

# LOUIS CYR AND CHARLES SAMPSON: ARCHETYPES OF VAUDEVILLIAN STRONGMEN

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For every person who can, hundreds allege. This holds particularly true in the world of vaudevillian strongmen. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the performances of strongmen began to take a foothold in the popular entertainment industry and many strongmen could perform amazing feats of strength.<sup>1</sup> Many more, however, claimed to be able to perform amazing feats of strength. The prevailing attitude, summed up in P. T. Barnum's immortal assertion that a sucker is born every minute, encouraged charlatans to ascend vaudevillian stages hoping for what Andy Warhol would later call their fifteen minutes of fame.

Of these two categories, those who can and those who allege, two *fin de siècle* strongmen—Louis Cyr (can) and Charles A. Sampson (allege)—can be seen as the epitome of each specific sub-genre. There were many other strongmen in each category; however, many names have been forgotten. Nonetheless, numerous accomplishments (both real and fake) by these two performers are remembered. As each man was in the fore of his respective sub-genre, it is highly probable that other performers of the same style performed in a similar manner.

There are many differences between these two strongmen. Louis Cyr was born Noé-Cyprien Cyr in a small French-Canadian hamlet in Quebec—Saint Cyprien de Naperville—on 10 October 1863.<sup>2</sup> Charles A. Sampson, who professed that “my name is Sampson, not Samson, as it is often written by those who suppose I assumed a name to suit my profession. . . .[,]” was born in Metz, Loraine, France, on 16 April 1859.<sup>3</sup> All similarities end with their common ancestry.

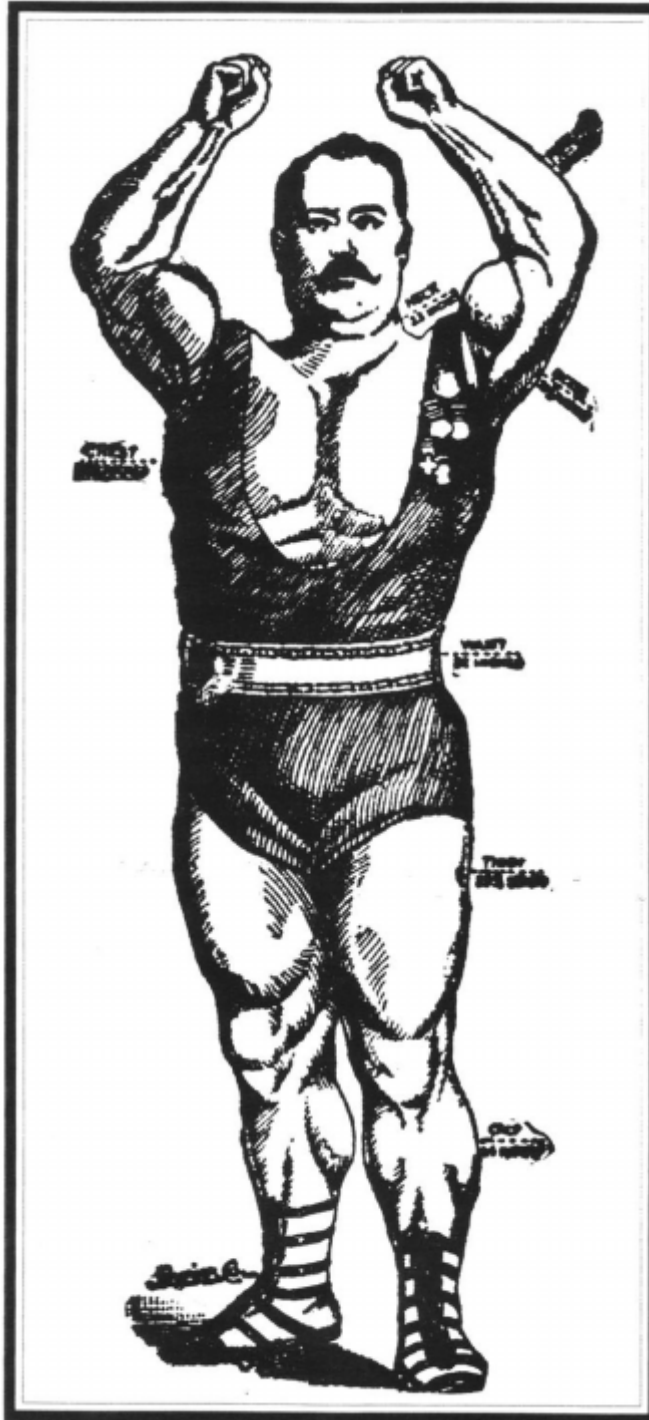
Even the way in which the two performers entered the world of strongmen is different. Cyr was

raised in the traditional rugged and strength-minded mentality of the Canadian woodsmen of the nineteenth century. At that time, many people in Canada were employed as lumberjacks, and “feats of strength in the Canadian forests in those times were a daily and important event.”<sup>4</sup> Cyr's grandfather, who had been a woodsman in his younger days, inspired within young Noé-Cyprien a love of strength, and this old Canadian was the driving force early in Cyr's life. If legend can be believed, Cyr did not know the potential of his own strength until he lifted a farmer's cart out of a muddy rut in the dirt road. Soon after this encounter the farmer returned to inform the eighteen-year-old Hercules of an upcoming strongman contest in Boston. This contest was composed of only one test: lifting a horse. After much theatrics, Cyr lifted the horse's four hooves off the ground and proved that he was the strongest man at the competition. It was not long before he would prove that he was one of the strongest men in history. There is little doubt that this story, told in most books and articles about Cyr, is highly romanticized.<sup>5</sup>

Sampson, on the other hand, was not amazingly strong as a child and said later that he literally awoke one day to find that he possessed superhuman strength. By his own account, he was a “healthy, high-spirited boy” who enjoyed living life more than school. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out he joined the French Ambulance Corps and was grazed by a bullet early in his military career. From that time his health began to fail and in 1873, while lounging in his house, a bolt of lightning struck him. After about a month of complete paralysis he awoke to find that he could bend an iron ring by placing it over his upper arm and flexing his biceps.<sup>6</sup> Al-

though it is possible that lightning struck him, it is highly improbable. In any case, gaining superhuman strength as a result of being struck in this manner is simply impossible. Clearly, Sampson fabricated this story for his autobiography. It was popular at that time for vaudevillian strongmen to say that they overcame childhood ailments and weakness.<sup>7</sup> He also explains in his book that he ran away with the circus several times and it was there that he learned how to use his phenomenal strength.<sup>8</sup> It is more likely that instead of joining the army at age eleven, Sampson ran away to the circus where he developed his body by performing as a gymnast and acrobat. No matter what the actual story, it is certain that there is more truth in Cyr's account than there is in Sampson's.

