiding” in San Antonio in an attempt to avoid the head-to-head contest that had been talked about since the previous year.⁶³ In October, however, the two women agreed to meet in a public contest on 18 October 1893 at Madison Square Garden.⁶⁴ At the end of October, the match had still not come off but the *Gazette* was clearly beginning to throw its support behind Minerva. They devoted a full page to an engraving of Minerva on 28 October 1893 and noted that she was currently in New York completing arrangements for her match with Yucca.⁶⁵ By December, tired of their dallying, Richard K. Fox of the *Police Gazette* decided to heighten the stakes and commissioned a special championship belt to be made and sent to Minerva with the understanding that it would become her personal property if she “wins it three times or holds it one year against all comers.”⁶⁶ The belt was made of silver and gold and consisted of 17 plates, held together with small dumbbells. On the front was a picture of Richard K. Fox and an inscription that read, “The Police Gazette Championship Belt, Representing the female heavy-lifting championship of the world. Presented by Richard K. Fox on December 29, 1893.”⁶⁷ In an article in the *Gazette* in early January, it was noted that so far neither Yucca, or Mlle. Madro of France, or Madame Robusta, “who claims to be the champion of Europe,” had found the courage to face Minerva. Accordingly, the *Gazette* observed, Minerva now has in her

possession a special trophy which helps “to prove” that she deserves to be considered the world’s strongest woman. “Minerva will stand ready to compete for the belt against all comers, according to the rules governing the trophy,” the article continued, before finally noting that the belt was “the first trophy ever presented to a female heavy weight lifting champion.”⁶⁸

Fox’s hope that Minerva and Yucca, or any of the other strongwomen working in the 1890s would meet in a head-to-head contest apparently failed to materialize. Minerva published a challenge to the world on 20 January 1894 in the *Police Gazette*, and though excitement seemed to build later that summer and fall about the possibility of Athleta coming across the Atlantic to vie for the belt, that too never seems to have happened. In fact, I have not been able to find any solid evidence of real contests held between strongwomen in the *Gazette* during the 1890s, nor have I found any other newspaper articles discussing such contests during this era.⁶⁹ That the women did not meet head-to-head is not that difficult to understand, given the nature of the circus and vaudeville in this era. If Minerva and Yucca never met, they could each continue to advertise themselves as the “world’s strongest.” Furthermore, strength artists rarely played in the same cities at the same time and so there would have to be a serious financial inducement to make such a contest attractive to them, as it would be difficult for



Josephine Blatt as she appeared in approximately 1905, when she was performing with her daughter Matilda Blatt as one of the Minerva Sisters in a song and dance act in Vaudeville.

—Photo Courtesy June Stephens

them both to find work in the same city at the same time.

Fox continued to feature Minerva in the *Gazette* and published her open challenges to the strongwomen of the world to meet her in an open contest during 1894 and the spring of 1895.⁷⁰ When no contest materialized, Minerva and Blatt decided to settle the matter of her physical dominance in an exhibition at the Bijou Theater in Hoboken, New Jersey, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan. On Monday, 29 April 1895, the house was packed for the evening's vaudeville show. The *Gazette* described the evening's entertainment as "one of the best all-round vaudeville combinations seen at this house this season," and Minerva not only headlined the show, she reportedly "lifted and juggled heavy dumb bells [sic] and weights with ease."⁷¹ Near the end of her act, she asked for 18 volunteers from the audience, men who averaged around 150 pounds apiece. Once assembled on stage, the men were asked to stand closely together on a broad platform while Minerva climbed to a platform above their heads. She donned her harness, bent her legs, and managed to lift all 18 men and the platform from the floor. The *Police Gazette* proclaimed it to be a lift of 3000 pounds, which would be logical if the men totaled 2700 pounds and the platform and chains about 300.⁷² However, as lifting records often do over time, this great lift, which is still

the *Police Gazette* in 1923, and her *Billboard* obituary claims she lifted 28.⁷³ Because the obituary in the *Police Gazette* was the most accessible source on Minerva's life until recent years, it is not surprising that both the *Guinness Book of Records* and David Willoughby in *The Super Athletes* repeated the erroneous claim that there were 23 men on the platform.⁷⁴

However, the reports from 1895 suggest that the total weight was closer to 3000 pounds than the 3564 pounds claimed for her later.

