

SEARCHING FOR THE REAL

PAUL ANDERSON

A Review Article

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Authors who seek to inspire confidence and credibility are probably best advised to avoid the word “definitive,” especially in describing their own work. Randall J. Strossen, however, exercises no such restraint in promoting his *Paul Anderson, The Mightiest Minister*. While it does contain many facts (virtually all of which are known) and lots of pictures (many of which are not known), it is a far from complete depiction of the life or even the lifting career of this most celebrated of strongmen. Although basically biographical in approach, the book is really a pastiche of previously published articles (including some by the author himself) and reminiscences from those who wish to portray Anderson in the best possible light. Fully 57 (almost two-thirds) of the 87 pages of non-pictorial text is either wholly or mostly quoted material, including many reprints. Margins are exceedingly generous and, with one notable exception, the format is basically cut and paste.

What is obvious from the outset is that this is an “official” biography or hagiography-instigated, sanctioned, and supported by the Anderson family and associates. This preconditioning provides two essential qualities that permeate the book. The first is a distinctive Christian air that is manifested through visual symbols, Biblical quotations, frequent references to “Doubting Thomases,” and billowing heavenly clouds-but no angels! When this iconography is blended with a text that is laced with repeated references to Paul’s Christian commitment, the result is a memorial to the subject’s religious fervor and evangelical mission. Virtually none of this spirituality is evident in Strossen’s other publications, namely *Super Squats* or *Milo, A Journal for Serious Athletes*, but it is absolutely basic to the convictions of those who administer the Paul Anderson Youth Home and staunchly support this life of its founder. Additionally, and most critically, this book aims to please Anderson’s legions of supporters, Christian and otherwise, who are unwilling to entertain views that are even slightly critical or questioning about him. Such a meeting of minds disallows any objectivity and permits almost no wiggle room for Strossen. This is the kind of account where the interpretation is essentially predetermined and evidence is then provided to support it.

One of the casualties of this approach is breadth of coverage. Never probing very far into Anderson’s life

outside of lifting, the author limits his narrative almost solely to information that has been provided by family members or already published. The first chapter on Anderson’s boyhood, for instance, consists almost entirely of a verbatim account by Paul’s sister Dorothy. It shows that he was reared in a rather typical Southern environment, “loving dogs, hunting, and playing football,” but there really weren’t clear signs of the indelible marks he would make on the weightlifting world (p.1). We also learn that, despite a devilish streak, Paul was an exceptionally well-behaved and respectable young man, to the extent of assuming a chaperone’s role on his senior class trip to Washington. Arguably the most significant event of his childhood was his affliction with Bright’s Disease in the second grade, an experience which had longterm consequences. Other formative influences of significance are omitted. We are told little about his relationship with his peers and the opposite sex, both primary conditioners of youth. Despite Paul’s later roles as educator, poet, and writer, virtually nothing is revealed about his early academic experiences. There are conflicting stories about why Anderson left Furman University after his freshman year. Strossen’s statement that he “decided to take a break from college” totally dodges the question. Most surprisingly, no mention is made of his religious background. From this account, one might conclude that he was not a Christian and never attended church as a child. That so little information and analysis is provided on his youth is quite out of keeping with Strossen’s training in psychology and Anderson’s work with delinquent youth, both of which are predicated on the assumption that childhood influences are of the utmost importance in shaping adult behavior.

The second chapter relates Anderson’s experiences as an amateur weightlifter, beginning with his tutelage in East Tennessee from legendary deadlifter Bob Peoples. Herein lay the first serious poundages discrepancy which occurred at the critical first encounter between these two iron game notables in 1952. Contrary to Peoples’ contemporary report that Paul did an amazing double deep knee bend with 550 pounds, Anderson recalls over two decades later in his memoir, *Paul Anderson: The World’s Strongest Man*, that it was an even more remarkable 600 pounds. Strossen never even notes, much less attempts to clarify, this discrepancy.



This photo captures the two things that defined Paul Anderson's life—the iron and his ministry to his boys.