Perhaps the greatest difference between Cyr and Sampson, besides their abilities, was their type of performance. Louis Cyr performed pure feats of strength. He would enter onto stage, go through a series of lifts, and then he would exit. Sampson, however, was a true showman and dazzled his audience not with brawn, but with brain. He would enter onto stage and perform amazing tricks that most of



IN 1898, CYR TOURED WITH JOHN ROBINSON'S CIRCUS. THIS IMAGE, FROM A CIRCUS POSTER FOR THAT SEASON, INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING MEASUREMENTS FOR CYR: WIDTH ACROSS SHOULDERS—27"; NECK—23"; FOREARM—19"; BICEPS—21.5"; WAIST—52"; THIGH —29 3/4"; CALF—24"; AND CHEST—58.5."

the audience believed to be real demonstrations of strength. Although it is likely that Cyr faked at least some of his feats, there is far less likelihood that he faked for the same reason as did Sampson.

Cyr began his career as a strongman with contests of pure brute strength. After he supposedly lifted the horse at the contest in Boston, Cyr's name began to be known throughout Canada and it was not long before he found himself matched with David Michaud, then considered to be the strongest man in Canada. The contest was a simple one: whoever lifted the heavier stone won. Michaud, the current champion and quite a bit older than Cyr, was defeated when Cyr lifted a stone said to weigh anywhere from four hundred eighty pounds to as much as five hundred twenty-two pounds.<sup>9</sup> Ben Weider asserts that when it was officially weighed the stone tipped the scale at five hundred twenty-two pounds.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the true weight of the boulder, Cyr now held the title of The Strongest Man in Canada.

Due to Cyr's victories at the competition in Boston and over Michaud, it was not long before others in the profession caught wind of this young Canadian and began offering and accepting challenges to and from Cyr. This was to become his ma-

jour style of exhibition. Becoming a strongman was not an overnight decision. While he was riding the small wave of local fame, Cyr toured Quebec performing; but he continued with traditional work because the performances were not paying enough to support him and his new wife. Finally, after several jobs working on farms, in the forests, and a stint in the Montreal police department, Cyr became a professional strongman and toured widely in North America and Europe. Everywhere he went he offered challenges to the assumed champion, and everyone who met the “Brawny ‘Canadian Oak’” was defeated.<sup>11</sup>

Contests of strength are nothing new, and audiences have been attending such performances for centuries. For example, in the Roman era, gladiatorial fights were very popular, and in our own time (beginning in the early nineteenth century), boxing and wrestling have been popular forms of entertainment. All of these spectacles are sport-related, yet the concept of challenging others to competitions was not foreign to vaudeville. Douglas Gilbert states that during the 1880s “an interesting phase” was occurring in variety acts; contests among performers were becoming popular. Gilbert explains that such acts as clog or jig dancers, harmonica players, bone soloists, and pantomimists would compete for titles or even silver cups.<sup>12</sup> There is little difference between contests involving dancers or musicians and contests involving strongmen. It is unknown if Cyr was consciously working within this perspective, but his exhibition style does fit into Gilbert’s “phase.”

Cyr was always challenging the established strongmen or the pompous fakes who claimed to be stronger than anyone else, and everyone who met Cyr lost. The list of challengers reads like a virtual *Who’s Who* of the strength world: David Michaud in Quebec in 1881; Richard Pennell in Philadelphia in 1886; Sebastian Miller in Montreal in July 1891; Cyclops and Sandowe, the False (whose real name was Montgomery Irving<sup>13</sup>), in Montreal in October 1891; Donald Dinnie in Potarch, Scotland in 1892; The McCann Brothers in England in 1892; August Johnson in Chicago in April 1896; Otto Rinaldo in Montreal in April 1899; Hector Décarie in Montreal in February 1906; and others. Professor Edmund Desbonnet asserts that Cyr even faced Eugen

Sandow, the Prussian strongman, while both men were in London, but this match is doubtful.<sup>14</sup> While Cyr was performing in Boston after his return from England, one advertisement read:

Cyr is at all times ready and anxious to meet any of the alleged strong men of any nation—*Sandow preferred*—and will cheerfully forfeit the sum of \$1000 to any of them who can duplicate his feats.<sup>15</sup>

Another article on the same day has a similar message: “In naming the men of strength he [Cyr] would be pleased to meet, he mentions Sandow (who is preferred) . . . and many others.”<sup>16</sup> If Cyr had met and beaten Sandow in England as Desbonnet claims, it seems odd that Cyr would use as a promotion a challenge to Sandow; rather, a declaration of Sandow’s defeat would be more apropos. Leo Gaudreau asks why Cyr, who was clearly stronger, felt the need to face Sandow. He conjectures that the strongman who had the most victories over other strongmen received more and better bookings.<sup>17</sup>

Charles A. Sampson also worked within this “phase” that Gilbert describes. It seems more likely, however, that Sampson was conscious of the theatricality in such competitions, or at least in offering such competitions. In 1889, Sampson was working at the Royal Aquarium in London with his assistant and protege Franz Bienkowski, who used the stage-name Cyclops. Sampson, like Cyr, proposed challenges to other strongmen, offering £500 to the person who could duplicate his performance. Inasmuch as Sampson’s salary at the Aquarium was only £10 per week, this offer was quite risky.<sup>18</sup> Challenges, however, were becoming common in the world of strength because strongmen offered them as a means of legitimizing their claims to strength. The logic was that the strongman would not offer so much money if there was a chance of losing; therefore, Sampson—offering £500—must truly be the strongest man in the world. Such an offer, otherwise, would not be financially sound. Also, the challenge worked to heighten the theatricality of the performance. There was certainly dramatic tension during the pause in anticipation of an acceptance. Sampson’s plan, however, backfired on 28 October 1889 when Sandow “jumped the stage,”

accepted the dare, and defeated Sampson. Strongmen of Sampson's caliber did not expect their challenges to be accepted; but sometimes people did accept, and many strongmen took precautions.