Whatever the final weight, this lift, done in front of Sam Austin, the sporting editor of the *Police Gazette*, and a packed house of enthusiastic fans, solidified once and for all Minerva's claim to the title, "Strongest Woman in the World." After Minerva finished off the evening's entertainment by catching a 20-pound cannonball, Austin presented her with a special gold loving cup on behalf of Richard K. Fox and the *Police Gazette* to commemorate her historic achievement.⁷⁵

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Police Gazette* article about her famous lift is that it is also the first time Minerva is identified in print as "Mrs. Josephine Blatt."⁷⁶ In fact, the *Gazette* makes note of the fact that she "is known in private life as Mrs. Josephine Blatt."⁷⁷ When, where, and if Minerva and Blatt actually married is not known.⁷⁸

Following the appearance in Hoboken, Minerva and Blatt went to Washington, D.C. for an extended stay.⁷⁹ In late June of 1895 Minerva repeated her big lift in a special



Matilda Blatt performed on-stage with Minerva and Blatt in later years as a singer. She often dressed as a boy and was known for her rendition of "Danny Boy."—Photo Courtesy June Stephens

exhibition at a popular resort called River View just outside the city. She again lifted 18 men at one time, and the report in *The Washington Post* described her as a "marvelous specimen of muscle."⁸⁰ (The total weight of this lift has not been preserved.) Minerva and Blatt continued appearing at River View, often doing two shows a day, through the middle of July.⁸¹ On 14 July 1895 a crowd of 3000 watched their strength act and then held their collective breath as high diver Kearney Speedy dove from an 80-foot tall tower into a tank of water only three feet deep.⁸²

After their appearances at River View, however, Minerva and Blatt seem to disappear from the American scene for several years. It is likely that she and Blatt went to Europe as I find no newspaper advertisements for their act, or mentions of her, in the *Police Gazette* after 1895 until her obituary is published. According to the obituary, Minerva and Blatt spent four seasons with the Rentz Circus in Europe, and also worked in Germany with both Circus Schumann and the Merkel Circus, so it is probable that she and Blatt were in Europe at least during part of the late 1890s.⁸³

In 1900, however, Minerva and Blatt were living in Canton, Ohio when the federal census was done. Living with them was 17-year-old Matilda Blatt, who is listed as a "daughter" on the government record. Matilda was born in August of 1882, which makes it likely that she was a daughter from Minerva's marriage to Christian Wohlforth.⁸⁴ It is also worth noting that on the census Minerva and Blatt stated that they had been married for 17 years, a claim inconsistent with the public record as revealed in the divorce proceedings. As for what the family was doing in Canton, Josephine is listed as 35 years old, and with no profession listed beside her name. Charles is listed as a "saloonist and restaurateur," and is said to have been born in February of 1858, making him 42 in 1900.⁸⁵

According to family records made available to me by Minerva's descendants, Matilda was a good singer who sometimes appeared on stage with Charles and Minerva. Dressed frequently as a boy, she was known for her rendition of the Irish ballad "Danny Boy," and in later years supposedly performed a song and dance act with her mother called the Minerva Sisters.⁸⁶ Matilda married Ralph Travis in 1905 and, according to the family, this ended her career in entertainment. Matilda and Ralph eventually had eight children.⁸⁷

From 1905 until her death on 1 August 1923,

from stomach cancer, I have found no records of any sort regarding Minerva and Blatt except for the information contained in the two obituaries I found of her in the *Police Gazette* and *Billboard*.⁸⁸ According to *Billboard*, Minerva and Blatt continued performing until approximately 1910 when they retired to Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and Tottenville, New York. Tottenville is geographically just across the Hudson River from Perth Amboy, and it appears that after Blatt settled there he and Minerva began investing in real estate.⁸⁹ Minerva, whose weight had risen to 230 pounds by this time, became ill with stomach troubles in 1921. In *Billboard*, Blatt claimed that she had always been a woman with an unusually good appetite but did not consider it abnormal. "As far as eating was concerned," he claimed, the only thing she truly favored was lobsters. "She wanted lobsters whenever she could get them," and was never, according to him, a great eater of meat.⁹⁰ An article from the early 1890s quoted in my earlier article on Minerva, however, told of far more extravagant eating:

Eating is about the principal part of my existence . . . and I always have the best I can possibly procure. For breakfast I generally have beef, cooked rare; oatmeal, French-fry potatoes, sliced tomatoes with onions and two cups of coffee. At dinner I have French soup, plenty of vegetables, squabs and game. I prefer small birds to chicken, etc., the reed bird and such of that kind, as they have more nourishment in them. That is where I get my strength from. When supper comes, I am always ready for it, and I then have soup, porterhouse steak, three fried eggs, two different kinds of salads and tea.⁹¹

