

# CHAMPION, COLUMNIST, AND PHYSICAL CULTURIST: ARTHUR F. GAY AND THE MAKING OF ROCHESTER'S HEALTH AND STRENGTH COMMUNITY

by Alec S. Hurley  
The University of Texas at Austin

The interwar period was a boon for strength writers. Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture*, Bob Hoffman's *Strength & Health*, and George Jowett's *The Body Builder* all published articles on strength, wellness, and occasional dietary advice to readers across the United States. The publications fought not only for supremacy of market share, but also for writers to fill their pages. Legendary strength figures such as Ottley Coulter and Earle Liederman routinely found a home in these magazines for their sage advice, knowledge of the strength community's history, and a bit of self-promotion. Because of their writings, several of these writer/strength athletes are widely known today courtesy of historical studies by Jan Todd, John Fair and other scholars.<sup>1</sup> However, one man—and his equally impressive and gifted wife—has yet to receive scholarly attention. This paper aims to add Arthur F. Gay and his wife, Emily, to the prominent list of interwar strength writers. In doing so I also examine how their writings influenced the health and strength community of their hometown Rochester, New York.

## BACKGROUND

Arthur Gay was born a native son of Rochester on 2 April 1895. As a teenager he attended East High School, less than two miles from where his long-standing physical culture center would emerge several years after graduation. In his final year in high school, he was a member of the 1912 track team and garnered local recognition as the county champion in the quarter mile.<sup>2</sup> Like other strongmen of the day, Arthur boasted that physical culture had turned him from a weakling child to an imposing figure as a young adult. His growth was more tangibly connected to the local YMCA, and its director, Herman J. Norton.<sup>3</sup> At just twenty-one years old, Gay opened his own physical culture school. First accepting clients in September



Originally sent to George Jowett, Arthur Gay notes on the back of this portrait that it won first prize in the Physical Culture Posing Contest of 1917.

1916, the school received steady press coverage by the local newspapers just a year and a half into its run as its owner departed for the war effort.<sup>4</sup> The school closed its doors in his absence, only to reopen in 1921 at 252 East Avenue, where the facility remained through the entirety of Gay's professional career as an instructor. East Avenue at the time was the closest Rochester had to a main boulevard. Elegant mansions belonging to Rochester's most powerful families lined the street and living or working on the maple-shaded avenue was an undeniable marker of status.<sup>5</sup> Gay, and his family, lived roughly three miles from his eponymous school and its well-to-do neighbors in a closely nestled suburban tract in the northeastern corner of downtown.<sup>6</sup>

Before reopening his gym, Arthur Gay married Emily G. Lewis in 1918. Both Rochester natives, the pair had two children together, a daughter and a son, Gertrude and Jackie.<sup>7</sup> As the clan grew, the entire family embraced the physical culture lifestyle. His wife was a dedicated partner and trainer at his long-running gym downtown as well as a prolific columnist in the very same publications in which Arthur appeared. The eldest child, Gertrude, was an award-winning participant in regional and national beauty and fitness contests. At fourteen she won first prize at the 1933 National Physical Culture Convention for possessing a perfect figure. She followed that up with another win the following year in the category for "national bathing and beauty perfect form contest." The latter win was par-

Alec S. Hurley is a doctoral candidate in the Physical Culture and Sport Studies Program at the University of Texas at Austin. His research looks at the intersection of sport clubs, urban landscapes, and civic identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Correspondence to: [alec.hurley@utexas.edu](mailto:alec.hurley@utexas.edu)

ticularly noteworthy as the Gay's teenage daughter bested a couple of Hollywood starlets.<sup>8</sup> She first appeared in her mother's weekly column as an example of the type of youthful feminine beauty that middle-aged women desired and pursued. Emily also used her daughter as an example that fitness and form could be trained rather than inherited. Emily argued that through her and Arthur's encouragement of proper exercise and diet, Gertrude blossomed by her teenage years overcoming her sickly childhood.<sup>9</sup> Gertrude later parlayed her well-trained beauty into a national modeling career, under the name "Lucky Saunders."<sup>10</sup> Jackie, followed his older sister's footsteps when he graced the first page of his father's column in *The Bodybuilder* as an example of an individual reared under the scientific and practical application of physical culture knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

During the Great War, albeit before United States involvement, Gay reached the pinnacle of his professional performing career. In 1917, he recorded a stage performance where he lifted a 140-pound boy overhead 30 times and then ten more times with just one hand.<sup>12</sup> By 1918, he claimed to have lifted 300 pounds with one finger and with one arm, performed 16 overhead repetitions with a 100-pound dumbbell. His greatest lift, he reported, as a 2,250-pound backlift. The latter two lifts would rise to 408-pounds and 3,386-pounds respectively by the end of the decade, with the backlift performed by carrying the weight of fifteen men.<sup>13</sup>

But war came, and Gay responded. However, before shipping out for a naval hospital in Newport, Rhode Island, he made time to enter and take second place at a strong man contest in Brooklyn.<sup>14</sup> In the Navy his first appointment was as a boatswain first-class aboard the USS Constellation. Before departure, he was awarded a medal declaring him the champion weight-lifter of the Navy. He earned this distinction by lifting one-to-two-pound weights 207 times. The lift was most likely performed as an overhead movement, but those details remain unearthed.<sup>15</sup>