Sampson had many ways of safeguarding himself from losing his own challenges. Even before facing Sandow, Sampson was protecting himself from the potential of being defeated. One of Sampson's earliest European claims of superhuman strength came while he was performing at the Canterbury Theatre of Varieties, where he stated that he could lift 2,240 pounds (one imperial ton). In order to demonstrate just how impossible this lift was, Sampson would invite members of the audience to the stage to attempt to lift the huge barbell from the two barrels on which it was perched. Everyone who attempted to lift the bell failed. As the audience exited the stage, Sampson's manager launched into a dramatic speech detailing the difficulty of the feat about to be attempted. When the manager finished, a drum roll pealed through the auditorium and, with even more histrionics than the manager's speech, Sampson slowly lifted the bell.<sup>19</sup>

The secret was not in Sampson's phenomenal strength; rather, it was in the manager's speech. While the manager spoke, holes in the bottom of the two bells were opened and the sand (or lead) emptied into the barrels on which the barbell was resting. Once the manager finished his perfectly timed speech, Sampson would walk over to the now empty bell and easily lift it, all the while acting as if it were a struggle. Unfortunately for Sampson, one night he was exposed as a fraud on stage, an occurrence that seems to have happened frequently during his career. That particular evening, instead of testing the weight before the demonstration, two audience members jumped onto the stage after Sampson had completed his lift and showed everyone that the bell was now hollow.<sup>20</sup>

Sampson was resilient, however, and did not give up on his career. Not too long after his exposure in Canterbury he began working at the Royal Aquarium. It was at the Aquarium that Sampson boasted he could lift three hundred forty pounds over his head. After the barbell was wheeled out on its cart, Sampson demonstrated how amazingly heavy this weight was by again inviting spectators onto the stage to attempt to lift the weight. The fact that no one could lift it was not entirely due to the lack of ability within the

audience. Sampson had rigged the barbell so that no one could lift it no matter how hard they tried. The cart was made of lead and said to weigh over four hundred pounds. The barbell was secured to the wagon by two inconspicuous spring-clips. As the audience members returned to their seats, Sampson's partner, Cyclops, would busy himself polishing the audience's fingerprints off the shiny bell. The polishing was merely a deception for his real task—releasing the spring-clips so Sampson could lift the weight.<sup>21</sup>

In a similar manner, Sampson was able to fool most of St. Petersburg in 1898. While he was performing in the Russian capital, George Hackenschmidt, the professional wrestler, had an opportunity to see the strongman perform. Hackenschmidt describes a barbell that Sampson had strategically placed atop a wagon at the entrance to the theatre. The wagon was positioned so that the audience was forced to walk past it. The audience was also invited to attempt to lift the bell. Hackenschmidt, being a strongman himself, "knew by the size of the barbell that even if full of lead I ought to manage it easily but it defied me."<sup>22</sup> Upon closer examination, Hackenschmidt noticed that the bell was fastened to the wagon and that the four wheels of the wagon were secured to the wooden floor.<sup>23</sup> Without removing the nails that held the wagon at bay, it was impossible for anyone, including Sampson, to lift the weight.

That same evening, and during the performance, Sampson publicly challenged Hackenschmidt to come on stage and lift a barbell that he, Sampson, had just finished lifting. The challenge seemed safe enough but Hackenschmidt was wise to the trick and exposed Sampson on stage in front of a packed house. Sampson had lifted a hollow bell and, upon replacing it on the stage floor, arranged it in such a way that it was partially obstructed by a curtain. While Sampson was offering his challenge, the stage crew was busy filling the empty bell with lead. Hackenschmidt agreed to the challenge on the condition that Sampson lift the bell once more; obviously, Sampson refused and Hackenschmidt then turned to the audience and exposed Sampson as a fraud. Sampson immediately countered the accusations and offered to meet Hackenschmidt that Friday for a true contest of strength. Sampson, however, never arrived for that match: "When the time came for Sampson's act, a man

stepped in front of the curtain and announced that owing to an accident to his hand Sampson would be unable to fulfill his engagement. Thus ended his appearance as an athlete in St. Petersburg."<sup>24</sup>

After his encounter with Sandow and Hackenschmidt, Sampson made sure that there was no way he could be beaten again at his own challenges. Shortly after departing the Aquarium, Sampson and Cyclops played the Day's Music Hall in Birmingham, England. In order to "spice up their act," Sampson again offered his nightly challenge; but no one accepted.<sup>25</sup> Sampson consulted with Edward Lawrence Levy, a local weightlifter and coach, to find a local strongman who would be willing to accept the challenge. Levy suggested Montgomery Irving. Irving was the perfect person for the match because there was little chance he could win, and if he did prove to be the superior, Irving was willing to throw the match for an extra £5.<sup>26</sup> Not long after this match Cyclops and Montgomery teamed up and toured North America.

Contests of strength at this time had no official rules. By tradition, each contestant would select several feats from his repertoire, and the other would attempt to duplicate them. Whoever performed the other's feats better was the winner. Needless to say there was much argument and many contests ended in dispute.<sup>27</sup>

Louis Cyr, unlike Charles Sampson, did not resort to trickery to win his challenges. Cyr was almost as strong as he claimed and won his matches honestly. He made a respectable career by lifting weights equal to what he claimed he could lift.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, he kept a scale on stage to measure any weight should someone in the audience doubt his abilities.<sup>29</sup>

Two of Cyr's matches have become legendary: one occurring in 1906, because it decided the new Strongest Man in the World; and the other occurring earlier, in 1891, because it spawned an immortal response in the history of the Iron Game.