At lunch and dinner, she explained, she also had a bottle of the best wine she could procure. In fact, Minerva claimed that it was costing her about \$7.00 a day to eat in 1892 because "I will only eat the best of everything and have my meals cooked to order. I cannot get what I want from the regular hotel bill of fare."⁹² Whether diet played a part in her death from stomach cancer cannot, of course, be proven. However, from the start of her physical troubles in 1921 until she became bed-ridden in 1923, her weight reportedly went from 230 to 110 pounds. She spent the last three months of her life in North Arlington, New Jersey, and was buried there on

4 August 1923. She was described on the death certificate as a "housewife."⁹³

The final dramatic episode in the tale of Minerva and Blatt took place in 1924. Apparently, shortly after Minerva's death Blatt became friends with Sadie Tarbox, a much younger mother of three who lived in Perth Amboy, New Jersey.⁹⁴ According to the *New York Times*, Blatt met her when he went to visit his son Charles, then 25 years old, and his son's wife, Cecilia, who also lived in Perth Amboy. (When and where Charles was born is not known.) Blatt was apparently taken with Mrs. Tarbox and purchased a building at 80 Main Street in Tottenville where he set her up in business with a restaurant and candy store.⁹⁵ He also remodeled the second floor of the building to make it into living quarters for her and her children. Blatt, however, continued to live in a second story apartment at 5440 Arthur Kill Road in Tottenville. According to neighbors, on Wednesday, 30 July 1924, Blatt and Mrs. Tarbox had a loud argument at his home over his wife's jewelry, his real estate, and, particularly, Minerva's championship belt. According to the *New York Times*, Blatt felt Mrs. Tarbox had taken things from his home that she shouldn't have, so he demanded their return. Mrs. Tarbox, on the other hand, believed that Blatt should leave all of his property—Minerva's jewelry, her "diamond-studded" championship belt, and the real estate—to her, rather than to his son Charles and his wife, Cecilia. Some neighbors who overheard the argument said Blatt also threatened to sell the belt.⁹⁶

After the fight, Blatt left his house and went to visit a Lutheran pastor, the Reverend Jacob Ganss. Ganss told police that Blatt was so upset by the fight with Tarbox that he offered to give the preacher his real estate and the belt rather than to see Mrs. Tarbox get his property. The preacher claimed that Blatt said, "that woman robbed me of all my money and my wife's jewelry and now she'll get the rest of it if I don't give it to somebody."⁹⁷ Ganss refused the gift and advised Blatt to go see his son and daughter in Perth Amboy that evening, which he did. According to Cecilia, Blatt's daughter-in-law, he asked the young couple to meet him at his home the next morning so that he could deed the property over to them and give them Minerva's belt to keep.⁹⁸

The following morning, Cecilia arrived at Blatt's apartment alone, her husband having been detained in Perth Amboy. Blatt then sent for Mrs. Tar-

box and told her in Cecilia's presence that he was giving his real estate to his son Charles and the belt to Cecilia. He then told Mrs. Tarbox that he hoped she and Cecilia could become friends, at which point Mrs. Tarbox reportedly said, "I don't want to know her or have anything to do with her," and turned her back on Blatt and Cecilia. Cecilia went on to report, "My father-in-law was highly insulted and became angry. I was insulted and left the apartment while my father-in-law was scolding her. I was half way down the stairs when I heard two shots. I ran back. They were both on the floor."⁹⁹ Mrs. Tarbox had been shot in the back with a .38 caliber pistol, the bullet lodging in left lung; she died within five minutes according to the coroner. Blatt shot himself with the same gun behind his right ear. He died instantly.¹⁰⁰

The murder/suicide rocked the community of Tottenville, where Blatt was known as a well-established businessman.¹⁰¹ When Blatt's will was read, to everyone's surprise, the bulk of his estate went not to Charles Jr. and Cecilia but to 18-year-old Charlie Travis, the oldest of Matilda and Ralph Travis's eight children. In the newspaper report on the disposition of Blatt's estate, Matilda is described as a step-daughter, and Charles Blatt, Jr., is described as Blatt's "adopted son."¹⁰² Charlie Travis, Minerva's grandson, and Blatt's main heir, was still a senior in high school at this time but was described as "large for his years." The papers made much of the fact that Charlie, known as "Specks," because of his freckles, had been working that summer on a road gang earning just \$5.00 a day, but that he inherited four houses and a store with a total value of around \$75,000.¹⁰³ There is no mention of the final disposition of Minerva's belt in any of the newspaper accounts, and the family members I've interviewed have no idea of its whereabouts.