Bodybuilder/wrestler Harry Smith, on the other hand, provides much greater insight into Paul's personality and describes how easily perceptions of exact poundages can become distorted. "Anderson in those days was "laid-back. Always a quiet person. A cracker boy with no airs about him. Peoples was also laid-back. You had to pull conversation out of Paul. 'Don't tell me what it weighs. Just load the bar, and I'll pick it up' was his line." Paul's lifts were still superior to any standard of the time, but the 50 pound differential illustrates some of the difficulties in verifying his unofficial lifts.

In chronicling Anderson's rise from state and regional standout to world champion from 1952 to 1955, replete with pictures, Strossen's account is quite clearly at its strongest inasmuch as it relies on lifts completed under official conditions and reported by responsible publications. Again, however, amidst an abundance of data, the human element is lacking. While mention is made of how Anderson's progress was hampered by injuries, it would be far more enlightening to know his means of support, what he did with his time, his career goals, and most importantly, what was motivating him to achieve such unprecedented feats of strength, especially in the squat. What were the psycho/social forces pro-

pellling him? He was hardly a normal human being! While coverage is provided on his international debut in Moscow and his world championship victory in Munich in 1955, it lacks depth and drama, and receives scarcely more attention than some contests of lesser consequence. No sense of their impact on world weightlifting or Cold War politics is conveyed. Paul's 402 press in Gorky Park was a propaganda coup that catapulted him to immediate fame. Likewise, for the coverage of the 1956 Melbourne Olympics the author forsakes Anderson's own dramatic and detailed recollections (the foremost primary source extant) for D. G. Johnson's less stirring account in *Lifting News*. Most importantly it was at this moment, according to Anderson, that he gave his life to Christ, a commitment that supposedly shaped all of his subsequent life. As Paul confirmed to me in March of 1986, "You are correct about my total Christian commitment being made in Melbourne. Before then I was a church individual, but not a real committed Christian." How Strossen could have omitted such a momentous event in this otherwise religious rendering, even as a "milestone" at the end, is not easy to comprehend.

Another incongruity between author and subject appears at the outset of the section on "The Early Professional Years." Here Strossen's statement that Paul abandoned his amateur status as a "means for earning his livelihood" is at variance with Anderson's own claim that he did it for reasons of Christian charity. In a 1962 letter to Bob Hoffman, he states that "I am in full swing with the 'Paul Anderson Youth Home.' We are taking homeless children [in] every day. This is a dream I have had for sometime. In fact this is the reason I started doing the professional work." While Strossen may have a point, he ignores testimonials from his subject (not limited to this letter) over a matter of great consequence to Paul's Christian commitment. Another relevant factor which bears investigation is that Paul's Olympic lifting career may have reached its zenith. While there seemed no limit to what he could press or push press from the racks, he was never able officially to clean much more than 440 pounds. He perhaps realized that other heavyweights, the likes of Yuri Vlasov, Gary Gubner, and Joe Dube, would soon emerge to eclipse his marks, simply from his inability to get over the "hump" of the clean. Thus it was more promising to stick with unofficial strongman lifts where he could apply his own standards, play to his strengths, and receive maximum recognition for his efforts. Virtually all of the lifts described in "The Early Professional Years" are of the unconventional variety.

By no means the least interesting aspect of Paul's professional career was his brief but spectacular foray into show business. But there is no indication in



Early in his career as a professional strongman, Paul Anderson did a number of shows in Las Vegas and Reno where this publicity shot was taken.

Strossen's book of how long Anderson performed in Las Vegas and Reno, how much money he made (for himself and the casino), or what the audience response might have been to his performances, either on site or on the Ed Sullivan Show. It can only be assumed that his kind of act had little of the staying power of a Wayne Newton, Debbie Reynolds, or Siegfried and Roy! Much less is conveyed (less than a sentence) about Paul's pursuit of other sporting endeavors—namely wrestling and boxing. In keeping with his practice of saying nothing unfavorable about his subject, Strossen brushes this experience aside by saying that “neither sphere was as well suited to his abilities as the world of pure strength.” Far from drawing attention away from Anderson's weakness, this glib assertion has the effect of provoking any intelligent reader to want more. How many matches did he engage in? What was his record? How did he train? How did his strength and size assist or hinder him? And how much money did he make? Finally, though it is arguably the most significant (and publicized) feat of strength in Anderson's illustrious career, the big (6,270 pound) backlift is only mentioned in passing, and divorced from its historical context. No empirical evidence is provided, no date, no information on the circumstances surrounding its performance, and no mention is made of testimony from witnesses. With no concrete information

on Paul's record backlift, it is not possible to capture any sense of the moment.

