

THE ORIGINS OF MUSCLE BEACH: A RECONSIDERATION

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“Muscle Beach became an international icon, a paradigm of the larger than life Southern California lifestyle, and the larger than life heroes who dominated the stage.”

—Mark Sarvas, *Santa Monica News*¹

Released in 2009, the oversized, two-inch-thick, *Los Angeles: Portrait of a City*, contains more than five hundred photographs of life in the City of Angels. Only one image appears on the book’s front cover, however, and it shows a group of men, women, and children—all tan and fit—on a raised platform doing acrobatics at the original Muscle Beach in Santa Monica.² Off the platform an audience has gathered, and their eyes are nearly all focused on a small woman flying through an almost cloudless blue sky toward the safety of her partner’s arms. Some members of the audience are in street clothes, many more in beach wear, and while the vast majority of the audience and all the participants on the platform are white, several Black men are also present, watching the acrobatics demonstration which occurred nearly every weekend at Muscle Beach in the middle years of the twentieth century.

If historian Alan Trachtenberg is right and symbols serve a culture by “articulating in objective form the important ideas and feelings of that culture,” then the use of Frank Thomas’ photo as the cover for a book attempting to capture the essence and spirit of Los Angeles (LA) could not be more appropriate.³ The micro-second captured by the shutter’s closing is filled with movement and beauty. It reveals Muscle Beach as a cultural nexus where athleticism,

fun, fitness, daring, performance, family, and the beach merged. Greater than its disparate parts, the photo presents Muscle Beach as a site where physicality, sensuality, muscle, grace, and the idea of limitless possibility converged. Muscle Beach was unique. At Muscle Beach in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s well-conditioned bodies, amazing acrobatic tricks, and demonstrations of physical strength took center stage in a way never before seen in America. Although closed down by the City of Santa Monica in 1958, what started at Muscle Beach served to inspire the fitness revolution of the last half of the twentieth century and, it irrevocably linked the sun, sea, and sand of Southern California with the quest for physical perfection.

In the mid-1950s, when Thomas took his photo, the idea of Muscle Beach as a non-conventional outdoor gym and performance space home to hard-bodied men and women had already spread well beyond the United States. Hundreds of muscle-magazine and wire service stories, several newsreels, and the dozens of public appearances, acrobatic performances, and even the TV and film work by some of the early regulars at Muscle Beach made it so famous that it was admired and emulated as far away as chilly Aberdeen, in Scotland.⁴

Despite the importance of this patch of sand and the men and women who flexed, flipped, flew, and lifted there, surprisingly little attention has been paid to Muscle Beach by academic historians. Tolga Ozyurtcu has written the sole dissertation on Muscle Beach and neither that dissertation, nor the few other scholarly articles written to date, have paid much attention to how the original Muscle Beach began and why it evolved as it did.⁵ In order to fill at least part of this void, this essay attempts to provide a definitive “origin narrative” for what is now generally referred to as the “original” Muscle Beach—a distinction necessary because

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This Frank Thomas photograph, taken in 1954, was used on the cover of the 2009 pictorial history: *Los Angeles: Portrait of a City*. The photo perfectly captures the informal performance space where sand, sun, muscles and acrobatics became internationally famous as Muscle Beach.

three and a half miles south of the Santa Monica Pier, another beach-side exercise area favored by the bodybuilding fraternity later became known as “Muscle Beach-Venice.” What follows should not be considered as a complete history of Muscle Beach, but as an appetizer or *amuse-bouche* before the full meal to be prepared by future scholars.

BECOMING MUSCLE BEACH

In 1916, Santa Monica resident Charles Loeff, hoping to make his newly adopted city a more desirable tourist destination, opened a massive amusement pier immediately adjacent to the existing city pier.⁶ Loeff’s new “Santa Monica Pleasure Pier” featured carnival rides, a fun house, a bowling alley, a billiard parlor, and several restaurants.⁷ It also created space for fishing and walking, became a concert stage at times, and fundamentally changed the Santa Monica Beach experience. As had happened at Coney Island in New York, Loeff’s new pier proved to be a magnet for the building of restaurants, apartment buildings, and hotels in

its close proximity.⁸ Muscle Beach’s evolution was linked to the pier both because of the site’s proximity and because the pier proved to be an excellent vantage point for watching the action of the lifters and gymnasts on the mats and platform below it. Over the years, more than one new member found his or her way to Muscle Beach by being curious about the people they could see from the pier doing acrobatics. And, when Muscle Beach began hosting free public exhibitions on weekends, the amenities offered by the pier and the nearby cafes—where one could even buy Muscle Beach burgers—made this unusual outdoor gymnasium an attractive weekend destination even for those who never stepped on the platform.

The pier’s involvement in the founding of Muscle Beach is uncontested. Other parts of the story as to how Muscle Beach began have varied widely over the years. According to *Life* magazine in 1946, “Although uninhibited Californians had used the beach for years to display their muscles, it began to be invaded by professionals in 1931, when a Santa Monica high school

athletic coach, impressed with the local show of strength, installed playground equipment.”⁹ *Muscle Power* author Gordon L’Allemand had an entirely different take in a 1949 article, however. He claimed Muscle Beach started when Johnnie Collins and Barney Fry, “decided they wanted a place to lift weights, pose with bulging muscles . . . and toss their girlfriends around.”¹⁰ Another narrative (a variant on *Life’s* genesis myth) which is still common was first advanced by Joel Sayre in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1957. According to Sayre, the prime movers who founded Muscle Beach were a “kindhearted widow” named Kate Giroux and a football coach named Vincent Schutt, who began organizing games for children at the beach around 1930.¹¹

Those who were actually there, however, tell a rather different story about how—and why—Muscle Beach began in the mid-1930s. According to Relna Brewer McRae, the impetus to gather on that hundred-yard stretch of sand just south of the pier and practice tumbling, acrobatics, and adagio was influenced by larger forces—the 1932 Olympic Games in neighboring Los Angeles; a massive 1933 earthquake centered just off the coast of Long Beach; and, of course, the shared need of many Americans to find ways to make ends meet during the Great Depression.¹²

