

In his commentary on the 1973 world powerlifting championships in Harrisburg, Terry Todd noted how "the crowds turn out far better to watch the big men lift-they come to see the living embodiment of their childhood dreams, they come to see the giants. I've often wondered about this, about why it is that the Capuchin monkey, the lemur, the ocelot, and the impala receive far less respective attention at the zoo than the gorilla, the rhinoceros, the tiger and the elephant. Or the lesser kudu than the greater kudu."<sup>1</sup> Creatures of great size and strength, from either the human or animal realms, are not only a source of endless fascination but provide the stuff from which legends are created. So each generation in the twentieth century has witnessed amazing feats from such giants of strength as Louis Cyr, Louis Uni, Eugen Sandow, Henry Steinborn, Hermann Goerner, John Davis, Doug Hepburn, Paul Anderson, Vasily Alexeev, Bill Kazmaier, and Mark Henry.

Countless other strongmen of somewhat lesser repute have successfully promoted themselves by association to the fictional accomplishments of the likes of Apollo (William Bankier), Atlas (Angelo Siciliano), Attila (Louis Durlacher), Hercules (Clevio Massimo), Thor (John Miki), Milo (Luigi Bara), Samson (Alexander Zass), Goliath (Karl Westphal), and Ben Hur (Dick Solomon).<sup>2</sup> Falling through the cracks in the annals of strength history is a figure who never aspired to fame and fortune and is virtually unknown outside the "long woods" district of eastern Connecticut where he spent his entire life. Yet in Voluntown, where he is often likened to Paul Bunyan, the strength feats of Elmer Bitgood assumed larger than life proportions. Such stories are easily dismissed by historians who rightly insist that legends should be rooted in verifiable facts. Indeed most of what is known about the life and accomplishments of Bitgood has been based on hearsay. But his inclusion among the modern giants of strength, and not just a local hero, depends on the extent to which sufficient historical grounds can be established to support his awesome reputation.

That a legend has developed around the life of Elmer Bitgood may be attributed to several interrelated factors. First, he was undoubtedly big and strong. According to his brother Paul, a naturopath in New London, Elmer weighed 290 pounds at age 25 and was 5 feet 9 inches in height. His chest measured 52 inches, his waist 50 inches, and his biceps 20 inches. He wore a size 12 shoe and a 7  $\frac{1}{2}$  hat. These dimensions are not extraordinary by present standards, but Bitgood should be assessed by the standards of his own era, not ours. He lived from 1869 to 1938. At the prime of his lifting career in 1894, according to life insurance data, he exceeded the average adult in bodyweight (for his height) by 126 pounds with a correspondingly large girth.<sup>3</sup> Despite his extraordinary size, surviving photographs convey an image of raw strength rather than obesity.

A further foundation for the Bitgood legend lies in the many stories that abound of his lifting prowess. In the decades following his death, many individuals testified to his prodigious strength. Not surprisingly, these eye-witness accounts have been expanded upon over the years—owing partly to the tricks that memory plays on all of us, the ego charge one sustains from

improving upon an already good story, and in the case of Voluntown, a certain (ethnocentric) pride of place that comes from boosting the historical of one's hometown or region.<sup>4</sup> An additional enticement for us to believe the Bunyanesque tales associated with Elmer Bitgood comes from a packet of photographs housed in the archives of the Voluntown Historical Society in the basement of the town hall. They show Elmer hoisting various heavy objects, including barrels, globe bells, and hunks of iron. There is also a picture of Elmer and his younger brother Doane standing beside a large table, designed for backlifting, with a pile of boulders on top. To help dispel curiosity about the weight of these devices, such numbers as 500, 120 and 300 appear on them. But the clarity and uniformity of these numbers suggest that they may have been superimposed on an earlier generation of photographs. If so, one wonders who might have done it, when, and above all, why. Especially suspicious is a picture of Elmer holding a sphere labeled "500" overhead with one hand with ridiculous ease. Here the number "5" appears flat, though the surface is bent. Another photo shows the strongman posing in overalls with a barrel marked "360" overhead. Not only is his face expressionless, but his arms are bent and his muscles show little sign of flexing. Either we are being hoaxed by some gross misrepresentations or Bitgood did really possess superhuman strength. Is seeing really believing?

> A final basis for belief in the legend of Elmer Bitgood is artifactual. In the driveway of Arthur and Mary Anne Nieminen off Brown Road lies a collection of solid granite barbells and dumbells (inserted with bars) that once belonged to the Bitgoods. They were moved from the Bitgood homestead on Wylie School Road where the strongman trained and allegedly performed impromptu feats of strength for visitors. Jan Mallett, the current resident, states that she is constantly digging up pieces of iron when preparing flower beds in her yard. After the last of the Bitgoods died, Arthur Nieminen, as executor of the property, sold it but was allowed to keep the stones and move

Has any human ever been strong enough to lift a freight car? If the legends can be believed, Elmer Bitgood was. This caricature appeared in the *Providence Sunday Journal* in early 1948.

