

SANDOW: NO FOLLY WITH ZIEGFELD'S FIRST GLORIFICATION

Josh Buck, University of Maryland

On 21 March 1896, Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. starred the French Actress Anna Held in *A Parlor Match*, and this production is what historians cite as the precedent that later became Ziegfeld's hallmark the glorification of women. Although there is validity in this historical account, it is nevertheless misleading. Three years earlier, Ziegfeld had glorified a man, a strongman named Eugen Sandow, and it was then, in 1893 rather than 1896, that the now famous Ziegfeld techniques for glorification emerged.

Sandow was truly the first person to be "glorified" by Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., as Patricia Ziegfeld pointed out in her autobiography: "Eugene [sic] Sandow was Daddy's first experiment in the fine art of glorification."¹ Yet no one has studied this initial experiment or fully explained how Eugen Sandow's fame in America was due to the exploits and promotions of Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr.

Although Ziegfeld began his successful career in 1893, books on Ziegfeld contain only a few paragraphs or pages that deal with his career before Anna Held, and few researchers have studied Ziegfeld's early career or examined the managerial techniques that he used before *A Parlor Match*.² From such information there is much that can be learned about this impresario extraordinaire; a man who spent thousands of dollars on a single dress worn once; a man who would revolutionize the American revue; and a man who would create a legacy through the glorification of women.³

In summer 1893, Ziegfeld found a way to rescue his father's failing venture at the Chicago Columbian Exposition. Florenz Ziegfeld, Sr., director of musical events for the Exposition, found his Trocadero Theater company in dire straights.⁴ Aware of the public's growing interest in Vaudeville, Ziegfeld, Jr. went to New York City and headed for the Casino Theater, known for its variety shows.⁵

The main attraction at the Casino was a musical farce called *Adonis*, with Henry Dixie in the title role. The final scene consisted of a tableau with the "delicate and wispy Dixie" striking a classic pose while the curtain was being drawn.⁶ The curtain immediately opened to reveal a true Adonis: Eugen Sandow.⁷ The performance then continued with Sandow striking various other poses to display his muscles and ended with his trademark: having three horses walk across a plank which lay over his stomach while he was in the Tomb of Hercules position.⁸

Legend contends that Ziegfeld went backstage

after the final curtain and, when Sandow arrived in his dressing room, offered him a contract. Whether this story is accurate or not, Ziegfeld did sign Sandow as the headliner for the Trocadero Theatre. Because Sandow's managers were disappointed with their meager revenue from the strong man, they happily agreed to relinquish him to Ziegfeld.⁹ Having little money to offer, Ziegfeld convinced Sandow to accept ten percent of the ticket sales rather than the one thousand dollar she was demanding.¹⁰

Historians have attributed Ziegfeld's interest in the Casino Theatre to its popularity in the vaudeville circuit; however, this explanation overlooks the likelihood that Sandow was familiar to Ziegfeld before his departure for New York. Four year's earlier, on 30 October 1889, the *Chicago Tribune* ran on its front page the news that an "Unknown" was "stronger than Sampson."¹¹ This referred to the previous night at Westminster Aquarium in London, where Sandow had beaten strongman Charles A. Sampson and assumed the title of the strongest man in the world.¹² It is plausible—even probable—that Ziegfeld had read this article and sought out Sandow as the headliner for the Trocadero rather than simply stumbling across the strongman through serendipity, as Patricia Ziegfeld suggested.¹³

To introduce Sandow to his Chicago public, Ziegfeld, Jr. invested the last of his finances in an advertising blitz in Chicago.¹⁴ He "papered the town with posters of the scantily clad muscleman and placed rather lurid advertisements in local theatre programs to tantalize the public."¹⁵ Ziegfeld also created "highly romanticized . . . biographies of Sandow to catch the media's eye."¹⁶ The blitz worked, for on 1 August 1893, Eugen Sandow premiered in the Windy City at the Trocadero Theatre, performing to a packed house.¹⁷