Relna saw the Santa Monica Pier—and the sandy beach just south of it that would become known as Muscle Beach—for the first time in the summer of 1926. Her family was in the midst of a move to Northern California from Missouri, and they stayed for three months in Ocean Park, Santa Monica’s southern neighborhood. Six-year-old Relna and her nine-year-old brother, Paul, were entranced by the pier with its roller coaster and merry-go-round, and she spoke movingly 90 years later of how she loved playing in the sand and wading in the shallow surf under their mother’s watchful eye that summer.¹³ That same year, significantly, both the Los Angeles and Santa Monica school districts added gymnastics to their physical education curriculum and competitive sport offerings.¹⁴ This meant that when the Brewer family moved back to Santa Monica in August of 1929, 12-year-old Paul began learning rudimentary gymnastics and tumbling at John Adams Junior High School. When he entered Santa Monica High three years later he continued to be involved with gymnastics, even though the newly-built school had not yet built a boy’s gymnasium and the equipment they had to practice on was outdoors and consisted of only a set of parallel

bars, a horizontal ladder, and a simple horizontal bar.¹⁵ Although these were less than ideal training facilities, Paul and his friends remained committed to gymnastics and worked out frequently after school. “Paul didn’t have the right build for gymnastics,” Relna explained in 2016, “But he just loved tumbling and gymnastics, and later found he had better coaches at the beach than he ever did in the schools . . . but it was because of school that first he got interested, and his interest became my interest too.”¹⁶

Paul and Relna were not the only teens in Los Angeles interested in gymnastics in the early 1930s. As the City of Los Angeles began mobilizing to host the 1932 Olympic Games, the greater Los Angeles school gymnastics programs began to be viewed as potential sources of gymnasts for the American team.¹⁷ Part of the new enthusiasm for gymnastics was undoubtedly caused by the IOC’s decision to award individual medals in the sport for the first time. (Previous Olympic Games had only awarded team medals in gymnastics.) The Los Angeles Organizing Committee had requested the change and it had also asked to include three new gymnastics events in which Americans were expected to do well: Indian club swinging, rope climbing, and tumbling.¹⁸

As the Games drew closer, connections between the schools and the private Los Angeles Athletic Club (LAAC)—already heavily involved in helping prepare athletes for the Games—strengthened when LAAC athletic director, Al Treloar, let it be known that the club would train any high school boy who showed



Although Abbye “Pudgy” Stockton remains the most famous woman to have been part of the early days of Muscle Beach, Relna Brewer was the first female star at Muscle Beach. Brewer began going to the beach with her brother Paul after the 1933 earthquake damaged his high school.

real talent for the sport.¹⁹ In 1930, the LAAC also hosted the Men's National Gymnastics Championships and sold tickets through the schools at discount prices for students.²⁰ Student sales jumped significantly when the *Los Angeles Times* reported that two boys from Dallas, Texas—Roland Wolfe and Byrd White—would participate in the men's contest.²¹ Fourteen-year-old Roland Wolfe, emerged as a teen sensation from the 1930 Nationals. Wolfe easily won the tumbling competition although he was only 14, came back and took second in the nationals the following year; and then, at the 1932 Olympics, won the first and only gold medal ever awarded for tumbling, at age 17.²² Wolfe became a hero to most would-be gymnasts in the Los Angeles area—including Relna and Paul. Even though they did not attend the Games, the Brewers saw the newsreel released after the Games, which showed Wolfe's tumbling routine. "He inspired a lot of us," she reported, "and I remember us talking about the fact that he was a teenager like we were, and yet he had already done so much."²³

The final impetus for the founding of Muscle Beach arrived on 10 March 1933, when a massive earthquake shook Southern California for more than ten seconds. Centered just off the coast of Long Beach, the quake was followed by 34 aftershocks causing additional damage to many area buildings, including Santa Monica High School.²⁴ Santa Monica school officials closed several buildings at the High School be-

cause of quake damage, moved many classes into tents, and, not surprisingly, decided to hold off on its pre-earthquake plans to build a boy's gymnasium.²⁵ Harold Zinkin, whose memoir remains the best source on these events, wrote that the Long Beach earthquake was the precipitating event that caused Paul Brewer and some of his high school teammates to turn to the beach for a place to practice.²⁶ Relna agrees. It was not unusual, she explained in 2016, for Paul and some of his friends to horse around and practice some of the tricks he was learning in school when they would go to the beach before 1933. After the quake, however, when they could no longer practice at Santa Monica High School, he and several friends decided that the soft sand at the beach might be their best alternative. Paul and his friends found, however, that the sand got in their eyes when they tumbled. Relna cannot recall where they got it, or whose idea it was, but they acquired a long, heavy rug which they placed on the sand when they trained. According to Relna, the rug's arrival marked the real start of Muscle Beach.²⁷

THE MAGIC CARPET

The City of Santa Monica had dedicated an area just south of the pier as a children's playground in the 1920s, but in the early 1930s, with Works Progress Administration funding, they hired Kate Giroux as a playground supervisor.²⁸ In addition to swings, slides, a merry-go-round, and some child-sized gymnastics equipment,



In the beginning, Paul Brewer and his high school friends worked out at Muscle Beach on an old carpet they found, and its main function was to help keep the sand out of their eyes as they practiced gymnastics. As more young people began gathering at Muscle Beach and wanting to learn tricks, Paul and his friends added a tarp on another section of sand, and then, in 1935, after UCLA gymnastics coach Cecil Hollingsworth had also begun working at the adjacent playground area, the City of Santa Monica allowed them to build a low wooden platform, which is shown in this photograph. The platform turned Muscle Beach into a true performance space and soon people began gathering to watch the free shows.



While Pudgy Stockton's backbend and ability to support this "four-high" is amazing, she's actually not the most famous athlete in the photo. That designation belongs to the small girl seated on top, Patricia Keller McCormick, who grew up at Muscle Beach and was taught to lift weights by Relna Brewer while still a child. In an interview, McCormick told Jan Todd that she believed the weight training and gymnastics she did at Muscle Beach was enormously beneficial to her as a competitive diver. McCormick became one of the greatest women divers in history, winning both springboard and platform events at both the 1952 and 1956 Olympic Games.