them to their present location. Originally, explains Nieminen, there were many more small items of iron paraphernalia, but they were carried off by thieves over the years. The larger stones, however, defied even the most determined acts of criminal mischief. Nieminen has also resisted offers to sell the stone barbells, the heaviest of which supposedly weighs 1,225 pounds, believing that they should remain a part of the heritage of the county.<sup>5</sup> (Ed Note: Using circumferential measurements supplied by the Nieminens, Greg Ernst calculated that the granite bells would weigh between 1520 and 1700 pounds. It is also interesting that the boulders are only 27" apart, which would make it very difficult for a true superheavyweight to take a comfortable deadlift grip.) But the nagging question remains of why they were assembled and whether anyone, including the Bitgoods, ever used them. Surely no one would go to the trouble and expense of constructing these awkward instruments of exertion if they were never to be employed. Like Stonehenge or the Travis dumbell that once graced the portal of the York Barbell Club on Ridge Avenue, their mere presence begs an explanation. and logic dictates that someone very strong must have lifted them. Furthermore, they fit perfectly into the rural ambience of eastern Connecticut and into a time in United States history before anyone was manufacturing barbells. Prior to the founding of Milo Barbell Company by Alan Calvert in 1902, and for at least a decade after, improvisation was the rule. The Bitgood apparati were nothing if not improvised. By far the most important impact the boulderbells have had over the past half century has been to provide a tangible reinforcement for the growing legend of the Paul Bunyan of New England.

History, however, relies more on the written than on oral or artifactual tradition, and the search for the real Elmer Bitgood must begin with the earliest possible primary accounts. In lieu of any manuscript sources (letters, diaries, memoirs, etc.) from the period, newspapers provide the most reliable observations of the Bitgoods, and the earliest such account, entitled "Bitgood Brothers, Voluntown's Giants," appeared in the 7 May 1909, issue of the *Norwich Bulletin.* The article, accompanied by a picture of Elmer and Doane beside their backlifting table, asserts that this apparatus held

> five stones weighing 2,200 pounds. Elmer then gets underneath, puts his hands on the small stool and raises the table three or four inches with his shoul

ders, lowering it gently back to place. Then, if the visitor wants to see something more, he has a stone as big as a small automobile, weighing 2,400 pounds, which they roll upon the table, and that is hoisted in the same way.... Then he has two stone bar bells, the heaviest 230 pounds, which he will put up over his head, one at a time, and finish up with a one-handed feat in which he holds at arm's length a stone weighing 150 pounds, and will also lift it with his little finger put through a ring in the stone.

In an obvious effort to lend credibility to these claims, Doane assured the reporter that "the weights lifted are guaranteed . . . by a committee of townsmen who weighed them on a pair of new scales and marked the weights, so that there can be no mistake." But the Bitgoods refused to subject their strength to public scrutiny when some performers billed as the Apollo Brothers came to Norwich and issued a sack lift challenge to local strongmen. Although Doane called it a "plaything," he refused to accept the Apollos' challenge out of concern that "he might break up the show for the rest of the week."<sup>6</sup>

Still, in light of feats performed over the next half century by such strongmen as Paul Anderson, Hermann Goerner, Karl Norberg, and countless Olympic lifters in competition, the Bitgood lifts reported by the Norwich Bulletin are far from the realm of impossible. Those reported by a 1916 account in the Providence Sunday Journal entitled "Voluntown's Modern Samson," however, verge on the unbelievable. This article seems intent upon raising Elmer Bitgood to legendary status. A romantic tone is set at the outset by the author's likening Elmer to such mythical heroes as Canadian strongman Joe La Flamme and Ireland's Tim [Finn] McCool who reputedly built the Giant's Causeway between Ulster and southwest Scotland. But it is Samson, not Hercules, Atlas, or even Paul Bunyan with whom Elmer is compared. Unlike those heroes of yore, however, Bitgood was both real and still alive to claim the distinction of being the "strongest man on earth." His feats of strength included lifting "a 180 pound keg with both hands over the head, lifting 175 pounds of good solid Connecticut rock with one hand straight up above the head; 'muscling out' 51 pounds in each hand with arms at right angles to the body; [and] raising a dumbbell [makeshift barbell] weighing 416



A Young Elmer Bitgood easily hoists a barrelmarked "360" in similar photographs, overhead. Photo Courtesy John Fair

pounds with both hands over the head." Accompanying this unsigned article are some pictures of Elmer lifting these weights in his bib overalls. While the one-hand overhead lift with a 175 slab and the "muscle-out" with two 51 pound weights are quite believable, it seems highly unlikely that the double barrel barbell he is hoisting weighed 416 pounds, especially since it is clearly marked "200" on one side. Whether Elmer could even have cleaned such an unwieldy apparatus is the question that would confront most modern iron game authorities, especially considering the thick bar and reversed (curl) grip displayed in the picture!<sup>7</sup>

To provide substance to these reputed claims, the reporter sought first-hand evidence by actually visiting the Voluntown area. He immediately observed that "Bitgood seems to be the most widely known citizen of eastern Connecticut." Indeed he "exper-ienced little difficulty in procuring directions as to how to reach the Bitgood farm, and almost every farmer seemed eager to tell of some wonderful exploit that he had seen his fellow townsman perform. The nearer the reporter approached his destination the more wonderful were the tales, and those related by the soothsayers and oracles of the village itself seemed almost unbelievable." At the first farmhouse across the Rhode Island line, where the reporter sought directions, he was told that Elmer, just to stay trim, "picks up a couple of stone gate posts, weighing 400 or 500 pounds apiece, and carries them around, one in each hand, a great deal easier than a chore boy would a couple of cans of milk." Later, when the reporter's driver got their automobile stuck in the mud of one of rural Connecticut's unpaved roads, a local farmer appeared, expressing regret that Elmer Bitgood, who could extricate the machine "quicker than scat," was not available.