What seems obvious to even the most casual reader is that Paul, despite his alleged conversion in 1956, was still searching for something. And during the years after Melbourne he was searching most obviously in the fame and fortune sector, or at least for a career in which he could employ his very unique abilities. Interestingly, neither in the publicity surrounding his professional endeavors nor in his post 1956 correspondence is any mention made of his idea for a boys home. Only in his sworn affidavit for AAU reinstatement in October 1963 does Paul himself reveal this altruistic intent. Nor was his Christianity evident during the early post Olympic period. Tommy Kono does not recall Paul ever mentioning his conversion at Melbourne and Peary Rader, known in the iron game for his Christian witness, never mentions Anderson's spirituality until the 1960s. Lacking too is the salutation, so familiar in his later letters of “Your Friend in Christ.” Finally, no one I've interviewed in Georgia who knew Paul in the 1950s remembers him for his religiosity then. What appears to have had the greatest impact on Anderson's life, providing a focus for his career and Christian commitment, was his courtship and marriage to Glenda Garland in 1959. Yet scant mention is made of this most significant of developments, or of their daughter Paula. Unquestionably by 1962 Paul found fulfillment by discovering, almost simultaneously, the love of his life, his God, and a meaningful career. Arguably, any of these commitments meant more to him than weightlifting at this point.

Indeed Glenda Anderson confirms that while her husband may have had a conversion experience and ideas about starting a boys' home as early as the Melbourne Olympics, they remained latent until the early 1960s. By this time Paul was attempting to regain his amateur status with an eye to crushing challenges from Yuri Vlasov and other heavyweights at the Tokyo Olympics. He was also built perfectly for the fledgling sport of powerlifting. But Anderson was not reinstated and had to live with the consequences of his earlier decision to turn professional. At this critical juncture Strossen misses an opportunity to boost the stock of his subject by not bringing out the fact that unlike other elite lifters of this era, Anderson, despite his awesome strength, was never suspected in the 1950s of taking steroids. Nor did he benefit from any of the supportive devices that modern powerlifters employ to boost their lifts, sometimes by hundreds of pounds. That Paul's strength was all natural is never sufficiently recognized or credited to him. Instead, Strossen takes a harsh negative turn by belittling the early powerlifting achievements of Terry Todd in his classic confrontation with Gene Roberson at the first national power meet in 1965.

This demeaning spirit continues into the chapter

on “The Later Years” where Todd’s 650 squat at a Dallas power meet in 1964 is called “small potatoes” in comparison to Anderson’s feats of strength. A more positive spin on these events is provided in Todd’s 1972 article in *Muscular Development*. In the 1964 meet Todd had just won the heavyweight class with a quite respectable deadlift of 700 pounds. Then, after a pressing exhibition, Anderson had that same poundage placed on racks

and with no squat warm-up at all, proceeded to knock off 8 reps so easily that I’m positive he could have done at least 15, maybe more. I mean he popped up and down with that 700 pounds like he was lifting feathers instead of iron. I’ll admit that before I saw him squat, I was skeptical, believing that he probably didn’t really go very low or was not really as strong as I’d always heard he was. . . . the depth and ease of his squats changed my skepticism to awe and admiration.

These sentiments in support of Paul’s credibility are even stronger than Peary Rader’s eyewitness account of the same meet that Strossen reproduces. Less credible, however, are speculations about a 600 pound press that Anderson *might* have done had he not become so engrossed in the development of his children’s home. Given the importance of this enterprise to Paul, and the Christian ministry that accompanied it, it is remarkable that barely a page of text and only four pictures are devoted to it. The author thus misses the climactic events of his subject’s life, extending over two decades—the point toward which all previous events seemed destined to culminate. It would be interesting to know not only some details of the many thousands of exhibitions he performed but the general public response to his muscular ministry. Surely there are letters available, interview possibilities, printed testimonials, etc. that could provide some idea of his impact. Paul’s involvement with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and other evangelical groups begs coverage. Likewise, much more attention needs to be devoted to coverage of the Paul Anderson Youth Home. Details about his lifting career are meaningless otherwise. Arguably there had never been an athlete whose combination of talent and Christian witness reached quite so many souls, yet this account hardly touches upon it. Lost too is the opportunity to show how the mightiest minister constituted a continuation of the popular muscular Christianity tradition of the nineteenth century.

