



# The Quest for the Quarter Master

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*Dateline: Oklahoma  
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Two carjackers got a big surprise when they jumped an elderly man who was waiting peacefully in his car for his wife and grandson to return from shopping at a Dallas mall. As the 83-year-old retiree settled into his seat for his wait, a red-haired woman suddenly appeared at his window and began hitting him with her purse as her companion stuck a gun through the passenger-side window. "They shouldn't have done that," said the retiree, who has a reputation of being able to tear quarters with his bare fingers. The intended victim disarmed the gunman by breaking his arm and sent the two crooks running for their lives. The "victim" waited for the right moment to fight back. It came when the gunman glanced away. "I grabbed his arm and broke it over the door," the "victim" said of his response, speaking literally. "The bone was sticking out of his arm." Disarmed and crippled by a compound fracture, the man "fled like a possum," according to the "victim." Although the would-be carjackers were apprehended by police, the "victim" didn't want to return to Dallas for a court appearance.<sup>1</sup>

—*Amarillo Globe News*

OOO

Dr. Joe Hood, a long-time lifting friend of mine from Alabama who now lives and practices in Austin, saw this item on the internet and was immediately struck by the reference to the "victim" having the reputation of being able to tear a quarter in half. Joe shares my interest in odd feats of strength, and so he quickly forwarded the item to me, adding that, "it was heartwarming to an

old Alabama mountain boy like me to read about a proud old man prevailing against long odds, with the criminals getting a bit more than they bargained for." Joe had heard me talk about having seen Jesse Wood, a legendary Texas powerlifter who was in his prime in the 1970s, place about 50% of a dime in his jawteeth and bend the coin by pressing upward on the exposed half. Apparently, this inspired Joe, who was soon duplicating this feat with dimes and, on occasion, quarters, to the unending dismay of his dentist. I should add that Joe has been a very strong man for about 30 years. He was the national champion in the 220 pound class twice in the American Drugfree Powerlifting Association, and he held the national ADFPA record in the deadlift in the 220 pound class for several years, with 792 pounds. Physically, he's a dead-ringer for Hermann Goerner.

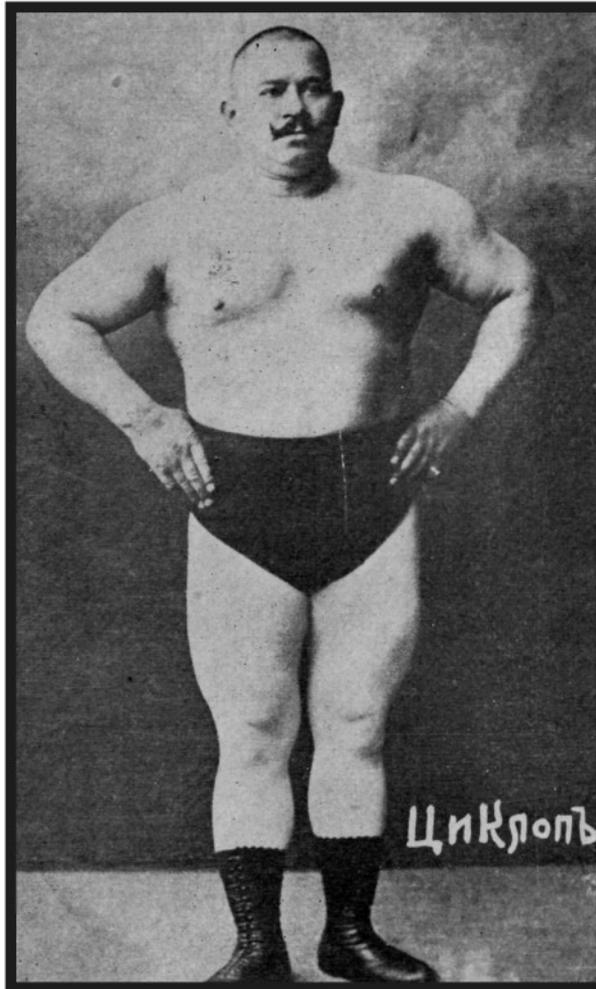
As Joe and I discussed the story about the old man and the quarters, we both concluded that although we couldn't believe such a feat was possible for anyone, much less a man of 83, we were still sufficiently intrigued to want to know more. We suspected that the old man must have claimed he could tear, or perhaps bend, quarters when he was young—maybe 40 or 50 years before, a claim that couldn't be disproved. In any event, Joe agreed to delve into the background of the story, and after he reached the man who wrote the original article for a small paper in southern Oklahoma he explained to the writer why he was calling. The writer said that the old man was quite well known in the area and that everyone up there had "gotten a kick" out of what happened to the carjacker down in Dallas who pulled a gun and had his arm broken. During the conversation, Joe asked the writer how long ago it was when