> 'Pull that machine out of there?' contemptuously asked the driver. 'Why that 36 horse power motor won't even budge it. What we need is a couple of good horses.' 'Makes no difference what you think you need, Elmer could pull it out, and what's more, he has done it,' replied the farmer. 'Last fall after one of those thawing spells, when the roads were a good deal worse than they are now, a fellow with a good deal bigger car than this came along and got stuck. He came down and got my horse, but we couldn't move the car. We were trying to get something under the back wheels by lifting the car with a jack when Elmer happened along.

'He stopped and looked on a minute or two. Then he came over, told us to get the jack and the old boards out of his way. Then he grabbed hold of the rear springs and lifted that car right out of the ruts up on to solid ground and told the driver to get in and go along. It's too bad he ain't here.'

'Yes, it is too bad,' ejaculated the driver as he viciously jabbed away at the mud with a tire iron. 'I suppose that strong man of yours lives on ox hearts and fried elephant's ears.'

This facetious remark further aroused the farmer, whereupon he launched into a tirade about Elmer's eating exploits.

> 'Last winter he hired out with a man over near Jewett City. The man was loading telephone poles on cars and Elmer hired out at so much a month and keep. He told the boss when they made the bargain that he expected a good dinner every day, but was not so particular about his breakfast and supper.'

> 'That seemed reasonable to the boss and after the bargain had been made he asked Elmer what he considered a good dinner. "Oh," said Elmer, "four or five roast chickens and the usual fixings will do.""

> 'Just for the fun of the thing the boss got four roast chickens ready the first day and Elmer ate every scrap and crumb and licked up the last bit of gravy. What I'm telling you is true as gospel and the four chickens wasn't an over heavy meal, either.'

> 'I've been told that Elmer and his next door neighbor went down to Plainfield a couple of years ago to get some groceries and among the things they bought was a half-barrel of crackers. On the way back Elmer began to nibble at the crackers. He'd reach into the barrel and take a fist full and eat them while his neighbor drove the horse. He wasn't trying to see how much he could eat, was nibbling the crackers more as a pastime just as he would peanuts, but before he got home every gosh-hanged cracker was gone.'

'Now, understand I wasn't there, but the man that told me the story

has a pretty good reputation in this community, and it's the common talk of the whole town that he can drink eight quarts of milk without taking the can down from his head: so believe it or not.'

Upon reaching Voluntown, the reporter was regaled with similar stories by local citizens gathered at the village store, to the extent that Bitgood "made the famous strong men of the world resemble a collection of weaklings." Additional stories included one about how Elmer would "spell" his horse while plowing—meaning that he would actually relieve the animal periodically by harnessing the plow to himself and pull it around the field several times while Old Dobbin rested! A local lumberjack allegedly saw Bitgood lift a sawmill boiler, with several men standing on it, that it had taken four horses to haul out of the woods.<sup>8</sup>

"Seeing is believing" was the response of the reporter from Providence, but to ensure that "those who were telling these remarkable stories were not endeavoring to make a Hercules out of a Lilliputian," he visited Elmer who was living temporarily with his brother in Plainfield. In what is the only known interview with Bitgood, the reporter describes him as "blushing like a school girl" and admitting that the stories about his ravenous appetite and his lifting the steam boiler were "somewhat exaggerated." But he did confirm that the "big dumbell made up of two kegs and an iron bar" did weigh "416 pounds. Each keg with the pebbles represents a little more than 200 pounds and the weight of the bar makes up the rest." Furthermore, he explained how he performed a back lift with "2100 pounds of rock" on a platform in his backyard.

> Then I have more rocks that I put on until the weight is 4200 pounds. How often do I lift that? O, sometimes three or four times a day and sometimes not for a week. It all depends; if I need exercise I try it and if visitors come along and won't believe I can do it. I just show them.

Two other stunts Bitgood performed to the delight of visitors was pulling a "stone drag" loaded with 1,100 pounds of rock and a wagon with 2,100 pounds, each for 25 yards. Total abstinence from alcohol and tobacco he regarded as part of the reason for his ability to perform such feats.<sup>9</sup>

What the reporter lacked, of course, was absolute verification of Elmer's lifts. With all of his apparatus about ten miles away in Voluntown, Bitgood was unable to demonstrate his exercises or have his weights tested on certified scales. In lieu of such verities there was hearsay. When the reporter 'became suspicious that perhaps after all the weights were not as represented," Elmer responded that a group of government forestry workers had recently visited his yard, and even the largest of them could do no more than lift one end of his big dumbell. Most others as well could barely budge it. "They tell of men who are able to take that weight and put it up with one hand, but I have never met any of them." For further corroboration of his lifts, Bitgood referred the reporter to "Neighbor Brown" who treated him to even more stories, including one about Elmer breaking nine cant hooks in three days while loading telephone poles in Jewett City, and vouchsafed his reputation to no less an authority than Sheriff Bliven of Plainfield, who had witnessed Elmer remove his 6,500 pound touring car from the mud.<sup>10</sup> By this time the stories were beginning to gain a circular quality and a life of their own. Yet it was in these ill-defined circumstances that the Bitgood legend was born.

