

**Experiences with John Grimek
by Father Jim Schwertley**

My first impression of John Grimek was a profound one, an event that jump-started my weight training that has continued unabated for 53 years, though I have been a priest for 37 years.

It was early September 1945. I had been training for a few weeks with the old York Barbell Course Number One. At age 16 I toiled alone in my room anxiously waiting for muscles to bloom. There had been little progress with the freehand exercises, push-ups, and chins I had been doing the previous year to blow up my meager 105-pound frame. I had gained 20 pounds that year, to 125 pounds, but my biceps only stretched the tape to 11 1/2 inches, and my chest to 35 inches. I was not surging with confidence that I could do much better with weights, but I grimly pushed and pulled with and through the exercises three times a week.

Then it happened. On a drug store shelf I spotted a copy of *Strength & Health* magazine from which I had ordered the weights two months before. Lo, there he was, John Grimek, perched on a pillar, a Herculean figure, gracefully reaching up with his left arm as if to shade his eyes, or perhaps salute strength gods. A mighty right arm braced on the pillar, sinewy legs stretched out along the floor. I was awestruck. I had never seen such a magnificent build. The symmetry, the huge chest, the wasp waist, the cantaloupe-sized deltoids. It was a turning point! I felt a surge of energy. I bought the magazine and devoured its contents. I was on my way, and I have not missed more than a week of workouts in a half century. I have often looked at the pillar pose for inspiration and still consider it

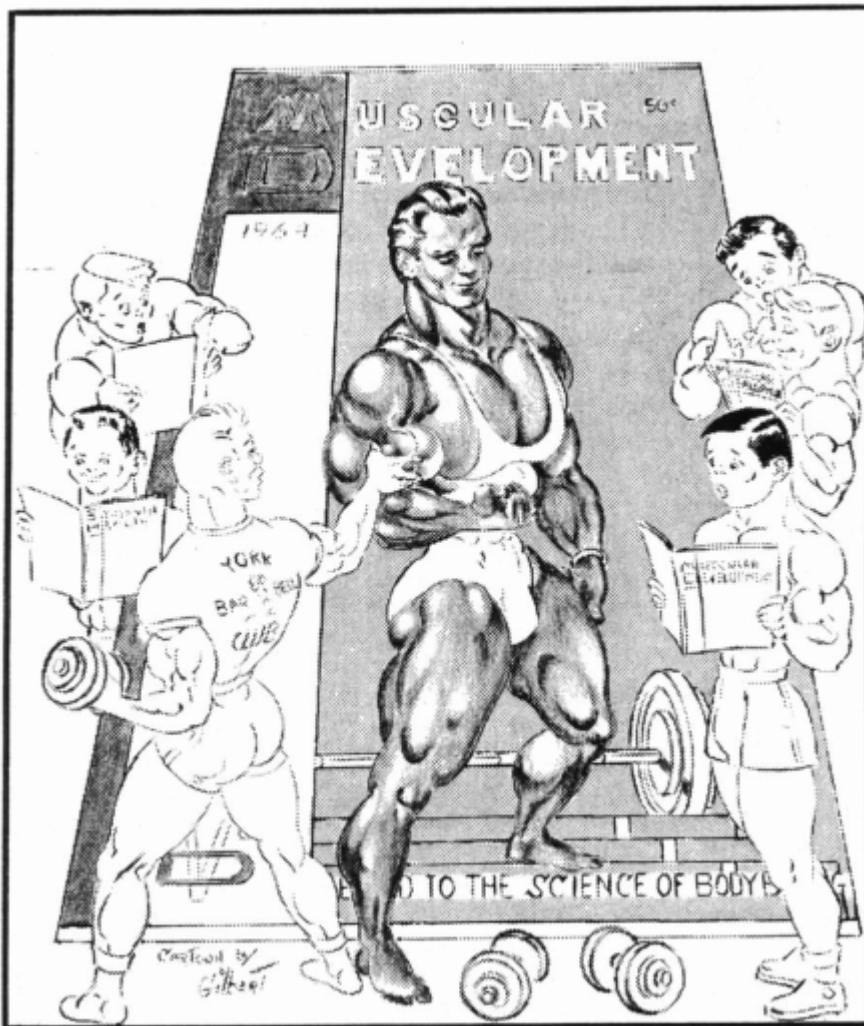
the greatest physique shot I have ever seen. Even in an era of more scientific training methods, advanced nutrition, supplement awareness, and use of steroids, I do not believe anyone could match it for overall magnificence, even to the facial handsomeness. It was and is a photographic parallel to the statue of David by Michelangelo.

Two years later I saved some money digging ditches in the summer and took a train to York to see the great one. It was like a pilgrimage. Unfortunately, Grimek was not in town but I got to see the other hulks and lifters, and was particularly impressed by Steve Stanko, who rivaled Grimek in size but not in shape and symmetry. Bob Hoffman was there, intently watching his charges doing their explosive lifts.