After the War, Arthur Gay continued working as a strongman performer back in Rochester. In a change from dominating the stage in the biggest cities, his acts in the 1920s were truncated to various "stunts" for local charity and entertainment events.<sup>16</sup> While far from his title as the champion weight-lifter of the navy, he received nearly equal press coverage from the largest paper of his hometown for his feats of athleticism, once earning him the crown of "the best rope jumper in the city."<sup>17</sup>

Through his gym and community performances, Gay built the foundation of a resolute physical culture environment.<sup>18</sup> In addition to his expertise in physical culture put on display during roles as a judge and referee for formal events such as sanctioned AAU competitions to local beauty contests, Gay embraced contemporary media to reinforce his message.<sup>19</sup> Beyond his monthly column in Jowett's magazine, *The Bodybuilder*, and his live demonstrations and instructions, the radio offered Gay another medium through which to expand his message of measured physical culture and bodily improvement. Granted occasional five- and ten-minute slots throughout the 1930s, he took to the air from the early morning to the prime-time

evening slot to speak to the local community about the importance of health.<sup>20</sup> Community events and messaging were important to Gay as they reinforced his appeal and credibility in the world of local fitness.<sup>21</sup> His success as a young man helped him find prominence as a national expert, instructor, and writer. Credibility being crucial to the maintenance of such a career, Gay was bestowed a certain amount of good fortune to accompany his hard work. Throughout his youth he was praised for his "ideal proportions." *Strength* magazine recalled in 1927, Gay's nearly perfect measurements as he had a sixteen-inch neck, biceps, and calf then considered the highest physical ideal by art critics and strength authorities alike.<sup>22</sup>

#### BERNARR MACFADDEN'S INFLUENCE

The earliest influence on Gay's understanding of physical culture came from Bernarr Macfadden's magazines. By his late teens he had become an enthusiastic follower of Macfadden's training methods. What elevated Arthur from casual trainer to prominent physical culturist was his ability to develop his own system of progressive weightlifting and physical culture. A short six months after he began to first follow the methods prescribed in Macfadden's magazine in 1914, he devised his own system of progressive weigh training. The influence of the legendary strength and health advocate combined with his own ingenuity earned him a gold medal as the most perfectly developed man in America in 1915 according to the physical culture societies.<sup>23</sup> On 1 May 1917 he was awarded first prize in the "International Physical Culture Competition" held at the Madison Square Garden in New York City. In this contest he reportedly bested over one-thousand other entrants. His victorious pose was then displayed in the June issue of Macfadden's *Physical Culture* magazine.<sup>24</sup>

Proximity played a factor in developing their relationship further than merely author and reader. Gay's early posing victories in New York City were sponsored by Macfadden's magazine, which led to sporadic, yet cordial interactions throughout their professional lives, though possibly stopping short of a fully-blossomed friendship. When Macfadden's Physical Culture Hotel opened in Dansville, NY—forty miles south of Rochester—in 1930, Arthur and his family were among the first to visit. The following year Macfadden hosted Arthur and Emily as his personal guests of the hotel during the Christmas holiday.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting on his numerous visits in a letter to Macfadden circa 1938, Gay raved about the quality of the food—remarkable for a man for whom diet, and the abdominals comprised most of his written focus. In the same letter he wrote that the reason he and his whole family returned so frequently—everything from day trips to weeklong stays—was that no place was better suited for the benefit of one's mental and physical health.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the most compelling piece of evidence that the two maintained at least a passing friendship was Arthur's revelation that Macfadden had taken him for joyrides in his plane. In closing his 1938 letter, Gay wrote, "I wish to thank you publicly for many pleasant and enjoyable hours spent at the Physical Culture Hotel and also for several thrilling trips with you in your Stinson plane."<sup>27</sup>

Despite their professional—and personal—connections, the two men possessed vast differences in their approach to physical culture, particularly dietary regulations. Arthur withdrew from Macfadden’s evangelized understanding of diet early in his career. Whereas Macfadden zealously latched onto fad diets—especially iterations of vegetarianism—Gay remained adamant that a complementary and filling diet from across the food spectrum was ideal.<sup>28</sup> Even where some overlap existed between the two men, Gay rarely ventured into the extreme claims favored by his mentor. Where Macfadden embraced diet as an all-encompassing facet of life, once even going as far as to create a religion based on a synthesis of Christian doctrine and diet fads, his pupil understood it merely as one part of the means to a fulfilling and moderate life.<sup>29</sup> The schism expanded to the written works of both men as Gay emphasized balance and moderation in his articles on abdominal strength, including those published in Macfadden’s outlets.<sup>30</sup> Macfadden wrote extensively about “super foods” ranging from vegetarian meals to the scientific application and “miracle” qualities of milk.<sup>31</sup> Not all of their opinions caused such a divisive break between the two. On the use of pharmaceutical aids to cure illness, both Macfadden and Gay believed, preached, and wrote in fervent opposition.<sup>32</sup> Their friendship and lengthy professional relationship lent an aura of respectability to their debates. That closeness and respect resulted in at least one appearance on a local talk radio shows in the early 1930s.<sup>33</sup> Their joint session resulted in Gay being interviewed by his mentor on the benefits of his training system.