At the end of this piece, I find I have nearly as many questions about Minerva and Charles Blatt as I did at the beginning. While Joseph Schauer of Hoboken may well have been Minerva's father, I have not found the definitive link that allows me to confirm that fact with certainty. In her obituary in *Billboard*, Charles Blatt told the reporter, "Mrs. Blatt was a native of Hoboken . . . her father, Joseph Schauer, was an unusually strong man, and . . . Josephine, when but 18 years of age,

carried a barrel of potatoes up a flight of stairs.”¹⁰⁴ According to Blatt, having heard of the wonderful feats of strength of this girl, he became infatuated, and married her in 1888.¹⁰⁵

Clearly, this is the version of their story that Blatt and Minerva wished to have remembered. However, the facts just don’t quite match up with the tale. While Joseph Schauer being listed as her father both in the obituary and on her death certificate should seem like sufficient evidence, why can’t I find a Josephine anywhere who fits the right criteria in the Schauer family tree? On the federal census for 1880, Joseph and Louisa Schauer list a daughter named Josephine, but she’s only ten months old at that time. She can’t possibly be Minerva, who reportedly gave birth to Matilda in 1882. A more likely candidate is Hannah, the second daughter of Louisa and Joseph Schauer. Hannah was reportedly 18 in 1880, making her about 19 when and if she married Christian Wohlforth. This would also mean she was born in 1862 which is in line with the year of birth found on Minerva’s (Josephine’s) death certificate. Hannah is the closest fit, in terms of age, of any of the Schauer daughters, and if she did become Minerva, the fact that her name was Hannah may help explain why she is sometimes referred to as “Johanna” in newspaper reports.¹⁰⁶ Even so, I can’t definitively prove Hannah became Minerva.

The Schauers’ third daughter, named Minnie, was only 13 in 1880, but the closeness of “Minnie” to “Minerva,” makes her another possible candidate. Marriages at such a young age were not uncommon in the nineteenth century, and if she married Wohlforth when she was only 14 or 15 and then quickly became a mother, it is easier to understand why she may have felt trapped by the marriage and decided to leave Wohlforth and the children.¹⁰⁷ Minnie’s age also matches statements made in the *San Antonio Daily Light* and *The New York World*, suggesting that Minerva was 24 years old in 1892. If true, this would mean she was born in 1867 or 1868 rather than the 1862 listed on her death certi-



Portrait of Minerva from late in her life provided by her great granddaughter, June Stephens.

cate.¹⁰⁸ As for why either Hannah or Minnie used “Josie” or “Josephine,” rather than their real names, I can only speculate.

Perhaps it was a middle name, or perhaps, in reinventing herself as a performer, Minerva simply chose a name for herself from the classic mythology that she felt would help her hide from her husband.¹⁰⁹ We will probably never know.

The Spanish philosopher George Santayana argued in 1906 that “History is always written wrong, and so always needs to be rewritten.”¹¹⁰ This article has attempted to do just that, to rewrite the history of Minerva and Blatt based on the factual records I’ve been able to gather. Minerva’s great granddaughter, June Stephens, was enormously helpful to me in this quest for the truth about Minerva and Blatt, and I’m also deeply grateful to the expanding world of digital records and archives that

allowed me to find primary sources for this article that I would otherwise never have seen. However, I still have unanswered questions and may very well follow Santayana’s dictum and revise her history again in future years.

Notes.

1 Jan Todd, “The Mystery of Minerva,” *Iron Game History* 1(2) (April 1990): 14-16, is available for free download at: <http://www.la84foundation.org/SportsLibrary/IGH/IGH0102/IGH0102i.pdf>.

2 Ibid. See footnotes in the original article for a full list of sources.

3 Ibid., 16.

4 J. Stephens to J. Todd, personal communiqué, 4 October 2003.

5 “Letter, dated 13 March 1891,” *National Police Gazette*, 28 March 1891: 10. Reprinted in: Gene Smith and Jayne Barry Smith, eds., *The Police Gazette*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 134-135.

6 Shortly after the appearance of this letter, Josie Wohlford changed her name to Minerva, at Fox’s suggestion. In addition to publishing the *National Police Gazette*, Richard K. Fox was vitally involved in the promotion of professional sports in North America in the Gilded Age. Fox was especially fond of boxing and had a special championship belt made for the 8 July 1889 fight between John L. Sullivan and Jake Kilrain. That belt contained 200 ounces of solid silver and was deco-

rated with diamond studs and gold ornaments. Sullivan won the fight after 75 rounds, but refused to wear the *Police Gazette* championship belt because he hated Richard K. Fox. So, the citizens of Boston raised money to create a new belt for him and this belt, which he wore with great pride is now at the Smithsonian. Fox also gave belts to strongman Louis Cyr and to Minerva. Cyr's belt now resides at the York Barbell Hall of Fame in York, Pennsylvania. Minerva's belt is still missing.

⁷ Smith and Smith, eds., *Police Gazette*, 134-135.

