

# AMERICAN ICARUS: VIC TANNY AND AMERICA'S FIRST HEALTH CLUB CHAIN

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*Vic Tanny is doing more than any other private citizen to make every American health and exercise conscious.... With the wizardry of a Merlin he has conjured up his recreational fairylands and, like the legendary Pied Piper of Hamelin, has played his magic tune—luring millions of Americans away from their television sets, away from their unsound eating and drinking habits, back to the use of their legs, their muscles, their entire bodies!*<sup>1</sup>

In May 1961, the large-format, hard-cover magazine *Wisdom*, a reportedly nonprofit publication that claimed to honor “the Great Minds of All Time,” carried a portrait of Vic Tanny on its cover.<sup>2</sup> On the back cover, Tanny’s image appears again, alongside portraits of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Paul Dudley White, the famed cardiologist who recommended exercise to President Dwight Eisenhower when Eisenhower had a heart attack.<sup>3</sup> That Tanny received top billing in *Wisdom*’s special issue on American fitness, and that he was declared “America’s Greatest Physical Educator” by the magazine, is significant.<sup>4</sup> *Wisdom* explained that the reason for this special issue was to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Tanny’s “record breaking, outstanding achievement in physical education.” According to *Wisdom*, Tanny was America’s “Greatest Crusader for Better Health and a More Physically Fit Nation,” and the hyperbolic article went on to explain that Tanny was doing more to bring “the great benefits of vibrant health and physical fitness to millions of American men, women and children” than anyone else.<sup>5</sup> Tanny’s medium for this great contribution to national fitness, the ensuing pages explained—and illustrated with dozens of photos—was his chain of “beautifully appointed Tanny Recreation Centers, stretching the length

and breadth of the land.”<sup>6</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s Vic Tanny’s name was known across America. He was described as one of “the country’s most influential fitness entrepreneurs;” a “visionary;” and in one magazine as the “high priest” of health.<sup>7</sup> However, most modern Americans no longer remember Tanny and are not aware that he was the first to have a national chain of gyms and that through his gyms he revolutionized the marketing of fitness and influenced the rise of resistance exercise as the preferred form of health club training for both men and women. Tanny’s name and legacy have faded, perhaps overshadowed by the long career of his indefatigable contemporary, Jack LaLanne, whose televised fitness show lasted 35 years and made him a national celebrity.<sup>8</sup> Tanny’s contributions have been forgotten because he was a businessman first and foremost, and won no major bodybuilding or lifting titles that kept his name and image before the public. While both things contributed to Tanny’s disappearance from modern popular culture, Tanny also suffered swift and unexpected financial ruin in the 1960s that soon made him, and his more than 80 gyms, yesterday’s news. Regardless, the fact that *Wisdom* showcased Tanny—as it had also celebrated the achievements and ideas of Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Winston Churchill, Helen Keller, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, and, yes, even Jesus—suggests that Tanny’s story deserves serious scholarly attention 50 years later. Tanny’s life, and his involvement in the nascent fitness industry of the middle years of the twentieth century, created a template for the successful merchandising of fitness to the masses which continues to be used even in the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup>

## **A Big Businessman Starts Small**

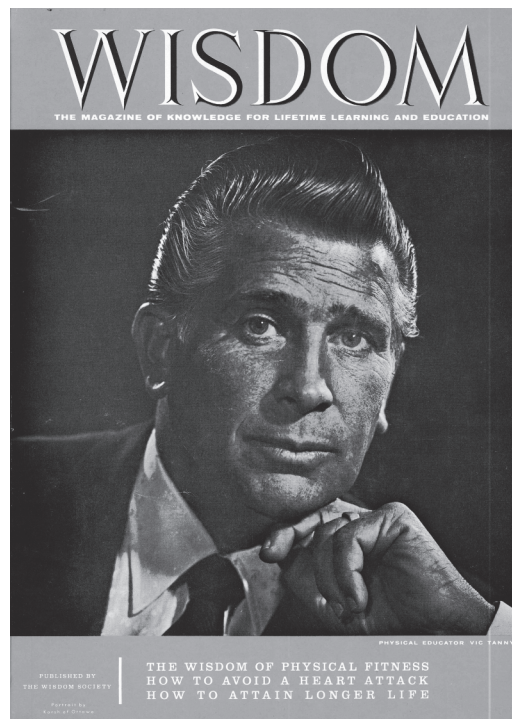
Victor Anthony Tannidinardo’s personal story starts on 18 February 1912 in Rochester, New York, but his family history in America begins earlier.<sup>10</sup> His father, Oscar, came to New York from Italy in 1904 as Ostilio Ullof Tannidinardo, joining the wave of more than 15 mil-

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lion immigrants to America from southern and eastern Europe between 1900 and 1915.<sup>11</sup> Sometime thereafter, he changed his name to Oscar Tanny, likely in an effort to “whitewash” his Italian heritage amidst a wave of nativism that arose in response to the immigration boom.<sup>12</sup> In New York, Oscar met Vic’s mother, Angelina, the daughter of Italian immigrants.<sup>13</sup> Oscar and Angelina married in 1909 and had four children: two daughters, Lola and Norma; and two sons, Victor and Armand.<sup>14</sup>

By most accounts, the Tanny family had little money, a reasonable assumption, given Oscar’s decision to leave economically-depressed southern Italy.<sup>15</sup> According to E.M. Orlick, a professor of physical education at McGill University in Canada and prolific physical culture author, although Oscar worked two jobs to provide for his family they had few luxuries during Vic’s childhood.<sup>16</sup> However, by 1930, Oscar had established himself as a tailor in a clothing factory, and neither his wife nor his children (save for 21-year-old Lola) worked, according to the 1930 census.<sup>17</sup> By then, Oscar also owned his own home, at 137 Argo Park in Rochester, valued, according to the census, at \$7,500—the equivalent of over \$100,000 in 2016. The house’s value—regardless of what the 1930 census reported—was nearly double the average cost of a home in the state of New York at the time.

Perhaps influenced by his father’s hardworking example, young Vic “was always working at something.”<sup>18</sup> In interviews given later in his life, Vic portrayed his life as a twentieth-century version of the Horatio Alger myth, telling reporters that he began selling newspapers at age four and had never stopped working. Tanny also claimed that when subscription-selling contests were held, he would buy up the papers and distribute them for free to non-subscribers on his route. “They got the habit and couldn’t help subscribing,” he said. “I went on to win so many circulation contests...that they had to disqualify me to build up the confidence of the other kids.”<sup>19</sup> Vic also worked in his father’s tailor shop after school. When cus-



**Wisdom magazine devoted its May 1961 issue to Vic Tanny, describing him as “America’s Greatest Physical Educator.” Ironically, Tanny was on the verge of economic collapse and within several months filed for bankruptcy.**

tomers came to have a suit cleaned, Vic claimed he would offer them an additional deal: “Press everything you got on for half a buck!”<sup>20</sup> According to Vic, many people jumped at the chance to have their clothes ironed while they waited and thus avoided having them sent later for cleaning. Though apocryphal, these stories foreshadow the business strategies Tanny used to build his gym empire decades later: *chutzpah*, aggressive salesmanship, low margins, and high volume.

According to *Wisdom’s* biography, Tanny attended John Marshall High School in Rochester, where he allegedly played a handful of sports, won a strength test conducted by school coaches, and was unanimously voted as having the best athletic build.<sup>21</sup> Shortly thereafter he found his way to Arthur Gay’s famous gymnasium at 252 East Avenue (about four miles from his family’s home) in Rochester, then a “mecca” for physical culture enthusiasts in the Northeast.<sup>22</sup>

Journalist Henry Clune reported that Jim Rawnsley had a gym in Rochester before Arthur Gay appeared on the scene but that Rawnsley’s gym was a sordid affair.<sup>23</sup> Clune wrote, “There was no chrome plate, no fancy paintings, no beauty salon aspect to [the] gym’s narrow little room in the Ward Building.”<sup>24</sup> Gay’s gym, on the other hand, was modelled more on the lines of Sig Klein’s elegant and world-famous gym in Manhattan—containing mirrors, carpets, paintings, and beautifully designed equipment from an earlier period.<sup>25</sup>

Gay’s interest in physical culture began at the Rochester Y.M.C.A. on South Avenue, where he enrolled in a young boys’ class under Herman J. Norton, director of physical education for the local public school system.<sup>26</sup> By the time he reached maturity, Gay had reportedly built an impressive physique possessing 175 pounds of “knotty, heavy-veined muscles,” and had used those muscles to earn “more honors and championship records than he can remember.”<sup>27</sup> When Gay opened his own gym, he designed it so that it stood out from Rawnsley’s and other

dreary competitors. Like Professor Attila, whose studio Klein operated after Attila's death, Gay built a luxurious "Physical Culture Studio" and filled it with the best equipment available.<sup>28</sup> Gay's gym appealed to both serious athletes (like champion boxer Bill Darling) and prosperous businessmen (like Thomas J. Hargrave, chairman of the board at Eastman Kodak), and even successful musicians like Wendell Hoss, whose devotion to Gay and physical culture was prominently featured in his obituary.<sup>29</sup> A local newspaper described the gym in 1934, shortly after Tanny joined:

*Gay's Studio is fully equipped with bicycle and walking machines, reducing vibrators, and electric cabinet baths. Sun treatments with sun lamps during the cold months and on the roof during the summer months are delightful features. Hand massages are also given. Individual dressing rooms and shower baths are part of the Gay Gym equipment. Gay has the largest weight assortments of any institution in this section of the country.... An outstanding feature of Gay's physical culture methods is the individual training accorded each pupil under the personal supervision of Mr. or Mrs. Arthur F. Gay.*<sup>30</sup>

The article's reference to Gay's wife, Emily, alludes to one of the gym's more innovative features: it catered to both men *and* women (in fact, some ads referred to it as "Arthur and Emily Gay's Gym.")<sup>31</sup> In the early twentieth century there were only a handful of gyms where women were welcomed in America.<sup>32</sup> Because the idea of commercial health clubs was still in its infancy and the local YMCA was the main gym in many cities, women were largely excluded. As historian Jan Todd put it, "deciding to train in a gym was not a simple matter for women; most health clubs were for men only."<sup>33</sup> Gay advertised that his methods could help men and women alike and so set up a separate department for women at his gym.<sup>34</sup> Segregation of the sexes would linger in American gymnasiums into the 1970s, but Gay's inclusion of women at least represents the beginning of a move towards equal access.<sup>35</sup>

Tanny joined Gay's gym around 1931, according to his brother Armand, and under Gay's tutelage built himself into a respectable, well-muscled weightlifter. "I trained Tanney [*sic*] for five years," Gay later claimed. "I built him

up from 125 pounds to 190 pounds of perfectly proportioned muscle."<sup>36</sup> Like many other physical culture entrepreneurs (or their supporters) Tanny appears, in later years, to have embellished his lifting records in order to appear more accomplished and knowledgeable. *Muscle Builder* author E.M. Orlick described Tanny in heroic terms, explaining that Tanny "started at the bottom, but by dint of his gnawing persistency, he sweated his way to the top."<sup>37</sup> Orlick wrote that Tanny earned three consecutive state weightlifting championships while training with Gay in Rochester, and that he had put 320 pounds overhead in the clean and jerk. However, contemporary evidence fails to support Orlick's claims. Weightlifting reports in Bob Hoffman's *Strength & Health* magazine show that, in January 1933, Tanny placed only third in the 165-pound weight class at a local contest held at Gay's gym.<sup>38</sup> The following month, he elected to judge a meet rather than compete himself.<sup>39</sup> *Strength and Health* includes no other references to Tanny's performance in any meet, and local newspapers show that, while Tanny continued to enter contests until 1935, records eluded him.<sup>40</sup> It seems unlikely that he approached the results that Orlick claimed.