As he built a reputation for Sandow, Ziegfeld's talent for manipulation became apparent. Ziegfeld invited some of Chicago's prominent women to Sandow's premiere, gambling that the presence of these ladies would bolster publicity. After the performance, Ziegfeld positioned himself at center stage, and taking another gamble, announced that anyone willing to donate three hundred dollars to charity would be granted a private interview in Sandow's dressing room. His gamble paid off, for neither Mrs. Potter Palmer nor Mrs. George Pullman would allow the public to believe that she was unconcerned with social causes. Both ladies, duped by Ziegfeld's ploy, soon found themselves in Sandow's dress-

ing room, being offered the opportunity to feel the muscles of this modern day Hercules.¹⁸ Inasmuch as Ziegfeld planned for the ladies to go backstage, he probably also planned for the pressmen to be waiting outside the dressing room, enabling them to cover the ladies' experience and print every word. Ziegfeld's scheme worked, and by the next day, as Marjorie Farnsworth put it, "You were no one, really no one, my dear, unless you felt Sandow's muscles."¹⁹

Later, Ziegfeld arranged for Amy Leslie, the drama critic for the *Chicago Daily News*, to interview Sandow in a nearby park. The timing of the events that transpired was so well choreographed that it is hard to believe that Ziegfeld had not manipulated this course of events as well. Following Ziegfeld's directions, Sandow, while strolling through the park during the interview, picked a snapdragon and explained that the flower reminded him of his youth in Germany. As Leslie was reflecting on the strongman's sensitive side, an irate guard appeared and tried to apprehend the strongman for picking the flower. According to John Burke, the guard shouted "that Sandow had broken the law . . . Unwisely the guard grabbed Sandow by the elbow." Sandow, however, "simply picked up the guard and held him at arms' length, examining him as if he were some curious specimen of the parks fauna." He put the guard down only when Miss Leslie pleaded for him to do so.²⁰

There are reasons to believe that Ziegfeld was pulling the strings of this puppet show. The park, which was on the Exposition's grounds, was quite large. The odds of a guard observing Sandow Rick the flower were not very high. Further, if Ziegfeld's advertising blitz was so successful (and it was: "Sandow's act. . . [at] the Trocadero . . . raked in \$30,000 in six weeks"²¹), there must have been few who could not recognize the strongman. Indeed, if the guard was unaware of Sandow's identity, he would have arrested Sandow for the attack. Finally, if muscleman Sandow was supposed to be a "gentle giant, equally comfortable with a bouquet of flowers or a heavy barbell in his hand," then his violent response seems out of character.²² Ziegfeld's hand appears yet again.

Ziegfeld seemed to know what the public wanted, and he gave it to them. What they wanted in 1893—the Gilded Age of the Victorian Era—was sex. Ziegfeld challenged the mores of—and so titillated—society by revamping Sandow's costumes from a "blue top and discreet pink tights that covered [Sandow] from neck to toe," into nothing but silk briefs.²³

Sometime earlier, Sandow had posed for several nude photographs depicting classic Greek and Roman postures. Although Anthony Comstock, the watchdog of America during the Victorian Era said that "nude paintings . . . are the decoration of infamous resorts, and the law-abiding American will never admit them to the sacred confines of the home,"²⁴ thanks to Ziegfeld's advertising,

these pictures could be found in the bedrooms of many of high-society's adolescent girls. These pictures were bought and displayed by these girls to pay homage to their latest idol. Many American aristocrats had been exposed to Greek and Roman art while travelling abroad, and thus were more accepting of these classically inspired photographs.²⁵ In each case, Sandow was photographed in the nude except for the strategically placed fig leaf. The leaf proved to be yet another gimmick used to gain publicity—prompting discussions about how the leaf was attached. According to Chapman, there were several techniques utilized. One method used a wire around Sandow's waist, which was later etched out of the photograph. The other common method was to either tie or glue the leaf directly to Sandow.²⁶

Ziegfeld also exploited the fashionable gossip columns. The American public's preoccupation with these columns was no secret, and like everyone else, Ziegfeld knew that people who were written about one day were the next day's conversation piece. While Sandow was still performing in Chicago, Ziegfeld fabricated stories—personally created rumors—linking Sandow with the actress and sex symbol Lillian Russell. They were written about prolifically; columnists guessing when they met, how they met, and even when they would wed.²⁷ Months later, when Ziegfeld heard about Sandow's real marriage, he dredged up these old rumors to keep American women from learning that Sandow was no longer an eligible bachelor.²⁸