## IDEALS

As early as 1919 Gay was in consistent communication with George Jowett, one of the leading physical culturists and magazine editors. In one letter Gay wrote with a hopeful eye towards an increase of competitions in the Rochester area. He wrote not only as a competitor, but as a teacher of several pupils whom he claimed could “make a good showing.”<sup>34</sup> His first national accomplishment as an instructor was when his eighteen-year-old star pupil, George Weber set the junior world record for most consecutive sit-ups with 1,700.<sup>35</sup> Another of his pupils, the well-regarded weightlifter Vic Tanny performed very well at local AAU competitions across the rust belt.<sup>36</sup>

Gay’s vision for what accounted as proper strength and health was built on the foundation he had experienced during his own training. More importantly, he understood that his own success—itsself the result of an individually tailored form of Bernarr Macfadden’s plan—was not universal. The allure of his successful strongman career drew the first and most ambitious strength performers to his revitalized Rochester studio, but it was his lived virtues of patience, personal accountability, and a fine sense of humor that sustained his operation. A profile of Gay’s physical culture school in 1934 spoke to its cutting-edge resources saying, the “studio is fully equipped with bicycles and walking machines, sun treatments with sun lamps during the cool months and on the roof during the summer months. Individual dressing rooms and shower baths in-

cluded. . . . Gay has the largest weight assortment of any institution in this section of the country.”<sup>37</sup> Upon his return from the war, he and Emily transformed the Rochester physical training scene. A far cry from the bare-bones dens of their local predecessors, the Gay’s center for physical culture was more akin to Sig Klein’s elegant facility in Manhattan.<sup>38</sup>

When not in use for his own training sessions, Gay used his gym to host displays of strength and weightlifting competitions. The competitions included athletes from within Rochester and the broader rust belt region, including Ontario, Canada. In two shows in the winter of 1929-30, multiple American lifting records were broken.<sup>39</sup> The record-setting trend continued into the 1930s, where yet another contest was conducted in April of that year at his physical culture school.<sup>40</sup> New amateur records were also set at a competition hosted by Gay’s gym in early 1932.<sup>41</sup>

In recognition of years of dedicated service in the name of physical culture to his city and the region, Arthur Gay was named the chairman of the Niagara AAU district for weight-lifting. That honor capped a seven-year tenure in which he had been an active member since 1930. Simultaneously, he was granted a national appointment as one of the leaders of the 1936 Olympic Weightlifting team to represent the United States at the Berlin Olympics.<sup>42</sup> His promotion was granted in part because he promoted inter-city matches and a Rochester weightlifting championship every year since the start of the decade. His goal moving forward was to establish a broader regional or district annual championship.<sup>43</sup>

Gay’s devotion to his hometown was made richer in the blending of values. Rochester prided itself on the virtues of patience and personal accountability.<sup>44</sup> His school of physical culture embraced those ideals. In a profile of Gay’s gymnasium on East Avenue, the local Rochester paper exclaimed, “an outstanding feature of Gay’s physical culture methods is the individual training accorded to each pupil under the personal supervision of Mr. and Mrs. Gay.”<sup>45</sup> Individually tailored one-on-one development, with no group classes, formed the crux of his teachings. Development of physical fitness meant more than mere musculature increases for Arthur. His center for physical culture endured because of his unwavering assessment that “no two people possess the same amount of strength or endurance.”<sup>46</sup> His firm beliefs permeated his ruminations on physical culture when he turned to writing. Through his column a third aspect emerged to complete his views on the training of the average man’s body. Pleasure was just as important to the crafting of the body as strength and diet.

## PATIENCE

Among Gay’s list of mantras and beliefs, his most impassioned was the benefit of exercise on the general health of bodily processes. Rather than developing strength for the sake of strength, his writings reflected his understanding that “exercise . . . increases the powers of digestion by giving muscular attention to the stomach and intestines.”<sup>47</sup> Inner strength presupposed outer strength.

Vital power, as he termed it, could only be strengthened through the abdominal muscles. Inner strength, vital power, or whatever name it should fall under was a central theme in Gay's writing.<sup>48</sup> In his articles, he acknowledged that the average man seeking to increase his fitness, focused on bulging biceps, a big chest, and massive legs. To counter that perception, he argued that those external physical ambitions were useless unless they were accompanied by a sound pair of lungs and a strong digestive system.

Longevity of health was the motivating factor behind Gay's reasoning. A strong and symmetrical body at the expense of one's vital organs was passionately advised against because they were "much more essential to the body than either big legs or arms."<sup>49</sup> His calls for a patient approach to strength and health often reinforced the idea of adequate goal-setting. To that effect, he once wrote, "don't try to accomplish in one month what should really take you three to six. Be patient, go slowly but surely toward your goal. Be sensible about eating, sleeping, exercising and really *live*."<sup>50</sup> He wrote plainly, but wisely that a rushed job will never produce results. When pressed, he offered a practical bit of counsel to his readers on their first year of training, writing "practice breathing and don't exercise too much."<sup>51</sup> Proper technique was essential. He believed this was especially important for thin men, who he claimed were always in a hurry. To this end he believed that they should take advice from larger men who could show them a proper style of patience and a hearty appetite.<sup>52</sup>

Patience was equated with moderation in Arthur's writings and teachings. That virtue was routinely embraced by Arthur and expressed zealously by Emily. Moderation, as a value, received prominent coverage by the Gays in columns on both diet and in training. In an article of the science of bodybuilding, Arthur acknowledged that hard drink should be cut from one's diet but made an exception for an occasional ale. Perhaps most surprising about his focus on moderation was his allowance for smoking. In that same article he claimed that he was "not opposed to moderate smoking [as it] is normal and healthy."<sup>53</sup> He acknowledged that it might cause some harm—as most things done beyond moderation often do—but concluded that such potential harm was negligible if partaken moderately. The imminent practicality of their teachings and writings—although perhaps frowned upon today—spawned an enviable universality.