Tanny reportedly opened his first gymnasium in 1930, at age 18, together with his brother Armand. The brothers admitted neighborhood children into their parents' garage where they had a small amount of weight training equipment and charged five cents per visit.<sup>41</sup> Again, evidence contradicts this. Armand claimed his brother "didn't even see a barbell" before age 19. It is far more likely, as other sources state, that Tanny opened his first gym in 1935, at age 22.<sup>42</sup> According to Henry Clune, Gay "took him on as a kind of assistant." When Tanny left Gay's, the younger man opened his own training facility on Ridge Road, in Rochester, renting a space over a bowling alley.<sup>43</sup>

All sources do agree that the first Tanny gym "was no elaborate affair," and performed "way below expectations" as it had more of the atmosphere and appearance of Rawnsley's gym than Gay's Physical Culture Studio.<sup>44</sup> Orlick called it "a sort of proving-ground," a test of his knowledge and of the viability of the industry.<sup>45</sup> Others were less generous: "Vic Tanny didn't seem to be able to get going in Rochester," remembered Joe Ortolani, a weightlifter who trained at the Rochester Y.M.C.A. "In time, he gave up."<sup>46</sup> Vic himself admitted that "the place smelled like a locker room and it was so dark I could barely see my own muscles."<sup>47</sup>

By this time, Tanny had graduated from the Brockport State Teachers College with a bachelor's degree in ed-

ucation, and was working as a history and social studies teacher near Rochester. He taught three grades, coached the school's baseball and basketball teams, and also made time to operate his gym.<sup>48</sup> Although teaching no doubt seemed a relatively attractive occupation when he first began his career, teaching salaries dropped by as much as eighteen percent during the Great Depression, turning "modest" into "meagre."<sup>49</sup> The Depression no doubt also made it difficult to attract and keep customers at his gym, and so while Tanny was better-off than many Americans and had some job security, he began to worry that he would never really get ahead. And so, according to E.M Orlick, Tanny—like thousands of others during this era—decided to move to California, America's new land of opportunity.<sup>50</sup>

According to *Wisdom* magazine, the impetus to relocate to California began when he visited the West Coast in 1938 to take a postgraduate course at the University of Southern California and fell in love with the climate, the proximity to the film industry, and the care that so many people took with their appearance.<sup>51</sup> Orlick tells a different version of the story in *Muscle Builder*: "[O]ne day Tanny woke up, walked to his bedroom window and stared out at a dismal rainy scene . . . That very day he sold his Rochester Gym, packed all of his belongings and headed West to Santa Monica."<sup>52</sup> In reality, the move was not quite so decisive, dramatic, or spontaneous.<sup>53</sup> It was Vic's younger brother Armand who left New York first, after deciding to attend UCLA because it would cost a tenth of his tuition bills at the University of Rochester. Vic followed a year later, arriving in the summer of 1940.<sup>54</sup>

### Muscle Beach

College-bound Armand arrived at Santa Monica in 1939 in the midst of a terrible heat wave. The usually balmy coast baked under record-high temperatures, reaching nearly 110 degrees Fahrenheit in September.<sup>55</sup> One night, unable to sleep for the sweltering heat, Armand decided to take a walk along the shore to cool off. He heard there a familiar sound: the clanking of barbells. The younger Tanny had stumbled upon Muscle Beach, today an iconic symbol of the twentieth-century physical fitness boom. In 1939, of course, Muscle Beach was still relatively unknown. "Honestly, I had never heard of it," Armand remembered.<sup>56</sup>

Muscle Beach in 1939 was little more than a low, wooden platform by the Santa Monica Pier with some neighboring gymnastic equipment. Although it had begun

attracting media attention, and many of the "regulars"—Pudgy and Les Stockton, Relna Brewer, Ran Hall, Russ Saunders, Johnny Collins, John Kornoff, and Harold Zinkin—were already emerging as Muscle Beach "stars," it was primarily an acrobatics practice space at that time, and barbell training was not yet well established there.<sup>57</sup> The barbells Armand heard being lifted belonged not to the city but to individual "regulars" at Muscle Beach who brought them to the beach and took them home at the end of each day.<sup>58</sup> However, the discovery of the so-called Muscle Beach Gang proved to be providential as the chance meeting resulted in lifelong friendships for both brothers and, when Vic arrived the following year, Muscle Beach also was instrumental in the opening of his first gym.<sup>59</sup>

Vic Tanny arrived in Santa Monica with \$750 to his name, which Armand claimed in a 1999 interview "was like \$100,000 today." [Actually, \$750 equates to about \$12,600 in 2016.]<sup>60</sup> The fact that the Santa Monica Parks Department did not allow weights to be stored at Muscle Beach at that time gave Vic the idea to open a gym in Santa Monica close to Muscle Beach. His hope was that the serious lifters at Muscle Beach would prefer to do their clean and jerks and squats without sand getting in their eyes, and he no doubt also realized that the vision of so many weight-trained bodies performing acrobatics at Muscle Beach on the weekends was the best free advertising one could get to sell the benefits of weight training.

The first Tanny gym was on the second floor of a building at the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard and Second Street.<sup>61</sup> The loft he rented was old, small, and in disrepair, but the landlord offered it to Tanny for just \$35 per month in rent. Tanny crammed the space with weights and other kinds of exercise equipment and charged his new members \$5 per month to train there. "People came in, curious—[because] they had never even seen a weight," Armand said.<sup>62</sup> "Nobody knew anything when we first opened. People would come in and say, 'Are we supposed to pay you to lift those things?'"<sup>63</sup>

Although many Muscle Beach Gang members became members, Vic needed more paying customers and so he began thinking of new ways to advertise his gym.<sup>64</sup> He began by holding weightlifting exhibitions at the gym, with the audience crammed against the walls "for fear the floor would collapse." He then began hosting larger contests and multi-event strength and bodybuilding shows in bigger venues.<sup>65</sup> In 1941, for example, Vic hosted the AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) Mr. California contest. It was won

by Muscle Beach regular, Harold Zinkin, who would go on to invent the Universal Gym machine.<sup>66</sup> Over the next decade, Tanny promoted a number of other successful strength and bodybuilding extravaganzas that helped identify Santa Monica as a critical site for the emerging sport of bodybuilding.

According to historian John

Fair, bodybuilding contests like Tanny's Mr. California remained somewhat on the periphery of physical culture interests until the late 1930s.<sup>67</sup> Between 1938 and 1939, however, a striking number of bodybuilding shows were held throughout the northeastern United States, including the meet recognized as the first Mr. America contest. The popularity of physique contests steadily increased throughout the 1940s, thanks in large part to the efforts of Bob Hoffman, owner of the York Barbell manufacturing company in Pennsylvania and ardent supporter of weightlifting and other strength sports. According to Fair, the publicity Hoffman generated for the first Mr. America bodybuilding contest in his magazine, *Strength & Health*, contributed "more than any other factor" to that event's long-lasting significance in the physical culture world.<sup>68</sup>

Exactly when and where Tanny first met Bob Hoffman, founder of the York Barbell Company and the publisher of *Strength & Health* is unknown. However, the Tanny brothers definitely read the magazine in the early 1930s, as a letter from Vic extolling the physical transformation of his brother Armand was featured in *Strength & Health* in March 1935.<sup>69</sup> Two photos from that article show Armand at age thirteen; and again, two years and fifty-five muscular pounds later, at age fifteen. Those photos were then used by Bob Hoffman in his promotional pamphlet, "The Road to Super Strength," published in 1935.<sup>70</sup> In 1941, photos of both Armand and Vic appear in *Strength & Health*, along with a profile on Armand who had just won the Pacific Coast Weightlifting title. Hoffman also



**Pudgy Stockton saved this photo—taken at Slapsy Maxie's restaurant on January 27, 1946—in one of her photo albums now at the Stark Center. Sharing the booth are (left to right) national weightlifting champion, Joe De Pietro; Pudgy and Les Stockton; Walt Marcyan and his wife Roberta; Mr. America John Grimek, partially hidden; and Vic and Shirley Tanny.**

gives Tanny's new gym a positive plug in the caption over Vic's physique shot, telling readers that Tanny "operates one of the finest gymnasiums on the West Coast . . . Visit the gym some time," he wrote, "you'll like the Tannys, and the people who train at their gym. You'll see Frank Jares, West Coast Hercules training there regularly and at times Pudgy Eville and other strong men and women."<sup>71</sup>

Although the early details remain sketchy, Vic Tanny suggested to Hoffman that they become business partners shortly after Tanny opened his Santa Monica gym. The partnership began with Tanny becoming a distributor for York Barbells on the West Coast. Whether Tanny made much money as a York Barbell retailer remains unknown; regardless, the idea of joining forces with Hoffman was a good one because by partnering with Hoffman, Tanny gained access to the pages of *Strength & Health* where he built his reputation as an expert and promoted his California shows and, later, his ever increasing network of gyms.<sup>72</sup> Tanny also began writing a "West Coast Column" for Hoffman in May 1941, which did much to promote the Tanny brothers and Muscle Beach to readers who never made it to that magical spot just south of the Santa Monica pier.<sup>73</sup>

Tanny apparently also discussed the possibility of manufacturing weight-training equipment in a more extensive partnership with Hoffman, and also explored the idea that Tanny's gym would serve as a York headquarters for western expansion. Hoffman turned that offer down, but it seems likely that, in the course of his discussions, Tanny may have gleaned some insights into the manufacturing



Ray Van Cleef took several photos of Tanny's early gyms which he sent to Peary Rader in the late 1940s, for possible inclusion in *Iron Man* magazine. Tanny is shown here, in the office of his second Long Beach gym with gym manager, Phil Pfister. An earlier attempt to establish a gym in Long Beach had not been successful because of a blackout imposed during World War II. Tanny's first Long Beach gym closed in 1942.

process—insights that would pay dividends when Tanny began producing his own equipment a decade later.<sup>74</sup>

Somehow, in the midst of moving across the country and beginning a new business in California, Vic also found the time to marry Rochester native, Florence Shirley Grastorf, born in 1922.<sup>75</sup> Ten years younger than her husband, Shirley, as she preferred to be called, did not immediately move to Santa Monica. However, the Tanny's eventually had four children: a boy, Vic Junior, and three girls.<sup>76</sup> Unlike some physical culturists during that era who celebrated their heterosexuality by putting their family in the limelight, Shirley and the children stayed largely in the background of Tanny's public life. Vic's sister, Norma, on the other hand, moved to Santa Monica where she became part of the Muscle Beach scene and married Bert Goodrich, the first Mr. America and a Hollywood stuntman.<sup>77</sup>