The match that occurred on 26 February 1906 was Cyr's last competition.<sup>30</sup> The contest was with Hector Décarie at Sohmer Park in Montreal, and Cyr came out of retirement, and his sickbed, to maintain his right to the title of The Strongest Man in the World. Louis Cyr neither won nor lost; the match was a draw and allowed Cyr to retain the title. This contest of strength, however, is problematic. A cursory look at the contest shows the possibility that either man (or,

indeed, both men) was guilty of throwing the match. Décarie's first lift was a right arm side press, and he won the point when Cyr refused to match 171 pounds. It seems odd that Cyr would forfeit when just seven years earlier he pressed 273½ pounds using the same technique. The fact that Cyr was dying of Bright's Disease, a debilitating and deadly kidney condition, could account for his early concession; however, Cyr's illness does not explain Décarie's refusal a few feats later. The sixth test (Cyr's third choice) was "the shouldering and jerking aloft, without any leg splitting, of two dumbbells, one in each hand."<sup>31</sup> In this fashion, Cyr lifted 227 pounds, six pounds more than what had been listed as the record.<sup>32</sup> Décarie declined to try to match Cyr's weight at all. Throughout the night, each man conceded the point to his opponent; by the end of the evening, each man won the four tests that he presented. Many of the spectators felt cheated by the highly publicized contest and the headline in the following day's *Montreal Star* declared "Cries of Fake were Heard."<sup>33</sup> The oddest part of the evening was the conclusion. Once the referee declared the match a draw and Cyr still the title bearer, Cyr stepped forward and announced:

Hector Decarie [*sic*] is perhaps the strongest man I have ever met in all my years in the arena. It gives me deep pleasure to recognize him as my successor to the title of 'Strongest Man in the World,' and my championship Belt. I sincerely hope that he will respect and do justice to this, the highest honour that can be bestowed upon an athlete.<sup>34</sup>

Cyr relinquished the title although he did not lose it, thus raising suspicions that perhaps this contest was little more than a publicity stunt to help establish Décarie. Because Cyr abdicated the title and belt voluntarily, it would be impossible for anyone to argue with Décarie's claim to the title. The two strongmen were friends, and Cyr, given his illness, probably realized that this was going to be his final appearance in public as a strongman. Therefore, it is likely this contest was arranged for Cyr to leave the arena forever as the victor and for Décarie to enter it with the legitimate claim to the title because it was bestowed upon him by the old possessor.

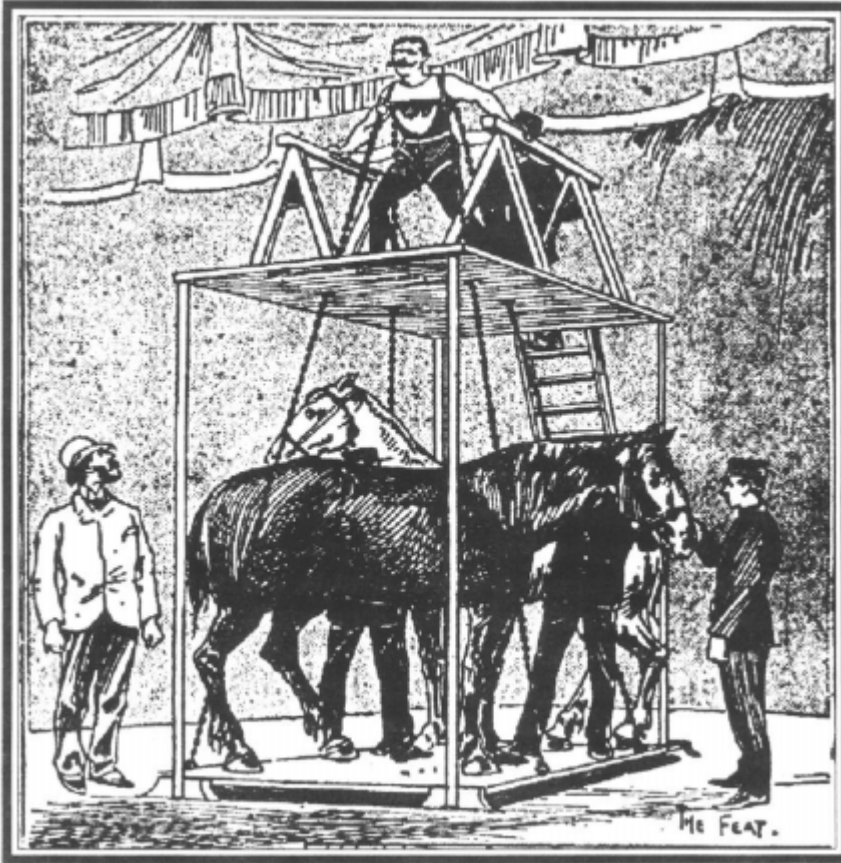
Perhaps the most notorious contest in which Cyr was ever engaged was between himself and the team of Cyclops and “the false” Sandowe on 28-29 October 1891. After their tour of Birmingham, Sampson and Cyclops parted ways and Cyclops teamed up with Irving. Attempting to capitalize on Eugen Sandow’s fame, Cyclops renamed Irving “Sandowe.” The two miscreants arrived in Montreal shortly after Cyr left on a tour of New England. Immediately, they began to challenge Cyr by saying that he was afraid to face their challenge. Learning of this, Cyr broke his engagement in the U.S. and quickly returned to Montreal.<sup>35</sup> On the night of 28 October 1891, the curtain rose and Cyclops made the challenge that he had been making for several days: “where was the Canadian Samson who was supposed to be so strong?” From the audience Louis Cyr’s voice could be heard responding with the now immortal reply, “*Je suis ici. Je suis arrivée!*” (“I am here. I have arrived!”) Cyr quickly ascended the stage and beat Cyclops feat for feat.<sup>36</sup> The following evening Cyr returned and offered \$1,000 to Cyclops if he could duplicate Cyr’s performance. Cyclops refused to compete, and Cyr was the undisputed winner.<sup>37</sup>