Unquestionably the most specious and least convincing chapter, one that is no doubt foremost in the author’s estimation, deals with “Paul’s Unofficial Lifts.” Here two hypothetical situations are created to explain what cannot be verified through historical evidence. The

first pertains to the 6,270 pound backlift that Paul allegedly performed on 12 June 1957, in his backyard in Toccoa. After rationalizing for two pages about why Paul should have been able to do it because of the strength he displayed on many other lifts throughout his career, for which there are “mountains of documentation,” Strossen then creates an imaginary setting, complete with a table similar to one that Anderson’s father supposedly crafted for Paul and weights similar to those that might have been placed on it. The inescapable fact remains, however, that neither the table nor most of the assorted lead and iron objects that were supposedly on it exist any longer. Furthermore, we do not know the exact dimensions of the table or the exact nature of the objects. There is no record of anything ever being weighed and no photograph extant of the event. In fact, there is no historical evidence that the lift was ever even done.

The first report of a feat resembling the big backlift appears in the January 1959 issue of *Iron Man*, just as Paul was in the midst of his “very successful” professional wrestling career. “We hear that he has made a 6200 lb. back lift for a new world record” (p. 36). It would be interesting to know why it took fully one and a half years for any publicity to appear on this momentous event. The same 6,200 figure reappears two years later in the March 1961 issue, again with no intervening coverage. Shortly afterwards it appeared in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for the first time in 1962, but only as 6,000 pounds! Although the *Guinness* folks have no record of who submitted the entry, Paul himself provides some enlightenment on the circumstances surrounding its acceptance in his autobiography.

By June 1957 people had begun to ask: If you are indeed the World’s Strongest Man and World and Olympic champion, why aren’t you listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*? French Canadian Louis Cyr had the record for the most weight ever lifted in any manner by man with the incredible four thousand pounds-plus back lift (crouching under a table loaded with weights and lifting it on his back). His record had stood since before the turn of the century.

We had to know exactly how much the lifting table weighed before the lift, so after we nailed it together, we took it apart and weighed it. (You can imagine how much wood and nails went into a table that would support thousands of pounds of weights. The table itself weighed eighteen hundred pounds.) Then we nailed the table together again.

We weighed each weight as it was added to the table. When the total of weights and the table reached 6,270 pounds, I set myself carefully and squarely beneath it and raised it off the ground,

breaking the record by more than a ton.

What begs an immediate answer is why, if the big backlift was staged specifically as a record for the *Guinness* book, it took six years to register it—and then only as 6,000 pounds. Also, contrary to Paul’s description of the lift, the actual entry states that the weight was “lifted off trestles,” not “off the ground.” Finally, as Steve Neece and Joe Roark have asked, if the lift was done for publicity purposes, why was there no photographer, journalist, or credible lifting authority present to verify and publicize this stupendous feat?