the old man was supposed to have been able to tear quarters, and the writer said, "Well, as far as I know he can still do it. I know he was doing it a couple of years ago." Trying to contain his excitement, Joe kept talking until he got the old man's phone number.

Joe phoned me immediately with the news, and I urged him to call the old man and ask him in a very nice way if he'd be up for a visit from some Texans who had a long-time interest in physical strength. When Joe made the call he found the old man to be personable and quite willing to talk about what had happened in Dallas as well as about his tearing of quarters. He told Joe that he didn't separate coins much anymore, and that he wasn't as strong as he'd been when he was younger, adding that it hurt his fingers more now than it used to. "But I can still tear 'em," he said, "and if you boys want to come up I'll tear one for you." After Joe gave me this remarkable news, it was clear that we had to have

a road trip to see this old man for ourselves. Joe agreed enthusiastically, and I said that I wanted to take several people along who would enjoy such an opportunity and who would also be able to add their observations to ours in the extremely unlikely event that the old man could actually perform this seemingly impossible feat.

The first person I called was Dennis Rogers, the professional strongman who lives in Houston. Dennis is justifiably famous for his ability to bend a crescent wrench into an "S" shape, break standard handcuffs, tear small chunks out of decks of cards, tear in half a Houston phone book that has been covered both vertically and horizontally with duct tape, and perform other similar feats. Dennis is probably the best-known and most successful performing strongman in the U.S. at this time,



Polish strongman Franz Bienkowski, known professionally as Cyclops the Coin Breaker, reportedly broke coins in front of both Edmond Desbonnet and Theodore Siebert. Massively built, Bienkowski weighed 250 pounds at only 5'6".

and he's also a very serious student of the great performing strongmen of the past—such as Joe "Mighty Atom" Greenstein, who, like Dennis, was smaller than the average man. When I explained to Dennis what was up he said he'd even re-arrange his schedule to be able to come along. The other person I called was Joe McCoy, a man who lives in a small town below Dallas, which would be on our way to Oklahoma. McCoy has been organizing, promoting, and videotaping various sorts of iron game events for many years. He's seen a lot over the years, has a deep interest in all aspects of strength, and has a real knack with a camera.

As for me, I've had a particular fascination with hand strength ever since I was about ten years old and saw my maternal grandfather show me how he could place an uncracked hard-shell pecan between his thumb and bent fore-finger and break the shell of the pecan. (A "hard-shell" is a small native pecan—not one

of the larger, "paper-shell" pecans developed by scientists over the years.) I asked "Papa" to do this quite a few times over the years, until I had entered college, and he broke every pecan I gave him. Every time he did it he'd always smile and quietly repeat what he'd told me that first time—when we were sitting together in a river-bottom pecan grove, hunting squirrels—"Bud, very few men can do that...and no boys." What Papa did and what he said created the sort of ongoing bond between us that binds boys to their grandfathers. I've wondered many times if my own hunger to be strong began that long-ago day in the pecan grove.

By the time I got to college I'd begun to develop what's turned out to be a lifelong interest in strength, and I'd learned that when he was in his prime my Grand-

father Williams, who was about 5'10" and 215 pounds, was reckoned to have been the strongest man in his part of Texas. Unfortunately, I never got to see him lift and carry bales of cotton, but many men from his community told me that he could do it easily, almost casually. All I saw was the breaking of the hard-shell pecans, and all I know is that as I grew to well over 300 pounds and developed a fairly strong pair of mitts myself, I was never able to break a native hard-shell pecan like Papa could.