This contest is problematic as well. Cyclops had a specialty that was never used during this competition. Certainly if he wanted to defeat Cyr in something, he would have used a stunt that he had reason to believe the Canadian could not accomplish. This specialty was breaking coins with his fingers. There is much debate as to whether this particular trick was real or not. Professor Desbonnet swears that Cyclops could truly do it, and that he witnessed Cyclops break a coin in March 1897.<sup>38</sup> However, other people feel these claims related to breaking coins are false and are achieved merely by sleight-of-hand.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of who is correct, the question of why Cyclops did not use this feat remains. If Cyclops really could break coins, he should have been able to complete the task on stage in front of Cyr. If the stunt was faked, there still should have been no problem as the stage was set for Cyclops’ performance.<sup>40</sup> Another point of contention is Cyr’s return the next day to counterchallenge Cyclops and Sandowe. There is no reason that Cyr could not have laid the counterchallenge the same night—certainly, he was well prepared to face Cyclops. The answer might be that if the second half was postponed, there would be more time to advertise and thus a larger

box office revenue to split. This is not unprecedented. Many strongmen had clauses in their contracts to assure that they would receive at least a percentage of the box office take.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, the way in which Cyclops was promoted leads to questions of his mission in the world of strongmen. When Cyclops was working for Sampson, he was referred to as Sampson’s student and protégé. Several historians argue that it was Cyclops who conceived the idea of touring the United States, thought to change Irving’s name, and engineered the tour of Montreal while Cyr was away.<sup>42</sup> If Cyclops was the architect of this scheme, then it is curious that his position had not changed. While in Canada, Cyclops was promoted much the same as he was in England, as “The champion pupil of World Champion Sandowe.”<sup>43</sup> It is possible that Cyclops was nothing more than a professional villain. Many actors have made a career of playing only criminals; there is no reason to believe that the world of vaudevillian strongmen did not have their crop of “professional” criminals as well. Certainly, if managers were looking to hire winners like Cyr, there had to be people who were willing to be losers. Irving was one such person—having accepted £5 to ensure Sampson’s victory. There were unscrupulous performers available and the evidence suggests that Cyclops was one of these people. [*Editors’ Note: The eminent historian of strength, David Willoughby, accepts the accounts of Desbonnet and Siebert, both of whom saw Cyclops break coins.*]

When not facing other strongmen in competition, Cyr performed amazing feats of pure strength. During the course of his career, he established many records and provided some truly amazing demonstrations of his strength. Although Cyr often competed with other strongmen (either to wrest their titles or to defend his own), by far most of his performances were non-competitive, professional shows. He, like many performers, had trademarks for which he was famous. In a time before television, trademarks allowed performers to ensure that the public would not soon forget them. Many vaudevillian performers relied on trademark songs, dances, skits, or *shlick* to help the audience remember them from tour to tour. When the performers arrived in a city and performed, they were expected to do their trademarks. Many vaudevillians made their careers out of performing the same routine



CHARLES SAMPSON PREPARES TO RAISE TWO HORSES IN A HARNESS LIFT. NOTE THE INCORRECT ARTISTIC RENDERING.

for many years.<sup>44</sup> Cyr, like these other vaudevillians, had his own trademarks.

One of Cyr's more famous trademarks was that of holding back horses. He performed this stunt officially for the first time at Sohmer Park, Montreal, in 1891; but there is evidence that he was performing this amazing act before then.<sup>45</sup> While still touring throughout Canada, Cyr seems to have used this display of strength, and according to Hy Steirman, it was usually performed as a bet.<sup>46</sup> Certainly, the most famous time he resisted the pull of horses was on a bet. While performing in England, Cyr had the opportunity to be the guest of the Marquis of Queensbury, the man who codified the modern rules of boxing and who effected Oscar Wilde's incarceration. Wagering one of his horses, the Marquis challenged Cyr to resist the pull of two dapple-grays. Having performed this stunt with as many as four horses, surely keeping the Marquis' two horses in check should have been easy for Cyr. And, according to George F. Jowett it was. Cyr received one of the horses as a reward and it lived for many years on Cyr's farm in Montreal.<sup>47</sup>

Although this feat seems impressive, there is as much science to it as there is strength. Obviously, someone with little strength could not perform such a test; but Cyr was uncommonly strong. Strong as he was, however, he was not nearly as strong as even one horse, let alone two or four, even though the stunt seemed to imply that he was "stronger" than the horses whose pull he was "resisting." In 1931 *Science and Invention* printed an article describing tricks of the strongmen that anyone could accomplish; among these tricks is resisting the pull of "four husky individuals, each one more rugged than you . . ."<sup>48</sup> According to the article, all that is needed is a rope tied in a circle with about an eight inch diameter and at least four volunteers. The performer grips the rope and two of the volunteers grip the elbows of the performer while the second two grip the waists of the first two. At the signal, the volunteers begin pulling while the performer remains in the middle.<sup>49</sup> The technique for resisting horses is the same. and as long as the pull is equal and opposite, and the performer keeps balance between the two pulls, there is less strength

involved than might be imagined. Nevertheless, to the layman "this feat will prove to be an amazing and thrilling exhibition of true Herculean Might."<sup>50</sup> [Editors' Note: This stunt, which is to a certain degree deceptive, still requires great strength, and is dangerous, if the pull is great enough. Four men are one thing; four 1500 pound horses are another thing altogether. Recently, Greg Ernst, the Nova Scotia strongman, suffered a serious rupture of his pectoral muscle when a group of men whose pull he was resisting in this manner pulled the rope more suddenly than they should have done and caused the injury.]

Another famous trademark of Cyr's, and a feat in which he set records, was the backlift. For this stunt, Cyr would crawl under a platform that had been placed on supports and would raise the platform off the supports with his legs, hips, shoulders, and back. During his career in vaudeville, Cyr lifted mostly pig iron and, of course, people. While performing in Maine, Cyr backlifted a platform weighing 261 pounds upon which he placed twenty men "whose

combined weight with that of the platform . . . aggregated 3790 pounds.”<sup>51</sup> According to *Who's Who in Canadian Sport*, Cyr's heaviest backlift occurred in Boston in 1895 when he lifted 4,337 pounds.<sup>52</sup> However, if contemporary accounts can be believed, Cyr raised 4,400 pounds of pig iron on his back in May 1895 and again sixteen months later in September 1896.<sup>53</sup> *Great Canadian Sport Stories* asserts that Cyr's greatest record was made in 1894 at Sohmer Park, Montreal. At this performance, he supposedly lifted 4,562 pounds of living weight (i.e., “eighteen fat men”).<sup>54</sup> Regardless of the exact poundage, it is likely that Cyr lifted well over two tons.<sup>55</sup> [Editors' note: David P. Willoughby notes that Cyr's “performances in this style of lifting are surrounded with confusion.” In most instances neither the people lifted nor the platform were actually weighed. Willoughby contends that Cyr's best in this lift was probably between 3900 and 4000 pounds (*The Super Athletes*, p. 57)].