Giroux kept bats, balls, nets, and horseshoes for pitching in an old piano box, which she padlocked at the end of each day.²⁹ As a playground supervisor in charge of small children, Giroux was not happy when Paul and his teen-aged friends began trying to do acrobatic stunts at the playground. Relna still takes umbrage when someone suggests Giroux was responsible for starting Muscle Beach and helping to get the first platform installed. In a letter to the *Smithsonian* following a 1998 article by Ken Chowder, Relna wrote, "Your article on Muscle Beach . . . was great and humorous, but not quite accurate. Muscle Beach was started in 1933 by Paul Brewer an acrobat and gymnast who wanted to practice on the sand. Katie Giroux . . . had no interest in the acrobats at all..."³⁰ In an in-person interview with the author in 1997 and again in 2016 on the phone, Relna claimed that Giroux's antipathy toward the teen-aged acrobats went well beyond disinterest. Giroux reportedly told Paul and his teammates, "We don't need or

want acrobats down here." Relna remembers her, in fact, as a "mean woman" who went to the city, demanded that acrobatics be banned at the city playground, and reportedly told the city fathers, "This is a children's playground; I want you to get those crazy acrobats off my beach."³¹

Giroux was also concerned, according to Relna, about the propriety of young men and women doing acrobatics together. The 1930s saw an enormous transformation in terms of what was acceptable as swimwear for both men and women. Both the 1932- and 1936-men's Olympic swimming teams, for example, wore one-piece suits with straps over their shoulders, even though simple trunks were beginning to gain ground. Women in many parts of the United States still wore knee length skirts over leggings when they entered the water in the mid-1920s, yet by the end of the 1930s the two-piece suit with bare midriff was increasingly accepted.³² At Muscle Beach, however, even in the photos from the mid-1930s, most men appeared shirtless and wearing simple trunks, while many of the young women, especially those who participated in acrobatics, wore two-piece bathing suits, with no attached legs, and without short skirts to supposedly preserve modesty. For Pudgy Stockton, who became the most famous of these pioneering women, the decision to wear a two-piece suit was based on the desire to be practical, not provocative, even though in Pudgy's case the distinction often had a lot to do with the eye of the beholder. In an interview in 2001, she explained that once she started acrobatics, she realized that one-piece swimsuits restricted her movement too much. "Since no one sold two-piece swim suits at that time," she recalled, "and I was hard to fit in any case, my mother took apart one of my older brassieres and used it to make a pattern. She made all my suits for me in the early days."³³ Relna remembers the exposed flesh of the Muscle Beach gang as a cause of concern for Giroux. "She didn't like us wearing bathing suits all the time," Relna explained, "and I think she didn't like it when the men lifted us and touched our legs and bottoms. She actually told me once that she thought what we were doing was immoral."³⁴

While it was not a baseball diamond in a field of corn, the rug on the sand just south of the pier did seem to have some sort of magic, for almost as soon as it was put in place other Los Angeles teens began showing up and wanting to participate. One of the first to arrive was

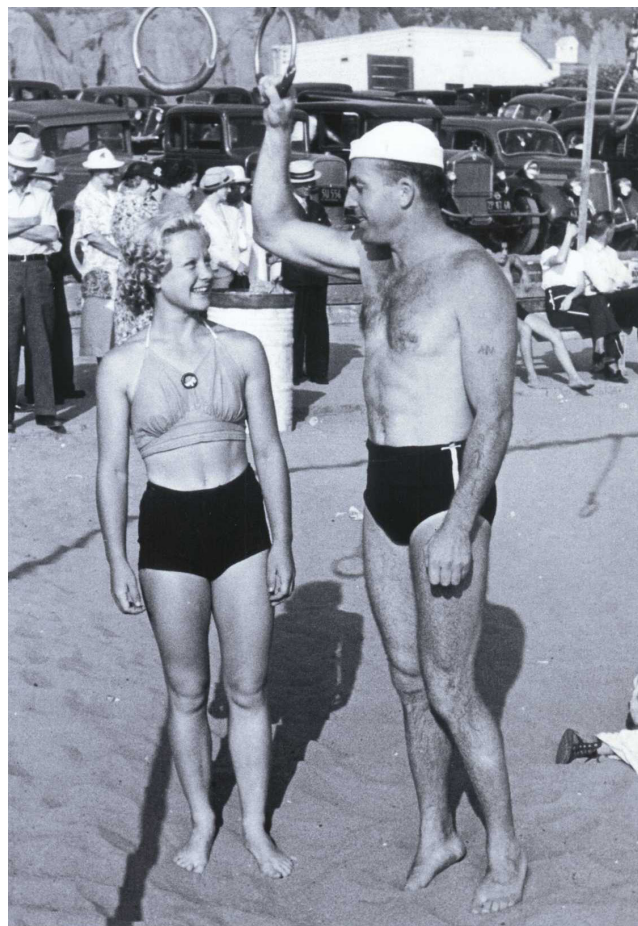
John Kornoff.³⁵ Kornoff was only 13 when he saw Brewer and a few other teens practicing on the rug, but after wandering over and meeting the group, Kornoff came to the beach as often as he could. According to Zinkin, Kornoff could perform tricks while he was in junior high school that no one at Muscle Beach had yet imagined. He was twice named best high school gymnast in the city of Los Angeles and received a football scholarship at Washington State University starting in 1939.³⁶

Randall (Ran) Hall also showed up that summer along with the professional acrobat, Johnnie Collins, who became the first unofficial coach at Muscle Beach. Hall had attended Hollywood High where his gymnastics skills brought him an invitation to train at the LAAC in 1931 as a prospective Olympic team member. Although Hall failed to make the Olympic squad, he became friends through the LAAC with a number of professional acrobats who trained there, including the older Collins. Hall and Collins and several other professional acrobats and pro wrestlers sometimes met for outdoor training sessions at the Crystal Pier in Ocean Park. However, after discovering the Brewers and their friends practicing at Muscle Beach in 1933, Collins and Hall became Muscle Beach regulars and Collins, in particular, began teaching the young teens more advanced acrobatics and adagio and encouraging them to think about becoming performers rather than competitive gymnasts.³⁷ Adagio is a form of partner acrobatics—often set to music—in which one or more acrobats are supported overhead while performing feats of flexibility or lifting another human. Adagio, hand balancing, and acrobatics are terms used somewhat interchangeably to describe the kinds of physical activities at early Muscle Beach where the building of human pyramids, hand to hand balancing, throwing (or catapulting using a teeter board) women through the air, and many other circus-level acrobatic stunts made Muscle Beach a mecca for photographers and “an attraction” that was beginning to draw an audience.³⁸