It was not until April 1934, however, that the next Bitgood article appeared in the press. The Norwich Sunday Record reproduced the photograph that appeared with the 1909 article and featured some embellishments and additions to that original piece. Instead of merely holding "at arm's length a stone weighing 150 pounds," the latest version states that he would "hold out" this weight, implying a horizontal rather than a vertical lockout. But the most impressive-sounding new feats credited to Elmer involved steam engines. At a Fourth of July picnic Elmer allegedly lifted the end of a boiler and engine weighing 4.500 pounds with an additional nine men seated on it. On another occasion, the article reports, "he stopped a steam engine running under 85 pounds pressure . . . for a full minute."<sup>11</sup> The curious aspect of these prodigious feats of strength is that they appeared to have just been done and that Elmer could easily repeat them at will. He was, in fact, 65 years old and would die only four years later of heart disease.

By far the most consequential account in spreading the Bitgood story was G. Y. Loveridge's "Strong Elmer Bitgood, The Man and the Legend," which appeared in *The Providence Sunday Journal* eight years after Elmer's death. Like his 1916 precursor, Loveridge went on a fact-finding odyssey to eastern Connecticut. Truth in this instance proved more elusive inasmuch as it was no longer possible to witness Bitgood perform. His lifts were now the exclusive preserve of the memories of his friends and relatives. Loveridge himself, recognizing the fleeting nature of his evidence, admits that "memories already are becoming indistinct, the old homestead has vanished, and the time is setting in when Elmer will be forgotten, only to arise years later, perhaps, reincarnated in myth." Loveridge first learned of Elmer's exploits from a friend of a friend in Providence named Ray Millar who related how the strongman had once gone to Danielson and on a bet lifted the front end of a freight car off its tracks and then wanted another \$25 to put it back. "But maybe that's just a story," he suspected. Another informant was Tom Lewis, 78, of Moosup who told Loveridge that he had seen Bitgood

> lift a hundred-pound anvil by the horn with one hand and carry it same's you might carry a stick. . . . . Carry it over there and come back and set it down again. There was a steam boiler at a lumber mill where he worked, and I've seen him put a railroad tie in the firebox and four or five men climb onto the boiler and Elmer put his back under the tie and lift the whole business.

Then Loveridge visited Voluntown to see the stone weights, some of which still remained at the site where only a foundation remained of the Bitgood homestead. His conclusion after seeing not only the big barbells but the smaller stones with iron rings used for finger lifting was one of conjecture and amazement. "If these were what Elmer had exercised with, he must indeed have been a man powerful beyond easy belief."<sup>12</sup>

In Voluntown, Loveridge also talked with a frail old man and his son Lloyd. The former could not remember much about Elmer except that he was "tremendously powerful and big." Yet he "could run a hundred yards as fast as any man." Lloyd recalled that he was visiting the Bitgood house at age seven and wanted some pears from a tree whose branches he could not reach. Whereupon Elmer walked over to a rail fence and "took the top rail in one hand as though it was a stick and knocked off some pears for me." Mrs. George Dawley, also of Voluntown, remembered Bitgood as a gentle giant. "I never heard a bad thing about him. . . . He was always good-natured, never harmed anybody. Doane was very stout too, a very stout fellow. They were all big, portly men." Albert T. Sisson of Providence concurred that Elmer was "a big, good-natured, fair complexioned man with red cheeks." When amused, he would "put back his head and laugh in that deep voice of his and his belly would shake. There wasn't a bit of meanness in him. He was a placid sort of man, always ready to laugh." Sisson also testified to witnessing Bitgood



Elmer and Doane Bitgood with their backlift apparatus at their home on Wylie School Road in Voluntown, Connecticut. Photo Courtesy John Fair

backlift his platform with stones and seeing him move the stone-sled he had improvised.<sup>13</sup>

Revelations of a more extreme nature, no less laden with memories, were supplied by a distant relative, Dr. Ellsworth Marshall Bitgood, a retired veterinarian in Middletown. That Elmer "could snap the hickory handle of a cant hook [used for log rolling] as though it were a mmatch" was common knowledge. He had seen Elmer lift the boiler and also the end of a wagon full of railway ties, but he admitted that he liked to amuse friends with a Paul Bunyanesque story that when Elmer approached a closed gate with a wagon and team of horses, he would simply lift them over it. Likewise Elmer's great size lent itself to stories of his huge appetite. So Dr. Bitgood would "cheerfully relate how when Elmer was thirsty he would place one hand on each end of a keg of cider and drink the contents." Ellsworth's version of the cracker barrel episode now differed substantially from the one from 1916. It now included Doane rather than a neighbor, took place on the way from Norwich, not Plainfield, and consisted of a full barrel, rather than a half barrel, of crackers.<sup>14</sup> How wonderfully accommodating oral tradition can be to changing versions of reality.