In the first years of my lifting career I read all of the back issues of *Strength & Health*, *Iron Man*, *Muscle Power*, and *Muscle Builder* that had been published, and those wonderful old magazines flooded my mind with tales and images of hard-handed men who could do remarkable feats of bending, tearing, and breaking. At first, I believed almost everything I read, but in time—as I read more and more and had a chance to talk to mature men with years of experience in the game—I became skeptical of certain claimed feats of hand strength. One of the feats that I began to doubt was the bending—and particularly the tearing or "breaking"—of coins with the bare hands. My father had a vise, and using a pair of strong pliers, I bent and broke a few coins of different sizes that were held tightly in the vise. These "experiments" made me even more skeptical.

As I got ready to make the trip to Oklahoma with Dennis and the two Joes I decided to have a look at our university's book, file, and magazine collection so I'd be up to speed on the matter of coin-bending and tearing. Although my "look" was certainly not an exhaustive one, I reacquainted myself with many of the stories I'd read—and often re-read—in years past. I started, as I often do, with David P. Willoughby's masterwork, *The Super Athletes*. Willoughby, in his book, argued that even though many top strongmen took the position that the tearing of a U.S. quarter or fifty-cent piece with only the bare hands was beyond human capability, he believed that it had been done in the past by a number of men. He cited, in particular, the most famous of these men—Poland's Franz Bienkowski, who performed under the stage name of "Cyclops, the Coin-Breaker." In support of Bienkowski's ability, Willoughby cites Professor Desbonnet, the French physical culture authority, who wrote that he had personally seen the Polish strongman break a *ten-centime* piece, which is a coin made of copper or bronze with a slightly larger circumference than that of a U.S. half-dollar, although

somewhat thinner. Willoughby also cites—in support of Cyclops—Professor Siebert, Desbonnet's German counterpart, who said that he saw Cyclops break several ten-pfennig coins "solely with the thumb and forefinger of one hand!"<sup>2</sup> Clearly, this is an example of both Siebert and Willoughby either letting their imaginations run away with them or being careless with language. I say this because it is obviously impossible to bend or break any sort of coin with only one hand, as their language implies, unless the coin is pushed against something. The only way that such a bend could even theoretically be done would be for the strongman to use that one hand to grip the coin and then press it against a solid object of some kind until it bent or, if it was made of brittle metal, broke. In that regard, I recently asked Joe Weider if he'd ever seen anyone bend a U.S. or Canadian coin with bare hands, and he told me a story about 1953 World Heavyweight Weightlifting Champion Doug Hepburn, who worked for him briefly in the mailroom when Doug was in his lifting prime. Joe went on to say that he also had several women working there who opened mail from people who had sent in some change to pay for one of his training courses, and that the women would keep the dimes and quarters in a receptacle until they accumulated enough to be rolled up in a special paper and then taken to the bank. Where Doug Hepburn comes in is that one day Joe got a call from the bank complaining that some of the dimes coming in had been slightly bent and asking Joe if he knew what was causing it. So Joe went to the mailroom, and when he asked the women who worked there what was happening their eyes went immediately to Doug, who admitted, sheepishly, that he sometimes got bored and bent dimes. Joe said Doug acted like a little boy with his hand in the cookie jar, but that when he was asked how he did it he put a dime between his thumb and index finger and, with about half of it extended past the tip of his thumb, pushed it against a wooden doorjamb until the dime bent over his index finger—and then smiled.<sup>3</sup>