⁸ "Minerva," *National Police Gazette*, 11 March 1893: 11.

⁹ See: Jan Todd, "Center Ring: Katie Sandwina and the Construction of Celebrity," *Iron Game History* 10(3) (November 2007): 4-13, for a discussion of the ways in which circus performers often assumed new personas as performers.

¹⁰ Reprinted in: "Minerva the Champion Strongwoman," *National Police Gazette*, 11 March 1893: 11.

¹¹ "Minerva Interviewed: A Pleasant Hour with the Strong Woman," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 15 August 1892.

¹² Department of Health, State of New Jersey, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Certificate and Record of Death for Josephine Blatt, 1 August 1923. The birth certificate lists Charles P. Blatt as her husband. She had been at 20 Hendel Ave. in North Arlington, New Jersey, for only three months. Before then she lived in Tottenville, New York, on Staten Island.

¹³ Harry Shelland, "Recalling The Great Minerva," *National Police Gazette*, 28 December 1931: 8. As for the weight of the barrel, while farmers no doubt used barrels of different sizes, one report on the website, *The Voice of Agriculture*, reported, "The first way they shipped potatoes in the old days was in wooden barrels. A barrel of potatoes weighed 165 pounds and the lid would be stenciled with the name of the farm." Viewed at: <http://www.fb.org/index.php?fuaseaction=newsroom.focusfocus&year=1999&file=fo0517.html>.

¹⁴ "Minerva Sued for Divorce: Her First Husband Says the Strong Woman Married Too Often," *New York Times*, 13 June 1893.

¹⁵ In the *New York Sun*, Minerva is referred to as Johanna Wohlfarth. See: "Both Men Were Freed; Minerva the Strong Woman in Two Divorce Suits," quoted in *San Antonio Daily Express*, 19 June 1893. *The Philadelphia Enquirer* article on the case: "The Strong Woman Sued for Divorce: Muscular Minerva's Little Love Affairs Aired in Judge McAdam's Court," 13 June 1893: 4, refers to her as Catharine Wohlfarth. In *The News* for Frederick, Maryland, she is referred to as Johanna Wohlfarth on 13 June 1893: 1.

¹⁶ The 1880 United States Census has a Christ(ian) Wohlfarth living in Brooklyn as a boarder with the Thurman family. He was born in approximately 1852 in "Westenburgh," but no state or country is given. At this time Wohlfarth was employed in "a provisions store," which fits his description as a "pork packer" in the *Times*.

¹⁷ "Both Men Were Freed."

¹⁸ "The Strong Woman Sued for Divorce."

¹⁹ "Both Men Were Freed."

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ In the 1880 census for Phillipsburg, New Jersey, a Henry Bercaw is listed as living with a wife, named Mary. He was born in 1846 which would make him 47 at the time he married Minerva in 1893. See: "Henry Bercaw" 1880 United States Census, viewed at:

<http://pilot.familysearch.org/recordsearch/start.html>.

²² "Hercules of Our Day: Louis Cyr Undoubtedly the Strongest Man in the World," *Washington Post*, 4 January 1891: 10. Blatt is also discussed in: "Modern Samsons," *Grand Forks Herald*, 27 September 1891: 7.

²³ "Monsieur Blatt," *New York Clipper*, 11 May 1889: 140. The article discusses his performance at the Doris Museum, a wax museum and amusement venue in New York. He is also mentioned in an advertisement with testimonials in the *Clipper* on 15 November 1890: 575; in an advertisement in the *Clipper* for Davis' Pittsburg Museum that describes him as a "cannon ball catcher and dumbbell performer," on 29 November 1890: 599; and in an advertisement in the *Clipper* for Billing's World Museum in Boston on 20 December 1890: 653.

²⁴ "A Strong Pair," *Davenport Morning Tribune*, 17 January 1892.

²⁵ *Elizabeth, New Jersey Directories*, 1883-1891. Viewed at: <http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv+1&db=1890&elzjn%2c&rank=0&%2c%2>.

²⁶ Charles P. Blatt, Sr. was born in Salz, France on 19 November 1826. In 1887 when he filed a passport application he was living at 46 Washington Avenue in Elizabeth, New Jersey. "U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925," viewed at: www.ancestry.com. In the 1880 census, a Blatt family with both father and son named Charles was living in Philadelphia. Whether this is the same family is not clear. The father in this instance is listed as 52 years of age, making him born in 1828, not 1826. The boy is listed as 12 years old which means he was born in 1868. In the *Elizabeth, New Jersey City Directory* for 1890 and 1891, Charles Blatt resided at 833 Martin Street. Only heads of households were normally listed in the directories. Viewed at: www.ancestry.com.