Diet for Gay was the most important prerequisite for a successful bodybuilding regimen. Despite its pride of place within his program, Gay avoided specifications, providing only recommendations. Sufficient calories, as many as four thousand for the thin man looking to bulk, were adequate so long as they consisted of good, sustaining foods.<sup>54</sup> Beyond that, he wrote in scathing tone against the "mechanization" of eating where appetite had become what he called a "food habit, which recurred according to the clock and not the needs of the body." His outspoken and unrestrained criticism of dietary fads such as the "eighteen-day diet" put him at odds with his mentor. He

was also greatly concerned with the deleterious effects of "fad dieting" and went on record stating that "it is never safe to reduce more than one to two pounds a week."<sup>55</sup> It was one of many of Gay's principles that continues to be backed by modern research.<sup>56</sup>

His wife, Emily, supported his claims in uncompromising terms. Railing against what she termed "tricks, bluffs, and schemes" she claimed that all were futile. Such "freak diets" she wrote, were only harmful in the long run.<sup>57</sup> Only through sensible dieting would one be able to reduce properly and thus regain the youthful look so many of his readers and clients desired. The fad to achieve a slender body, especially for women, brought hundreds of tablets into local drugstores; she condemned them all.

Her work was most notable for her extended commentary about the science behind diets. Her greatest strength, as an esteemed columnist in her own right, was her ability to apply health terminology in a relatable style. When writing about calories, she stated, "It is like a measuring unit—like your measuring cup that you use when measuring flour for a cake... The calorie simply represents the amount of heat and energy produced by the bread."<sup>58</sup> However, her articles were not always based on legitimate science as she once chastised the growing presence of condiments and spices in everyday meals, believing them to unnaturally increase the desire for food in a rebellious overthrow of nature. The foundation of her assertions, that undernourishment affects one's energy levels and complexion, was correct but her recommendations sometimes fell into extremes.<sup>59</sup> Emily maintained that the success of her husband's training program was due in large part to the minimal effects of uncertain dietary regulations.<sup>60</sup>

Along with diet, Gay stressed the importance of proper breathing. Adamant that exercises should never be performed too fast, he asserted that proper breaths, a by-product of a well-developed core, were of the utmost importance.<sup>61</sup> Among his bounty of claims to this effect, one from 1927 stands out where he asserted, "The most important of all organs to have in condition before attempting anything with any other part of the body is the stomach."<sup>62</sup> Even under a plan to increase weight Arthur insisted that "a balanced diet, fresh air, and graduated exercise" will bring about desired results without any additional extraordinary efforts.<sup>63</sup>

His program only worked due to time, effort, and discipline. A reality he acknowledged when he wrote, "that his plan doesn't work completely over eighteen days, but it has the ever-pleasing result of being permanent and without ill effects."<sup>64</sup> Time, for Gay, was the necessary component to building lasting health. He insisted that there were no short cuts in the body changing process and that there was no mystery connected to physical development. Steady progress, daily adherence to a schedule, and a measured diet constituted the fundamental steps.<sup>65</sup> He argued throughout his life that fundamental change to the body could only be established through the proper development of core muscles and breathing techniques. Both aspects were necessary prerequisites to any formal weight-lifting program. He argued that since one's body was prone to

stay in the position it had been subjected to during exercise, it was thereby critical to maintain a strong, fundamental base to one's movements.<sup>66</sup> As a part of his commitment to patience, Gay emphasized the importance of non-lifting measures. For him, fitness was a lifestyle to be embraced both within and outside the gym. Exercise, sleep, and eating all required systematic precision to allow one to fully embrace the rewards of strength and health.<sup>67</sup>

Understanding the basics of a proper foundation was found clearly in the writings of his wife. She realized most of her female audience had limited exposure to or no experience with physical training. As a result, Emily's articles featured brief tangents on anatomy. Her essays focused on points of the body most directly connected to beauty mainly on the face, legs, and hips. But, even within such articles, she minced no words when addressing the various components of muscles impacting the strength of the hip including the abs and diaphragm. Complimenting Mrs. Gay's consistent use of introductory terminology was her antagonism towards devices of vanity or comfort. Her notion, shared by her husband, that only persistence, patience, and proper form could change a body led to charges against bras, pills, or fancy footwear in her writing. Strength came from within. Arthur and Emily positioned themselves as the conduit through which individualized personal improvement could be achieved and maintained.

#### PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Arthur advocated for personal desire and knowledge when it came to fitness. Exercise, he believed, must be that of an individual nature owing to the variance in constitution and temperament. He urged his readers to embrace personal accountability, writing, "it is a matter for *you* to decide for yourself just what exercises are and are not suited to your requirements."<sup>68</sup> In one case in the late 1920s, he preached his effort-based evangelism from a Baptist pulpit, vigorously attacking the "pill-feeders, who think they can acquire health out of a bottle."<sup>69</sup> His wife went further when she chastised both Turkish baths and sweat loss programs, which she claimed were "stupid efforts to dodge effective and healthful cures."<sup>70</sup>

A well-balanced program was one that effectively trained both endurance and strength. Such a program needed to be tailored to one's individual requirements to properly address any deficiencies in either of those two areas without overexerting or overemphasizing one to the detriment of the other.<sup>71</sup> His distaste towards generalized workout plans extended to ideal images of the "perfect man." Despite being awarded such distinctions in his youth, he argued that height-to-weight ratios were woefully inadequate and caused undue frustration for those attempting to better themselves. He wrote once that those "calculations fall into serious error and short or tall men are assigned unnatural or freakish measurements."<sup>72</sup> His wife also wrote in criticism of the unreasonable fitness and beauty standards of the age. Echoing her husband's criticism of the classical Greek ideal she claimed that the famous Venus de Milo would "look awkward and far from beautiful in present-day clothes [being] far too plump, too

heavy, and too bulky."<sup>73</sup> Hence, the Gay's gym focused solely on one-on-one training to avoid falling prey to such generalizations.