But, according to at least one source, there was a newspaper reporter and an AAU official present at the event. According to an article by Paul’s brother-in-law, Julius Johnson, in a memorial issue of the *Toccoa Record* in October 1994, Maurice Payne and Karo Whitfield were present and helped organize the event. Betty Swords, curator of the Stephens County Historical Museum and lifelong resident of Toccoa, verifies that Payne was a photographer for the *Anderson* (South Carolina) *Independent* and was in charge of its Toccoa circulation. Karo Whitfield was an Atlanta gym operator, a category I international referee, and a major promoter of weightlifting in Georgia. It is inconceivable that neither Payne nor Whitfield, who supposedly staged the backlift for publicity purposes, would not publicize it until six years later! Yet one searches the *Anderson* and *Toccoa* newspapers (for 1957 and 1958) in vain for any picture or story on the 6,270 pound backlift. A short article does appear in the *Record* verifying Paul’s appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show on the 16th, only four days after the alleged backlift. This news item shows that the local paper did provide coverage of *Anderson* and further suggests that he may have been off pursuing his show business career and not even in Toccoa on the 12th. These suspicions are reinforced by contemporary articles in *Strength & Health* indicating that following Paul’s “most successful engagement at a large Reno night-club,” he traveled to Los Angeles where he performed various strength feats at Muscle Beach and made plans with his promoter Harold Cantonwine, a Los Angeles resident, for a “strength act to tour the country.” There is no indication, nor does it seem likely, that this series of events orchestrated by Cantonwine and culminating with the Sullivan Show (also staged from the west coast) was interrupted to enable Paul to return to Toccoa to perform a record backlift. It would have constituted a critical break of historical sequence of events.

By no means the least interesting aspect of Johnson’s article is that, though it provides eyewitness-quality testimony of Paul’s memorable lift, it is not cited by Strossen. Johnson verifies that Paul used the “stout

wooden platform” his father had built for him and that previously

many people saw him use that kind of platform to lift several [sic] people at one time. That afternoon he decided to fill it up with weights to see if he could lift over 4,000. For the centerpiece he used an old iron safe, filled with cement. He said it was ‘pretty heavy.’ As I recall, it weighed something over 3,000 pounds. Around the safe they stacked other weights until the platform was covered in a fairly balanced manner. Paul slid under it and with a mighty effort lifted it up. It bent slightly, so he held it until it was steady and everyone could clearly see that all four legs were off the ground.

Then they weighed and recorded all parts, including the platform. Again and again they checked the total which was 6,270 pounds. Whitfield said this was more than 800 pounds over the previous record. He suggested that they should notify the Guinness Book of Records. He and Payne the reporter took on that task and officially certified what they had seen. The Guinness people accepted their testimony and published Paul’s feat in their books annually for over thirty years.

This first-hand testimony closely coincides with *Anderson*’s own account of his famous backlift, yet neither are cited as evidence by Strossen. Again it begs the question of why, if Payne and Whitfield took their evidence to the *Guinness* authorities, it took another six years to see the light of day. Finally, the question emerges as to how much of a primary source Johnson’s account really is. Such phrases as “I recall,” “a fairly balanced manner,” “Paul slid under it,” “a mighty effort,” “bent slightly,” and “all four legs were off the ground” suggest strongly that Johnson actually saw what he describes so graphically. But in a telephone conversation in February 2000, he informed me that he never witnessed the lift and dismissed this occasion as just another time when Paul had lifted this much weight and more. Voila!

Likewise there is no one in Toccoa or anywhere else who has ever come forward as having seen the lift actually performed. Payne committed suicide in 1959 and Whitfield died in 1982 without leaving any papers—so neither of the original organizers are talking. And Glenda *Anderson* suspects that all of the records verifying Paul’s *Guinness* entry were destroyed through a conspiracy mounted by the supporters of Indian strongman Sri Chinmoy!

A clue to resolving this seemingly impossible dilemma can be found by examining the context of Peary Rader’s first mention of *Anderson*’s backlift in early

1959. This information was drawn from an article that appeared in the *Omaha World-herald* on 4 November 1958, publicizing Paul's forthcoming wrestling match on Saturday in the City Auditorium. Among various other feats of strength attributed to him, **"No. 1 is the fact he holds the world record for the back lift, having hoisted 62 hundred pounds about five inches."** [bold print in original] Although no one in the iron game was aware of this magnificent feat of strength at this time, wrestling fans were among the first to know. Furthermore, in this version Paul allegedly lifted the weight "about five inches," which borders on the fantastic. It would be interesting to know the source of the *World-herald* statement, but it was most likely some wrestling promoter or Paul himself, and not some other weightlifting authority.