²⁷ Shelland, "Recalling the Great Minerva," 8. Shelland also claims that Minerva's father was known for his strength, especially his vise-like grip. A similar claim is made in *Billboard* in her obituary.

²⁸ See: 1880 United States Census for Hoboken, New Hersey, page 98, available at: www.ancestry.com.

²⁹ *Gopsill's Jersey City, Hoboken, West Hoboken and Union Hall Directory for 1886-1887*, 574.

³⁰ *Gopsill's Jersey City, Hoboken, West Hoboken and Union Hall Directory for 1887-1888*, 474.

³¹ *Jersey City, New Jersey Directories for 1891-1893*. Viewed at: www.ancestry.com.

³² "Minerva," *National Police Gazette*, 11 March 1893: 11.

³³ "Letter, 13 March 1891," *National Police Gazette*, 28 March 1891: 10.

³⁴ In "Minerva Interviewed: A Pleasant Hour With the Strong-woman," *San Antonio Daily Light* 15 August 1892, it states, "In Mexico she made a great hit and many friends. She is a member of the Daughters of Rebecca and has a fine diamond ring which was presented to her by the Odd Fellows in Mexico. She also wears a diamond ring which President Porforio Diaz gave her, and besides these has rings, silk shawls and medals, which were given her in that country. These she took great pleasure in showing to the reporter."

³⁵ "A Wonderful Woman, She Lifts Heavy Weights, Horses, Etc., As Though They Were Straws," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 12 August 1892: 1.