One of the primary reasons for his adherence to individual training with a physical culture expert was that he recognized the possibility of "overwork" often a cause of unsupervised gym sessions. He argued in his writings that under personal supervision, those who have taken up weight-lifting have been *far healthier* than they would have been otherwise.<sup>74</sup> He was insistent that only supervised work could bring about results.

He understood that there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the "theory of weight-lifting," but did harbor reservations about the potential repercussions of abuses from unsupervised physical training. The importance of a teacher had less to do with the actual activity of lifting than it did with the preparation. He wrote that most men, upon arriving in a gym have "no realization of their posture's effect on the body carriage."<sup>75</sup> Thus, a qualified instructor provided a great advantage in maximizing the basic elements of an exercise program. He wrote that the use of light weights, bodyweight, or even calisthenics could produce some benefit for the individual if undertaken intelligently and supervised by a knowledgeable teacher.<sup>76</sup> To the former strongman's credit, Gay remained skeptical of the long-term benefit of calisthenics and argued that for strength—and thus health—to be built, it was necessary for there to be resistance to the action of one's muscles. Next to digestion, resistance was the "all-important factor in building strength." His writings also pushed back on the popular criticism of weightlifters being "muscle-bound." He argued, always in a forthright manner, that weight training did not change the essence of an individual stating "weight-lifting makes no man slow if he is not naturally a slow type." He appealed to his reader's circumstance and wrote his sage articles arguing that all people were weight-lifters because even as infants we all have experience the daily sensation of lifting.<sup>77</sup>

His gym, therefore, became a "mecca" for many men and women of his hometown who suffered from over- or under-weight.<sup>78</sup> The allure of individualized attention and personally catered results bore a substantial and fervent following. His efforts pre-dated his military service as several hundred Rochesterians laid claim to his successful methods of patience and individualized attention since 1917.<sup>79</sup>

Writings espousing the benefit of individual training met action as he oversaw the women's department of his gym as well as the men's. Arthur made sure that his female clients were provided full access to his facilities every Tuesday and Thursday—leaving the men to occupy the remaining days.<sup>80</sup> Although rarely speaking directly to the equality of the sexes, his articles routinely featured claims that both men and women should aspire to strength with equal personal resolve. Arguing the case that women were capable of developments of strength and should be encouraged to do so, he wrote in 1937 that "When a boy or girl grows to maturity without the use of their muscles that are essential to bring out their full strength, that boy or

girl does not come into possession of all manly or womanly powers.”<sup>81</sup> Arthur’s claims were reinforced, often with more passion, by his wife. In her column she walked a fine line between the fashion and beauty articles geared towards women and legitimate essays on strength and science.

For general fitness, she acquiesced to the constraints of the age when she argued it was inadvisable for any woman to ever lift a barbell heavier thirty or forty pounds. Such strength, she claimed, already demonstrated “normal” levels of fitness and health.<sup>82</sup> Despite her concerns, Emily was an enthusiastic supporter of limited weight training for women. The lighter barbells, she always recommended 8-15 pounds in her columns, were excellent tools for the sports and athletics she favored for women and remarked at the accomplishments one could achieve through that training method. In fact, she believed that the true feminine form was the athletic form. True beauty, she wrote, came from being healthy and that she encouraged the modern woman to find lasting beauty through participation in healthful sports, recreations, and the outdoor life.<sup>83</sup> In the summer she encouraged swimming as much as possible, as well as all the golf and tennis one could manage. The ultimate benefit of these sports, she argued was the abundance of fresh air consumed during the activities. To drive her point home, she included pictures of the Gay’s teenager daughter—by then a winner of several beauty and fitness contests—who developed her award-winning contour through a combination of swim, dance, and a routine of regular exercises.<sup>84</sup> In an article describing the musculature of the hips, she was implored her female readers to train properly, saying “if you have muscles why not develop them? Muscles give shape and contour.”<sup>85</sup> She wrote that exercising even with a light barbell never becomes boring. The true challenge for female fitness was “that silent opponent in your head requiring concentration and effort.”<sup>86</sup>

Emily Gay supported her husband on two key aspects of their embrace of structured individualistic training. She was adamant in her monthly column for *The Bodybuilder* that unsupervised and unstructured training would produce no discernable result. Also, she too, railed against modifications—pertaining to diet and clothing—that she viewed as providing an insufficient quick fix to what should be a lifelong pursuit of health. To convince women of the inherent value in beginning a weight training regimen, she appealed to the various forms of domestic lifting many women did on a daily basis. This assortment of “natural forms of lifting” included picking up children as well as domestic chores.<sup>87</sup>