Fueled by its location and Tanny's talent for promotion and salesmanship, the Muscle Beach gym "took off . . . immediately," Armand said.<sup>78</sup> Vic decided to use his profits and replicate the model at a second gym near

the Belmont Pier in Long Beach, California.<sup>79</sup> The location should have worked well; Long Beach, like Santa Monica, was a popular tourist destination and beach proximity made people conscious of their bodies. However, Vic's timing was unlucky. Shortly after Vic opened in 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and America formally entered World War II. Because of its strategic location as a port that could accommodate battleships, "the whole town of Long Beach was blacked out," Armand said. "Battleships were sitting offshore!"<sup>80</sup> In a letter to John Terpak at York Barbell, Tanny explained what happened to his Long Beach gym: "For about ten days I thought everything was going to hell out here," Tanny wrote. "People wouldn't go out. Business everywhere dropped off so greatly that they had to stop all blackouts until the real thing comes along. People seem to have lost a lot of interest since the scare and many have screwed back east. Half of my midwestern bastards in the gym have joined the great exodus. The Long Beach place was perking along perfect until the war and now I'm afraid I'll have to get up off my lazy ass and get to work and build it up good."<sup>81</sup> Although Vic did his best to

make Long Beach a success and continued to sink "quite a bit" of capital into the gym, he finally closed it in the summer of 1942. "The blackouts blacked us out," Vic lamented. Luckily, the gym in Santa Monica remained going "like a house afire," he reported to John Grimek in a letter, and his business there more than doubled between January and May of 1942.<sup>82</sup>

For the remainder of the war, however, Vic forgot about further gym expansion and took a day job at Douglas Aircraft in Santa Monica where he worked with Moe Most and several other Muscle Beach regulars making airplane parts.<sup>83</sup> During this time he allowed his Santa Monica gym members to leave their dues in a desk drawer during the day since he couldn't be there. Because he was doing government-accepted defense plant work, he was able to keep the gym going, keep his name before the public, and dream of the day he could try expanding once again.<sup>84</sup>

### Postwar Rebirth

Although the war slowed the growth of Tanny's



These two photos, taken by Ray Van Cleef, show the interior of Tanny's second Santa Monica gym on Fourth Street. According to Van Cleef's notes to Rader explaining these undated photos, the gym was being run at this time by Armand Tanny, and it was often referred to as "Armand's gym." Its basement location also gave it another name—The Dungeon. The bodybuilder at the dumbbell rack is gym member, Tommy Humphrey, a Muscle Beach devotee, who became involved with the fight to save Muscle Beach in the late 1950s.

gym business, it nonetheless continued to spread awareness of health and fitness in America and helped Hoffman and others lay a foundation for the peacetime to come. Soldiers trained with resistance of some kind during the war—many for the first time—and experienced for themselves the benefits of regular exercise. In Santa Monica, hotels along the beachfront had been used as separation centers for servicemen. Muscle Beach caught the attention of many of these men and, after the war, many of them returned to live year-round where they could enjoy the sunshine, sparkling beaches, and Muscle Beach. "People seem to be pouring into California," Tanny wrote to Hoffman of the postwar migration, noting that it opened up all kinds of business opportunities for those ready to move. "The West," Tanny wrote, "is ready for the plucking."<sup>85</sup>

One of Tanny's first moves after the war was to open a new gym in Long Beach, at 25 Locust Avenue, about three miles from his former location.<sup>86</sup> The gym proved to be a success this time and allowed Tanny to focus on his biggest venture yet. Ever the gambler, Tanny purchased a seven-thousand-square-foot former United Service Organization (USO) center in Santa Monica as a site for a new Santa Monica gym.<sup>87</sup> In the history of Southern California physical culture—particularly bodybuilding culture—the new Santa Monica gym exceeded any other

location Vic ever owned. Located in a basement on Fourth Street, Tanny's new gym quickly became known as "the Dungeon." Steve Reeves, George Eiferman, and countless other bodybuilders during this era in American bodybuilding thickened their traps and widened their lats in "the Dungeon" while helping to create a new subculture of bodybuilding, youth, sunshine, exercise, and sex appeal—all identified with Santa Monica and Southern California.<sup>88</sup> The Dungeon, like Tanny's first Santa Monica gym, was built for serious lifters and bodybuilders and possessed two squat racks, dumbbells from 5 to 115 pounds, six incline benches, ten flat benches, a platform for Olympic-style weightlifting, a heavy-duty leg press machine, a pair of dipping bars, and a juice bar. Pieces of pipe set into the building's foundation held weight plates.<sup>89</sup> Sunlight entered through a single window high on the wall. Water sometimes leaked through the walls and ceiling, and some even claimed that rats scurried among the shadows. Even so, when Bob Hoffman and the York Barbell team came west, their training sessions were held there.<sup>90</sup> Dozens of film stars and wannabe actors also honed their physiques there alongside the best bodybuilders in America. In many ways a symbiotic relationship evolved between Muscle Beach and the Dungeon. Vic and the Dungeon were viewed as part of the Muscle Beach family—the Mr. Mus-

cle Beach shows highlighted people's hard, regular efforts in the gym—and Muscle Beach became more true to its name in the postwar era because of Tanny and the Dungeon.<sup>91</sup>

Tanny contributed to this transition in a second major way: introducing big-time bodybuilding contests to California audiences. In 1948, together with his brother-in-law Bert Goodrich, Tanny hosted the Mr. USA contest at Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, one of the largest in Southern California. It attracted an audience of 5,000 and earned glowing reviews. Spurred by this success, Tanny and Goodrich planned an even more extravagant contest the following year. On 26 March 1949, in front of an audience of more than 6300, they hosted an event that *Iron Man* editor Peary Rader called “the greatest physique contest the world has been privileged to see.”<sup>92</sup> The show began with a 21-piece orchestra, a “very good” barrel jumping act, a gymnastics show, and then a comedy skit featuring Pansy the Horse. Pansy was followed by a repetition bench press competition, won by George Eiferman who made 20 repetitions with 250 pounds.<sup>93</sup> Bob Hoffman came out from York, Pennsylvania to serve as master of ceremonies for the Miss USA portion of the contest. Judges for the women's contest included Shirley Temple, and others were movie and theatrical stars.<sup>94</sup> Shirlee Tegge of Michigan won the Miss USA award, although one reporter noted that “none of the fifteen shapely cuties in bathing suits who competed, got as many whistles as Mr. U.S.A.”<sup>95</sup> Those extra whistles and the USA trophy went to two-time Mr. America John Grimek, coaxed out of retirement by the lure of the contest. Grimek also received a four-foot gold trophy, a \$1000 check, and “more cheers from the 5,000 fans who jammed the Shrine auditorium than Jane Wyman did when she won the Academy Award.”<sup>96</sup> “Look,” screamed one middle-aged woman as Grimek pulled in his stomach to perform a “vacuum” pose. “His waist is hardly there at all!”<sup>97</sup> Grimek beat out fellow bodybuilding greats Clancy Ross, Steve Reeves, and George Eiferman for first place. Armand Tanny finished fifth.<sup>98</sup>

According to historian John Fair, the 1949 Mr. USA contest was a “credible, though short-lived [attempt] to elevate bodybuilding to a higher level,” and contributed to the shift in bodybuilding prowess and popularity from East Coast to West Coast.<sup>99</sup> However, many signs point to the event's legacy as more long-lasting than Fair suggests. Scholars Tolga Ozyurtcu and Alan Klein have both explained how, from a modern perspective, the prestigious

contests of California helped to legitimize bodybuilding throughout the world.<sup>100</sup> The inclusion of film stars, bands, and other “high class” amenities elevated the show beyond the normal posing contest. Similarly, in their autobiography *Brothers of Iron*, bodybuilding and fitness moguls Joe and Ben Weider, who would make recreational bodybuilding mainstream by the end of the twentieth century, argue that what Tanny was helping to create was a “Golden Age” for bodybuilding during in the 1940s. Muscle Beach, claimed the Weiders, “planted a seed in the minds of thousands” about what was possible with training. Nearly every man who went there, including Joe Weider himself, “wanted exactly what [Southern California] had to offer—more muscle power and a great build to attract the ladies.”<sup>101</sup> It seems, therefore, that the Mr. USA contest Tanny hosted was not only one of the first organized physique shows on the West Coast to attract national attention but a vital step in the evolution of Santa Monica and Southern California as the eventual cynosure of twentieth-century bodybuilding.

### Expansion

Between the fame of the Dungeon, Tanny's presence as both author and celebrity in *Strength & Health*, and his successful promotion of physical culture extravaganzas such as the Mr. USA contest, he had redefined himself by 1950 as a major figure in the American fitness and bodybuilding scene. And, as he watched America recover from World War II, Tanny realized that the growth of highways, the birth of new shopping malls, and the rise of suburban neighborhoods in the postwar era created new opportunities for gyms located closer to people's homes. As historian Roberta Pollack Seid argues, by the early 1950s, postwar abundance was contributing to a larger and less fit population. With automobiles for transportation, packaged foods, spacious refrigerators, and greater prosperity, fewer calories were burned in an average day and many more calories were purchased during a normal trip to the grocery store. “The opportunity, and the temptation, to overeat were becoming omnipresent,” Seid explains.<sup>102</sup> As a result, a few artificially-sweetened beverages were introduced in the early 1950s and Seid claims there was a growing interest—particularly among women—for diet information.<sup>103</sup>

Despite a widespread lack of real understanding of the factors contributing to the expanding waistlines of Americans, health and fitness began to be taken more seriously. In 1952, the National Institutes of Health declared



obesity the nation's number one nutritional problem, and the following year, physician Hans Kraus and his graduate research assistant, Ruth Prudden Hirschland (who later legally changed her name to Bonnie Prudden) conducted a study measuring the fitness levels of children in America, Austria, and Italy. They found that European children outperformed Americans in every measure—findings that set off alarm bells across America in those early days of the Cold War.<sup>104</sup> Most scholars agree that politicians and physical educators alike interpreted the Kraus-Hirschland study as “hard evidence that America was going ‘soft’”—and that American children might not be strong enough to fight Communism.<sup>105</sup> When President Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in September 1955, newspapers and popular magazines pushed the idea that cardiac disease was a new “silent killer,” raising health concerns for working men, particularly those white collar office workers whose jobs were considered stressful.<sup>106</sup> Tanny capitalized on both the political and personal motivations that were inspiring people to become more physically active. “There has been a surge toward exercise for a longer, healthier, fuller life,” a new Tanny ad read in 1956, “and in keeping with the President’s intention to revitalize the people of America, Vic Tanny offers specialized guidance on correct eating [and physical development].”<sup>107</sup> Clearly, Tanny grasped both the *zeitgeist* of 1950s America and its implications for his business.