With Collins attending and happy to share his knowledge, interest in the idea of becoming professional acrobats mushroomed, and by the end of the summer there were about twenty men and boys—and Relna—regularly meeting at the playground.³⁹ One of the new group who found Muscle Beach that summer was a mid-twenties bus mechanic named Al Niederman, who worked for the City of Santa Monica. Niederman had also been introduced

to gymnastics in the public schools and he and Paul became the unofficial leaders of Muscle Beach in its first years.⁴⁰ It was Brewer and Niederman, for example, who decided to acquire a large tarp in 1934 and claim more of the playground for their training sessions as numbers continued to grow. And it was Niederman, with his carpentry and welding skills, who built most of the original gymnastics equipment as the Beach evolved.⁴¹

In 1935, Cecil C. Hollingsworth, then the gymnastics coach at The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), was hired with WPA funds to teach children’s gymnastics classes during the summer.⁴² Having Hollingsworth involved with the gymnastics group was helpful on several levels. Kate Giroux liked having him around to keep eye on the teenagers; several of his UCLA gymnasts also began coming to the beach because Hollingsworth was there;



Relna Brewer wears one of the first two-piece bathing suits ever seen in America as she talks with master craftsman, Al Niederman underneath the gymnastics rings that he built at Muscle Beach. Niederman was a Santa Monica city bus driver and he designed, welded, and helped install the original rings, parallel bars and other adult gymnastics equipment that was added to Muscle Beach in 1935.



Over the years, the young men and women who attended Muscle Beach became incredibly adept at acrobatics. Pudgy Stockton's archive at the Stark Center, contains dozens of photos such as this one showing the Muscle Beach Gang, as they came to be known, in a variety of spontaneous demonstrations of strength and grace. In these five "two-highs," Pudgy and her husband Les Stockton, are the second couple from the left; Gloria Smith is the first top from the left; and Deforrest Most is the third bottom from the left.

and, most importantly, his presence at Muscle Beach gave Brewer and Niederman additional ammunition when they went back to the city and requested permission to build a small platform, flying rings, and parallel bars at the playground.⁴³ Although the same request had been turned down the previous year, this time the City agreed as long as Niederman did the welding and directed the construction of the platform. The small platform they built was only three feet by twelve feet and stood barely an inch or so above the ground. However, it was a huge improvement over the carpet and tarp, and when combined with the new 25-foot-tall set of rings and Niederman's parallel bars, an adult could at last practice real gymnastics on the beach.⁴⁴

By 1938, the number of people involved with Muscle Beach had risen to about 50 regulars and the group's training sessions, particularly on the weekends, had begun to attract

large crowds. Reporter Joseph Fike, trying to make sense of the rapid growth in the popularity of sport gymnastics in Southern California for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote in 1938, "It is not altogether a coincidence that local interest in tumbling and apparatus work has grown as the playground has grown until the Los Angeles area today is probably the national center for this type of activity."⁴⁵ Fike believed this achievement was no accident and it was caused by the combination of the Los Angeles City Schools gymnastics program and what was happening at Muscle Beach where annual attendance at the Santa Monica Playground had jumped from approximately 3500 visitors in 1930, to 1.8 million individuals by 1937.⁴⁶

Despite this enormous growth, participation on the platform at Muscle Beach was still largely a white phenomenon. Historian Alison Rose Jefferson suggests that racial segregation was the norm on most California



This photo should be titled “Barbelles with Barbells,” as these Muscle Beach regulars are among the women most well-known for incorporating barbell exercises into their time at the beach. Les Stockton was the first person to bring barbells to Muscle Beach and for a time, he and his friends would carry them from his car out onto a hard spot in the sand so they could workout. Left to right are: Relna Brewer McRae, Vera Fried, Alyce Yarick, Pudgy Stockton and Lisle de Lameter.

beaches into the 1960s despite the fact that the California courts had upheld the rights of African Americans to use all beaches in California in 1927. According to Jefferson, African Americans, like other Angelinos, went to the beach in Santa Monica, but they normally gathered at a two-block-long stretch of sand at the end of Pico Boulevard in Ocean Park that was derogatorily called the “Inkwell.”⁴⁷ Although the Muscle Beach regulars welcomed Olympic Weightlifting Champion John Davis to the platform when he visited, there is no record of other Black men or women participating in the activities at the original Muscle Beach.⁴⁸ By the 1950s, when men’s bodybuilding contests began being held as part of Beach festivities on the Fourth of July, a few African-American men participated in those competitions but they were not “regulars” at Muscle Beach.⁴⁹

For most women, inclusion in the activities at Muscle Beach did not begin with learning gymnastics in school. There were no high school gymnastics programs for girls in the 1930s, the 1932 Olympics did not include women’s gymnastics, and the only report in the *LA Times* of women involved with gymnastics prior

to the beginning of Muscle Beach is coverage of a 1908 AAU tournament in which the girls’ club assisted and “augmented” the boy’s team as it competed.⁵⁰

Abbye “Pudgy” Stockton, for example, by far the most famous woman associated with Muscle Beach, had no experience with acrobatics until her steady boyfriend Les Stockton cajoled her into beginning to train to help her lose weight.⁵¹ She began working out about two years after her 1935 graduation from Santa Monica High School, and at first Stockton would only exercise in the privacy of her bedroom. After losing twenty pounds through a combination of calisthenics, dieting, and light dumbbell training, Pudgy—a nickname her father gave her when she was a small child—agreed to accompany Les to Muscle Beach now that she felt comfortable being seen in a bathing suit. Naturally reserved and somewhat shy, Stockton remembers being overwhelmed at first by the atmosphere at Muscle Beach. Knowing she had no gymnastics background, Stockton said she just tried to stay out of the way in the beginning and began her training by learning to do a handstand. In an autobiographical profile

from 1947, Pudgy described her mastery of the handstand as “the main turning point of my life, although at that time I didn’t realize it.”⁵² Years later, Pudgy explained that it took some time for her to get strong enough to hold herself in the handstand position but being regarded as part of the larger community at Muscle Beach had been her inspiration. Said Pudgy, “We may have been learning our acrobatics from each other, but we still wanted to do things perfectly—to make the movements impressive and beautiful . . . Everyone else was so good, I felt I had to be perfect, too.”⁵³