In Emily’s first article in George Jowett’s *The Body Builder*, she lashed out at previous generations for restricting the “honest display of the female figure.” Through “grotesque illusions and forgeries” such as laced waists and padded busts she claimed that the natural female form had been exaggerated and corrupted. That manufactured female standard destroyed the real beauty of health, to which she would set her sights on correcting through her monthly column.<sup>88</sup> She placed the blame for leg weakness

on the use of high heels. In an article on the proper form for recreational pedestrianism she blamed the stilted nature of the shoes in prohibiting the proper movement and swing from the hips through which one gains sufficient economy of force. Without such nature grace and power, great beauty could not be achieved.<sup>89</sup> She also placed the blame for a weak bust on the use of brassieres. Her ire stemmed from the understanding that bras “cause the chest muscles to atrophy and as a result there is no muscular action to hold the bust up.”<sup>90</sup> She was adamant that the muscles themselves needed to do the work because that is their natural function. The idea that unused muscles would dissipate due to artificial support was a common theme in both her and her husband’s writing. They believed that restrictive clothing was no different than a fad diet or pill in terms of a short cut on the path to bodily transformation. Therefore, she alerted her readers, a reasonable amount of exercise—along with forgoing a bra—needed to be taken regularly for “the muscles to receive better circulation and thus increase their tone and definition.”<sup>91</sup> To obtain the optimal symmetry and firmness desired in a ‘normal’ bust, Emily encouraged both her female readers and her clients to engage moderately in sports and exercise. However, she was quick to note that such actions were restorative as “a normal girls’ bust [ages 14-17] will develop properly so long as she wears no tight undergarments.”<sup>92</sup>

To both men and women, the Gays wrote, taught, and lived their message of personal accountability and patience. Their desire for individualized betterment could be observed through their repression of their own egos. Despite competing in, and winning, various strongman shows in his twenties, Gay preached avoidance of the “extremes of strength, such as to lift horses or elephants.”<sup>93</sup> It was to the ‘average man’ whom Gay directed his writings. In an article for Bob Hoffman’s *Strength & Health* he stated that the body of the average middle-aged man did not promote self-respect.<sup>94</sup> He argued that while being an athlete was not a requirement to live fully, he was adamant that every man should engage in some form of exercise or recreation. To that end, he developed a generic series of standards that “Mr. Average Man” should be able to complete. The tests, set for a forty-five-year-old male, included being able to walk seven miles in two hours, run one mile in eight minutes, ten consecutive pushups, and various endurance pieces such as rowing or swimming.<sup>95</sup> Emily also muted her own experience for the goals and development of her female clients and readers. Her own journey of physical rediscovery resulted in a loss of nearly forty pounds (from the mid- one seventies to the mid-one thirties) in the two decades she and Arthur had been married.<sup>96</sup> Their goal of promoting general fitness resulted in perhaps the couple’s most unique contribution to the reams of strength literature in the interwar period. General fitness produced the best results when the individual in pursuit of them enjoyed the avocation. Pleasure was a much a part of a successful regimen as structured individual training or diet.

#### PLEASURE

Even in Arthur’s most fervent and impassioned

pleas for a healthy lifestyle, he remained focused on the larger aim of life. He addressed the necessity of joy in strength when he wrapped up a speech saying, “Health does spell religion, but I say it spells more – it spells life, it spells success, it spells happiness.”<sup>97</sup> His wife summed up that feeling more emphatically, writing “I want to *LIVE* and not simply exist.”<sup>98</sup>

Health was about identifying a lasting set of principles that could serve a man or woman for life. Since life is to be enjoyed, he insisted that “one’s favorite exercises or recreation should be a source of comfort and pleasure and should be discontinued if proved otherwise.”<sup>99</sup> Specifically, he claimed that beneficial and enjoyable exercises should often consist of “moderately heavy weights... giving you a satisfactory measure of resistance and yet avoid the possibility of strain.”<sup>100</sup> Gay built on those claims expressing a profound respect and desire for periods of rest and recovery in the training process. Up to a week or two of time away from structured, supervised training he wrote, would not hurt one bit. Drawing from his experience as a former competitor and active weightlifting referee and committee chair, his advice on rest carried weight. His words held significant value among men looking to increase their musculature as Gay criticized them for “always want to exercise and never rest.”<sup>101</sup> Even during periods of training, he doubled down on claims to avoid pushing oneself to exhaustion during exercise, emphasizing instead a comfortable and enjoyable level of engagement.<sup>102</sup> The common man required a simple approach to training. Though he emphasized a focus on the large muscle groups, including the those associated with digestion, his writings were clearly influenced by the nineteenth century ideology *mens sana in corpore sano*. In conjunction with physical training, Gay encouraged his readers to read enlightening books and take time to play.<sup>103</sup>

Upon reflection on distinctions between energy (vitality) and work (strength), he urged his readers to observe children in play. Though lacking strength, Gay wrote that children possessed boundless energy and thus more enthusiasm for life.<sup>104</sup> The joys of a lift of strength and health could also inspire a renewed sense of confidence in a person. Understanding that for most of the average man’s day his body would be covered under his clothes he asserted that the well-proportioned man – often of below average height – was right to shed his clothes where acceptable to be admired for the work he has rightly endured.<sup>105</sup> Confidence was manifest not only through the production of strength, but also in the use of energy provided by one’s bodily transformation. He remarked early on about the importance of joy in relation to diet, weights training, and rest, writing, “Eat what your appetite calls for, exercise your muscles and keep them in condition. Laugh all you can and enjoy your life to the utmost.”<sup>106</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A man who embraced his own words through a life thoroughly lived, passed away on 4 June 1981 at the age of 86 from kidney failure. His wife, training partner, and equally prolific writer, Emily passed on several years

before. At the time of his death, he continued to operate a physical fitness center, just around the block from his original long-standing facility. His physical culture exploits as a pioneer in the burgeoning Rochester fitness scene and as a contributor to national success within the AAU and Olympic movements have been granted sufficient treatment. It is his writings, wedged between other legends of the interwar physical culture era, that deserves a deeper inquiry. As he would have likely preferred, such is a task which could only be embraced through patience, guided individual effort, and no small amount of pleasure.