Between 1949 and 1951, Tanny opened two new gyms in Los Angeles, bringing his total in the greater Los Angeles area to four. Then, on 2 January 1952, he opened another gym, this time in Compton, California, and then another in San Bernadino in the early summer. As the gym chain expanded, Tanny began a vigorous newspaper advertising program to attract new members. In late 1951, Tanny was “cordially inviting” customers to join what Tanny claimed were “the World’s Largest Body Building Gyms,” and offered patrons four months’ free member-



**Vic Tanny watches Mr. America Steve Reeves perform hack squats during a training session in the late 1940s. Reeves and his good friend, George Eiferman, helped Tanny’s gyms become known on a national level.**

ship.<sup>108</sup> He also tried a new form of advertising, offering \$2,000 to anyone who could swim from Santa Catalina Island to the Santa Monica pier—a distance of 41 miles. Thirty-eight-year-old Roy Sutter, of Fort Worth, Texas, attempted the feat on 1 July 1952, and though he covered himself in greasy lanolin to stay warm in the cold water, he conceded after two miles, claiming he was struck by a porpoise that “knocked him three feet out of the water.”<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, Sutter’s attempt garnered a great deal of coverage across the Western and Southern United States—for the swimmer, for Tanny, and for the new gym. Perhaps Jack LaLanne drew the inspiration for his own famous long-distance swims from the event; although LaLanne already had a history of performing similar feats, including a world record in consecutive push-ups.

After Sutter failed to make the swim on two other occasions, Tanny offered to pay Jose Cortinas, a 210-pound Cuban-American \$1000 if he could complete the swim. It took Cortinas an incredible 29 hours to traverse the distance, but he succeeded in 1952—earning even more publicity for Tanny and his gyms.<sup>110</sup> In the years ahead, especially after he began doing television advertising, Tanny employed other publicity gimmicks as well. Betty Weider, one of America’s top fashion models in the 1950s, recalls her stint as the “Tanny Girl,” and a contest Vic ran in which people were supposed to guess her measurements.<sup>111</sup> Again, no one ever won.

By the end of 1952, Tanny was running 12 gyms in Southern California. On 20 September 1952, Tanny opened his seventh gym, in Huntington Park.<sup>112</sup> By the end of the year, he had added five more to his chain: one in North Hollywood, one in Alhambra, one in Burbank, and yet another in Los Angeles (bringing the city’s total to three), and one in San Diego.<sup>113</sup>

The intense attention Vic devoted to his rapidly expanding gym empire did not help his relationship with his wife, Shirley, and the couple divorced in 1953. By this



Over the door at Tanny's Santa Monica gym at Fourth and Broadway was a sign advertising that this was the place to "Exercise to Develop Strong and Healthy Bodies." This group of early Tanny Gym members certainly believed that. From left to right they are: unidentified man in sun glasses; Kerris Keirn; Frank Jaries; Vic Tanny; Gordon McRae; Vic's brother, Armand Tanny; and another unidentified man in sunglasses. Seated are Art Walge and Les Stockton. Note in this photo that, like Armand, Vic had wide shoulders; the rest of his physique was never exceptional.

time, Tanny had become enough of a celebrity that the story of their divorce was national news. "Body Builder Vic Tanny, owner of a string of muscle-building gymnasia, was divorced Thursday on grounds his wife did all the weight-lifting in their family," began the United Press International Wire Service report. "Mrs. Tanny, five feet, four inches and 120 pounds, said the six-foot, 230-pound muscleman made her 'carry out the garbage and mow the lawn.'"<sup>114</sup> Chores aside, their relationship remained amicable after their divorce; but the separation may have come as an unpleasant shock to Vic and, no doubt, to his four small children.<sup>115</sup> Tanny opened no new gyms that year, nor in 1954. Armand also broke rank and moved to Las Vegas to appear as part of the "male chorus" alongside George Eiferman, Joe Gold, and a revolving cast of other bodybuilders in movie star Mae West's Sahara Hotel night club act.<sup>116</sup>

While Vic was no longer married, he hadn't stopped thinking about women and he came back in 1955 with a new approach to his growing chain of gyms that particularly targeted them as customers. Previously, Tanny

gyms appealed mostly to men who were at least semi-serious bodybuilders and competitive weightlifters, or ex-GI's who had learned the benefits of weight training in the military.<sup>117</sup> According to some who remembered Tanny, his early gyms excluded women.<sup>118</sup> However, evidence suggests this was not a consistent policy. Les Stockton, for example, contacted Tanny in 1944 suggesting a husband-and-wife weightlifting contest, to "introduce women's weight-lifting on the West Coast."<sup>119</sup> It seems unlikely that Stockton would have made such a suggestion if Tanny truly barred women from his facilities. Certainly, by the mid-1950s, several of Tanny's Muscle Beach pals—including Pudgy and Les Stockton—had opened gyms that catered to women, and Jack LaLanne was particularly targeting women in his morning television show. Pudgy Stockton realized that she would attract more women members if she called her facility a salon—rather than gym—and if she made her workout space feel feminine and elegant.<sup>120</sup>

And so, whether he was late to the market or not, Tanny didn't hold back once he decided that there was

money to be made in training women. In February of 1955, he announced that he was opening “ladies’ gyms” next door to his Long Beach and Compton locations, claiming in his advertising that he had invested “over \$1,000,000 in gym equipment designed for perfect contouring.”<sup>121</sup> Later that year, Tanny also began offering special women’s training courses designed for new mothers and for “bust development,” and he visited women’s social clubs in southern California to demonstrate simple exercises, espouse the benefits of physical fitness, and try to attract women members to his gyms.<sup>122</sup>

As Tanny opened new gyms in the years ahead it seems clear that he had decided to move away from serious weight training and bodybuilding and pursue different kinds of gym members. By creating modern, luxurious clubs that looked like the interiors of fancy hotels rather than well-used Y.M.C.A.s, Tanny hoped to attract businessmen, professionals, and, of course, those millions of women who were encouraged to stay at home rather than pursue a profession.<sup>123</sup> In June of 1956, for example, Van Nuys Chamber of Commerce President Robert S. Fuller recognized Tanny “for bringing to Van Nuys the finest and most modern gym in the world and for furthering the progress of the community.”<sup>124</sup> Tanny’s new facility had “carpeted floors, mirrored walls, and pastel colors,” making it “completely different from all others.”<sup>125</sup> It was, to use a term that Tanny began using himself, a health club—not a gym—and it was a space where members could exercise alongside people of their own social class amidst tasteful decor, chrome barbells, mirrored walls, and futuristic machinery.

Although never stated in the advertising, nearly all Tanny gyms were racially segregated to protect members from training, or swimming, or sharing a steam room with a person of color. In 1956 Tanny’s Compton Gym was sued by Leslie Gardner, an African-American male who was told he could not take out a membership. When the case was retried on appeal, a Tanny employee, who had worked at the Compton Gym when Mr. Graham was refused access, explained under oath that while there was no written race policy, managers were supposed to screen all applicants and decide who would be permitted to become a member.<sup>126</sup> The determining factor—as the testimony below reveals—was whether the person would be detrimental to the business:

*Witness: In November, 1956, the facilities at “Compton Gym” were various types of*

*equipment designed and utilized for corrective exercise, specifically “gym” equipment, showers, and dressing facilities. There was no swimming pool or steam room. At that time people were allowed to come in on a membership basis; they were enrolled for six months or a year. A person applying for membership had “to make out an application” in writing. The procedure when a person came into the “gym” was as follows: “[T]he first thing the management must do is to find out whether the person is sincere in their desire to improve their physical appearance, physical condition and improve their health.”*

*Q. Was that the only measure which you used to allow or disallow people from membership?*

*Witness: Definitely not.*

*Q. What other policy did you follow at that place at that time?*

*Witness: Well, a person must be—let me see, how would I put that correctly? The manager is instructed to use his own discretion as far as screening people; not to accept anyone who would be detrimental to the business welfare at that specific location.*

*Q. Did that include also an instruction to them that Negroes were detrimental to the welfare of that particular establishment?*

*Witness: It was put on the basis where the manager, of course, was in charge of the gym and did the screening himself to use his own judgment on the merits of the individual and not to any single specific group or to Negroes as a block. . . . A person who had any physical history of any medical difficulty whatsoever or psychological emotional problems, it is obvious we would never enroll.*

*Q. How would you determine it? Is that on the application at the time?*

*Witness: No, it is done in the process of the manager interviewing the individual.*

*Q. You stated that the policy was of turning down people who wouldn’t further the*

*business; is that correct?*

**Witness:** *I said that we would not accept anyone whom they might judge as being detrimental to the business.*

**Q.** *Well, didn't that include a general policy of turning down all Negroes?*

**Witness:** *I wouldn't say that.*

**Q.** *The general public may apply for admission; is that correct?*

**Witness:** *I would say so.*

**Q.** *Your invitation advertising was given to everyone; is that correct?*

**Witness:** *'Eight to eighty' is the way we stated it.*

**Q.** *Was a year the lowest period of time which you would allow anybody to enroll for?*

**Witness:** *The only exception would be guests of existing members who were training at some gym out of town and were visiting for a short period of time.*

**Q.** *Did you in November of 1956 have a general policy at the Compton Gym to refuse admission to Negroes?*

**Witness:** *No. Defendant also issued guest passes.*

**Q.** *That is all you had to do, is just call up and say, 'Mr. Smith, I would like a guest card. I would like to come over and work out,' and you would let them work out?*

**Witness:** *Well, we would set up an appointment for them when and where we could have the extra help there and take them through the guest trial to see whether they would be adaptable to the program."*

Tanny lost the original trial and the appeal.<sup>127</sup>

Despite such legal setbacks, Tanny's quest to have gyms stretching across America continued unabated. Perhaps he was inspired by the lead of business magnates Sam Walton, who started Walmart in 1950, and Ray Kroc who began McDonald's in 1955, but Tanny began working so that the "same Tanny product" was available wherever you were. To create this homogeneity, he established his own line of exercise machines that became standard in all his gyms. He also created exercise plans and marketing plans that were distributed from the national office and employed

everywhere. The phenomenal growth of McDonalds, after all, was the consistency of the food. The fries and burgers tasted the same, whether you were in Tampa or Tacoma.<sup>128</sup>

Tanny aimed for a similar brand identification for his gyms. Some might argue that Tanny sold out bodybuilding in his pursuit of bigger dollars through his new white, middle, and upper class customers. While he had done that, the reality was more complicated as he had begun to dream the bigger dream of getting the whole nation into better shape.