Another Bitgood who assisted in the transmission of Elmer lore was the youngest Bitgood brother, Jessie Paul, a naturopath from New London. At first he had difficulty recalling Elmer's feats for the Providence reporter. What brought them to mind was the relation of Elmer's lifestyle to his own medical practice. Hence his was a message with a moral. Elmer allegedly lived a simple life, drank only milk and water, and never married. He was a devout Baptist who preferred reading the Bible to attending dances. Then he learned about Samson and allegedly concluded that great strength came from living right. "Brother had a red Devonshire bull calf once. He used to take it into his lap like a pet even when it weighed two or three hundred pounds." Consequently, defying the natural disposition of adult bulls, this animal, 'when it was full grown . . . was gentle as a kitten." Dr. Bitgood also claimed that his brother had had some training from noted physical culturist Bernarr Macfadden and had gone on stage for awhile, but he did not want to be a professional strong-man. "Sandow and men like that were weaklings compared to brother," he asserted. "We often had strong men come to the farm, but they couldn't lift the weights. One of them was associated with Louis Cyr, the Canadian strong man." On a visit to Norwich, "this man came to the farm and he just looked at the weights and they were beyond him." Dr. Bitgood estimated that Elmer reached his prime at age 25 (circa 1895), fully fifty years earlier.<sup>15</sup> Loveridge seems skeptical at times but he, no more than the 1916 reporter, could halt the march of a legend.

It is not surprising that Jessie Paul, whose testimony to Loveridge strained credibility, was responsible for the next stage of the legend's growth. An aura of historical fiction permeates a 1953 article in the Hartford Times where Bitgood leads reporters to a rock with a giant "V" carved in it, located 200 yards west of the house on Beach Pond Road where the doctor was born. The house, he alleges, was built by a pirate named John Hunter and the "V" was a clue to a spot nearby where Hunter buried his treasure in the seventeenth century. Dr. Bitgood insists that his great, great grandfather, Samuel Bitgood, who migrated from England, was the first to see the "V-Rock of Voluntown" in 1790. But where was the pirate's gold? "Has he ever dug for it?" a reporter asked. "'No,' the doctor replied. 'Where would you dig?' Five yards from the rock? Five rods? Five miles?' Nor does the local legend specify whether the 'V' represents the roman numeral or the letter."<sup>16</sup> The pirate story appears to be a classic case of making something out of nothing.

Not content to spin just one spurious yarn, Bitgood uses this opportunity to improve upon the story of his late brother's strength. Whereas Elmer had admitted to backlifting 4,200 pounds, now it was 4,600, and "the great physical culture exponents of the day, Bernarr Macfadden, Lewis Sears [sic] of Canada, and the Great Sandow" were making "pilgrimages to Voluntown to witness his feats of strength." But the most far-fetched pieces of new information claim that Elmer "tossed the 625-pound bell over his head" and that he "thought nothing of lifting a 1,225pounder waist [not thigh] high and walking around the yard with it." This seems remarkable inasmuch as no modern weightlifter or powerlifter, with the benefit of steroids, revolving sleeves, perfectly balanced bars and bells, and scientific training techniques has exceeded a 600 pound clean and jerk. Nor has any modern powerlifter done more than a 925 pound deadlift, much less bring it all the way up to his waist and walk around the yard with it. Finally, the good doctor drew upon his medical knowledge, long since dismissed by the medical profession as myths, to explain his brother's death. It was "a result of his feats of strength, and complications brought on by an overworked heart," he explained. "He was too powerful for his own good. Like a rich man he squandered his substance." Either to draw attention to himself, his family, or his community, Dr. Bitgood felt compelled to expand upon the truth.<sup>17</sup>

Over the next fifteen years the stock of stories about Elmer Bitgood continued to grow-to the extent that fact blended easily into fiction and the name Bitgood became synonymous with Bunyan. Richard L. Champlin, commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Elmer's death in Yankee magazine, makes this connection. "When Paul Bunyan left New England's logging camps for the Great Lakes country, his departure created a strongman vacuum. Will the legend of Elmer Bitgood fill that vacuum?' Champlin, blending Loveridge's stories with some of his own, appears determined to do just that. He tells about how "one of the old model cars" got stuck in the mud near Elmer's home. "It bogged down in its own ruts, wouldn't go forward or back. Elmer to the rescue." He brought out a harness, hitched himself to the car, and "hauled it up hill with the passengers still inside." Then there was the story of the fellow who "wanted to cut the trees in his maple swamp" one winter and brought in a pair of oxen to do it. "However, the beasts did little but thrash about. They couldn't move the logs. 'Better get the Bitgoods,' someone suggested." Elmer and Doane "marched out of the swamp easily. Trouble was, the weight of those logs upon their shoulders just pushed their legs into the frozen ground up to their knees." Champlin enhances his account with photographs of Elmer. One of them shows him holding aloft two huge barrels connected by a pole, larger than the ones shown in the 1916 article but again featuring the reversed (curl) grip. The caption reads: "500 lbs. in each hand doesn't bother Elmer (or are those barrels hollow?)." Further reason to think that Champlin might not believe quite everything he writes comes from his inclusion of testimony from a Miss Annie Bitgood of Oneco who doubted that Elmer ever lifted a freight car off its tracks. She assured him that "this story has gotten out of hand. Not everything they tell about Elmer happened just that way. 'Why, you know how stories grow. . . . You start with a feather in the mawnin', and by night it's a feather bed.""<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless Champlin persisted not only with his tales of Elmer's strength but equally amazing ones of his

great appetite. Elmer allegedly ate so much that his mother had to cook his meals in a washtub. Once Elmer went to a farmer and asked for some milk. "The farmer pointed to a 10-quart milk can and told him to help himself." Minutes later, after quaffing the entire two and a half gallons, he was back asking for more. Churches sponsoring fund-raising dinners were wary of the Bitgood bboys' possible attendance. "So when the word got around that there'd be a bean supper Saturday night, the clause was added, 'and don't tell the Bitgoods.' Nevertheless

Doane and Elmer did show up, and one time the) paid for five meals. They emptied every platter in sight, including the six-quart bean pot." Champlin's final story borders on the miraculous. It features

> our hero hoisting bales of wool up to the third story loft of a woolen mill. . . . He stood there near the edge, too near the edge, too near at one point, for he unbalanced himself and tumbled. On the way down, realizing that this would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, he glimpsed an open door on the first floor and some wool lying around, so he changed course in mid-air, sailed through the door and came to rest on a pile of springy wool. Lucky for him and the legend.