## NOTES:

1. See, for example: Benjamin Pollack and Janice Todd, “Before Charles Atlas: Earle Liederman, the 1920s King of Mail Order Muscle,” *Journal of Sport History*, 44 (Fall 2017): 339-420; and Jan Todd and Michael Murphy, “Portrait of a Strongman: The Circus Career of Ottley Russell Coulter,” *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture*, 7, no. 1 (June 2001): 4-21; and John Fair, “Father Figure or Phony: George Jowett, the ACW-LA and the Milo Barbell Company, 1924-1927,” *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 3, no. 5 (December 1994): 20-27.
2. “Strong Man Joins Navy,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 30 March 1918.
3. Ben Pollack and Jan Todd, “American Icarus: Vic Tanny and America’s First Health Club Chain,” *Iron Game History* 13 and 14, nos. 4 and 1 (December 2016): 18.
4. *Ibid.*, 22.
5. Blake McKelvey, *Rochester on the Genesee: The Growth of a City* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 155-156.
6. “Mrs. Arthur Gay Hurt in Auto Accident,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 25 October 1935.
7. “Birthday Greetings to Rochesterians,” *The Times-Union*, Undated clipping, Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County Historic Scrapbook Collection, 2.
8. Emily G. Gay, “The Modern Venus,” *The Body Builder* 1, no. 2 (August 1936): 17. Gertrude’s measurements at the time of her second win were: 5’ 5.5” (height), 126 pounds (weight), 34” (bust), 25” (waist), 37” (hips), 12.5” (neck), 10.5” (upper arm), 10” (forearm), 6.5” (wrist), 21.5” (thighs), 13.5” (calf), and 8.5” (ankle).
9. E. Gay, “Modern Venus,” 16.
10. She was a popular choice for print displays by Kodak’s Research Lab See: John Martin, “Pictofacts: Rochester Recognized!” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 14 September 1941, 75; and serialized illustrations in *McCall’s Magazine*. See also: Henry W. Klune, “Seen and Heard,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 18 August 1945, 17.
11. Arthur F. Gay, “Is Body Building a Science?” *The Body Builder*, 2, no. 1 (January 1937): 22.
12. “Arthur F. Gay Obituary,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 6 June 1981.
13. “Winner in the Posing Contest,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 27 May 1917.
14. “Strong Man Joins Navy.”
15. “Serving Country in War Forces,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 29 November 1918.
16. “Men Amused for Three Hours,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 1 January 1921.
17. “Seen and Heard,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 10 December 1928.
18. “Bare-Fist Boxing, Ancient Firemen, in Community’s Piece,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 4 October 1932.
19. “Seen and Heard,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 8 August 1933.
20. Records of Arthur Gay’s interviews are from 28 August, 15 October, 23 November 1934, and 23 February 1935. His interview with Bernarr Macfadden took place on 17 November 1932. All dates taken from Rochester’s *Democrat and Chronicle*.
21. “Plan Church Smoker for To-morrow Night,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 2 February 1928.
22. “‘Iron Man’ of City Praised in Magazine,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 22 September 1927.
23. “Winner in Posing Contest,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, 27 May 1917.
24. *Ibid.*