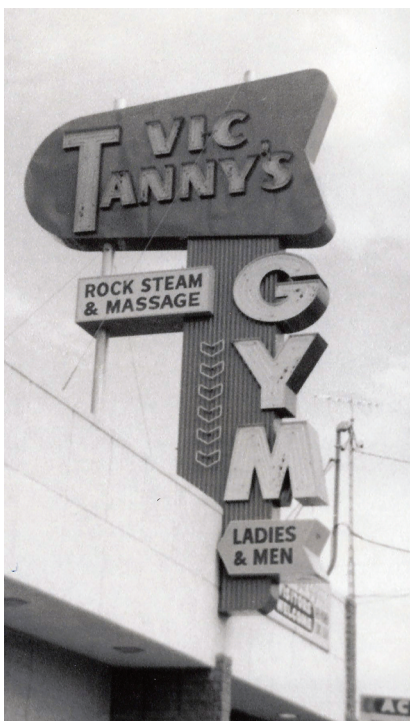
In March of 1957, Tanny applied for and received a corporate charter to open Vic Tanny Albuquerque, Inc., in New Mexico.<sup>129</sup> It would be his first gym outside Southern California where he was then operating 17 gyms.<sup>130</sup> In April he began advertising in the Albuquerque newspapers, claiming that "Today's modern Vic Tanny Gym is a far cry from the old-fashioned gymnasium." An advertisement explained that these new modern gyms were "a symphony of mirrors, gleaming chrome, leather, and plush wall to wall carpeting."<sup>131</sup> Over 140 customers reportedly bought memberships in the Albuquerque gym before it even opened.<sup>132</sup> Buoyed by the response in Albuquerque, Tanny placed ads directed at landlords in several Arizona newspapers. He was interested in only prime real estate locations, with access to transportation and parking and close to already-established businesses. "Vic Tanny wishes to open fifteen gyms in Phoenix within the next three months in order to keep pace with the tremendous Vic Tanny expansion in major cities everywhere," the ads read.<sup>133</sup> That was no hyperbole: Tanny planned to open 50 new gyms in northern California, New York, and Chicago.<sup>134</sup>

In the summer of 1957, Tanny opened his "newest, most modern gym," *spanning an entire city block*, at 2111 Franklin Street in Oakland, California. Interestingly, and perhaps in a direct challenge to LaLanne's growing national popularity, the new Tanny gym was just three blocks away from Jack LaLanne's well-established gym.<sup>135</sup> Tanny decided to compete head to head with LaLanne—who had built a number of special pieces for his gyms, by advertising that the new Tanny gym had "thousands of dollars' worth of scientific weight resistance equipment, personally developed [and manufactured] by Vic Tanny."<sup>136</sup> He offered discounted "charter memberships" to customers who enrolled before the gym's actual opening.<sup>137</sup> The other 50 gyms he planned to open across the nation, Tanny explained to an Oakland reporter, were all being modelled after this new Oakland health club.<sup>138</sup>

Moving from a regional business to a nationwide

one required a much grander marketing strategy and more reliable managers. Tanny rightly judged that an organization of that scale could not be managed by a single individual, so began creating a corporate culture and sharing some of the responsibilities. He chose, as his vice president and general manager, Rudolph “Rudy” Smith, a longtime associate, who came to Santa Monica from Nevada around 1941 to work for MGM Studios; and almost immediately joined Tanny’s gym.<sup>139</sup> Besides his film work, Smith had also competed in bodybuilding, and he began working for Tanny on weekends in 1951 when other staffers were absent. He later became a full-time employee.<sup>140</sup> Smith was bright, inventive, and a hard worker. Tanny soon asked him to manage one of the gyms where he found himself, “doing everything” from bookkeeping to cleaning up.<sup>141</sup> He also allegedly invented the “Smith” machine, a fixed-path barbell apparatus still in use in many commercial gyms today.

Tanny no doubt hoped that Smith’s experience at MGM and other film studios would help with their decision to begin advertising on television. Television had become a “central figure” in most American households by the end of the 1950s, reaching people of nearly all regions, races, and social classes.<sup>142</sup> It was, therefore, a potent advertising medium, part of the new postwar “world of high profit.”<sup>143</sup> Television commercials pushed products of all sorts, and physical culturists, like Jack LaLanne, Debbie Drake, and Tanny, quickly realized its potential for spreading their message—and products—of good health.<sup>144</sup> Tanny began purchasing television commercial time around 1957, hiring bodybuilder Charlie Stahl “to flex his muscles and hawk the Tanny name” on camera. Stahl, however, was more than just a pretty face, and also worked to place the ads on television.<sup>145</sup> Tanny intended the high-powered medium of television to attract enough customers to fuel the astronomical growth of his ever-more-luxurious gym chain. Unfortunately, viewers did not enjoy Tanny’s ads. *Variety* put his advertisements fourth on its top-ten list of “Commercials Liked Least” by members of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences in 1959.<sup>146</sup> One



**Tanny understood that his name could become a brand and had this neon sign installed at Fourth and Broadway in Santa Monica in the mid-1950s.**

southern California sports columnist dubbed Stahl “Breathless” in 1957, claiming he sounded like a “radio announcer who can’t announce.”<sup>147</sup> Tanny and Stahl tried to improve the ads, hiring a Hollywood agency to produce them, and injecting a bit of humor “to make the gyms attractive to young executives and career girls from offices as well as the factory workers.”<sup>148</sup> A 1961 ad, paid homage to Charles Atlas’ famous “98-pound weakling,” but placed emphasis on slimming down rather than bulking up. According to *Broadcasting* magazine:

*The spot opens on a beach where a shapely woman in a swimsuit is approached by a ‘man on the street’ radio interviewer. He asks her: ‘Miss Jones, is it true that you used to be a 150-pound weakling?’ She replies: ‘Was I ever! . . . Then Mama told me about Vic Tanny.’*

*Now Miss Jones is in the middle of the gym, working out on all of the machines in extreme fast motion. ‘And the first thing I knew, there I was working out in that luxurious Vic Tanny gym. My overweight hips lost their extra pounds, my bust became firm and youthful. I developed vim and vigor, too.’<sup>149</sup>*

Regardless of their reception, Tanny’s commercials were still valuable because “they showed men and women working out—no one had ever *seen* it,” explained fitness industry giant Harry Schwartz, who worked for Tanny as a business manager during the late 1950s. Despite the increased awareness of the need for exercise, even physicians and physical educators failed to agree upon recommendations for healthful physical activity, especially with regard to resistance training. The commercials helped explain how Tanny’s gyms and training methods could guide newcomers in their pursuit of fitness.<sup>150</sup>

Meanwhile, Tanny’s California gyms grew more and more sumptuous. His new facility in San Rafael boasted “a pink tile steam room, four showers, a large

dressing room, long mirrors on its walls, and shiny chromium plated and pink leatherette covered equipment.”<sup>151</sup> The gym, stocked with a “jungle machine,” a leg press, “lifts of various sorts,” and benches, was staffed by three full-time instructors, trained in the Tanny Method, and by two masseurs.<sup>152</sup>

Late in December of 1957, Tanny opened his first gym outside the Southwest at 345 Madison Street in Chicago.<sup>153</sup> Although newspaper ads claimed, “Tanny Gyms are in major cities from coast to coast,” no east-coast Tanny gyms existed in 1957.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, some began to criticize Tanny’s ads for their deceptive, bait-and-switch “sales.” For example, Sarah Landau of San Anselmo, California, wrote to the editor of the San Rafael *Independent Journal*:

*In regard to your large advertisement for membership in Vic Tanny’s gym at \$2.50 per month, I wish to state that about two weeks ago a group of girls went to Vic Tanny’s gym . . . only to be informed that the \$2.50-per-month offer was no longer open and that if they wished to become members then they would have to pay \$60 each. I feel that the ad Vic Tanny is running is [censored in original] in order to get people into his establishment.*<sup>155</sup>

The editor pointed out that, while \$2.50 per month was equivalent to \$60 for two years, he acknowledged that “there have been other complaints” about Tanny’s ads.<sup>156</sup> And, in fact, the difference between a \$2.50-per-month contract and a \$60-up-front one was material—for Tanny.

Tanny distrusted debt, understood little about finance, and—despite his ostensible success—seemed to harbor a deep-seated need to prove himself a capable businessman. “I’ve saved hundreds of thousands of bucks by telling bankers where to get off and then hanging up,” he boasted. “They never been treated like that in their lives. They find out this Tanny isn’t such a muscle-bound dope.”<sup>157</sup> So, eschewing traditional methods, he financed the enormously aggressive nationwide expansion by “bootstrapping” new gym openings, by using the proceeds from up-front contracts of recently opened gyms to fund the construction and staffing of even *newer* locations.<sup>158</sup> However, that strategy necessitated the use of arguably deceptive advertisements (like the one that so aggrieved Sarah Landau), leveraged the business, and ultimately under-

mined Tanny’s long-term vision.

In the short term, however, it was marvelously effective. By 1958, Tanny employed 650 people, owned 60 gyms, and cleared more than \$15 million. He savored his success, adorning his new office in Beverly Hills with “thick white carpet, pink walls, huge walnut desk, sectional couch, portable bar, and an enormous mural depicting an Indian raid near Fort Phil Kearny in 1867.”<sup>159</sup> Tanny bought himself a \$220,000 mansion on three acres of land near his office where he had twelve telephone lines installed to keep up with his empire. The house also had a kidney-shaped swimming pool, a private gymnasium and a playground for his children.<sup>160</sup> Only his mother, who also now lived in Los Angeles, was concerned about it all. She worried he was working too hard.<sup>161</sup>

She had right to be worried as Tanny was also discussing plans for international expansion in 1958, apparently oblivious to the fact that most would still consider his business largely a regional one.<sup>162</sup> The future gyms he had announced earlier—Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Cleveland, Detroit, and Dallas—all remained just that: planned, not opened.<sup>163</sup> Perhaps the problem was the long list of site requirements Tanny insisted upon for new locations. They had to be centrally located, with ample parking space, adequate soil conditions for installation of swimming pools, and available for leasing (not buying outright). In New York and other major cities, few landlords could meet Tanny’s demands.<sup>164</sup> Nevertheless, he began to also dream of—and advertise—future locations in Paris, Rome, England, and even Japan.<sup>165</sup>

In 1959, his visions—perhaps delusions—only grew grander. Tanny was purchasing so much commercial time on television that he attempted to merge with Guild Films, a television and movie company based in New York. The deal fell through, presumably because of Guild’s financial troubles.<sup>166</sup> Nevertheless, a Tanny publicist reported that sales increased 40 percent in Los Angeles thanks to the increase in television advertising.<sup>167</sup>