Willoughby also lists Cyclops' partner Charles Sampson, Charles Vansittart, Leon See, William Caswell, and John Grunn Marx as having apparently been able to break either U.S. or British coins. He also asserts—incorrectly, I believe—that "a considerable number of strongmen" could "bend a dime by holding it between the front teeth [and] then pushing upwardly on the coin with the thumb." He also maintains that Gregory Paradise and Joe "Mighty Atom" Greenstein could

bend a U.S. quarter using this technique. The reason I believe that Willoughby is mistaken here is that the force which can be exerted by the teeth is much greater in the rear teeth than in the front teeth. What's more, only the rear- or jaw-teeth are wide and flat enough to allow a coin to be clamped in the sort of vise-like hold that could withstand an upward push sufficient to bend either a dime or a quarter. Quite a number of authorities speak of coins being held in the jaw-teeth and bent, but no one to my knowledge has mentioned bending a coin while it was being held in the thin-edged front teeth. To give Willoughby the benefit of the doubt, he probably meant to say that the coins were clamped "between the teeth."<sup>4</sup>

Regarding Willoughby's references to Professors Desbonnet and Siebert having seen Cyclops break coins, I checked both of these authorities and found that they had, indeed, written that they had seen him do it. As to whether Cyclops was sufficiently gifted in sleight-of-hand to fool both experts is impossible to know at this great remove, and so we must take what the record gives us, weigh the evidence, and move on. One additional bit of information came from a 1948 article by Professor Desbonnet published in *Strength & Health*, in which the Professor says that when Leon See came to his gym in 1896 and lifted a thick-handled challenge barbell that had only been lifted off the floor by one man, See had never lifted weights before. When Desbonnet asked See's friend about the young man's background, the friend said that See didn't lift barbells, but "just breaks coins and tears over a hundred cards." What's most interesting about this statement regarding See is that it is the only mention of coin-breaking in Desbonnet's lengthy article—which is entitled, "The Man Who Breaks Coins!"<sup>5</sup>

We do know from other sources that See was an exceptionally strong-handed man, but there is some question about at least one of the men credited by Willoughby as having "broken" quarters—Charles A. Sampson. Even Willoughby seems to have had his doubts. For one thing, Sampson claimed that he was "The Strongest Man on Earth," even though his reputation rested not on the lifting of barbells and dumbbells but on his claims in harness-lifting, chain-breaking, and coin-breaking. Standing 5'7" and weighing only 175, Sampson was in his prime at more or less the same time as both Louis Cyr and Louis "Apollon" Uni, which Willoughby said made Sampson's claim almost laughable.<sup>6</sup>

Even though exaggeration was part of most professional strongmen's arsenals in those days, Sampson's greatest strength may have resided in his capacity for over-statement. He maintained, for example, that he had a 58" chest, a 16.5" forearm, and a 4.5"(!) wrist, measurements that set Willoughby's teeth on edge as they were either way too large (the first two) or way too small (the last one). Sampson also boasted that he could break a chain made of genuine welded links, 3/8" thick, made of iron or steel. Everyone I've asked about this maintains that this feat would be completely impossible unless one of the links had been sawn mostly through. As for his harness lifting, Sampson claimed that after only nine months of training he made an "official" record of 4008 pounds, which was more than the much heavier harness-lifting specialist Warren Lincoln Travis raised sixteen years later—after decades of training.<sup>7</sup> As for Sampson's coin-breaking, it's helpful to remember that he was also said to be very adept in sleight-of-hand. These details are useful as they establish the culture of hyperbole which dominated the world of professional strongmen and strongwomen a century or so ago, a culture which should make any modern student of strength skeptical about some of the assertions made by and about many of yesteryear's heroes.

Another historian of strength, Leo Gaudreau, took strong objection to Willoughby's somewhat easy acceptance of the coin-bending and breaking of so many men. One of the bases for his skepticism is the opinion of the legendary wrestler/weightlifter George Hackenschmidt,

who, read in a Russian newspaper that Sampson astounded everyone at a banquet where Russian royalty and high officials were present by tearing packs of cards and breaking coins. "Such performances," wrote Hack years later after much experience with Sampson, "ought not to be classed as strength feats as they are largely due to sleight of hand." I have seen many foreign coins and they do not seem to have the toughness and rigidity of our U.S.A. coins... I think I know a little something about metal because I worked for nearly 47 years, and I had to work with many different types of metals every working day. I think the foreign coins have . . . brittleness and, for that reason, my mind is