25. "Personal Mentions," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 30 December 1931.
26. Arthur F. Gay, "Arthur F. Gay Famous Athlete and Physical Culture Teacher Praises the Physical Culture Hotel," *Stark Center: Digital Library*; accessed 4 January 2022.
27. *Ibid.* Emphasis provided by the author.
28. Ryan Murtha, Conor Heffernan, and Thomas Hunt, "Building American Supermen? Bernarr Macfadden, Benito Mussolini and American Fascism in the 1930s," *Sport in Society* 24, no. 11 (November 2020): 1941-1955.
29. Mark Adams, *Mr. America: How Muscular Millionaire Bernarr Macfadden Transformed the Nation through Sex, Salad, and the Ultimate Starvation Diet* (New York, NY: Harper, 2009), 3.
30. Arthur F. Gay, "Strengthen Your Stomach," *Physical Culture* (August 1920).
31. See: Bernarr Macfadden, *Super Health From Elemental Foods* (1900-1955), Bernarr Macfadden, *The Miracle of Milk: How to Use the Milk Diet Scientifically at Home* (New York, NY: Macfadden Publications, 1928), and Arthur F. Gay, "Don't Have a Sour Stomach," Strongfortism advertisement, *Physical Culture* (February 1920).
32. Murtha, et al. "Building American Supermen," 1942.
33. "Today's Radio Program," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 17 November 1932.
34. Arthur F. Gay, Letter to George Jowett, 25 June 1919. George Fuisdale Jowett Papers, H.J. Lutch Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports, The University of Texas at Austin. All subsequent references to *The Body Builder* and *Strength & Health* were drawn from this collection.
35. "Rochester Youth World's Champion," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 18 December 1927.
36. "City's Strong Man Will Try to Set Marks," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 23 November 1934; Pollack and Todd, "American Icarus," 18-19.
37. "Personal Supervision Featured at Gay's," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 14 May 1934.
38. 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.
39. "Strength Show Tonight at Gay's Gymnasium," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 11 January 1930.
40. "Syracuse Strong Man to Have a Go at World's Lift Records," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 13 April 1930.
41. "Features in Lifting Exhibition," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 11 January 1932; "Shartles Sets New Weight-Lifting Marks," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 27 February 1933.
42. "Arthur Gay Elected For Olympic Group: Will Act on Weight-Lifting Committee for U.S.," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 6 June 1935.
43. "Gay Named Chairman of Niagara District," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 17 January 1937.
44. Curt Gerling, *Smugtown U.S.A.* (Webster, NY: Plaza Publishing, 1957), 1-2.
45. "Personal Supervision Featured at Gay's."
46. "Women Reduce at Gay School," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 23 April 1934.
47. Arthur F. Gay, "Building Better Bodies," *The Body Builder* 2, no. 4 (May 1937): 21.
48. Arthur F. Gay, "Strengthen Your Stomach," *Physical Culture* (August 1920): 47. For a lengthier treatment on the subject see: Ana Carden-Coyne, "American Guts and Military Manhood," in *Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion, and Fat in the Modern World*, eds. C. Forth and A. Carden-Coyne (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 77.
49. Arthur F. Gay, "Great Strength or Endurance," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 3 (September 1936): 9.
50. Gay, "Building Better Bodies," 20.
51. Arthur F. Gay, "The Thin Man," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 6 (December 1936): 19.
52. Arthur F. Gay, "The Thin Man," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 5 (November 1936): 20.
53. Arthur F. Gay, "Is Body Building a Science?" *The Body Builder* 2, no. 1 (January 1937): 23.
54. Gay, "The Thin Man," 20, 41.
55. Gay, "Great Strength or Endurance," 10.
56. "Gay System of Gradual Reducing Said Better Than Extreme Dieting," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 26 January 1931.
57. Emily Gay, "The Modern Venus," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 2 (July/August 1936): 35.
58. Emily Gay, "Know Your Calories," *The Body Builder* 2, no. 4 (May 1937): 5.
59. Emily Gay, "Your Skin, the Index of Health," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 3 (September 1936): 31.
60. "Women Reduce at Gay School."
61. Gay, "The Thin Man," 18.
62. "Rochester Youth World's Champion 'Sitter-Up,'" *Democrat and Chronicle*, 18 December 1927.
63. Gay, "The Thin Man," 20.
64. "Gay System of Gradual Reducing Said Better Than Extreme Dieting."
65. Arthur F. Gay, "The Thin Man," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 4 (October 1936): 32.
66. Arthur F. Gay, "Better Health Through Proper Posture," *Strength & Health* (March 1936): 15.
67. Gay, "The Thin Man," 20.
68. *Ibid.*, 18.
69. "Exercise and Proper Diet Best Way of Reducing, Says Arthur F. Gay," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 23 February 1937.
70. Emily Gay, "A Trim Waistline," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 6 (December 1936): 29.
71. Gay, "Great Strength or Endurance," 11.
72. Arthur F. Gay, "Physical Tests for the Average Man," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 2 (July/August 1936): 27.
73. Gay, "Modern Venus," 16.
74. Arthur F. Gay, "The Exercise Dilemma," *The Body Builder* 2, no. 3 (April 1937): 18.
75. Gay, "Better Health Through Proper Posture," 15.
76. Gay, "The Exercise Dilemma," 16-17.
77. Gay, "The Thin Man," 33.
78. "Gay System of Reducing Better Than Extreme Dieting"
79. "Exercise and Proper Diet Best Way of Reducing, Says Arthur F. Gay."
80. "Physical Culture is Health Builder," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 19 September 1932.
81. Gay, "Building Better Bodies," 19.
82. Emily Gay, "Should Women Use Barbells?" *The Body Builder* 2, no. 1 (January 1937): 28.
83. Emily Gay, "Keep Young and Beautiful," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 1 (June 1936): 19.
84. Emily Gay, "How to Beautify the Bust," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 5 (November 1936): 41.
85. Emily Gay, "How to Reduce Hefty Hips," *The Body Builder* 2, no. 3 (March 1937): 13.
86. Gay, "Should Women Use Barbells?" 28.
87. *Ibid.*, 27.
88. Gay, "Keep Young and Beautiful," 18.
89. Emily Gay, "Hips, Hips, Away," *The Body Builder* 2, no. 2 (February 1937): 12-13.
90. Emily Gay, "A Beautiful Bust," *The Body Builder* 1, no. 4 (October 1936): 30.
91. Gay, "How to Beautify the Bust," 28-29.
92. Gay, "A Beautiful Bust," 30.
93. Gay, "The Exercise Dilemma," 16-17.
94. Gay, "Better Health Through Proper Posture," 15.
95. Gay, "Physical Tests for the Average Man," 26.
96. Gay, "A Trim Waistline," 28.
97. "Physical Culturist, Minister Share Baptist Temple Pulpit," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 28 November 1927.
98. Gay, "How to Beautify the Bust," 41.
99. Gay, "Building Better Bodies," 20.
100. Gay, "The Exercise Dilemma," 18.
101. Gay, "The Thin Man," 20.
102. Gay, "The Thin Man," 20.
103. Gay, "Great Strength or Endurance," 11.
104. *Ibid.*, 9-10.
105. Gay, "The Thin Man," 20.
106. "Rochester Youth World's Champion 'Sitter-Upper.'"