Relna Brewer, two years younger than Pudgy, was the first real female star of Muscle Beach and, like Pudgy, received a great deal of publicity before she married a fellow Muscle Beach regular, Gordon McRae, and moved away during World War II. Petite, blonde, and looking as if she was always just on the edge of mischief, Relna was 14 when she began tagging along with Paul to Muscle Beach where, rather than being seen as the nuisance “kid sister,” she became everyone’s favorite adagio partner and grew to become a woman who relished being strong and a focus of the public’s gaze. Like many of the young people who came to the Beach during the Depression, Relna dreamed of a career in show business, and was given permission by her mother to take lessons from an older, ex-circus acrobat named Barney Fry, who ran a gym on the second floor of the Elks Lodge in Ocean Park. Fry became a major influence in Relna’s life and taught her jiu jitsu, wrestling, wire walking, and the standard strongman tricks of bending iron bars, tearing phone books, and lifting weights. Strong, agile, and a bit of a showoff, Relna admits she loved the attention her participation in these new activities brought her. Although she was still a teenager, Fry began acting as her manager/publicist and soon she was appearing in variety benefits and other shows where she did strength stunts, performed acrobatics, and often finished by wrestling men much larger than herself. At 5’3” and 115 pounds, with a trim, lithe figure, Relna challenged popular conceptions about strength and femininity and, as would also be the case for Pudgy Stockton, it was her combination of strength, a shapely physique, and facial beauty that sold photographs of her to newspapers and muscle magazines. Often referred to as the “Strongest Girl in America” in the early days of Muscle Beach, Relna’s exploits were reported regularly by wire services and appeared as far away as Brazil.⁵⁴



Barney Fry poses with Edna Rivers in this photo taken at Muscle Beach in the late 1940s. Fry ran a gym near the beach and particularly worked with women who wanted to go into show business. He taught Relna Brewer to wrestle and to do strength stunts such as phone book tearing and iron bending that made her a favorite with photographers and helped her find work as a film extra. Rivers was known as one of the strongest women at Muscle Beach and also did stunt work to help support herself.

MUSCLE BEACH COMES OF AGE

The metamorphosis of Muscle Beach from teen hangout/sport camp to the cultural phenomenon that became known around the world began around 1938. It started with the Works Progress Administration’s willingness to help build a much larger platform that stood three feet off the ground and was ten feet wide and forty feet long.⁵⁵ The new platform with its nearby bleachers was no longer merely a practice space. It was clearly a stage—calling for an audience—and even higher levels of professionalism.⁵⁶ Like the rug and the small platform, the big stage at Muscle Beach attracted yet more professional acrobats, and would-be acrobats, so that by 1940 there were about 50 regulars at Muscle Beach and an increasing number of them supported themselves away from Muscle Beach as acrobatic entertainers or stunt performers in the film industry. A 1947 article discussing Muscle Beach as a desirable site for professional photography estimated that as many as 50 different acrobatic acts had emerged from Muscle Beach in just 13 years.⁵⁷

Another transformational figure at Muscle Beach was Canadian Russell (Russ) Saunders, a former diving and gymnastics champion from Winnipeg, Canada, who came to visit his

sister in Los Angeles in late 1939 and then never left. Saunders had heard of Muscle Beach before he arrived, but after meeting the people there and seeing how much fun they were having, he decided to find a way to stay. As he was debating whether to enroll in college and continue as a competitive diver, Saunders was offered a chance to play an acrobat in a film starring John Barrymore. That job led to another film job, and that to the next, so that by the time he retired, Saunders had worked as a stunt man in more than one hundred feature films, and he had doubled for nearly all of Hollywood's leading men.⁵⁸ The likeable Canadian became the unacknowledged leader of the acrobatic side of Muscle Beach. Saun-

der's acrobatic skills surpassed everyone else's at Muscle Beach. However, he was not a fan of weightlifting. When asked, his standard reply was always to say he would rather lift girls than weights.⁵⁹

Weight training was not fully part of the Muscle Beach scene until the late 1930s. Les Stockton, who married Pudgy in 1941, was among the first to bring weights to the beach but once he started, others followed his iron-booted footsteps. Stockton began weight training at UCLA and became a convert when he gained twenty solid pounds in six months.⁶⁰ The added muscle significantly helped his gymnastics and so Les began proselytizing about the benefits of the weight training to all who would listen. Soon most of the men and a surprisingly large number of women at Muscle Beach began incorporating weight training in their workouts and a separate, and lower platform with a locking storage box was created for the activity.⁶¹

Although it would be after World War



Although diminutive, both Relna Brewer and Pudgy Stockton—who were both under 5'3" in height and weighed 110-115 pounds in the early years—were very strong, as can be seen in this photo that appeared in newspapers across America. Photographers showed up at Muscle Beach frequently and often asked Pudgy and Relna to do something together and to “demonstrate” their femininity. On the same day that this shot was taken, they also posed while combing their hair and applying makeup. Sadly, modern women athletes are often asked to “demonstrate” their femininity too.

II before bodybuilding developed into a major activity at the Beach, the group still took pride in 1941 when Harold Zinkin—one of their regulars—was named the first Mr. California at a contest organized by Vic Tanny.⁶² Vic Tanny and his younger brother, Armand, were part of the Muscle Beach family, yet both were always more interested in weight training than they were in acrobatics. When he first arrived in Los Angeles to attend UCLA in 1939, Armand Tanny had his eye on making the 1940 Olympic team as a weightlifter, a dream he had to give up when the 1940 Games were cancelled. As for Vic, he moved to Santa Monica the following year and opened a small gym close to Muscle Beach.⁶³ To promote the gym, Vic began or-

ganizing strength contests and bodybuilding shows, and even large-scale physical culture variety shows. As Vic's gym business expanded, and as bodybuilding itself became more popular in the 1940s, the Tanny connection brought more lifters and bodybuilders to the Beach. By 1955 when the City required the Muscle Beach weightlifters to form an official club so they could purchase insurance in case of accidents, more than one hundred members signed up.⁶⁴