Cyr had many other stunts for which he was famous and for which he is remembered. He is credited with lifting with only his middle finger 545 pounds.<sup>56</sup> It has been claimed that he could also lift from the floor to his shoulder, with only one arm, a barrel filled with wet sand weighing 432 pounds.<sup>57</sup> Cyr also pushed a fully loaded train car up a slight incline.<sup>58</sup> Melina, Louis Cyr's wife, would sometimes perform with her husband. She would do an equilibrist act in which she balanced herself atop a ladder that Cyr balanced on his chin.<sup>59</sup> Cyr, like the biblical Samson, wore his hair to his shoulders as a young man, and he would use his hair in his act. At some point in the show three volunteers were chosen from the audience and escorted to the stage where they were each told to take hold of the strongman's mane. Once everyone was secure, Cyr began spinning until all three men were swinging through the air. David Norwood says “while this was not in any way shape or form a legitimate lift it did entertain and please the crowds greatly.”<sup>60</sup> [Editors' Note: *This stunt seems to defy physical laws.*]

Like all strongmen, Cyr had a tour de force that he would use to conclude his show. A barbell was brought onto stage, which Cyr would immediately shoulder. Once the bell was on his shoulder, Pierre, Cyr's brother, would sit on it while eight men would affix themselves to either side of the bell (i.e., four men to a side). Cyr would then walk around the stage and then spin himself, and his cargo, around like a carousel. The bell weighed 232 pounds, his brother weighed 168 pounds, and the combined weight of the

eight men, the bell, and his brother “would be anything around 1800 lbs.”<sup>61</sup>

Charles Sampson also had several trademarks that he was sure to use at many of his performances. However, Sampson was as dishonest as Cyr was honest, and most of Sampson's trademarks were accomplished through trickery and deception. He had three stunts for which he is most famous: breaking coins with his fingers, breaking chains around his biceps, and his supposed records in harness lifting.

After Sampson's defeat at the hands of Sandow, he claims that he could sense change and retired to his home in Detroit, Michigan to train at lifting heavy weights.<sup>62</sup> He claims that eight months later he set a new world's record at harness lifting by raising 508 pounds more than the old record. Four weeks later, Sampson avers, he broke that record by lifting 4,008 pounds.<sup>63</sup> Harness lifting is one of the easiest feats of strength to fake due to the inherent nature of the apparatus usually used.<sup>64</sup> The weight to be lifted is loaded onto a platform which has chains attached to all four corners. The chains are then brought up to a second platform above the first where they are fitted onto a leather harness that the strongman passes his head through and rests on his shoulders. Once all is ready, the strongman, beginning in a partial squatting position, straightens up to stand fully erect, and thus lifts the weight on the platform below. Because of the large area of stage the platform covers, it can easily conceal machinery.

Once again Sampson was exposed as a fraud while on stage. During his performance, he would lift an elephant by the aforementioned method. The animal was led out onto stage and placed on the platform; Sampson ascended the ladder to the upper platform and donned the harness. Grunting and groaning, Sampson slowly lifted the elephant about six inches off the stage floor whereupon he would fall down on the platform unconscious from the strain, in the process dropping the lower platform and its huge cargo back down to the stage. Assistants would rush to revive Sampson with a glass of brandy.<sup>65</sup> How he was debunked has been remembered in two different stories.

The first story states that one night when Sampson performed his lift he fell to the ground as was planned, but the platform and elephant mysteriously stayed suspended in mid-air. Apparently, something had gone wrong with the hoisting machinery below the platform and it stuck in the up position.<sup>66</sup>

The second version has the weight never leav-



ing the ground. Many people were present to witness Sampson's harness lifting. Unfortunately, they did not see a champion lift a seemingly impossible weight (ten thousand pounds of stone in this version); rather, they saw a master showman unmasked for the fraud that he was. In this version, after the ten thousand pounds was loaded, Sampson began his routine as always; but the platform refused to rise. In an attempt to mask the backstage error, assistants rushed out and removed one thousand pounds of rock, and Sampson tried once more. Again, his attempts were futile. Again, his assistants came out and removed weight. Finally, after enough failures to enrage the audience (who began hissing and demanding refunds) the journalists in the audience jumped onto the stage to investigate. The journalists discovered that the platform was rigged to an apparatus that was designed to lift the platform from the bottom; the chains over Sampson's neck were merely cosmetic. The stagehand in charge of running the lift had passed out from intoxication with one hand still on the lever of the hoisting machine.<sup>67</sup>

Whichever version of this story is correct matters little. Sampson was again shown for the fake strongman that he was. However, Sampson did not let this discrediting—or any for that matter—slow him down. George Hackenschmidt summed up Sampson's scrapes with exposure thus: "But did such a disastrous defeat faze Sampson? No. He bounced right back in another city with a new bag of tricks!"<sup>68</sup> For all of the differences between these two strongmen's performances, it is interesting that they performed in the same venues: the circus and the dime museum. It seems that audiences did not know whether authentic strongmen or merely actors portraying strongmen on stage entertained them. Louis Cyr performed at Austin and Stone's Museum in Boston intermittently between 1895 and 1896. It was here, in Boston, that Cyr set many of his backlift records. Every biography that discusses it mentions that Cyr spent time with Ringling Brothers Circus. Unfortunately, these biographers have misled their readers. Cyr actually performed with the John Robinson Circus during the season of 1898; however, Ringling Brothers rented the former circus' property for that year and paid the John Robinson employees' salaries. This agreement between circuses is undoubtedly where the confusion arose. Sampson, in his autobiography, explains that when he first came to the United States in 1875 he performed "in museums and other places of amusement."<sup>69</sup> Before coming to America, Sampson had worked in a circus that toured

the principal cities of Europe playing, among other famous theatres, the Hippodrome in Paris. Unfortunately, Sampson declined to name the American cities in which he performed or the museums in which he worked; there is, therefore, no way to verify his claims. Cyr, on the other hand, appeared in many advertisements for both Austin and Stone's Museum and the John Robinson Circus.