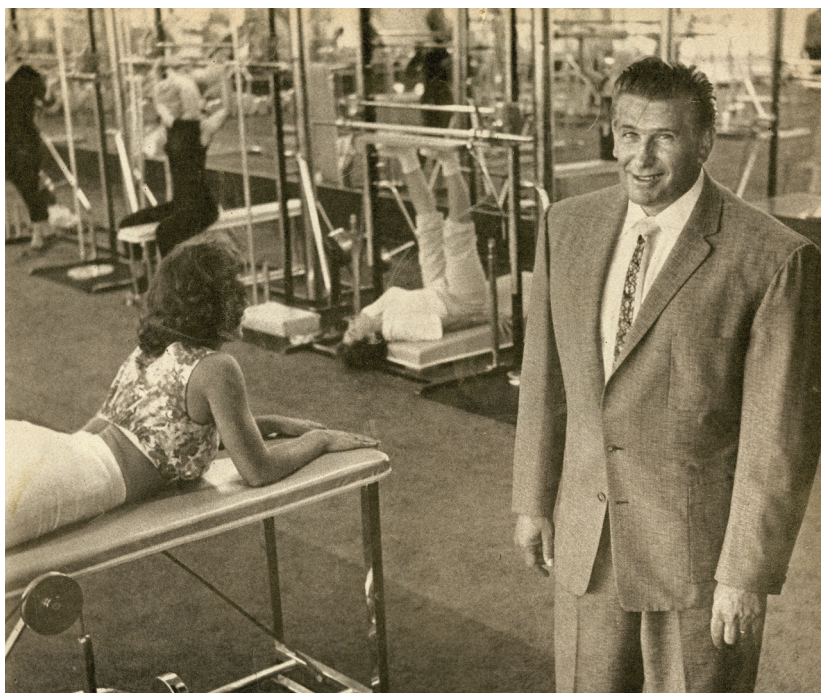
Tanny pushed his salespeople harder and harder as the 1950s were drawing to a close. His hard sell tactics became notorious and did much to hurt the company’s image. “Tanny once sent out mimeographed sales instructions to his staff with a list of suggested conversations when telephoning prospects,” alleged a particularly scathing article from *Time* magazine. “It concluded with, ‘If you fail to get an appointment, then take a gun out of the desk and shoot yourself.’”<sup>168</sup> Sales tactics seemed to reflect that directive: one woman claimed that a Tanny gym manager

“kept her locked in his gym office for an hour while he tried to persuade her to sign up.”<sup>169</sup>

As he got bigger, other scandals began to plague the company. In Oakland, firefighters stormed the ladies’ steam room at a Tanny gym after someone smelled smoke—though no signs of a fire were ever found.<sup>170</sup> Another member fell through a glass partition in a shower and subsequently sued Tanny for \$25,000 in damages.<sup>171</sup> In San Rafael, a woman claimed she ruptured a spinal disc while following the Tanny method. She, too, sued for \$25,000 in damages, plus medical payments.<sup>172</sup> A Tanny gym manager was accused of stealing \$300 in membership fees and, in Albuquerque, a gym member had over \$100 in jewelry stolen while he was working out.<sup>173</sup> Theft ran rampant at Tanny gyms, according to John Balik, publisher of *Iron Man* magazine, and a Tanny gym manager in Illinois in the 1950s. “Everybody was robbing him blind,” Balik said. “[Tanny] took the world by storm, but wasn’t set up . . . to run remotely. If he was in the gym, it would never happen, but from 2000 miles away, there were no controls.”<sup>174</sup>

Competitors sprang up, too. By 1959, over 750 “reducing salons,” often with names like Slenderella and Silhouette, catered to women who were brainwashed to believe vigorous exercise was a strictly masculine pursuit. These salons promised to reshape female bodies through massage, stretching, and other (typically ineffective) passive methods, and avoided resistance training. Tanny’s biggest competition came from Ray Wilson, founder of both the Silhouette salons and American Health Studios, a chain of gymnasiums virtually identical to Tanny’s. Journalist Jonathan Black claims that Wilson’s gyms “went toe-to-toe with Tanny in Southern California before each chain expanded nationally. ‘We both went kind of bananas,’ said Wilson. ‘We spent huge amounts on advertising and stole each other’s people. We had a gym war. It enthused everybody, it was great for the industry, but it hurt both companies.’”<sup>175</sup>

In truth, Tanny’s gyms predated American Health Studios by over a decade, and Tanny had begun to advertise and expand before Wilson opened his first gym.<sup>176</sup> However, because of Wilson’s efforts (and those of smaller proprietors), more than five million Americans purchased



**The difference in Tanny’s early gyms—which were mostly stocked with simple free weights—and the carpeted, chromed, luxurious health clubs he later opened, can be easily seen in this photo from 1958. By then, Tanny had begun to focus on working with women and moved to machine-based training.**

services from some type of health club by 1958, spending “untold millions of dollars.”<sup>177</sup> To stay atop his quickly-growing competition, Tanny did, indeed, resort to spending a veritable fortune on advertising in the late 1950s and early 1960s. *Time* magazine claimed he spent \$2 million on advertising in 1960 alone.<sup>178</sup>

Because he now had a direct competitor in Wilson, Tanny’s palatial gyms grew ever more grandiose. In 1960, having waited years to open his New York gym, he invested over half a million dollars in a location in the heart of Manhattan’s financial district, on Nassau Street. “It’ll be a sweetheart,” he promised:

*Imported Italian red carpets, piped-in hi-fi music, move [sic] theater and cinema-scope screen, South Seas Island-decorated swimming pool with a constant temperature, free bowling alleys with automatic pin spotters, free ballet and modern dance classes and new Tanny tab dispensers for vitamins, hand lotion and wheat germ oil. The walls will be pink and yellow and combinations of pink and black and*

*turquoise. We'll have scented air conditioning.... I don't call my places gyms. They're plush recreation centers. I don't like the word gym—it has a connotation of filth and paunchy people.*<sup>179</sup>

Other Tanny locations boasted similarly lavish appointments—skating rinks with Swiss chalets, fireplaces, and even pink ice.<sup>180</sup> The pink ice was difficult for employees to maintain, but it helped further distance Tanny's "recreation centers" from the intimidating mental image of gyms that kept so many Americans away in the 1950s.<sup>181</sup>

In retrospect, it is not so surprising that Tanny's ever-growing opulence would prove unsustainable, but the end came more quickly than many imagined. By the winter of 1960, he owned 88 gyms and generated somewhere between \$25 and \$35 million per year in revenue. He had even opened one Tanny Gym in Canada which allowed him—although it was "a broken-down gym in the worst part of town"—to legitimately claim his business was truly international.<sup>182</sup>

But as expenses mounted and revenue never caught up, Tanny finally resorted to financing the business with debt. Unfortunately, having no formal education in business, Tanny had no experience or knowledge of how to structure an appropriate line of credit. Nor did he place enough trust in Harry Schwartz's business advice, or hire a good financial advisor to help him figure out a plan. Instead, he took an advance on the astounding \$9 million that prospective customers had pledged to join Tanny's beautiful New York gym once it opened. Commercial lenders agreed to advance him sixty cents for each dollar of sales, which Vic in turn used for further expansions. The loans, however, were structured in such a way that Vic was required to repay a lump sum of \$3 million if he missed making a planned installment payment.<sup>183</sup> Not surprisingly, he missed a payment; and, even less surprisingly, he lacked the \$3 million he needed to remain solvent.

As his house of cards began to tumble, new revelations made things look even more dire. Tanny had insisted upon making himself "president of each separately incorporated gym, also president of the Management Audit Corporation, which sells financial and bookkeeping services to the gyms, and finally, president of the Vic Tanny Equipment Manufacturing Company," which furnished the gyms with weights and machines.<sup>184</sup> According to SEC reports, in February 1961, Vic personally owed creditors \$743,957.<sup>185</sup> He also owed the government back taxes.<sup>186</sup>

Tanny tried to raise funds by charging extra for his club's many amenities, and then in April 1961, decided to incorporate the business as a public company and make enough money through a stock offering to repay his debts.<sup>187</sup> These maneuvers proved unsuccessful. By summer of 1961, creditors had taken over his business operations and started to close locations.<sup>188</sup> Tanny had no choice but to file for bankruptcy.

Vic lost many of his most valuable employees along with the gyms themselves. Rudy Smith left the company to open his own health club in 1962, which he soon expanded to multiple locations.<sup>189</sup> The Holiday Spa chain Smith started would later be considered by some as the most successful health club chain in history.<sup>190</sup> Harry Schwartz went to work for Jack LaLanne, who no doubt smiled at Tanny's fall from grace.<sup>191</sup> By 1963, "virtually all" of the Tanny gyms in the Long Beach-Los Angeles area had shuttered their doors, as had six of the seven Tanny gyms in the San Francisco area.<sup>192</sup> Competitors rushed to salvage what little remained. Arthur Dallinger, another former Tanny employee, formed California Gymnasium Corporation and tried to scoop up some of the closed gyms' property.<sup>193</sup> So did gym owner/entrepreneur Ray Wilson, who got his start with American Health Studios shortly after Vic started his major expansion move. Wilson had filed for bankruptcy in 1959—presumably as a result of over spending on advertising required to compete with Tanny—but he managed to recover.<sup>194</sup> Vic's brother-in-law, Bert Goodrich, also wanted to take over operation of some of the Tanny gyms that were still open. Bert claimed that Vic supported his takeover attempt, but noted diplomatically, "I would like to continue using the Tanny name, but I do not think it is practical in view of recent developments."<sup>195</sup>

The 1960s were not kind to Tanny. The story of his economic collapse was featured in newspapers across the United States, and the man *Wisdom* hailed as a visionary physical educator became the butt of countless jokes. Jerry Lewis poked gentle fun at Tanny's Gyms in his 1963 feature film called *The Nutty Professor*.<sup>196</sup> Far stronger criticism came, however, in the 1964, *Muscle Beach Party*, a teen movie parody featuring "Jack Fanny," a stupid, poorly-dressed bodybuilding coach and fitness instructor. In one scene, Fanny, played by Don Rickles, discusses a contract with S.Z. Matts (Buddy Hackett), a rich business manager. "Mr. Fanny, please, just sign here. *Please*," says Matts. "Let's go over it again," replies Fanny. "I like the part about the gyms with my name!"<sup>197</sup>



As bankruptcy proceedings went forward, he lost his mansion in Beverly Hills and his mother had to move out of her expensive home into an apartment in Van Nuys.<sup>198</sup> Nevertheless, Tanny continued to promote merchandise with the Vic Tanny name, including a home gym and a line of health foods.<sup>199</sup> For a while, Vic insisted that his exit from the gym business was only temporary, claiming in 1963 that “[w]e are making arrangements to enter the New York market again in the very near future and expect to reopen our clubs.”<sup>200</sup>

While Vic never ran a gym in New York again, he did try briefly to have a second act in Europe. In 1964, a new Tanny gym opened in Frankfurt, Germany, with pink walls, white carpets and filled with Tanny’s chrome equipment. Its opening was covered by the military newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, which explained that although the gym carried Tanny’s name, he was not the owner. Mike Sanzone, a former New York boxer, had worked out a lease arrangement with Tanny for the use of his name and some of his old gym equipment. Sanzone had the Tanny equipment shipped to Frankfurt, where many American servicemen were stationed, because he believed it would make the servicemen and their wives feel like they were in an American gym. In the article, Tanny told the reporter that he once again had “big plans,” and that there would be more Tanny franchises in Europe. “We’re hoping to open 100 health centers in Europe and Britain...we’re already looking for locations in Bonn, Hamburg, Munich and Cologne, as well as in London.” Ever positive, Tanny painted a rosy picture of his financial situation in the interview, telling the reporter, “I spent a lot of the past year aboard my yacht,” and claimed to have “investments in oil now,” that left him in great shape financially.<sup>201</sup>

For reasons that remain unclear, Tanny did not find success in Europe. Interviews with Harry Schwarz and Ellington Darden, who knew Tanny in his later years, both report that they believed he spent several years after his bankruptcy travelling around America in a motor home, perhaps to evade creditors. Eventually, however, Tanny settled in Florida, where he opened a small gym using weights that Schwarz sent him. He continued to work out regularly, occasionally training with Arthur Jones, the founder of Nautilus, and Nautilus employee Ellington Darden, a bodybuilder/exercise scientist who saw a lot of Tanny in his final years.<sup>202</sup> Shirley also moved to the Sunshine State, opening two gyms near Fort Lauderdale that bore the Tanny name. Although divorced, she wanted to make sure Vic could be near their children.<sup>203</sup> Vic, unlike

many others involved in his story, however, never really recovered from the loss of his empire. He died of a heart attack on 11 June 1985, at age 73.<sup>204</sup>

### American Icarus

In ancient Greek mythology the Gods were frequently unkind to those who did not know their place and the greatest of sins was possessing *hubris*—that combination of arrogance, over-weening pride, and the belief that rules don’t apply to you. In the Greek theater, and in Greek mythology, the man possessing *hubris* is always punished by the end of the tale, and most of these men—like Vic Tanny—are not allowed by the gods to rise from the ashes as the Phoenix was allowed to do. The ancient Greeks would probably feel Vic Tanny got what he deserved. Like the tale of Icarus, Tanny’s ambitions were too large—he didn’t choose to live within the rules.