I got the chance to meet Grimek personally in 1950. There was a contest in Kansas City where he was scheduled to be guest poser. I went there from my hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. The contest was conducted in a boxing ring without ropes, with meager lighting. I had been in some contests in Nebraska before and this setting was even worse. At length Grimek entered the gym wearing a suit and tie, walking with a rolling, bouncy stride, very light-footed. When he came out to pose, he ran toward the boxing ring and leaped up on it, disdainfully, no mean feat. His posing was majestic, fluid, classical, powerful, and included splits and other agile moves. The place erupted with applause. This guy is quite a showman, I marveled.

Afterward I went to the dressing room and met him. It was surreal. His impeccable shape and symmetry were awesome. It was as if God had said, "I think I will make a perfect specimen." That was Grimek. His abs were not visible but his waist was trim and tight. He exuded power and grace. It appeared as if he had been dunked in a vat of milk. He had no tan but his skin had a glow to it, sort of a white aura. I have not seen anything like it. He seemed a bit shy standing there answering questions of a group clustered around. He seemed to have a gentle, friendly nature and made it a point to completely answer all questions.

Three years later in 1953, I was competing in regionals, and once in a national physique contest, going against



THIS CARTOON BY GILBERT ILL APPEARED IN THE MAY 1964 ISSUE OF *MUSCULAR DEVELOPMENT*. JOHN HAD JUST BEEN NAMED EDITOR.

people like Mickey Hargitay, Malcolm Brenner, Irvin Koszewski, Steve Klisanin, and Raymond Schaefer. The latter two won Mr. America contests, and Hargitay later won Mr. Universe. Such competition was a big challenge to a 5-8, 180 pounder with a Koszewski type of build. So I consulted Grimek in writing for training advice and also Olympic lifting tips. He always answered with advice and encouraging words.

Not long after that I entered the seminary and quit competing, but continued training, starting a weight program in the seminary as I had done in the Air Force in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I did not see or contact Grimek again for 30 years. I heard he had retired but still worked as an editor of the magazine. From time to time I would read his comments in answering training questions in various magazines. I thought the publishers could add a lot of class to their magazines if they would reprint the pillar pose on their covers instead of the soft porn shots they often use.

In 1984 I was at a convention in Newark, New Jersey and thought of going over to York to visit Grimek. This time I called to make sure he was there and he said he remembered meeting me and corresponding some 30 years before. I was skeptical that he would remember such a limited contact until he responded to my comment that I had gone to York in 1947 to see him but he was out of town. "When was that, in 1947?" he asked. "In early September," I said. "Oh yes," he replied. "I was in Milwaukee that week giving an exhibition." Wow, I thought, that's quite a memory.

I had problems getting to York, as I got lost in Philadelphia, but arrived at length, entering the York building, the new one, now an office, museum, and gym. It contained all the Mr. America photos and artifacts of past glories. But the building itself was shiny new. Grimek was seated behind a desk, typing. He looked vigorous and massive, remarkable in skin and muscle tone for a man of 75. He chatted amiably, mentioning that he had an injury to both shoulders caused

by a fall on an icy sidewalk while carrying some things. It prevented him from doing bench dumbbell presses and fly motions, which were favorites of his. He said he could still squat with 600 pounds. [Ed. Note: *Partial squat.*] I looked at him skeptically, wondering if he was serious. He was. Somehow I believed it. He really looked like he could do it.

Showing me around the gym and museum,



FROM THE BEGINNING, GRIMEK SEEMED TO INSTINCTIVELY KNOW HOW TO DISPLAY HIS MASSIVE BODY TO BEST ADVANTAGE.

offered to drive me over to the old York Barbell Company building, now abandoned. I had to get back to the convention as I had to give a speech the next morning, so we parted. I told him about my experience with the picture of him leaning on the pillar. He seemed pleased, though I am sure he had heard that before. I mentioned that it would be interesting to have someone make a marble sculpture of it sometime.

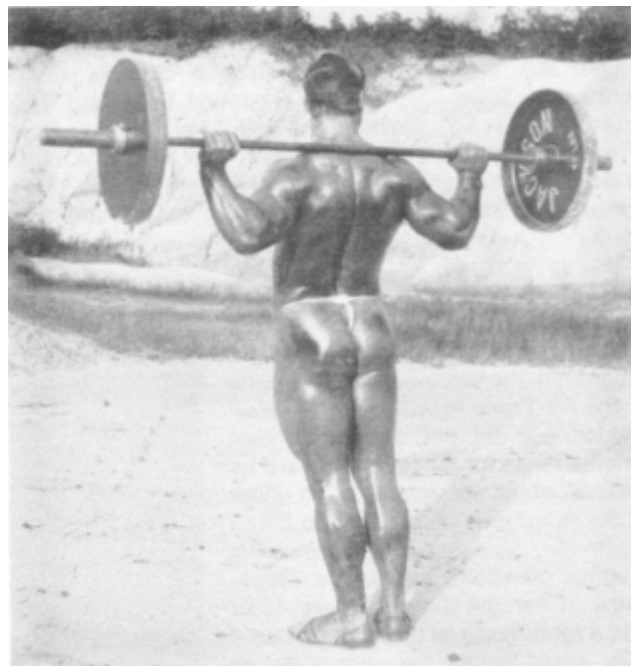
I met Grimek's wife Angela in 1988 in Los Angeles at World Gym. She was there with Grimek for the Mr. Olympia show. My old friend Peary Rader was there with them that day. I did not know it then, but that was the last time I would see Peary before he died. He was a good inspiration in previous years with his *Iron Man* magazine, a common sense publication without the hype, as was *Strength & Health*.