After the Columbian Exposition, the Sandow Trocadero Vaudevilles had a short vacation, performed their show in New York City, then headed west to California, playing San Francisco and several other West Coast cities. While the Sandow Trocadero Vaudevilles were in San Francisco for the Mid-Winter Fair, Ziegfeld learned that he could manipulate the United States Judicial system for free publicity.²⁹ Shortly after their premiere performance in the Bay area on 23 April 1894, Ziegfeld had Irving Montgomery arrested for impersonating Sandow. Ziegfeld and Sandow sued for fifty-thousand dollars "for all the confusion [Montgomery] had caused in the minds of the gullible public." Montgomery counter-sued, and a court hearing began.³⁰

After the troupe left California, they took a vacation. Ziegfeld returned to Chicago and Sandow went to England where he married Blanche Brookes whom he had met while he was in Manchester, England, several years earlier.³¹ While there, Sandow had posed in a "fine series of pictures" for her father, a well-known local photographer. Sandow and Blanche became friends and remained in contact from their first meeting until their marriage.³²

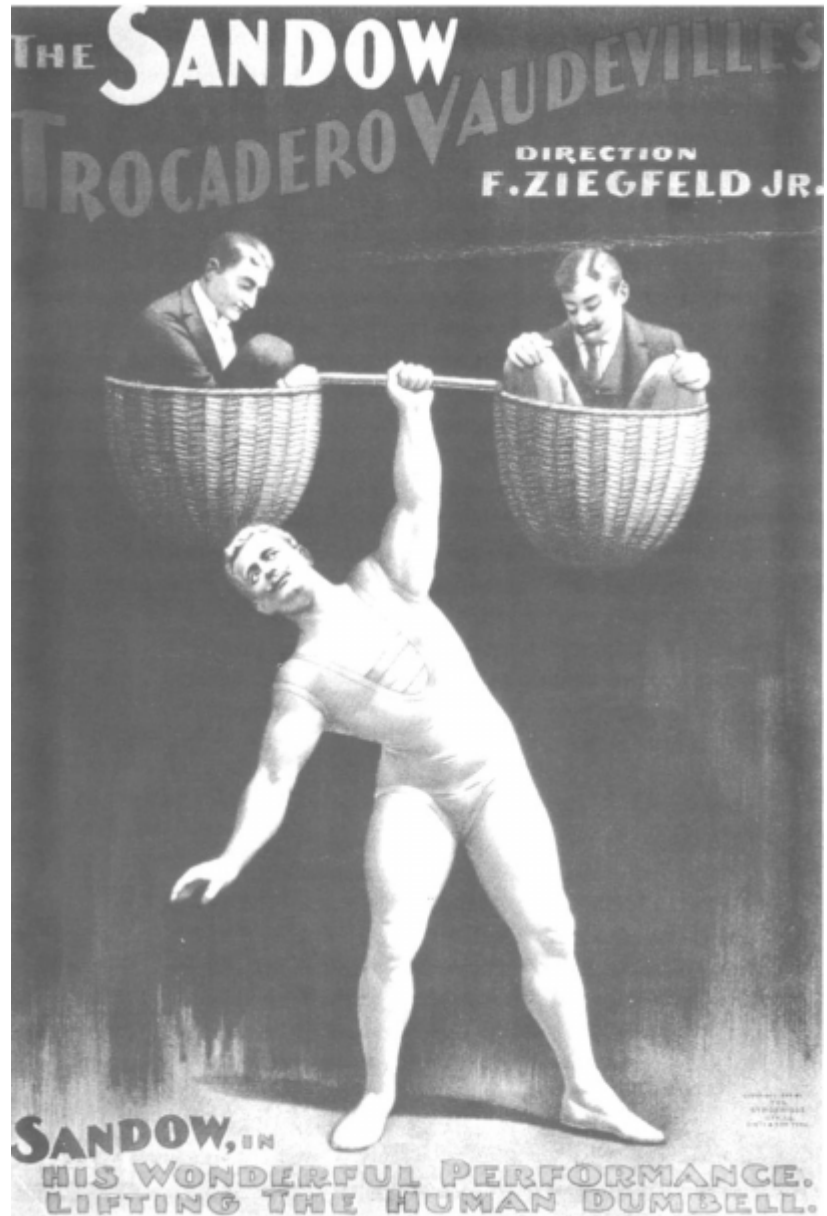
Sandow and his bride returned to the United States and, with Ziegfeld and the rest of the Sandow Trocadero Vaudevilles, began a seven-and-a-half-month tour on 1

October 1894. The troupe played such cities as Philadelphia, Baltimore and Cleveland (to which they returned several times).³³