And so, Paul Bunyan move over.<sup>19</sup>

That he could use his strength to defy the laws of gravity in air as well as on terra firma clearly added a new dimension to the Elmer legend. For iron game buffs, it does not get any better than this!

Not surprisingly, Champlin's account, reprinted in a volume entitled Mad and Magnificent Yankees, stimulated even greater interest in Elmer Bitgood.<sup>20</sup> What's more, it coincided with the 250th anniversary of the founding of Voluntown in 1721. It provided an opportunity for expression of civic To local historians, the Bitgood legend pride. proved irresistible—with all its trimmings. In her "Compilation of Facts and Not So Factual Happenings," the commemorative history of Voluntown, Judy Harpin faithfully recounts the varns handed down by Loveridge and Champlin. Stories about the freight car at Danielson, the sawmill boiler, the 625 pound overhead lift, the 1,225 deadlift/yard walk, the six quart bean pot and ten quart milk pail, and Elmer's miraculous flight from the top of a

woolen mill are all there. Even "Lewis Sears" shows up, epitomizing the weak knowledge base for this account.<sup>21</sup> Harpin's portrayal is believable only to those who also think there really was a Paul Bunyan.

Somewhat more credible is Prentice Phillips, whose distant memories of Elmer appeared in a March 1970 issue of the *Providence Journal*. Phillips got to know Bitgood in 1916 and learned that he had briefly been featured as a strongman with Barnum and Bailey's Circus. (*Ed Note: The Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wiscon*-



ELMER BITGOOD IN AN UNCHARACTERISTIC "STRONGMAN" POSE, AS HE MIGHT HAVE APPEARED AT THE TIME OF HIS PERFORMANCE AT THE BABCOCK THEATER IN VOLUNTOWN. PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FAIR

*sin, can find no record of Bitgood with the B&B show.)* But Elmer was too shy and certainly no showman. When he refused to perform in a leopard skin his contract was terminated. It was against that background that Phillips, an apprentice projectionist at the Babcock Theater, Voluntown's only movie house, suggested to his boss that an appearance by Elmer might be a good way to counteract sagging summer attendance. The theater manager, Lou Wilcox, liked the idea, but he could not convince Elmer to perform his feats of strength in a public hall. Finally, Phillips decided to try.

> At first, my efforts met with refusal, his excuse being that he had no weights and would have to use rocks. When I assured him that rocks would be acceptable, he added, 'And I ain't going to wear any fancy get-up neither. I come just as I am or not at all!'

> In spite of my pleas that undershirt and overalls was hardly the costume for a stage appearance, he was adamant, saying, 'I'll go on one time, just to please you! That's final; take it or leave it.' Without thought, I accepted.

> An amazed and somewhat disconcerted Lou Wilcox accepted the terms of our agreement, and posters announcing the appearance of 'ELMER the GREAT,' former Strong Man with Barnum & Bailey's Circus, at Babcock's Theater the following Saturday night were soon on display.

> Saturday night, in spite of the oppressive heat, we opened to a packed house. After the showing of the feature picture, followed by an episode of *The Perils of Pauline*, starring Pearl White, the curtains parted and Elmer faced a receptive audience.

By his side was a large table holding various sized boulders delivered by truck that morning. Whether they weighed 2,400 pounds as advertised, I don't know. But he did raise the table several inches from the floor.

Next, while the enthusiastic audience, with whistling and foot stamping, roared approval, Elmer held a huge boulder at arm's length and let it fall with a resounding crash to the floor.

This brought down the house in more ways than one.

The theater was located over Dearnly & Clark's Store, and as I watched from the wings, I became aware of an echoing crash coming from below. Not the sound of falling rocks but the crash of tin ware, breaking glass and crockery. Much too late, I remembered that the store's crockery department was located under the stage.

How much it cost for Elmer Bitgood's one-night appearance, plus the payment for the broken crockery, I didn't dare ask. But it must have been plenty.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike many other so-called "eyewitness" accounts, Phillips's has a ring of reality—that Elmer Bitgood was a very strong man for his time but hardly of mythical proportions. Furthermore, while virtually all of the other feats he performed were in the casual setting of his front yard (and thus more prone to exaggeration), this was a public performance, perhaps the only one of his entire lifting career. What will never be known is the exact poundages of the weights he hoisted and dropped above the Dearnly & Clark Store on that hot summer evening.

Meanwhile, in 1971 a folklorist named David E. Philips at the University of Eastern Connecticut assigned one of his students to collect more information on Elmer Bitgood from local elders. The student taped and transcribed interviews with a retired sawmill worker, who remembered stories told by his father, and a teacher, who had heard stories from the "Gas House Gang" at Cliffs Gas Station in Plainfield.<sup>23</sup> These episodes, incorporating some of the taller tales related by Champlin, along with some new and original accretions to the Bitgood legend, form the basis for a chapter on Elmer in Philips's popular Legendary Connecticut, Traditional Tales from the Nutmeg State, published in 1984. Again the emphasis is on yarns that feature size as well as strength. Elmer was so big, according to the sawmill worker, that he bought the largest overalls available.