In 1947, a new era began at Muscle Beach with the introduction of the Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests. The idea for the contests came from DeForest “Moe” Most, another former LA high school gymnast, who was named playground supervisor in 1947.⁶⁵ Most wanted the new physique contests to serve as the centerpiece of special holiday extravaganzas on the Fourth of July and Labor Day that would showcase the Muscle Beach regulars. Although Most had envisioned both the Junior and Senior Mr. Muscle Beach contests as small, local events, an army of photographers and even a newsreel

crew showed up for the first one on 4 July 1947.⁶⁶

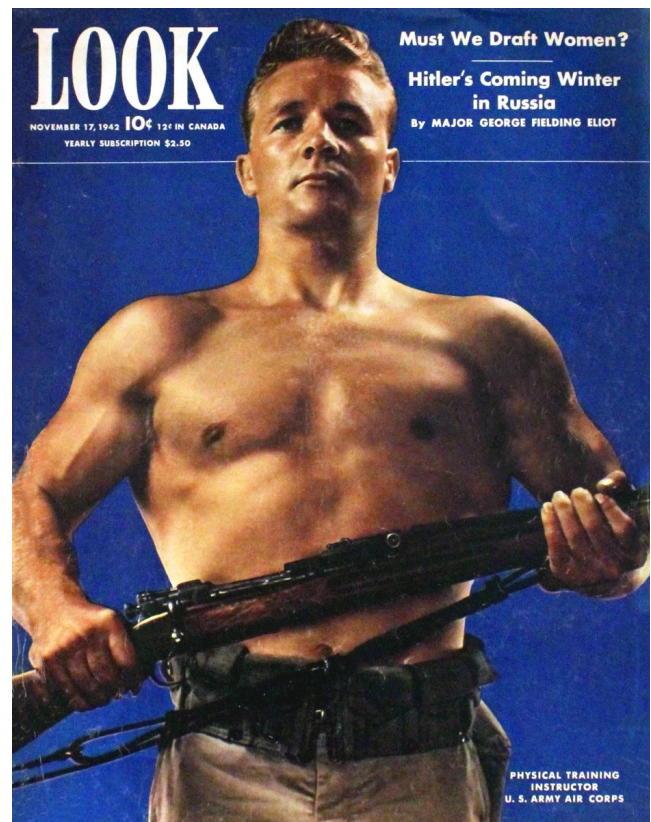
For the 1947 Miss Muscle Beach contest on Labor Day, Moe had invited neighboring towns to send a representative to the contest which resulted in some of the contestants being facially pretty but not necessarily in the best physical condition. The following year, Most restricted the contest to women connected to Muscle Beach and this produced a more fit-looking group.⁶⁷ Although referred to as a “beauty contest,” winning the Miss Muscle Beach title was predicated on the possession of a certain type of beauty. It was a “beauty-muscle” contest, wrote one journalist, and to win you needed to “pour beauty and biceps into the same bathing suit.”⁶⁸

Most’s decision to begin sponsoring physique contests was part of a post-War shift that made the appearance of the body and the ability to lift heavy weights increasingly important to the habitués of Muscle Beach. During World War II, many of the young men involved with Muscle Beach had enlisted in the various armed forces, where their muscular physiques and exceptional fitness caused some of them to be tapped as physical training instructors. Les Stockton, Harold Zinkin, Jack LaLanne, George Redpath, Bert Goodrich, and John Kornoff for example, all spent part of their war years helping new recruits get quickly into shape via barbell training.⁶⁹ The men of Muscle Beach introduced thousands of other men to the benefits of weight training and demonstrated that weight training did not make one “musclebound” as was commonly believed in this era. The military Beach bunch also helped build the mystique of Muscle Beach with their tales of the beauty, camaraderie, and great fun to be had just south of the Santa Monica pier.⁷⁰ The national impact of these early barbell advocates was further heightened when, on 17 November 1942, a full-color photograph of a formidable looking Johnny Kornoff, appeared on the cover of *LOOK* magazine. Harold Zinkin argued in his memoir that the *LOOK* cover marked a watershed moment in America’s understanding of physical fitness. “Shirtless, muscles rippling, and obviously fit to fight . . . Kornoff depicted the American ideal,” Zinkin wrote. “I believe that his photo on *LOOK*’s cover was the beginning of a change of attitude regarding fitness, an attitude that culminated years later in President John F. Kennedy’s focus on fitness, which even then seemed revolutionary.”⁷¹

Whether Kornoff’s cover had the impact Zinkin imagined is not clear. However, both

during and after the war dozens of servicemen stopped in Santa Monica on their way to and from the Pacific Theater, and some of them, including future Mr. Americas Steve Reeves and George Eiferman, decided to avail themselves of the military severance package of \$20.00 a week for 52 weeks and moved to Santa Monica so they could be part of Muscle Beach.⁷² The arrival of Reeves in the same year as the first Mr. Muscle Beach contest presaged a discernable rise in the interest paid to bodybuilding and heavy weight training at Muscle Beach.

Acrobatics did not suddenly disappear, of course, but a slow transformation was underway, a transformation precipitated by the fact that the original founders had grown older, married, begun careers, and in some cases no longer lived close to Santa Monica. The shift in emphasis was accelerated by specialized magazines like Bob Hoffman’s *Strength & Health* and Joe Weider’s *Your Physique* and *Muscle Power* that gave much more ink to competitive weightlifters and bodybuilders than they



Most of the Muscle Beach men served during World War II and Johnny Kornoff was chosen to exemplify all members of the military on the cover of *LOOK* magazine on 17 November 1942. Harold Zinkin argues in his book *Remembering Muscle Beach: Where Hard Bodies Began: Photographs and Memories*, that Kornoff’s muscular torso had a major impact on the growing acceptance of weight training after World War II.

did to pyramid builders in the 1940s and 1950s.⁷³ Although many of the original gang returned from time to time, and some—like Les and Pudgy Stockton, Moe Most, Paula Boelsems, and Russ Saunders—continued to live in Santa Monica and frequent the Beach, the influx of new people, new interests, and new forms of media, meant the sand on Muscle Beach had begun to shift.

In the 1950s the number of bodybuilders and competitive weightlifters associated with Muscle Beach continued to rise. Olympic champion Frank Spellman, for example, arrived in 1953 and took an apartment on the second floor of a building overlooking Muscle Beach.⁷⁴ Several years later, Isaac Berger, the reigning Olympic featherweight champion, and 1956 Olympic silver medalist, David Sheppard, moved west as well.⁷⁵ However, the increasing number of lifters, bodybuilders, and even pro wrestlers then associated with Muscle Beach began to concern some Santa Monica city fathers who viewed this generation of athletes and their bohemian lifestyle as undesirable. Toga Ozyurtcu has written an excellent analysis of the various political, social, and commercial

forces that converged in 1958 to kill the original Muscle Beach. But the finger that pulled the trigger was Isaac Berger's and Dave Sheppard's involvement in a rape case involving two underage Black girls.⁷⁶ As Ozyurtcu demonstrates, the rape charges levied at Berger, Sheppard, and several of their male friends provided the city with a convenient "reason" to bring in bulldozers under cover of darkness—with no public notice or public hearing—and demolish the equipment at Muscle Beach. Although neither Sheppard nor Berger were found guilty of anything, their case became a tipping point for the raising of broader concerns about what some perceived as a new and inappropriately permissive culture evolving at Muscle Beach—a culture tolerant of out-of-wedlock sex, the use of marijuana, and perhaps even homosexuality. As Ozyurtcu ably demonstrates, the end of the original Muscle Beach is a far more complicated story than space permits here, but I would add that the increasingly prominent identification of weightlifting and bodybuilding with Muscle Beach in the 1950s was a precipitating factor. Consider the words of Mayor Russell K. Hart, who told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1959,