During this time, Ziegfeld developed a formula for maximum publicity. They always arrived on Sunday night. Monday afternoons were devoted to promoting Sandow; the matinee for Monday was omitted, and most advertisements for the show ran a disclaimer like the one in the *Philadelphia Press*: “On account of a private exhibition given by Mr. Sandow to physicians and members of the press on Monday afternoon, the matinee of that day will be omitted.”³⁴ The Monday afternoon demonstrations, designed to allow doctors to view Sandow and to challenge Ziegfeld’s claims that Sandow was “physically perfect,” were by invitation only.³⁵ The exhibition usually began with Sandow entering the room “with his body hidden from view by a large Turkish bathing robe.”³⁶ He would always stand in the spot that afforded the best lighting and, with much theatricality, would throw off his robe to reveal himself “in all of his physical beauty, bared to the waist.”³⁷ He would proceed to show his control over the different muscle groups by posing and flexing, all the while lecturing on those muscles. During the course of the lecture, Sandow would discuss all the major muscles and call “each muscle by its scientific name.”³⁸ This was apparently quite impressive to the medical people of the nineteenth century, for most articles about the exhibitions draw attention to this feat.

Another portion of the presentation was Sandow’s demonstration of his phenomenal ability to expand his chest, and this, as with the rest of the presentation, received much coverage in the papers. The average man, according to Sandow, is able to expand his chest by only about two inches. Sandow maintained that he could use his highly developed abdominal muscles and thus increase his chest expansion by an unheard of fourteen inches—from forty-seven inches to sixty-one inches.³⁹ [Ed. Note: **Seemingly impossible chest expansions were often part of a strongman’s repertoire, but they were due much less to an ability to expand a set of muscles than to creative use of the tape coupled with an ability to compress the ribcage and surrounding musculature for the “before” measurement.**]

After the lecture and displays of muscle control, Sandow would demonstrate his strength by lifting a volunteer from the floor to the table. To add drama, Sandow



would place his hand on the floor with the palm facing up. He would then ask a volunteer to stand in his palm and would lift the volunteer from the floor to the table without bending his arm at the elbow.⁴⁰ To exhibit the strength of his abdominal muscles, Sandow would lie supine on the floor and allow a volunteer to stand on his abdomen. Once Sandow had taken a deep breath, he would quickly contract his abdominal muscles, knocking the volunteer off. One article recounts that Dr. Sargent Harvard’s physical advisor and anatomical expert, who weighed 178 pounds, was “shot up into the air two feet.”⁴¹

Dr. Sargent also examined Sandow and was quite impressed with the German strongman; many articles quoted the doctor’s opinion: “Altogether, Sandow is the most wonderful specimen of man I have ever seen. He is strong, active and graceful, combining the characteristics

of Apollo, Hercules and the ideal athlete. There is not the slightest evidence of sham about him. On the contrary, he is just what he pretends to be."⁴²

The private presentation, which usually lasted about an hour, was not limited to displaying Sandow. To warm up the audience before Sandow entered, Ziegfeld would have the "Clever Calculating.. Collie Dog," Miss Scottie, handled by Mr. L.G. Lewis, perform. She entertained the assembly by her skills in addition and subtraction as well as her most impressive trick: playing a hand of cards with someone from the gathering of doctors and newspapermen. Miss Scottie usually won.⁴³

The private performance was more than educational. It was an easy way for Ziegfeld to secure endorsements the leading physicians of the cities. What better advertising than having respected physicians telling their patients, friends, and neighbors that they had just witnessed "the strongest man on on earth," or the "superb picture of muscular male perfection"?⁴⁴

Ziegfeld used many other advertising techniques. The Sunday before the week's performance, major papers in each city ran stories stating where and when the troupe was to perform. All of the articles were essentially the same, using the same quotations, metaphors, and adjectives to describe the Sandow Tracadero Company; their near invariability suggests that Ziegfeld created the news releases and handed them to the papers for publication. In that same Sunday paper, there was usually a large advertisement for the show, with pictures of Sandow with horses walking over his stomach, Sandow holding a horse, or Sandow flexing his muscles. Beginning Monday, the advertisement was usually smaller, about four or five lines. There was almost always an advertisement again preceding the last performance, to remind the public.