> Then he'd get his mother to split them in the seams and put a big 'v' in it . . . and he'd take another pair of suspenders and put on the back and the bib of his overalls

would just about reach his bellybutton... . All he wore was a blue shirt and a pair of overalls. That's all he wore, and he worked in the woods barefooted right in the briars, anywhere. Barefooted, Never wore shoes. Just in the snow, they took their shoes off until the snow come again. Went barefooted all the time.<sup>24</sup>

AAnother anecdote by the teacher pits Elmer against an ordinary strongman.

Plainfield was a pretty good size town, and they used to have these traveling shows come in. . . . One time they had this wrestler there and offered \$50 for anybody that would get in the ring with him for three minutes, you know? And naturally everybody was afraid to get in there with this big wrestler. He was about 6' 2" according to the old timers. And they finally coached old Elmer to get up there and he didn't want to go in there. They finally got him up there and the promoter says to Elmer, 'Don't worry, he won't hurt you.' Elmer says, 'Okay, I won't hurt him.' But anyway, something went wrong. I guess the guy tried to throw Elmer down, you know because he had to pin him in three minutes, or lose \$50 and in those days \$50 was quite a bit of money. I guess he tried to throw Elmer down and maybe hurt Elmer a little bit or something because what I heard from the old timers Elmer just got a little p. o'd and picked this old guy up and bounced him off the floor and then sat on him for the rest of the time which was about 2 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> minutes. Just sat there, 350 lbs. or better sitting on the guy and the guy couldn't move. So the promoter was a little perturbed because he lost \$50 and Elmer was \$50 richer.<sup>25</sup>

This story could have been true, but the sawmill worker's contention that Elmer and Doane had barbells that weighed 1,700 or 1,800 pounds and that they would put one that weighed 1,000 pounds "over their heads" hardly induces confidence in the Bitgood legend.<sup>26</sup> Most

remarkably, however, Philips outdoes the storytellers by stating that "Elmer used to warm up with a 1275 pound 'barbarrel,' 'lift it right over his head,' before moving to the more challenging 1700-1800 pound apparatus." How much Philips really knew about weightlifting or believed the stories he recounted is uncertain, but the folklorist did believe that Elmer Bitgood was exactly the kind of "real creature" from whom legends are made. "In Connecticut, anyway, who needs Paul Bunyan?"<sup>27</sup>

The most recent renditions of the Bitgood legend repeat familiar stories of a half century earlier. By this time, Elmer had increased appreciably in size, possibly to help rationalize his incredible feats of strength. An anonymous typescript labelled "History of Voluntown" states that he was not only a "big man," but "it is said that his arms reached past his knees and were like legs of mutton." Photographs indicate, however, that these assertions are simply untrue. It also states that "in his prime year, Elmer weighed 350 pounds and was about six foot eight." This would make him about sixty pounds heavier and a foot taller than he was in the earlier accounts. Again the photographs do not support these claims. Finally, it was no ordinary cracker barrel that Elmer and Doane emptied on their return from Norwich. It was "about a 55 gallon barrel."<sup>28</sup> A 1994 account, authored by Linda Christensen, a teacher at Voluntown Elementary School, estimates that Elmer weighed 340 pounds at 5' 8" height, which would have given him a Paul Anderson type physique which definitely does not coincide with his photographs. Two further features stand out. The hundred pound anvil that Elmer allegedly carried like a stick by its horn in Loveridge's 1946 account now weighs 250 pounds and the strongman is holding it "straight out with one hand." Additionally a drawing appears of Elmer dressed in a collared shirt and tie. Given Elmer's strong preference for country attire (undershirt and overalls), this portrayal might be just as remarkable as his overblown feats of strength.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, in 1996 Russell James produced *The Making of a Connecticut Town* in commemoration of the 275th anniversary of the founding of Voluntown. James goes back to the more conservative versions of the Bitgood story related by G. Y. Loveridge and Jesse Paul Bitgood and avoids all mention of specific poundages lifted. Indeed far more emphasis is placed on how the Bitgood legend has been embellished over the years. "Stories abound about Elmer," writes James, "but reliable sources report having seen Elmer load stone onto a platform he built under the trees in his front yard, get under it on his hands and knees,



David and Arthur Nieminen with what remains of Elmer Bitgood's stone bells outside their home on Brown Road in Voluntown. Photo taken in December 1997.

and lift unbelievable loads of heavy stones with his back."<sup>30</sup> However laudable this somewhat terse and sanitized version might be for not stretching the truth, it lacks the vitality and romance of most previous accounts. Just as we prefer the rhinoceros over the Capuchin monkey, there is an instinctive human weakness for fabrications over truth. As William McNeill, former president of the American Historical Association, once observed, "an appropriately idealized version of the past may . . . allow a group of human beings to come closer to living up to its noblest ideals."<sup>31</sup> The potential of events that are larger than life, even untrue ones, to inspire civic pride and happiness should not be taken lightly.