The time Cyr spent at Austin and Stone's Museum was profitable. He set his backlifting record there and, although the hours were long, he surely made a large sum of money. Dime museums were a place where a vaudevillian could make a lot of money in a relatively short period. Performers could easily make "\$20 to \$30 more a week than the standard minimums on the straight time."<sup>70</sup> According to Sampson's autobiography, he was making between \$200 and \$300 per week while he worked at unnamed museums.<sup>71</sup> If Sampson can be believed, surely Cyr, who was more famous and still working 30 years later, was making quite a healthy income. The higher wages lit the work, however. Austin and Stone's museum opened at 10:00 A.M. and offered a show ("10¢ will admit you to everything") every hour until they closed at 10:30 P.M.<sup>72</sup>

While working at the museum, Cyr performed his backlifts many times a day, as well as lifting his famous barrel of water and sand with one arm. The rest of his performance consisted of feats he had been using while touring Canada, America, and Europe. The Austin and Stone show was a family effort. Peter, Cyr's brother, assisted; his wife performed occasionally; and on 20 September 1896, Cyr's daughter made her first Boston appearance.<sup>73</sup>

Cyr and his partner-protege Horace Barré toured throughout the American mid-west from 27 April to 7 November 1898, beginning in Baraboo, Wisconsin and ending in Rogers, Arkansas. During the seven months Cyr was performing in the circus, he never visited the same city twice and the circus performed every day except Sundays. Cyr was using many of the same feats that had made him famous; but he adapted several into two-man performances. Many of the advertisements for the circus declared that Cyr was "engaged at the princely salary of \$2,000.00 per week."<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately for Cyr's purse, he and Barre split the more modest sum of \$150 per week; even so, they were the second highest paid performers for that season.<sup>75</sup> While Cyr was performing under the Big Top, he curtailed his challenge performances; surely

this was due to the schedule he was keeping while employed with the traveling show. Nevertheless, he was always promoted with the famous John Robinson \$25,000 Challenge Feature. One advertisement for the circus bluntly stated, "Cyr's equal does not exist."<sup>76</sup>

Cyr was usually honest with his audience, though not always. Cyr was capable of legitimately performing most of what he claimed; however, lifting huge weights twelve hours a day for months at a time is impossible, even for someone as strong as Louis Cyr. Therefore, it was necessary to fake his lifts occasionally. Usually strongmen accomplished this by lifting weights labeled with higher figures than they really were. A conversation between Alan Calvert and "a celebrated weight-lifter" that was reprinted in an article explains the mentality of strongmen:

Calvert . . . said, 'you are perfectly capable of handling the amount of weight you claim, so why do you only handle one-third of that weight?' . . .

The reply was: 'What's the use? I make the people think I am working. They would believe I lifted 480 if I said so. . . . What's the sense of lifting 240 if I can get by with 80?'<sup>77</sup>

There is also photographic evidence of another example of Cyr faking a lift. Careful examination will reveal that the dumbbell in Cyr's hand is merely a wooden cutout with the number 273¼ painted on. Again, this was not because Cyr was not able to lift this much weight, but in the 1890s anyone who posed for a photograph had to sit still for a much longer time than today. It would have been extremely hard to hold the weight for that long in that position.<sup>78</sup>

Cyr was truly one of the strongest people in modern times. His contribution to history has been recognized with his induction into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame; what's more, Montreal has named schools, streets, and parks in his honor. Historians, however, have overlooked Sampson. In the few articles written about Sampson, most authors belittle Sampson's place in history by stating that his only significance was being the "stepping stone" for Eugen Sandow's fame.<sup>79</sup> These two men were much more than a record setting weightlifter and an accomplished showman-fraud, however; they were the essence of *fin de siècle* strongmen. Through their styles of performance, it is possible to see into the past and understand

the different types of strongmen who were performing within vaudeville before the turn of the century.

### Notes

1. Today, bodybuilders and weightlifters are capable of lifting heavier weights and possess larger physiques; however, this is due to modern equipment and the introduction of anabolic steroids.
2. There is some argument as to the exact date of Cyr's birth—10 October or 11 October. David Norwood asserts that the correct date is 10 October. David Norwood. "The Legend of Louis Cyr," *Iron Game History* 1, no. 2 (April 1990): 4.
3. C. A. Sampson, *Strength: A Treatise on the Development and Use of Muscle* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, Publishers, 1895), 33.
4. Terence Todd, "The History of Resistance Exercise and Its Role in United States Education" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1966), 118.
5. Ben Weider, *The Strongest Man in History, Louis Cyr "Amazing Canadian,"* with a Foreword by Gerald Aumont and an Introduction by Barry L. Penhale (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, Limited, 1976), 27-30. For more information, albeit highly romanticized, on Cyr's life, see George F. Jowett, *The Strongest Man that Ever Lived* (Montreal: Your Physique Publishing Co., 1949) and Weider, *Strongest Man in History*.
6. Sampson, *Strength*, 34-42.
7. Eugen Sandow and Bernarr Macfadden, for instance, told similar stories of their ill health as children.
8. Sampson, *Strength*, 42.
9. Bob Ferguson, *Who's Who in Canadian Sport* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall of Canada, Ltd., 1977), 62. David Chapman, "Louis Cyr: The Canadian Samson," *Muscle and Fitness*, February 1988, 107.
10. Weider, *Strongest Man in History, Louis Cyr*, 38. Weider does not mention who "formally weighed" the stones.
11. *Boston Globe*, 27 September 1896.
12. Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1940), 24.
13. There is some confusion about Sandow's real name. David Chapman refers to him as "Irving Montgomery" in *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), based on court documents from the San Francisco case. However, an original publicity poster in the Todd-McLean Collection uses the name "Montgomery Irving," as do most press clippings from that era.
14. Edmond Desbonnet, *The Rings of Strength*. trans. David Chapman (unpublished), 275.
15. *Boston Globe*, 19 May 1895. Emphasis added.
16. Ibid.
17. Leo Gaudreau, *Anvils, Horseshoes, and Cannons: The History of Strongmen*, 2 vols. (Alliance: Iron Man, 1975), 1:193.
18. Sampson, *Strength*, 52.
19. Gaudreau, *Anvils, Horseshoes, and Cannons*. 1:165.
20. Ibid. See also: Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent*. 24.
21. Gaudreau, *Anvils, Horseshoes, and Cannons*, 1:167-169.
22. George Hackenschmidt, Charles Sampson: King of Showmen and Knave of Strongmen," *Mr. America*, June 1962, 68.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent*. 80.