not closed to the [possibility] that a coin (not U.S.A.) can be broken. But when it is reported that Cyclops tore coins (tore, mind you) with the ease and speed that he was alleged to be capable of, I get properly suspicious . . . Cyclops was only a mediocre strongman [and] if he had any such power in his fingers, it would seem that he would have displayed it in other ways.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most thoughtful students of the iron game in the early part of the twentieth century was Alan Calvert, the founder of the Milo Barbell Company and the publisher for many years of the magazine, *Strength*. Calvert published *The Truth About Weightlifting* in 1911, and in that excellent book he briefly discussed coin-bending, but he covered the subject much more completely in several of the monthly columns that ran in his magazine.<sup>9</sup> The column was called "The Mat," and it covered issues of interest to Calvert's readers, and to himself. In October of 1924, an interesting letter from William Many and a response appeared in "The Mat."

Dear Sir: I have just heard a story of a man in our town who claims he can bend a twenty-five cent piece. There are a number of people who have seen him do it . . . He gets it between his teeth and then sets the heel of his hand to the exposed edge. Then he places his other hand on the wrist of the hand that does the work. I have never heard of anyone doing a stunt like that. If you think the feat anything extra I will get all the information I can. He can also bend a dime the same way.

Calvert responded:

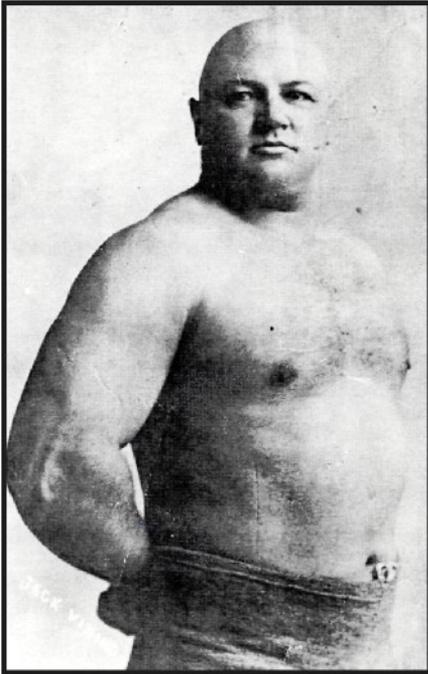
Upon receipt of the above letter I wrote to Mr. Many and asked him if to investigate the matter further. In his turn he sent to me a ten-cent piece and a twenty-five cent piece, and in the subsequent letter he said that he had actually seen Mr. Cartell bend the coins in the manner described. Both of the coins show toothmarks . . . The stunt is a very clever one. The coins show that Mr. Cartell gripped them near their edges with his

teeth, and this gave him a longer leverage when he pressed against the opposite edge of the coin with his hand. Mr. Many is an old correspondent of mine and I have always found his information to be reliable . . . This is the first positive evidence of coin bending that has ever been sent in to me. Now I would like to get some coins that were bent by the strength of the thumbs and fingers [alone] . . . I have received many letters from men who stated that they had seen other men bend coins with their fingers, so . . . if any of you fellows can furnish the evidence please send it along.<sup>10</sup>

Another bit of information that sheds light on this issue comes from a response made by David Willoughby to a question sent in to *Muscle Power* asking if anyone had "officially" bent a coin, "foreign or otherwise." Willoughby wrote:

There are many claimants . . . but I have yet to see one perform the feat. Perhaps the coins of years gone by were purer metal, softer in constituent, than the modern coins minted with combined alloys that make it an effort to bend them even when . . . held solidly in a vise . . . I am not denying that men have bent coins, but I have checked innumerable ones personally, who couldn't back their claims and were rampant with excuses. Nothing would please me more than meeting a coin breaker!<sup>11</sup>

Another person who would love to have seen a legitimate coin-breaker, or even a coin-bender is Tom Lincir, the president of Ivanko Barbell Company and an avid collector of antique barbells and exercise equipment. Unlike Willoughby, however, Lincir believes that he met a man almost four decades ago who was strong enough to do it. Tom had told me about this man before, and so I recently called Tom—who besides being an inventor is a master machinist—to ask him to give me what he had about the old wrestler he met back in the 1960s in San Pedro, where Tom lives. Tom said that the man went by the name Jack Viking, and that when he saw Viking for the first time he had never been so impressed by anyone's general look of overall power.