In a time before television, advertising relied on vivid and tantalizing words Ziegfeld, a master of vivid and tantalizing words, enlivened the announcements with such stimulating phrases as, "A Congress of Wonders," "Inaugural Presentation in America," "A Revolution in the Annals of Vaudeville," and SANDOW The World Knows Not His Equal."⁴⁵ He even billed the Trocadero Vaudevilles as "The Most Expensive and Most Refined Vaudeville Aggregation Ever Formed."⁴⁶

During the tour, Ziegfeld used more than doctors and advertisements to promote Sandow. He also used such gimmicks as autographed pictures of Sandow for all the women at the Wednesday and Saturday matinees.⁴⁷ As with other strongman acts of the time, Ziegfeld challenged the public to duplicate Sandow's performance. As a reward, Ziegfeld offered ten thousand dollars and the golden Championship of the World belt to anyone who could match Sandow.⁴⁸

With ticket sales ranging from fifteen cents to a dollar fifty, Ziegfeld was able to gross quite a large figure.⁴⁹ According to Richard E. and Paulette Ziegfeld, Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. "made nearly \$250,000 (about \$5 million today[1998])" on the tour.⁵⁰

No matter what Ziegfeld was saying or doing, the press was there to capture the moment and reprint it in their papers. Ziegfeld and Sandow were happy to be written about and fawned over by the press, as evidenced by the plethora of antics they specifically designed and catered for the journalists. These antics would range from excitement such as scandal, to reports of new acts in their program. At the turn of the century, Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr.'s savvy for using the media to his advantage came to the fore. He had an ability to present what the public wanted: scandal, romance, and good old-fashioned entertainment.

The years between 1893 and 1896 were a testing ground of sorts for Ziegfeld. It was during this time that he sharpened many skills that would later be used to exploit and promote his most successful and famous venture, *The Ziegfeld Follies*. With few exceptions, all the antics, ploys, and manipulation Ziegfeld used to promote Eugen Sandow find parallels later in his career, as they had proved to be successful techniques.

One important parallel between Ziegfeld's time with Sandow and his later career was his use of costume. Ziegfeld sold Sandow through sex appeal in part by changing Sandow's costume to nothing but silk briefs, knowing that it would cause a sensation. It is here that the concept of "glorification" began to take shape. Later with the Follies, Ziegfeld sold his chorus girls in much the same way, rarely showing nudity—rather he presented something even more erotic.⁵¹ He knew how to present the human body so as to suggest and not to offend. It was with this knowledge of how to present "a pretty girl. . . that haunts you night and day" that Ziegfeld was able to create an empire.⁵²

Similarly, Ziegfeld began using gossip columns to his benefit when he planted rumors about Russell and Sandow. Four years later he would use the same columns to promote Anna Held, and even further in the future, to glorify his showgirls by encouraging rumors that all Follies girls married millionaires.⁵³

Finally, while in San Francisco with Sandow, Ziegfeld realized how much free press coverage could be gleaned from a single court case. For the remainder of his career he would be in and out of court, suing for copyright infringement, being sued for alimony and non-payment, and suing and being sued for a multitude of other reasons,⁵⁴ as with the famous case of the milkman and Anna Held's baths.⁵⁵

When Eugen Sandow came to America, he was relatively unknown on this side of the Atlantic; however, in large part because of Ziegfeld, Sandow became a household name, an endorser of several products, and, later in life, a successful author. He was also able to mount several solo American tours.⁵⁶ It is obvious that Ziegfeld, whether consciously or subconsciously, tested all of his techniques of glorification with Sandow as his "initial experiment." It is evident that nearly all of Ziegfeld's endeavors were successful in elevating Sandow from a mediocre act at the Casino Theatre in New York City to one of *the* icons of the nineteenth century.

Notes:

1. Patricia Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfelds' Girl: Confessions of an Abnormally Happy Childhood* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1946), 36.
2. David L. Chapman's *Sandow the Magnificent* is perhaps the most detailed book covering the period discussed here, however, it should be noted that the book is a biography of Sandow, and deals with Ziegfeld only as part of Sandow's life. Only two chapters discuss Sandow's relationship with Ziegfeld, viz., "New York and Chicago, 1893-94" and "The Tour of America, 1894-96." David L. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994). I am greatly indebted to David Chapman for his help with this paper.
3. Michael Lasser, "The Glorifier: Florenz Ziegfeld and the Creation of the American Showgirl," *The American Scholar* 63(Summer 1994): 445. Some historians contend that Ziegfeld was little more than a playboy and an exploiter of women.
4. Charles Higham, *Ziegfeld* (Chicago: Regnery, 1972), 10-12.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. Chapman, *Sandow*, 49.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 50. The Tomb d Hercules was a supporting feat rather than a true lift. It was very popular with stage athletes.
9. Highman, *Ziegfeld*, 12.
10. Marjorie Farnsworth, *The Ziegfeld Follies*, with an introduction by Billie Burke Ziegfeld (New York: Bonanza Books, 1956), 14. In the end, Sandow averaged three thousand dollars per week.
11. *Chicago Tribune*, 30 October 1889. Sandow is referred to as "Unknown" in the article until the final sentence.
12. *Ibid.*; Chapman, *Sandow*, 23-32.
13. P. Ziegfeld, *Confessions*, 35-36.
14. Farnsworth, *Follies*, 14
15. Chapman, *Sandow*, 60.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Higham, *Ziegfeld*, 13.
18. *Ibid.*, 14.
19. Farnsworth, *Follies*, 16.
20. John Burke, *Duet in Diamonds* (New York: Putnam, 1972), 86; see also, Chapman, *Sandow*, 61.
21. Roger Austen, "Flo Ziegfeld's Blond Bodybuilder," *California Library Magazine* 4 June 1978, 31.
22. Chapman, *Sandow*, 61.
23. *Ibid.*, 62.
24. James Laver, *Manners and Morals in the Age of Optimism, 1848-1914* (New York Harper and Row, 1966), 197.
25. Chapman, *Sandow*, 64-65.
26. Telephone interview with David L. Chapman, 16 November 1996.
27. Burke, *Duet*, 86. Burke points out that not only were the rumors untrue, but that Russell was not impressed with Sandow, saying, "She found the rather simple and naive German something less than overpowering as a personality." Chapman, too, questions the closeness of their friendship. Chapman, *Sandow*, 62.
28. Chapman, *Sandow*, 92.
29. Details of Sandow's California's appearances can be found in Chapter five of Chapman's *Sandow*, 70-99.
30. Austen, "Blond Bodybuilder," 31-33.
31. Chapman, *Sandow*, 91; *New York Times*, 9 August 1894.
32. Chapman, *Sandow*, 71.
33. *New York Dramatic Mirror* October 1894-May 1895.
34. *Philadelphia Press*, 7 October 1894.
35. *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), 6 October 1894; *Baltimore Sun*, 23 October 1894.
36. *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, 23 October 1894.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Baltimore Sun*, 23 October 1894.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Philadelphia Record*, 7 October 1894.
41. *Ibid.* Dr. Dudley Allen Sargent was at that time an Assistant Professor of Physical Training and the Director of the Hemenway Gymnasium at Harvard. Telephone interview with Curatorial Assistant at Harvard University Archives, 5 December 1996.
42. *Philadelphia Evening Item*, 7 October 1894.
43. *Baltimore American & Commercial Advertiser*, 23 Oct. 1894.
44. *Chicago Daily News*, 19 January 1895; *Philadelphia Sunday Item*, 17 February 1895.
45. *Philadelphia Record*, 17 February 1895; *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 28 October 1894; *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), 6 October 1894; *Philadelphia Press*, 7 October 1894.
46. *Philadelphia Evening Item*, 7 October 1894.
47. *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 17 March 1895.
48. *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 28 October 1894.
49. *Chicago Times*, 20 January 1895.
50. Richard E. Ziegfeld and Paulette Ziegfeld, *The Ziegfeld Touch: The Life and Times of Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr.* With a foreword by Patricia Ziegfeld Stephenson (NY: H. N. Abrams, 1993), 28.
51. Lasser, "Glorifier," 445.
52. Irving Berlin, *A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody* (New York): Irving Berlin Music Company, 1946). This song was originally written and produced for The Ziegfeld Follies of 1919.
53. Lasser, "Glorifier," 447.
54. The court cases can be traced through the *New York Times Index*.
55. Ziegfeld had milk delivered every day to Held's hotel room; he informed the press that it was sent to the room so Held could bathe in it to keep her complexion young and soft. A few weeks later, as publicity began to fade, Ziegfeld had the milkman sue for non-payment; Ziegfeld counter-sued saying it was sour milk. Farnsworth, *Ziegfeld Follies*, 17.
56. Telephone interview with David L. Chapman, 16 November 1996. According to Chapman, Sandow was in the process of planning another tour of the U.S. when he died in 1925 in England.