Muscle Beach at play. The rings and adult equipment built by Al Niederman changed Muscle Beach and made it a Mecca for those who wanted to learn acrobatics and simply have fun.

that the city planned to strictly enforce the new regulations they'd established for Santa Monica Beach so that "the weightlifters will go someplace else and the name Muscle Beach will be forgotten."⁷⁷

CONCLUSION:

Mayor Hart did not get his wish. Today, just south of the Santa Monica Pier, close to the sidewalk, is a sign which reads, "The Original Location of Muscle Beach . . . The Birthplace of the Physical Fitness Boom of the Twentieth Century."⁷⁸ There is, admittedly, no weightlifting there, but a large "weight pit" and performance space at Venice Beach is proud to be known as Muscle Beach-Venice, and that space stays firmly in the public's eye because of its close connections to bodybuilder and former California governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger.⁷⁹ Beyond Venice, however, the original Muscle Beach lives on in the hearts and imaginations of old and new lifters alike who, through the vast number of photos on the internet, continue to be inspired by what once was.

What the mayor didn't understand was that Muscle Beach wasn't so much about the space as it was about the symbolic importance of the able-bodied men and women who inhabited that space. Like the statues of ancient Greece, photographs of the men and women of Muscle Beach continue to be reinterpreted by new generations of viewers who read them as models for physical perfection and as blueprints for personal transformation. The iconic bodies produced at Muscle Beach, and the world-wide publicity it and its habitués received, created a paradigm for fitness—muscular, tanned, powerful—and every bit as relevant to the CrossFit/functional training generation as it was when the original Muscle Beach gang showed the world how much fun it was to be fit.

**An earlier version of this article appeared as: Jan Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach: An Origin Story," Sport in Los Angeles (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 2017).*

NOTES

1. Mark Sarvas, "Muscle Beach Getting Back in Shape," *Santa Monica News*, 1 July 1988, 1.
2. Photo by Frank J. Thomas, attributed to 1954. Jim Heimann and Kevin Starr, eds., *Los Angeles: Portrait of a City* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2009), cover.
3. Allen Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), ix.
4. David Webster, "Muscle Beach Comes to Aberdeen," *Health & Strength*, 30 September 1954, 9.
5. Academic scholarship on Muscle Beach remains limited to a single dissertation: Tolga Ozyurtcu, "Flex Marks the Spot: Histories

- of Muscle Beach," (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2014), and a small number of articles: Tolga Ozyurtcu and Jan Todd, "Critical Mass: Oral History, Innovation Theory, and the Fitness Legacy of The Muscle Beach Scene," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 37, no. 16 (2020): 1696-1714; Jan Todd and Michael O'Brien, "Breaking the Physique Barrier: Steve Reeves and the Promotion of Hercules," *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 12, no. 4 (August 2014): 8-29; Jan Todd and Terry Todd, "Steve Reeves: The Last Interview," *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 6, no. 4 (December 2000): 1-14; and Jan Todd, "The Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 2, no. 1 (January 1992): 5-7; and Elsa Devienne, "Urban Renewal by the Sea: Reinventing the Beach for the Suburban Age in Postwar Los Angeles," *Journal of Urban History* 45, no.1 (January 2019): 99-125. Devienne, who lives in Paris, has also published in French a book on environmental issues related to California beaches entitled: *The Sand Rush: An Environmental History of Twentieth-Century Los Angeles Beaches (La ruée vers le sable: Une histoire environnementale des plages de Los Angeles au XXe siècle)* (Paris: Sorbonne Editions, 2020).
6. Fred E. Basten, *Santa Monica Bay: The First 100 Years* (Los Angeles: Douglas West Publishing, 1974), 68-73, 76-81; Elizabeth Van Steenwyck, *Let's Go to the Beach, A History of Sun and Fun by the Sea* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 78-79, 89-92.
 7. James Harris, *Santa Monica Pier: A Century on the Last Great Pleasure Pier* (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Pier Restoration Committee, 2009), 65-66.
 8. *Ibid*, 33-38.
 9. "Speaking of Pictures ... Muscle Flexers Show Off Weekly at California Beach," *Life*, August 1946: 14-16.
 10. Gordon L'Allemand, "Muscle Beach," *Muscle Power* 7, no. 5 (April 1949): 30.
 11. Joel Sayre, "The Body Worshipers of Muscle Beach," *Saturday Evening Post*, 25 May 1957, 34-35. Sayre's version was retold in a *Smithsonian* retrospective on Muscle Beach in 1998. See: Ken Chowder, "Muscle Beach," *The Smithsonian* 29 (1 November 1998): 124-137.
 12. Jan Todd, telephone interview with Relna Brewer McRae, 20 February 2016.
 13. Paul Brewer, "Muscle Beach Memories: Paul Brewer and Relna (Brewer) McRae," *Santa Monica Muscle Beach Newsletter* 4 (Spring 1990), 1-2.
 14. The two districts are now combined in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Gary Klein, "The Best, Bar None," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 December 1999.
 15. Brewer, "Muscle Beach Memories," 1; see also: Harold Zinkin and Bonnie Hearn, *Remembering Muscle Beach: Where Hard Bodies Began, Photographs and Memories* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 1999), 18.
 16. McRae Interview, 20 February 2016.
 17. At the 1932 Olympics, American athletes won all nine medals in these new events. Frank Roche, "Los Angeles is Athlete's Mecca: Cream of Nation Head Here for Pre-Olympic Meets," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 February 1931, F-5; and "Gymnastics," *Games of the 10th Olympiad Los Angeles; 1932: Official Report* (10th Olympiad Committee, 1933): 653-654.
 18. "Gymnastics," *Games of the 10th Olympiad*; Roy E. Moore, "Report of the Manager of the American Olympic Gymnastics Team," *Report of the American Olympic Committee* (New York: American Olympic Committee, 1932), 164.
 19. Roche, "Los Angeles is Athlete's Mecca," and Larry Black, "Heroes Without Press Agents," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 1939, F-6.
 20. "Texas Youngsters Arrive for National Gym Meet at Olympics Next Friday," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 June 1930, A 17; Jim Thurman, 10; Joseph Fike, "Athletes Aren't Always Show-Offs!" *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, 7 August 1938, 9-10.
 21. "National Gymnastic Tourney on Tonight: Olympic Stars Show Wares," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 1930, A-13.