My research has yielded a second early mention of the big backlift from the late 1950s, and again it is within the context of wrestling. In a video tape of the 26 year old Anderson wrestling one Bozo Brown in the International Amphitheatre in Chicago, Russ "Pappy" Davis waxes eloquent about the Georgian's many weightlifting accomplishments. "One time in a backlift, he lifted over 6,000 pounds. That, dear friend, is three tons." Obviously impressed with this feat, Davis repeats it later in the match. Then he alludes to an endeavor that, like Paul's wrestling career, stood to benefit from publicity generated from the big backlift. "Paul is in the mail order business," states Davis. "He's selling weightlifting equipment." Nothing about this money-making enterprise appears in Strossen's book, but in written responses to queries from Terry Todd in the 1970s, Anderson revealed much about his early entrepreneurial efforts.

Health Products Corporation was something that actually I really would like to soft pedal a little bit because it gets so family. . . . The idea come from my brother-in-law [Julius Johnson] wanting to start a corporation to handle various products under my name. Of course you know the thought and idea there is nothing really wrong with that. To make a long story short I worked with him on this and we started before the Olympic Games. After the Olympic Games they put out a weight lifting course. I also thought the best thing would be to put out the health food first. As you know the health food business was just kindly in it's infancy at that time especially the fact that the protein business was quite young and I think it would have gone better than the course. When we were doing the course, we were falling back into the old Earl Leiderman, Charles Atlas bit. Also it is a funny thing, they offered a money back guarantee on this course, which I never

did think was too good. There had been courses copied and returned. They did a great deal of advertising which even today I receive a world of material wanting to buy that old original course, from people who are finding the ads in 1957 magazines.

As I said to make a long story short I blew the 25,000 on advertising and never really accomplished a great deal. Many mistakes were made, and I would rather soft pedal it right here, concerning that.

It is hardly surprising that Paul wanted to "soft pedal" this information, but it fits the 1957 time frame, and Paul further admits that he went "out on the road" to promote this Health Products Company. Whether the three ton backlift was fabricated as promotional hype for this venture and later utilized to advance his wrestling career cannot be determined. There's hardly a smoking gun here. But the scenario is by no means unfamiliar amongst professional strongmen.

A final way of deconstructing Paul's legendary backlift is afforded by the curious course of entries by which it was recognized in the *Guinness Book of World Records* over three decades. According to Joanne Violette of the *Guinness* organization, Anderson's feat was first recognized in the 1962 edition as follows:

WEIGHTLIFTING: THE GREATEST WEIGHT EVER RAISED BY A HUMAN BEING IS, 6,000 LB. (2.67 TONS) BY THE 26 STONE, 1956 OLYMPIC HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION, PAUL ANDERSON (USA) AT TOCCOA GEORGIA, ON JUNE 12 1957, IN A BACK LIFT (WEIGHT RAISED OFF TRESTLES).

Exactly the same entry appeared in the 1963 edition. In both references the 2.67 tons refers to the long ton equivalent of 6,000 pounds. Whereas the short ton of 2,000 pounds is most commonly recognized in the United States, Canada, and South Africa, the long ton is the preferred usage in Great Britain, and the 2.67 figure was no doubt included in parentheses to make the lift comprehensible to what was then largely a British readership. By 1968, however, as worldwide sales of the *Guinness* book proliferated, the Anglicisms of long tons and stones (for bodyweight) are Americanized and a curious addition to Paul's world record lift creeps into the entry.

The greatest weight ever raised by a human being is 6,000 lbs. In a back lift (weight raised off trestles) by the 364-lb. Paul Anderson (U.S.), the 1956 Olympic heavyweight champion, at Toccoa, Georgia, on June 12, 1957. *Anderson is reputed to have once lifted*

6,200 lbs. [my italics]

This last sentence raises two new points of concern. First, it suggests that Paul performed a second record backlift that exceeded the one in June 1957, but no specific date or place is specified. Furthermore, the statement is couched in the elusive passive voice and employs the equivocal verb “reputed,” implying a less than definite progeny for the information. Even more remarkable, the ensuing 1973 edition of Guinness conflates this dubious 6,200 poundage with the original 1957 date and adds yet another 70 pounds.

The greatest weight ever raised by a human being is 6,270 lb. 2,844 kg (2.80) tons [2.84] in a back lift (weight raised off trestles) by the 26st. 165 kg Paul Anderson (USA) (born 1933 [sic]), the 1956 Olympic heavyweight champion at Toccoa, Georgia, U.S.A., on 12 June 1957.