- 36 Minerva claimed that San Antonio, "suited them to a T." Ibid.
- 37 "Bowen's Island a Gay Place in Central Park Days," *San Antonio News*, 15 October 1965. See also: Frances J. Bowen, "Historic Bowen's Island: Once City Garden Sport, Now Site for \$5,000,000 Worth of New Buildings," *San Antonio Express*, 23 January 1927: 2D.
- 38 Advertisement, *San Antonio Daily Light*, 26 August 1892.
- 39 "Central Park," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 22 August 1892: 8.
- 40 "Advertisement for Central Park," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 26 August 1892; and "Advertisement for Central Park," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 25 August 1892; and "Advertisement for Central Park," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 29 August 1892.
- 41 "Minerva Too Much for Nelson," *Daily News* (San Antonio) 7 November 1892. Reprinted in *National Police Gazette*, 26 November 1992: 10.
- 42 "Minerva in San Antonio," *National Police Gazette*, 3 September 1892.
- 43 "Two Women of Muscle: One Breaks Horseshoes, the Other Lifts 300 Pounds With Her Teeth," reprinted from the *New York World* in *Los Angeles Times*, 7 August 1892: 9. See for example: "Minerva Issues Another Challenge," *National Police Gazette*, 5 November 1892: 10; "Letter from Yucca," *National Police Gazette*, 12 November 1892: 8; and "Minerva Too Much for Nelson," *National Police Gazette*, 26 November 1892: 10.
- 44 Todd, "Center Ring," 8. Sandwina was born in 1884.
- 45 "In the Square Circle: News and Gossip of Men and Muscle," *National Police Gazette*, 12 November 1892.
- 46 Choynski's Recent Fight," *National Police Gazette*, 19 November 1892: 11.
- 47 "Untitled letter to Richard C. Fox," reprinted in *National Police Gazette*, 28 January 1893.
- 48 "Minerva the Champion Strong Woman of the World," *National Police Gazette*, 11 March 1893: 10.
- 49 "Will Yucca Meet Minerva?" *National Police Gazette*, 3 April 1893: 11.
- 50 "The Strong Woman Sued for Divorce." "Advertisement for Central Park," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 1 May 1893.
- 51 Henry Bercaw married in 1877 but his wife, Mary, died in 1885. They are both listed in the 1880 United States Census. Viewed at: www.ancestry.com.
- 52 "Henry Bercaw," *Portraits and Biographical Record of Hunterdon and Warren County New Jersey* (New York: Chapman Publishing Company: 1898), 503.
- 53 "Minerva Divorced: Blatt the Cannon Ball Catcher Caught the Strongwoman," *The News*, Frederick, Maryland, 13 June 1893.
- 54 Telephone service had been introduced in San Antonio in 1879, so Minerva could have called Blatt, or more likely telegraphed, to let him know the news. Viewed at: <http://www.sanantonio.gov/saPD/history1d.htm>.
- 55 "Both Men Were Freed: Minerva, the Strong Woman in Two Divorce Suits," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 19 June 1893.
- 56 Ibid. See also: "Minerva Divorced."
- 57 In advertisements for Central Park in the *San Antonio Daily Light*, other performers were also listed making it possible that Mrs. Blatt was also a performer.
- 58 "Strong Woman Sued for Divorce," 4.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 "Both Men Were Freed," *San Antonio Daily Express*, 19 June 1893.
- 61 Ibid. It is not known when her divorce from Bercaw was finalized.
- 62 "Strong Woman Sued for Divorce," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 June 1893.
- 63 "Yucca Looking for a Match," *New York Times*, 7 July 1893. For additional information on Yucca see: "Two Women of Muscle," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 August 1892, 9.
- 64 "Minerva and Yucca Matched," *National Police Gazette*, 7 October 1893.
- 65 "Minerva," *National Police Gazette*, 28 October 1893, 7. The picture of Minerva appears on page 13.
- 66 "The Strong Woman Trophy," *National Police Gazette*, 13 January 1894: 10.
- 67 Ibid. Although it was later claimed to be covered with diamonds, there is no mention of any gemstones of any kind on the belt in the original newspaper coverage in 1893.
- 68 "Minerva, the Famous Champion Strong Woman," *National Police Gazette*, 6 January 1894: 10.
- 69 No library has a complete set of the *National Police Gazette* from this era. In working on this article I examined all the issues of the *National Police Gazette* available on microfilm at the H. J. Lutzer Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, which has one of the most complete runs of this publication in the US, and I used the academic search engine—American Periodicals Online—which also searches some issues of *The National Police Gazette*. I also used www.newspaperarchive.com, Google News Archive, and Proquest Historical Newspapers Online to look for references to Minerva and Blatt in both large and small newspapers in North America between 1880 and 1930. In doing those searches I found numerous references to appearances and advertisements for upcoming shows, but not a single mention of a contest between these women champions. For the possible Minerva and Athleta match see: "The Latest Sporting News," *National Police Gazette*, 26 May 1894: 10; "Mlle Athleta," *National Police Gazette*, 2 June 1894: 6; "Mlle Athleta to Richard Fox," *National Police Gazette*, 23 June 1894, 10; and "Athleta and Minerva," *National Police Gazette*, 29 December 1894: 11.
- 70 "Latest Sporting News," *National Police Gazette*, 7 April 1894: 11; and "Minerva," *National Police Gazette*, 17 November 1894: 10; "Minerva," *National Police Gazette*, 16 March 1895: 11.
- 71 "Minerva's Wonderful Act: Lifts Eighteen Men; Combined Weight Three Thousand Pounds," *National Police Gazette*, 4 May 1895: 10.
- 72 Ibid. There is no mention in the article of the platform and chains being weighed separately. Eighteen men of 150 pounds would weigh approximately 2700 pounds.
- 73 *The Police Gazette* obituary on 22 September 1923, claimed that the lift was made on 15 April 1895 and that there were 23 men on the men for a total weight of 3564 pounds. "Minerva: Strongest Woman in the World," *National Police Gazette*, 22 September 1923. See also: "Death of Mrs. J. Blatt Recalls Feats of Lifting," *Billboard*, 25 August 1923: 86.
- 74 Norris McWhirter, ed. *Guinness Book of Records* (New York: Sterling Publishing, Co., 1985), 462; David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co: 1970): 577.

⁷⁵ Yucca was the only other American strongwoman in this era known for heavy-harness lifting and her best effort appears to be a lift made in Hartford, Connecticut at the Wonderland Theater in 1894 when she lifted six men, two of whom weighed close to 250 pounds, for a total weight, with apparatus, of 1306 pounds. "Yucca's Great Lift," *The Hartford Courant*, 17 April 1894: 1. "She stood over the men on a platform, with a belt around her waist. Most of the lifting was done with her legs. She lifted a 1,100 pound horse in the same manner."

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ I can find no record of a marriage license being issued to Charles Blatt in either New York, Texas, or New Jersey. I used national genealogy search engines such as www.ancestry.com; www.familysearch.org; and www.ancestorhunt.com for this search.

⁷⁹ "Captain Randall's Popular Excursions," *The Washington Post*, 26 June 1895: 9.

⁸⁰ "Wednesday and the Fourth at River View," *The Washington Post*, 3 July 1895: 2. See also: "Wednesday at Beautiful River View," *The Washington Post*, 10 July 1895: 8.

⁸¹ "Big Day at the River Resorts," *The Washington Post*, 15 July 1895: 7.

⁸² "Wonderful Speedy at River View," *The Washington Post*, 14 July 1895: 15.