22. Nancy Flake, "Conroe Man's Life One for the Record Books," *The Courier of Montgomery County* (Texas), 16 November 2009, 14.
23. McRae Interview, 20 February 2016. The Wolfe newsreel does not appear in any film index searched by the author. To view go to: <http://www.topendsports.com/videos/76/sports/unusual/olympic-tumbler-rowland-wolfe/>.
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25. "Schools at Beach to be Remodeled: Santa Monica Closes Two Buildings and Will Make Structures Quakeproof," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 1933, 10.
26. Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 18; McRae Interview, 20 February 2016.
27. McRae Interview, 20 February 2016.
28. Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 23-25; Jan Todd Interview with Relna McRae, 24 October 1997; Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 21-22.
29. Sayre, "The Body Worshippers," *Saturday Evening Post*, 140.
30. Relna Brewer McRae to "Smithsonian Letters Editor," 1 February 1999, Xerox copy in author's collection.
31. McRae Interview, 24 October 1997; McRae Interview, 20 February 2016; and Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 23.
32. Catherine Horwood, "Girls Who Arouse Dangerous Passions," *Women's History Review* 9, no. 4 (2000): 653-673; Angela Latham, "Packaging Woman: The Concurrent Rise of Beauty Pageants, Public Bathing, and Other Performances of Female 'Nudity,'" *Journal of Popular Culture* 19 (Winter 1995): 149-167.
33. Jan Todd Interview with Abbye (Pudgy) Stockton, 10 May 2001.
34. McRae Interview, 20 February 2016.
35. Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 27-28.
36. *Ibid.*, 43; "Notable Athletic Alumni of the 1930s," Roosevelt High School website, viewed at: https://roosevelths-laUSD-a.schoolloop.com/cms/page_view?d=x&piid=&vpid=1441094935558.
37. McRae Interview, 20 February 2016.
38. The modern sport of acrobatic gymnastics, now part of the World Games, is reminiscent of the kinds of adagio that happened regularly at Muscle Beach. See: "History of Acrobatic Gymnastics," at: <https://usagym.org/pages/index.html>.
39. Johnnie Collins's real last name was Kulikoff. Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 5, 39. See also Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 22-23. Oral history interview by Christine Lazzaretto with Paula Unger Boelsems, 7 July 2010, City of Santa Monica Beach Stories Initiative, typescript in author's collection.
40. Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 20-21, 27; McRae Interview, 20 February 2016.
41. McRae Interview, 20 February 2016.
42. Boelsems Interview; see also: Betsy Goldman, "Female Gymnast Once Flew Through the Air," *Argonaut Online*, 10 June 2009.
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44. Paul Brewer, "Muscle Beach Memories," 1; Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 21.
45. Fike, "Athletes," 10.
46. *Ibid.*, 9.
47. Allison Rose Jefferson, "African American Leisure Space in Santa Monica: The Beach Sometimes Known as the 'Inkwell,'" *Southern California Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 155-189.
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50. "Gym Clubs to Travel North: L.A. High and 'Poly' Combined Teams to Leave this Week," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 April 1908, VIII-7.
51. Todd, "The Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 6.
52. Pudgy Stockton, "Abbye (Pudgy) Stockton," unpublished typescript autobiography (1947), author's collection, 2.
53. Jan Todd Interview with Abbye (Pudgy) Stockton, 28 September 1991.
54. A full-page wire service article on Relna titled "Strong Women Aren't Freaks," with four photos appeared in many American papers in 1939 and was then translated and printed in Brazil. See: "Quando A Beleza Acompanha O Vigor," *Journal do Brazil*, 9 July 1939, Sec. 2; and Helen Welshiemer, "Strong Women Aren't Freaks," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 7 May 1939.
55. Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 26-27.
56. The WPA's investment in the new platform was viewed as part of an upgrade of the entire beach area. The following year they built the long, wide sidewalk that runs all the way to Venice and resurfaced the pier. Charles Epting, "Santa Monica's Top Five Landmarks from this Era," *Santa Monica Mirror*, 4 November 2014.
57. Tom Barnett, "Muscle Beach," *U.S. Camera*, August 1947: 28.
58. Myrna Oliver, "Russell Saunders; Muscle Beach Acrobat, Stunt Double in More than 100 Movies," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 2001, B8.
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60. Abbye Stockton, "Glorious Health-Vitality Building," *New Physical Culture* 91, no. 6 (June 1947): 29.
61. Jan Todd Interview with Les Stockton, 28 September 1991.
62. Mary Rourke, "Harold Zinkin, 82, Muscle Beach Pioneer Invented Weight Machine," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2004.
63. "Vic Tanny: America's Greatest Physical Educator," *Wisdom* 37 (May 1961): 3-6.
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65. Valerie J. Nelson, "Deforrest 'Moe' Most, 89; Gymnast was Unofficial Ringmaster at Muscle Beach," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 2006.
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67. Eugene M. Hanson, "Outdoor Health Show: Miss Muscle Beach 1948," *Muscle Power* 7, no. 2 (January 1949): 12.
68. "Bevy of Brawny Beauties to Vie for 'Miss Muscle Beach' Title," *Evening Outlook*, 28 August 1947, 1.
69. Les Stockton Interview, 28 September 1991; Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 63-68; see also "This and That," Washington State Gymnastics History, viewed at: www.wagymnasticshistory.com/history/thisandthat.html; and Al Thomas, "George Redpath: A Life in the Balance," *Iron Game History* 3, no. 1 (September 1993): 15-17.
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71. Photo of John Kornoff by Leo Aarons, *LOOK* 6, no. 23 (17 November 1942): cover; Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 68-70.
72. Todd and Todd, "Steve Reeves," 5.
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75. "Musclemen Held on Sex Charges," *Evening Outlook*, 10 December 1958.
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