Possibly this final figure of 6,270 pounds was derived from some confusion over 6,000 pounds and 2.67 tons. At any rate, it seems likely that it came from Anderson or a close associate. Indeed, in the November 1971 issue of *Strength & Health* under the heading of “It’s Official,” Paul asserts that “I have backlifted over 6000 lbs., to be exact 6270 officially.” In addition to a number of other startling claims in this list of his personal records (including a 485 clean and press!) this is the first time the word “official” has been invoked. Allusions to the presence of Whitfield and Payne would be a later accretion. The story then took on a life of its own over the next two decades, boosted by the worldwide credibility of Guinness and the unwavering trust of iron gamers everywhere in the integrity of Anderson and belief in his Christian mission. Eventually it was etched in granite and mounted in front of his boyhood home on Tugalo Street in Toccoa. By the early 1990s *Guinness*, realizing that it had no evidence for any backlift—6,000, 6,200, or 6,270—for Paul, deleted the entry and started listing only officially verifiable lifts in its weightlifting section. What this examination of successive entries shows is how something can be created out of nothing for the sake of a heroic tradition. In this endeavor the iron game is hardly unique. So prevalent is the tendency in serving the interests of subcultures and ethnic groups that William McNeill, in his 1985 presidential address to the American Historical Association labeled the practice “Mythistory.”

The problem with Paul’s claim to a 1200 pound squat is less acute. We at least have the satisfaction of knowing that some such lift was at least attempted at his exhibitions at the Mapes Hotel in Reno. But two further

flaws arise in Strossen’s line of argument. First, we are asked to accept the weight of an object that has never been weighed—in an attempt, once again, to invent history. That the glass-sided safes contained 15,000 silver dollars and that each one weighed 26.73 grams sounds plausible enough, but we have no official verification that the safes were really loaded with that number of coins or that the total actually weighed what Strossen calculates it should have—883.93 pounds. More seriously, we are asked to believe that the apparatus containing the silver dollars weighed at least three hundred pounds by comparing it to a similar device used subsequently for the World’s Strongest Man contest for deadlifting. For verification that this latter apparatus weighed 600 pounds, Strossen cites himself! Again, there are simply too many leaps of faith required here to create a climate of confidence. Most importantly, Strossen again overlooks published testimony from his subject in the most obvious of places—*Strength & Health* (July, 1957)—where Anderson states that the silver dollar apparatus weighed just “1100 pounds.” In reporting this information Harry Paschall, who was nobody’s fool, seemed skeptical.

We believe he probably used the well-known professional strongmen’s prerogative of stretching the poundage a bit, but we can tell you that 15,000 silver dollars weigh 600 lbs., and the apparatus possibly went another couple hundred. Certainly he is safe in offering anybody the \$15,000 who can duplicate this feat—for there is nobody around who can do 800 lbs. Maybe it even weighed more than this, since Paul is supposed to have squatted with 1,000 lbs.

It is significant that Strossen completely ignores the context in which the 1200 pound squat was allegedly performed—in the fast-paced atmosphere of a tourist Mecca where the major purpose was to promote gambling. Failure to perform the much publicized silver dollar squat was simply not an option for the casino promoters. And while there is no evidence that the event was rigged, fooling the public has a long tradition among strongmen, and it was in the best interests of the good folks at Mapes as well as Paul to make sure that he lived up to his billing of “Strongest Man on Earth.”

A further problem with Anderson’s squat relates to depth. Despite Strossen’s insistence that “Paul had a long history of squatting to rock bottom” and the protestations of Terry Todd that Paul went plenty low, there are too many iron gamers who were not so satisfied. I remember first seeing Paul squat at the conclusion of the All-South Power Meet in Durham, North Carolina, where I was completing my doctoral studies in the spring

of 1969. For much of the next week those of us who worked out at the Durham YMCA debated whether he broke parallel on his heavy squats. The consensus was that his squats would not have been passed in the preceding powerlifting contest but that his legs were so huge that he probably couldn't go any lower. As I recall, the only big man from those years who really hit "rock bottom" was Paul Wrenn of Tennessee whose squats truly inspired awe and admiration. Also, those of us who carried Anderson's 150 pound exhibition plates back to his car after the performance could not help but wonder whether they really weighed that much. Perhaps we were all expecting too much from this living legend, but I remember feeling a trifle disappointed. Finally, mention should be made of the frozen photo that Strossen painstakingly reproduces (on page 92) of Paul's descent with the silver dollar squat. While it certainly shows that he did "more than a half squat," it hardly constitutes proof of anything "rock bottom." If this frame shows Paul at his lowest point, as it surely must, it is evident that the tops of his thighs are still above parallel, thus providing yet more grist for the Doubting Thomas mills.