26. E. Lawrence Levy, *The Autobiography of an Athlete* (Birmingham: Hammond, [1913]), 47.
27. Dick Bachtell, "Pennell and Cyr Contest," *Strength & Health*. April 1943, 40.
28. *Boston Post*, 19 May 1895.
29. Ibid. It is conceivable that the scale could have been rigged to read a different weight; however, based on Cyr's official records, it is doubtful he would have needed to resort to such trickery.
30. For more information on the contest see Martin Franklin, "Louis Cyr's Last Match," *Muscle Power*, October 1947, and *Montreal Star*, 27 February 1906.
31. Franklin, "Louis Cyr's Last Match," 35.
32. *Montreal Star*, 27 February 1906. Franklin. "Louis Cyr's Last Match." 35.
33. *Montreal Star*, 27 February 1906.
34. Quoted in Franklin, "Louis Cyr's Last Match," 37.
35. Jowett, *The Strongest Man that Ever Lived*, 25-27.
36. Ibid., 29.
37. Ibid., 30-31.
38. Desbonnet, *Kings of Strength*, 158. When Desbonnet was writing he had a museum in Lille, France where the broken coin was on display.
39. Gordon Venables, *Mighty Men of Old: Being a Gallery of Pictures and Biographies of Outstanding Old Time Strong Men* (York: *Strength and Health*, 1940), 22.
40. It is interesting to note that Cyclops did not use this feat with Sandow in 1889 either. "Strength through the Ages: 'Cyclops' Bienkowski Breaking a Coin," March 1962, in the David Willoughby files in the Todd-McLean Collection, UT-Austin.
41. Sampson, *Strength*, 52. Marjorie Farnsworth, *The Ziegfeld Follies: A History in Text and Pictures* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1956), 14.
42. Jowett, *The Strongest Man that Ever Lived*, 25. Unidentified clipping in the David Willoughby files in the Todd-McLean Collection, University of Texas, Austin. Weider, *The Strongest Man in History, Louis Cyr "Amazing Canadian,"* 72.
43. W. A. Pullum, "Louis Cyr, The Strength Colossus: From Siegmund Klein's Scrapbook." [n.d.], clipping in the David Willoughby, Todd-McLean Collection, UT-Austin.
44. Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 83.
45. Many history books cite 20 December 1891 as the date that Cyr performed this feat at Sohmer Park; however, David Norwood, through careful research, has proven that Cyr was already in Europe by this time and therefore the date is incorrect. David Norwood, "The Sport Hero Concept and Louis Cyr" (MA Thesis, University of Windsor, Ontario, 1984). 78-80.
46. Hy Steirman, "Mighty Butterball," *True: The Man's Magazine*, May 1955, 78.
47. Jowett, *The Strongest Man that Ever Lived*, 41.
48. Seymour A. Davidson, "Strong Man Tricks Which You Can Do," *Science and Invention*, (April 1931), 1083.
49. Ibid.
50. Super Strength Systems. *Feats of Strength: A Step-by-Step Illustrated Guide in the Practice and Performance of Authentic Feats of Strength* (NY: Super Strength Publishing, 1979). 17.
51. *Lewiston Evening Journal* (Lewiston, Maine), 3 March 1891.
52. Ferguson, *Who's Who in Canadian Sport*, 62.
53. *Boston Post*, 19 May 1895. *Boston Globe*, 27 September 1896.
54. Trent Frayne and Peter Gzowski. *Great Canadian Sports Stories: A Century of Competition* (Toronto: The Canadian Centennial Publishing Company, Limited, 1965), 106.
55. On 17 September 1898, Patrick J. McCarthy supposedly crushed Cyr's record by lifting on his back 6,370 pounds. Although Cyr's record pales in comparison to this astronomical figure, this record is discounted by David Willoughby, David Webster, and other serious historians of strength. Cyr's record was not broken officially until the 1990s when Greg Ernst of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia exceeded 5000 pounds on several occasions. See: Terry Todd, "Gregg Ernst, Bringing Back the Backlift," *Iron Game History*, 3(September 1993): 1-3 and Edwin A. Goewey, "How Good Were the Old-Time Strong Men?" *Muscle Builder*, March 1926, 44.
56. Wilfrid Diamond, "Thomas Inch and the Strong Men He Knew," *Muscle Power*, September 1947, 14.
57. Frayne and Gzowski, *Great Canadian Sports Stories*, 108.
58. David P. Willoughby, "Louis Cyr: 'The Daddy of 'em All'," *Ironman*, January 1961, 30.
59. *Lewiston Evening Journal* (Lewiston, Maine), 3 March 1891.
60. Norwood, "Sport Hero Concept and Louis Cyr," 40.
61. Diamond, "Thomas Inch and the Strong Men He Knew," 15.
62. Sampson, *Strength*, 76.
63. Ibid., 79, 84.
64. For a detailed illustration how this lift can easily be used by a con artist to dupe the public see Goewey. "How 'Feats of Strength' are Faked."
65. Miscellaneous clipping in the Ottley Coulter files of the Todd-McLean Collection, University of Texas: Austin. See also: W. A. Pullum, "Strong Men Over the Years," in *The Amazing Samson as Told by Himself* by Alexander Zass, with a Foreword by W. A. Pullum (London: The Samson Institute, 1926), 30.
66. Gaudreau, *Anvils, Horseshoes, and Cannons*. 1:167.
67. Goewey, "How 'Feats of Strength' are Faked," 43.
68. Hackenschmidt, "Charles Sampson: King of Showmen and Knave of Strongmen," 68.
69. Sampson, *Strength*, 44.
70. Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 22.
71. Sampson, *Strength*, 44.
72. *Boston Globe*, 28 May 1895.
73. Pierre seems to have anglicized his name to Peter. Cyr seems to have changed his daughter's name as well: from Emiliana to Miliano.
74. John Robinson advertisement in the Prints and Photographs collection at the Library of Congress, cat. no. LC-USZ61-1285. John Robinson Circus Herald, 1898 at the Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI.
75. John Robinson Show Payroll Record, *Workmen's Time Book*, Season 1898, no. 1, at the Circus World Museum. Baraboo, WI.
76. John Robinson advertisement in the Prints and Photographs collection at the Library of Congress. cat. no. LC-USZ62-24601.
77. Goewey. "How 'Feats of Strength' are Faked," 41.
78. For more information on early photography see Gus Macdonald, *Camera: Victorian Eyewitness* (New York: Viking, 1979).
79. Hackenschmidt, "Charles Sampson: King of Showmen and Knave of Strongmen," 67.