My next contact with Grimek was in 1989. I was in Washington DC for a talk. Realizing York was fairly close, I rented a car and drove up to see him and his wife Angela. They came to meet me in front of their old parish church and we went to breakfast. He said he was troubled by a sore arch irritated years ago by having done backlifts. I do not remember whether John said he lifted 3000 or 4000 pounds in the lift. But it made little difference to a mortal like me. In either case it could give any lifter a case of fallen arches.

John seemed to enjoy talking as always and as we left the restaurant parking lot, he was almost hit by an approaching car, which he didn't notice due to preoccupation with the story he was telling. 'Look out, John,' I yelled. He swerved and avoided a collision. 'You've still got good reflexes,' I said. He smiled.

My last visit was in 1992 when I drove up there from Annapolis where I was attending a graduation. I went to his home which to my surprise was only about a mile from the old York building. On the way, I wistfully stopped at the old red brick building; the place Bob Hoffman turned from the York Oil Burner Company to the center of muscle-dorm for about three decades—the world famous York Barbell Club. It looked worn out, rusty-red in the afternoon sun. It reminded me of the old Roman Coliseum, dripping with history, a monument to a majestic past. I walked around it sadly, looking at the boarded windows. I checked out a small grassy area where I had slept all night under a bush 37 years before, having arrived in York too late to find a hotel with rooms available. It was Labor Day weekend and there was no room in the inn for the pilgrim. Even the bush was no longer there.

Driving down the street to Grimek's house, I saw him sitting on his front lawn awaiting my arrival. Once again, with careful attention to detail, after my 1947 experience, I had called to announce my coming. Grimek still looked massive in a short-sleeved shirt, unlike any 83 year old man I had ever seen before, or since. We went to lunch with Angela. He chided me for eating a salad.



BEFORE HE WENT TO WORK FOR HOFFMAN, JOHN POSED FOR A SERIES OF PHOTOS USING A WEIGHT SET MADE BY THE JACKSON BARBELL COMPANY. NOTE THE DEEP TAN AND POWERFUL SWEEP OF HIS QUADRICEPS.

"Rabbit food," he said. I reminded him that gorillas also ate the stuff.

Grimek offered to show me Bob Hoffman's grave but I was once again pressed for time and had to leave. I didn't get to meet any of his family, or his friend Jules Bacon, the Mr. America of 1943 who John said still trained at the Gold's Gym and was a volunteer instructor there. John said Bacon was an usher in their neighborhood church and went there early in the morning to unlock it. "Sounds like my kind of parishioner," I said.

Angela said when I spoke to her after John's death that they had been to dinner with Jules Bacon that evening, the night of John's heart attack. "Everything was fine then," she said. John died at 11:00 PM. An era covering most of this century ended.

I saw John at a distance when he was introduced at one of the Arnold Classics in Columbus, Ohio, but I missed him later in the big crowd. I kept in touch at least once a year and several years ago sent him a framed copy of the pillar pose, which had been my initial inspiration decades before and had remained so. He wrote back in appreciation.

My last contact with John was two months ago before his death when I called asking how he was doing in recovery from his hip operation. He said it was progress-

ing but that he had a lot of soreness in his legs making walking difficult. He said he might not be able to get to London later in the year for the reunion of the Mr. Universe winners.

I had planned to visit him this summer while on vacation and perhaps meet Bacon and maybe some of John's family. So when my friend Clarence Bass called to inform me of John's death, I was especially shocked and experienced a greater sense of loss than I would have otherwise. I realized our next meeting would have to wait for another time in another world. He was indeed a mentor to me and to countless others. That influence will continue.



Final Thoughts

In later years, John always responded to my letters— I loved it when he called me “Clancy Ripped”—so I knew something was wrong when I wrote recently for information to be used in my new book and heard nothing. There will never be another Grimek. An era has passed, but John will live on in the memories of Father Jim, Judge Dan, and many more like them.



MARK BERRY PUBLISHED THIS PHOTO OF THE VERY YOUNG JOHN GRIMEK IN *YOUR PHYSIQUE AND ITS CULTURE* IN 1935. BERRY WROTE: “ONE OF THE BEST BUILT MEN OF ALL TIME. AN INCREASING NUMBER THINK HE IS THE BEST BUILT.”