Icarus, the ambitious youth of Greek myth, was cautioned by his father, Daedalus—who made him wings of wax and feather—to be careful to not fly too close to either the sun or to the sea. Icarus should choose the middle path, his father explained, so the wax would not melt and the feathers would not become wet with sea spray. But, once aloft, the joy of flight overwhelmed Icarus. He forgot he had any other mission than to soar higher and higher. Filled with pride at his prowess and loving the view from above, he ignored his father’s warning until, too late, his feathers began floating away on the air currents as the wax softened. He fell, his descent from the heavens swift, brutal, and final, and he paid the ultimate price for his *hubris*.<sup>205</sup>

We no longer live in Ancient Greece and our sense of right and wrong are no longer so absolute. Tanny undoubtedly did many regrettable things but he also gave us a grand idea—chain gyms—that brought fitness and health and an improved quality of life to millions of Americans. We need to remember that when Vic opened that first gym in New York City, it was one of fewer than three dozen health clubs in the entire five boroughs that make up that great city. Today, there are hundreds of facilities in that city alone.<sup>206</sup> The International Health, Racquet, and Sportsclub Association suggests that as of January 2016, there were at least 36,180 health clubs in the USA. Those myriad clubs—large and small—elegant as well as simply functional are all the direct descendants of Vic Tanny’s dream.<sup>207</sup>

In closing, perhaps our modern Icarus is better served by the quote attributed to Oscar Wilde than the ver-

sion of Icarus created by the ancient Greeks:

*Never regret thy fall,  
O Icarus of the fearless flight  
For the greatest tragedy of them all  
Is never to feel the burning light.*<sup>208</sup>

#### NOTES:

1. The Wisdom Society for the Advancement of Knowledge, Learning, and Research in Education, "Vic Tanny: America's Greatest Physical Educator," *Wisdom Magazine* 37 (May 1961). Magazine pages are not numbered in *Wisdom*. The Wisdom Society, with offices in Beverly Hills, California, was run by publisher and editor, Leon Gutterman. It appears that the hard-bound, beautifully-produced special issues of *Wisdom* were provided via subscription to those who joined the Wisdom Society. Although *Wisdom* got into trouble with the postal service in 1963 when Gutterman began selling spots in the society's hall of fame in return for a \$100 "gift" to Gutterman himself, no wrong doing was reported before 1963, which suggests—but does not, of course, prove—that Tanny's inclusion was a testament to his real status in American culture at the time. See United States Postal Service, *Appeal of P.S. Docket 3/64—Wisdom, The Wisdom Society, Wisdom Hall of Fame, Wisdom Encyclopedia* (1974), at <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/judicial/admin-decisions/1974/3-64.htm>.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Wisdom Society, "Paul Dudley White, M.D." *Wisdom*, 37 (May 1961): 64.
4. Wisdom Society, "Vic Tanny," 2.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. *Ibid.*
7. See Marla Matzer Rose, *Muscle Beach: Where the Best Bodies in the World Started a Fitness Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 10; Jonathan Black, *Making the American Body: The Remarkable Saga of the Men and Women Whose Feats, Feuds, and Passions Shaped Fitness History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 36; and Peter Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," *LIFE* magazine, 29 September 1958: 71.
8. Jack LaLanne was born on 26 September 1914, and *The Jack LaLanne Show* first aired in 1951 and continued for 34 years, until 1985. Upon his death in 2011, LaLanne was called by many journalists "the Godfather of Fitness in America." See, for example, Robert Cochrane, "You Should Know Jack: A Qualitative Study of *The Jack LaLanne Show*" (master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2012); and Richard Goldstein, "Jack LaLanne, Founder of Modern Fitness Movement, Dies at 96," *The New York Times*, 24 January 2011, A25.
9. Albert Einstein was featured in Volume 1 of *Wisdom*, Winston Churchill in Volume 4, Abraham Lincoln in Volume 5, Helen Keller in Volume 11, Jesus in Volume 12, Ben Franklin in Volume 23, Pablo Picasso in Volume 25, Ernest Hemingway in Volume 26, and Thomas Edison in Volume 35.
10. Dave Yarnell, *Great Men, Great Gyms of the Golden Age* (self-published, 2014), 131. Yarnell and others list Tanny's surname as "Tannidinaro," but some sources contradict this spelling. See, for example, the *Chicago Tribune* obituaries, 16 June 1985.
11. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930* (Rochester, New York, 1930); U.S. Library of Congress, "Immigrants in the Progressive Era," at: <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/progress/immigrnt/>; and Armand Tanny, interview by John Fair, 7 June 2004.
12. Dominique Padurano, "Making American Men: Charles Atlas and the Business of Bodies, 1892-1945" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2007): 32. Tanny's obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* claims that the family name was "Ianni" (from Iannidinaro), but this is contradicted by the 1930 census.
13. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*.
14. *Ibid.*
15. E.M. Orlick, "Vic Tanny, The Gym King of America," *Muscle Builder* 1, no. 3 (May 1958): 34.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*.
18. Orlick, "Vic Tanny."
19. Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," 74, and *Wisdom*.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Wisdom*.
22. Armand Tanny, "Vic Tanny Jr.," *Muscle Builder/Power* (November 1969): 46; Joe Roark, "Gyms of the Past," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 3 (July 1992): 17; and "Gay System of Gradual Reducing Said Better than Extreme Dieting," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 26 January 1931, 12. According to Roark, Gay's first gym opened at 32 South Avenue in Rochester; Gay moved in 1924.
23. Henry W. Clune, "Seen and Heard," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 30 September 1958, 17.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Kim Beckwith and Jan Todd, "Requiem for a Strongman: Reassessing the Career of Professor Louis Attila," *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 7, nos. 2&3 (July 2002): 47-48.
26. Clune, "Seen and Heard," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 25 November 1958, 25.
27. Lester Matthews, "Get a Big Load On Your Chest," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 8 August 1937, 4E; and Sigmund Klein, *Klein's Bell* 1, no. 3 (August 1931): 16.
28. Beckwith and Todd, "Requiem for a Strongman," 42-55.
29. Joseph Adams, "Hard Right Hand Smash Drops Jake," *Rochester, New York Democrat and Chronicle*, February 2, 1932: 23; and Clune, "Seen and Heard," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 6 February 1960, 15; Norman Schweikert, "Wendell Hoss-Obituary," viewed at: <http://wendellhoss.info/obituary/>.
30. "Personal Supervision Featured at Gay's," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 14 May 1943, 11.
31. "Arthur and Emily Gay's Gym" [advertisement], *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 26 January 1931, 12.
32. Beckwith and Todd, "Requiem for a Strongman," 50-53. Attila welcomed women members and hired Caroline Baumann as his women's exercise instructor.
33. Jan Todd and Desiree Harguess, "Doris Barrilleaux and the Beginnings of Modern Women's Bodybuilding," *Iron Game History* 11, no. 4 (January 2012): 8.
34. Art Gay, "How Will You Look on the Beach?" (advertisement), *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 2 April 1934, 6.
35. When co-author Jan Todd began training with weights in 1973, the European Health Spa in Macon, Georgia, where she then lived, would not allow men and women to train together; men and women used the gym on separate days.
36. Clune, "Seen and Heard," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 25 November 1958, 25.

37. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34.
38. Arthur Gay, "Report of Rochester Show," *Strength & Health* (March, 1933): 12-13.
- 39 "Rochester Strength Show," *Strength & Health* (April 1933): 14-15.
40. "Weight Lift Meet Scheduled at YMCA," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 11 April 1935, 23. One exception was the one-handed snatch, where Tanny set "local" records (presumably state records). See "'Strong Boys' Seek Records," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 14 April 1935, 4C; and "City's Strong Men Will Try to Set Marks," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 23 November 1934, 30.
41. Randy Roach, *Muscle, Smoke, & Mirrors, Volume I* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008), 374. Armand began training at age 11.
42. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34; and Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," 74.
43. Clune, "Seen and Heard," 6 February 1960, 15.
44. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34; and Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," 74.
45. Ibid.
46. Clune, "Seen and Heard," 6 February 1960, 15.
47. Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," 74.
48. *Wisdom*; and "State Probes Vic Tanny Enterprises," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 12 December 1963, 5B.
49. W. Willard Wirtz and Ewan Clague, *Salary Trends: City Public School Teachers, 1925-63* (U.S. Department of Labor, June 1965): 1-2.
50. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34. *Wisdom*, "Vic Tanny," p. 4. and "State Probes Vic Tanny." For info on the Great Depression see Wyn Derbyshire, *Dark Realities: America's Great Depression* (London: Spiramus Press, 2013), 112 and Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 67.
51. *Wisdom*, "Vic Tanny," 4.
52. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34.
53. Harold Zinkin specifically debunks the story in his memoir, *Remembering Muscle Beach: Where Hard Bodies Began* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 1999): 61.
54. Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 35.
55. Weather Underground, "Weather History for KSMO—September, 1939," at: [www.wunderground.com/history/airport/KSMO/1939](http://www.wunderground.com/history/airport/KSMO/1939).
56. Ibid.
57. Jan Todd, "The Halcyon Days of the Original Muscle Beach," *Sport in Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), in press.
58. Ibid.
59. Tanny Interview by Fair; see also: Tolga Ozyurtcu, "Flex Marks the Spot: Histories of Muscle Beach," (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2014), 79-109.
60. Armand Tanny, interview by Terry Todd, 9 June 1999. Accounts of how much money the Tanny brothers had when they moved to California range from between \$431 and \$750. See also: <http://www.dollartimes.com/inflation/inflation.php?amount=750&year=1939>.
61. Actual address: 1417 Second Street.
62. Tanny interview by Todd.
63. Rose, *Muscle Beach*.
64. See Alexander Cortes, *The Modern Gym Exposed*, at: <http://www.elitefts.com/education/the-commercial-gym-exposed/> for an interesting discussion of the number of members needed to support a modern commercial gym.
65. "Vic Tanny, Pioneer of Health Industry," obituary from the *Palm Beach Sun Sentinel*, June 12, 1985.
66. Mary Rourke, "Harold Zinkin, 82, Muscle Beach Pioneer Invented Weight Machine," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2004, and Vic Tanny, "West Coast Column," *Strength & Health* (June 1941): 4.
67. John D. Fair, *Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015): 73.
68. Ibid., 72.
69. Bob Hoffman, "Especially for Boys," *Strength & Health* (March 1935): 18.
70. John Grimek, "Armand Tanny: Pacific Coast Champion," *Strength & Health* (March 1941): 32-33.
71. Caption, *Strength & Health* (November 1941): 33.
72. Letter from Vic Tanny to Bob Hoffman in the personal collection of John D. Fair, 29 June 1946, and Vic Tanny, "West Coast News," *Strength & Health* (March 1949): 9. "West Coast News" appeared irregularly in *Strength & Health* into the 1950s, and Tanny was likely compensated for the material with advertising space in the magazine. All personal correspondence from Tanny in this paper comes from Fair's personal collection.
73. The first "West Coast Column" offered Tanny's greeting to reader, and suggested some topics the column might cover in the future. It also offered to help weightlifting teams in California to organize meets. See Vic Tanny, "West Coast Column," *Strength & Health* (May 1941): 11.
74. Letter from Vic Tanny to John Terpak, 7 May 1942.
75. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940" (Rochester, New York, 1940). Though unable to locate a marriage record, according to the census, Shirley was 17 and living at home with her parents in 1940. However, a letter from Vic to John Terpak mentions Shirley and references the birth of their first child in 1942, suggesting that the two were married by then. It is unclear when Shirley moved to Santa Monica. Florence Shirley Grastorf, Social Security Records and Claim Index, viewed at: [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com).
76. Harry Schwartz, interview by Ben Pollack, 13 March 2014. Harry worked as a business manager for Tanny in New York during the 1950s and '60s.
77. Norma married Bert Goodrich, an early Muscle Beach icon and winner of the first Mr. America contest. They remained married until Bert's death. Burt Folkart, "Bert Goodrich, 84; Gym Owner, First Mr. America," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 December 1991.
78. Tanny, interview by Todd.
79. Letter from Vic Tanny to "Jawn" Terpak, dated 1941.
80. Tanny, interview by Todd; Scott Harrison, "Times Editors During First World War II Blackout," *Los Angeles Times Photography*, 11 December 2012.
81. Letter from Vic Tanny to Terpak, 1941.
82. Letter from Vic Tanny to John Terpak, 7 May 1942.
83. Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 45; Dominic Juliano, *The Essence of Being* (Bloomington: Balboa Press, 2015); 45; and Valerie J. Nelson, "Deformist 'Moe' Most, 89; Gymnast Was Unofficial Ringmaster at Muscle Beach," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 2006.
84. Tanny, interview by Todd.
85. Letter from Vic Tanny to Bob Hoffman, 29 June 1946.
86. Ibid.
87. It is possible that, as Tanny had requested numerous times, Hoffman helped fund Tanny's new gym. However, no definitive evidence of this fiduciary relationship can be found.
88. Ben Sorenson, interview by Ellington Darden, published in *The New Bodybuilding for Old-School Results* (Colorado Springs: Testosterone Publishing, 2006): 21; and Ozyurtcu, "Flex Marks the Spot," 85. Sorenson met Vic in 1945 after serving in the Navy and later worked for Tanny as a gym manager.
89. "Tanny's Gym Equipment," *California Weight Lifters Association Bulletin* 2, no. 5 (April 1950).

90. Dave Yarnell, *Forgotten Secrets of the Culver City Westside Barbell Club Revealed* (self-published, 2011): cii.
91. Jan Todd, "The Halcyon Days." The Mr. and Ms. Muscle Beach shows began in 1947.
92. Peary Rader, "1949 'Mr. U.S.A.' Contest and 'Miss U.S.A.' Contest," *Ironman* 9, no. 3 (May 1949): 6.
93. Ibid.
94. Lew Pike, "Miss and Mr. U.S.A.," *Strength and Health* (May 1948): 8-11.
95. Aline Mosby, "Mr. U.S.A. of 1949: John Grimek, 40, Wins Title; Women Whistle," *Hayward (California) Daily Review* 28 March 28 1949, 3.
96. Ibid. Wyman was a singer, dancer, and actress who married Ronald Reagan prior to his political career.
97. "Muscle Champ Worries Over Exercise Lack," *Bakersfield Californian*, 29 March 1949, 23.
98. Pike, "Mr. and Miss U.S.A.," 27-28. Vic later said that Steve Reeves was really the best-built man that night, and it was only Grimek's "enigmatic star-quality" and stature—Grimek was 40, older than most of the other competitors—that led to his win. See Ellington Darden, interview by Chris Shugart, accessed online at [http://www.t-nation.com/free\\_online\\_article/sports\\_body\\_training\\_performance\\_interviews/a\\_return\\_to\\_the\\_golden\\_age\\_ii](http://www.t-nation.com/free_online_article/sports_body_training_performance_interviews/a_return_to_the_golden_age_ii).
99. Fair, *Mr. America*, 94-95.
100. Ozyurtcu, "Go West, Young Man," in "Flex Marks the Spot;" and Klein, "Pumping Iron: Crisis and Contradiction in Bodybuilding," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 3 (1986): 126.
101. Joe Weider, Ben Weider, and Mike Steere, *Brothers of Iron* (Champaign, Illinois: Sports Publishing, 2006): 182-183.
102. Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Press, 1989), 129.
103. Ibid., 104-105.
104. Ibid., 15. The most popular evidence for this is President Kennedy's "The Soft American" article (*Sports Illustrated*, 26 December 1960). Kennedy writes that since the times of ancient Greece and Rome, "the same civilizations which produced some of our highest achievements of philosophy and drama, government and art, also gave us a belief in the importance of physical soundness which has become a part of Western tradition. . . . But it is a knowledge which today, in America, we are in danger of forgetting" (p. 15).
105. Patricia A. Eisenman and C. Robert Barnett, "Physical Fitness in the 1950s and 1970s: Why Did One Fail and the Other Boom?" *Quest* 31, no. 1 (1979): 115-16; James R. Morrow Jr. et al., "1958-2008: 50 Years of Youth Fitness Tests in the United States," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 80, no. 1 (2009): 1-11.
106. Robert E. Gilbert, "Eisenhower's 1955 Heart Attack: Medical Treatment, Political Effects, and the 'Behind the Scenes' Leadership Style," *Politics and the Life Sciences* 27, no. 1 (2008): 3-5; and Shelley McKenzie, *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013): 93-94.
107. "Vic Tanny Gyms Offer Courses for Beginners," *Van Nuys (California) Valley News*, 12 August 1956, 2B.
108. "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Press Telegram*, 13 November 1951, A12; and "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Press Telegram*, 29 June 29 1952, A4.
109. "Texan Will Try Long Ocean Swim for Second Time," *Lubbock (Texas) Evening Journal*, 30 June 1952, 4; "Porpoise Nixes Channel Try," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 1 July 1952, 12.
110. "Determined Cuban Conquers Rugged Catalina Channel," *Tucson (Arizona) Daily Citizen*, 1 September 1952, 27.
111. Betty Weider, interview by Jan Todd, 22 December 2015.
112. "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Press Telegram*, 17 September 1952, A20.
113. "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Independent Press Telegram*, 21 December 1952, C4.
114. "Muscle Not Put to Use at Home," *Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Gazette*, 17 April 1953, 1.
115. William Tucker, "Creditors Out Muscle Vic Tanny," *Miami News*, 15 December 1963, 12A.
116. Armand Tanny, interview with Todd; and Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*.
117. Ben Sorenson, interview by Ellington Darden.
118. Ibid.; Harry Schwartz, interview by Pollack; and Jonathan Black, *Making the American Body*, 130.
119. Letter from Les Stockton to Vic Tanny, 17 June 1944, from The Les and Pudgy Stockton Papers, Box 6, Folder 136, at the H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.
120. Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 61. Stockton's Salon of Figure Development was on Sunset Boulevard.
121. "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Independent Press Telegram*, 17 February 1955, B4.
122. "Vic Tanny Gyms" [advertisement], *Van Nuys (California) News*, 13 October 13 1955, C14; "Exercises for Mid-Valley Unit," *Van Nuys (California) Valley News*, 12 January 1956, 15B.
123. For information on women in the 1950s see: Jane Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver, Women and Gender in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
124. "Community Achievement," *Van Nuys News*, 19 June 1956, 5.
125. Ibid.
126. California Court of Appeals, *Gardner v. Vic Tanny Compton, Inc.*, Civ. No. 24111 (California Second District, Division Three, 7 July 1960).
127. Ibid.
128. George Ritzer addresses this trend, which he calls "McDonaldization" by comparing the fast-food chain's Weberian business strategy to other organizations throughout society in his book, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Newbury Park: Pine Forge, 2011).
129. "Legal Advertising," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 12 April 1957, 17; and "'Rat Hole' Service Seeks Charter for New Mexico," *Jal Record*, 28 March 1957, 7.
130. "Vic Tanny Gyms in the Valley," *Van Nuys (California) Valley News*, 12 August 1956, 13A.
131. "What is a Vic Tanny Gym?" [advertisement], *Albuquerque Tribune*, 19 April 1957, 23.
132. "Vic Tanny Gym Opened Here," *Albuquerque Tribune*, 19 April 1957, 13.
133. Vic Tanny Wants Gym Locations in Phoenix" [advertisement], *Phoenix Republic*, 15 April 1957, 28.
134. "Notes on Bay Commerce," *Oakland Tribune*, 26 July 1957, E34.
135. "You Asked for It!" [advertisement], *Oakland Tribune*, 27 May 1957, E17.
136. Ibid.
137. Ibid.
138. "Notes on Bay Commerce."
139. "Rudolph 'Rudy' Smith" [obituary], *The Malibu (California) Times*, 14 July 2010.
140. Joyce Christensen, "L.B. Health Spas Doing Fat Business," *Long Beach Independent Press Telegram*, 15 May 1977, L-S1, L-S3.

141. Ibid.
142. Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013): 36-37.
143. Michael Novak, "Television Shapes the Soul," in Horace Newcomb, et al., *Television: The Critical View* (Oxford University Press, 2000): 345.
144. PBS, "The Rise of American Consumerism," at: [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tupperware-consumer/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tupperware-consumer/); and Toby Miller, *Television Studies: The Basics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010): 53.
145. Burt Folkart, "Vic Tanny, First Big Gym Chain Developer, Dies," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 June 1985, and Harry Schwartz, interview by Pollack.
146. "Commercials: Likes and Dislikes," *Variety*, 18 November 1959, 29.
147. Hank Hollingsworth, "Sports Merry-Go-Round," *Long Beach Press Telegram*, 27 August 27 1957, C1.
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