[Editor's note: It is possible that the lack of agreement in the recollections about Anderson's squat depth by those who saw him lift is due to a tendency some lifters have of varying the depth of their squat depending on conditions, weight on the bar, how they're feeling, and so on. Many lifters who comfortably hit deep positions (below the "thigh parallel" position) with a "light weight" while doing repetitions will "cut" their depth when a heavy single repetition is being done. As the author pointed out, I saw Paul do eight reps with 700 pounds in the squat with a standard Olympic bar and all but the first rep reached the "thigh parallel" benchmark. At the same time, I have heard several experienced weight men tell me that they had seen one or more of his heavy single reps and that he did not reach such a low position, or "legal" position with the heavier weight. However, I have also talked to seasoned lifters who saw him do a single "thighs parallel" squat with slightly more than 900 pounds. The simple facts are that almost all lifters vary the depth of their squats to some degree, and that some lifters can "cut" their depth and, by doing so, lift substantially more weight.]

The remaining chapter on Paul's training and diet is anticlimactic. Its principal thrust is on the obvious, his squat training and consumption of high protein foods. In this respect, as the author rightly points out, Anderson was in the forefront of training techniques of his time. What he neglects to point out is that Paul often engaged in the unwise practice of lifting heavy weights without warming up. According to Georgia colleague Ben Green, Paul did not have much time to train in his

later years, "so he kept a 400 pound barbell at home, and each time he passed it he pressed it cold." Glenda attributes some of his later health problems to this practice. Likewise he spent so much time on the road that his exhibitions often also served as training sessions. Contrary to the testimony of Bob Peoples on page 15 and the commentary of Larry Coleman in "The Strongest Man" video, Strossen correctly points out that Paul was never a big eater and consumed prodigious quantities of milk. What he does not mention is that Anderson never had a balanced diet. It was radically rich in protein, including raw eggs and even soup made from beef blood, but deficient in vegetables. Also, owing to his constant travels in his later years, he often consumed junk food, especially soft drinks, which did nothing for his declining health. A truism that does emerge in this final chapter, more implicit than explicit, is that Paul was an original who had a mind of his own and blazed his own way through the weightlifting world for a quarter century. As Julius Johnson observed, "He was an innovator."

That much cannot be said, however, for Randall Strossen's attempt to relate his life story. Most of the information, well known and previously published, serves only to reinforce preexisting views of Anderson's goodness and worth. Serious omissions abound, most of which could have been avoided by some quality research time in Georgia and elsewhere. The only original chapter, on "The Unofficial Lifts," is actually an exercise in virtual history which is hardly a substitute for real history. Instead of searching for tangible evidence of Anderson's 1957 backlift, the author attempts an arm-chair reconstruction which is unconvincing. What he calls "a shred of faith" to make his arguments believable actually amounts to a giant leap of faith. Furthermore, such specious arguments should serve as a caveat to the unwary that what passes for truth might be nothing more than speculation which feeds on itself and has no independent existence other than the reality of its own repetition. Indeed, there is no evidence that Anderson ever tried to backlift 6,270 pounds or that his silver dollar squats actually weighed 1,200 pounds. Strossen's book constitutes a missed opportunity to understand the most remarkable strength phenomenon of the twentieth century, whose official lifts alone entitle him to be called the World's Strongest Man during his prime (1955-1967). However strong and virtuous Paul may have been, he was a human being, not a saint or demigod, and deserves a much fuller and more probing treatment. This account, alas, raises far more questions than it answers and shows us how far away we are from knowing the full story of Paul Anderson.