⁸³ According to her obituary in the *National Police Gazette* on 22 September 1923, Minerva and Blatt—at different times during their careers—spent two seasons with Barnum's Circus, one season with Forepaugh's Circus, four seasons with the Rentz Circus in Europe, and also worked with both Circus Schumann and the Merkel Circus in Germany. They also performed for Keith's Vaudeville Circuit, which took them all across the United States and into South America. They were also, of course, with the Orrin Brothers Circus in Mexico in 1891 and early 1892.

⁸⁴ On the family tree provided to me by Minerva's great granddaughter, Matilda's birth date is also confirmed as being from 1882. The descendants of Blatt and Minerva do not have any birth records from this era that might help to unravel her parentage.

⁸⁵ 1900 United States Census, viewed at www.FamilySearch.org.

⁸⁶ Personal communiqué via email from June Stephens to Jan Todd. Digital images and notes in author's collection. The act done by Josephine and Matilda should not be confused with the iron jaw act also known as the Minerva Sisters that toured with John Robinson's circus in 1907 when one of the sisters had a tragic fall, and that was still working in vaudeville as late as 1913 as the "Human Butterflies." There are many references to the aerial act known as the Minerva Sisters on www.newspaperarchive.com. See for example: "Robinson's Circus," *Austin (Minnesota) Daily Herald*, 6 June 1907: 2; and "Amusements," *San Antonio Daily Light*, 27 January 1913: 4. I can find no references to Matilda and Josephine performing together in a song and dance act.

⁸⁷ Family genealogy records sent by June Stephens to Jan Todd, in author's collection.

⁸⁸ Department of Health of the State of New Jersey, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Certificate and Record of Death for Josephine Blatt, 1 August 1923. Author's collection.

⁸⁹ Tottenville was a thriving beach resort in the early twentieth cen-

tury with rapid ferry service from Perth Amboy. It had a number of hotels, restaurants, and a casino by the early twentieth century making it a likely spot for Minerva and Blatt to settle. For more information go to: Angie Mangino, "Tottenville: Businesses of the Past," at: <http://www.geocities.com/tottenville10307/BusinessesOfPast.html>.

⁹⁰ "Death of Mrs. J. Blatt Recalls Feats of Lifting," *Billboard*, 25 August 1923: 86.

⁹¹ "Minerva Interviewed."

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Why Minerva was living in North Arlington, New Jersey is not known, although it is possible, given her need for nursing care, that she was in a health care facility such as a hospice or nursing home. Department of Health for the State of New Jersey Death Certificate. See also: "Death of Mrs. J. Blatt," 86.

⁹⁴ In some newspaper accounts she is called Sadie Tarbone.

⁹⁵ "Murder and Suicide Follow an Insult," *New York Times*, 1 August 1924: 13. See also: "Kills Housekeeper and Then Commits Suicide," *Titusville Herald*, 1 August 1924; and "Diamond Belt is Cause of Dispute, Two Are Killed," *Bridgeport Telegram*, 1 August 1924: 6.

⁹⁶ "Diamond Belt is Cause of Dispute."

⁹⁷ "Murder and Suicide," *New York Times*: 13.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ "Kills Woman and Self to Get Diamond Belt," *The Washington Post*, 1 August 1924: 8.

¹⁰² "Day Laborer Inherits \$75,000 When a Vaudeville Magician Suicides," *The Kingsport Times*, 12 August 1924.

¹⁰³ Ibid., and "Specks Travers Digs On, Though an Heir," *Coshocton Tribune*, 11 August 1924.

¹⁰⁴ "Death of Mrs. J. Blatt Recalls Feats of Lifting," *Billboard*, 25 August 1923, 86.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ "Both Men Were Freed" and "Minerva Divorced."

¹⁰⁷ On the 1900 Census Minerva claimed to have been born in January of 1865, not 1867, or 1862, as it says on her death certificate.

¹⁰⁸ "Two Women of Muscle," *New York World*, reprinted in the *Los Angeles Times*, 7 August 1892: 9; and "Minerva Interviewed."

¹⁰⁹ There are three possible Schauer daughters who could have been Minerva: Mary, who was 20 in 1880, Hannah, who was 18, and Minnie, 13. The next two children were boys: Frederick was 10 in 1880, and Joseph, Jr. was 8. The remaining children were: Louisa, age 6, Antoinde, age 4, Albert, age 2 and Josephine, 10 months. 1880 U.S. Census for Hoboken, New Jersey, viewed at: www.ancestry.com. I have not found middle names for any of the children. The ancient goddess Minerva was known as both the god of useful and decorative arts and as a god associated with war. She was supposedly born, fully mature and wearing a full suit of armor. For more information on the goddess Minerva see: <http://www.dewey-browse.org/minerva/minerva.htm#Responsibilities>.

¹¹⁰ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Or the Phases of Human Progress* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1906): 45.