On the other hand, the serious historian has an equally important obligation to communicate some sense of reality, no matter how unpalatable to popular tastes for heroes. While it is easy to dismiss many of the outlandish reports of Elmer's feats and to doubt the poundages reported over a century ago under unregulated conditions, James' conclusion that "this man was endowed with extraordinary strength" has much to recommend it.<sup>32</sup> Collective evidence, by way of artifacts, photographs, and stories galore, indicates that there was in Voluntown a strongman of extraordinary repute who became a legend, and that the real Elmer Bitgood was hardly a hoax. New evidence unearthed largely from early eyewitness reports lends considerable credence to this belief.

Furthermore, any estimation of Bitgood's ultimate worth as a strongman must be reckoned according to the context of the times in which he lived. In light of current weightlifters and bodybuilders, Bitgood would probably be judged as mediocre, but for his era he may have been bigger and stronger than Davis, Kazmaier, or even the redoubtable Anderson were for their respective eras. Admittedly Louis Cyr (or Lewis Sears) might be another matter. It should be remembered that virtually all of Bitgood's feats were performed on make-shift apparatus and in a non-competitive and non-commercial environment. Unlike modern strongmen, he performed manual labor for a living and did not have the opportunity to spend four hours a day training in the gym. High protein food supplements and supersuits were unknown in his era. He ate plain foods, such as roasted chicken and baked beans, and lifted in his overalls. Incomprehendible in his time were such chemical inducements as steroids. He gained no advantages from any special equipment, expert coaches, or even from the adrenalin rush that one experiences in head to head competition with other lifters. Still he performed feats of strength that would be considered remarkable even today. The growth of the legend, it could be argued, has simply allowed Bitgood to compensate for the advantages accrued by succeeding generations. Obscurity in time (a century ago) and place (rural Connecticut) dictates that Elmer Bitgood will remain an enigma and that the search for the man behind the legend will be unending. But it is a mystique, rather than reality, and the desire for an embodiment of our childhood dreams, that provides so much appeal to the legend of Elmer Bitgood. Far more perhaps than the truth itself, it expands our appreciation of human potential. Most importantly, such tales are fun to contemplate and add immensely to the rich lore of the iron game.

## Notes

1. Terry Todd, "Meanwhile, Back At The Mosque . . . Highlights of the World Power Meet, Part II--The Heavies," *Muscular Development*, 11 (April 1974): 40.

2. See David Webster, *Sons of Samson, Vol. I, Profiles* (Irvine, Scotland, 1993).

3. *The World Almanac and Encyclopaedia*, *1894* (New York, 1894), 207.

4. Local historian Nan Chapman relates that for many years local inhabitants believed that Voluntown was a movie-making center of New England in silent picture days. The story, upon close investigation, turned out to be untrue.

5. Interviews with Bruce and Jan Mallett and Arthur and Mary Anne Nieminen, 23 June 1996.

6. *Norwich Bulletin*, 7 May 1909; reprinted 21 February 1928.

7. "Voluntown's Modern Samson," *Providence Sunday Journal*, 14 May 1916.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Norwich Sunday Record, 29 April 1934.

12. G. Y. Loveridge, "Strong Elmer Bitgood, The Man and the Legend," *The Providence Sunday Journal*, 24 February 1946. Bitgood himself allegedly recorded his strength feats on the ceiling of the attic in his house on Wylie Road. Unfortunately that record disappeared when the house was demolished to make way for a new structure. Interview with the Nieminens.

13. Loveridge, "Strong Elmer Bitgood."

15. Ibid.

16. "Voluntown's Cryptic Treasure Clue," *Hartford Times*, 24 July 1953.

17. Ibid.

18. Richard L. Champlin, "L'il Elmer Bitgood: The Facts and the Legend," *Yankee* (June 1968): 87 & 34-37.

19. Ibid.

20. See Richard L. Champlin, "Move Over, Paul Bunyan," in Clarissa M. Stilten, *Mad and Magnificent Yankees*, (Dublin, New Hampshire, 1973), 75-78.

21. Judy Harpin, A Compilation of Facts and Not So Factual Happenings Concerning Voluntown, Connecticut (Voluntown, 1971), 44-45.

22. Prentice Phillips, "No leopard skin for Elmer," *The Providence Journal*, 1 March 1970. For additional information on the setting (including a picture) of Elmer's public performance, see James, *Making of a Connecticut Town* (Voluntown, 1996), 36 & 41.

23. See J. Saari, "The Legend of Elmer and the Lil Legend of Doane Bitgood" and "Legends of the Bitgoods," student essay and transcription of interviews with Al Dawley and John Kivela on deposit at the Center for Connecticut Studies, Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic. I am grateful for the assistance of Dr. Barbara Tucker in retrieving these documents.

24. Interview with Dawley, ibid.

25. Interview with Kivela, ibid.

26. Interview with Dawley, ibid.

27. David E. Philips, *Legendary Connecticut, Traditional Tales from the Nutmeg State* (Willimantic, 1984), 65 & 70. 28. "History of Voluntown, Connecticut," typescript in author's possession. For another 1980s account see Charles Vacca, "They left a mark that's here to stay," *Norwich Bulletin*, 20 January 1982.

29. Linda Christensen, Voluntown History (Voluntown, 1994), 20.

30. Russell H. James, *The Making of a Connecticut Town* (Voluntown, 1996), 29.

31. William H. McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians," *American Historical Review*, 91 (February 1986), 6.

32. James, Making of a Connecticut Town, 29.

<sup>14.</sup> Ibid.