Professional wrestler Jack Viking was said to weigh 250 pounds with measurements of: 52" chest, 22 1/4" neck, and 20" arms. The photo was provided by Tom Lincir, who believes Viking could bend quarters.

The photo on the left backs up Tom's assessment as Viking—a professional wrestler at the time of the photo—was indeed thick and rugged, but so was Cyclops. Tom said that although he never saw Viking tear a coin of any sort, other men in the San Pedro area saw him bend quarters and other coins. Tom said Viking looked so truly powerful—even at seventy-two years of age—that he has always believed Viking's claims of bending

coins and bent pressing four hundred pounds.<sup>12</sup>

The early twentieth-century strongman Charles McMahon, however, felt just the opposite, as the following passage from his 1927 book, *Feats of Strength and Dexterity* reveals:

The possibility of this [coin-bending or breaking] feat has been an oft-discussed question. Very few, of which I am not one, claim to have seen this feat performed, consequently I am just a little skeptical about it ever having been done without some trick either of sleight-of-hand or metal treating...There is a group of physical culture enthusiasts who believe everything they hear about feats of strength and another group who believe nothing unless they see it done. There is still a third group which I prefer to belong to who will believe some feats they hear of being performed and will not believe others...With this [latter] group it depends on whom you hear it from or where you read it, and whether or not it appears possible on the face of

it. The third group is often wrong, but the other two are more often wrong...The mere fact that only a very few strong men ever claimed to bend and break coins makes it sound doubtful...and there may be foreign coins that are considerably softer as to metal than the American coins. Right there may be the joker as far as we Americans are concerned. When I speak of coin-bending and breaking...I mean American quarters and half-dollar pieces...Coin-bending in the strongman game is like perpetual motion in the invention field; too much time shouldn't be wasted on it."

As for wasting time, none of the four members of the Fellowship of the Quarter who drove to Oklahoma on December 20, 2003—two years before I sat down to write this account—felt the least bit sorry to be making the trip. For one thing, we all wondered if we could have stumbled upon an old man equally as remarkable as Karl Norberg, the ex-longshoreman who didn't start serious lifting until he was forced to retire at sixty-five and yet became, by the time he reached seventy, one of the top few bench pressers in the world. Being spoken of in the same breath with Karl Norberg would be high cotton indeed, as some authorities believe that his 460 pound, flat-back bench press done at the age of seventy-three in the late Sixties ranks as the greatest feat in lifting history when age, date, poundage, and bodyweight are all taken into consideration. So remarkable was the 265 pound Norberg that even today, with bench "shirts" that can add more than 30% (!) to a lift, no one his size within ten years of his age has matched the 460 he did back in the Sixties, wearing an undershirt and flip-flops.

Joe Hood and I set out from Austin on our quest late one afternoon, and picked up Joe McCoy early the next morning in Glen Rose before driving on up to one of the Dallas airports to meet Dennis Rogers, who had shifted his schedule so he could go with us on the trip to Oklahoma. All the way up, of course, we talked lifting and feats of strength, especially feats of hand strength. And we talked at great length about "The Old Man and the Quarter," to paraphrase Hemingway. For example, Joe Hood and Dennis compared their respective memories of having seen, sometime in the early Eighties, a man on the television show, "That's Incredible," tear

several quarters in half, and we all wondered if the eighty-three-year old we were going to see was the same man who had appeared on the show. Joe and Dennis both remembered that the man had not been introduced as a professional strongman, but just as a working man who was shown performing this colossal example of hand strength. I added that back in the early Eighties I read about someone who had supposedly torn a quarter in half on *That's Incredible*, but paid little attention to it since I didn't believe such a thing could be done.

When we finally got to the restaurant where the old man was supposed to meet us he wasn't there as we were a bit late, but when we called him he said he'd be right over. We went into the parking lot to meet him, and as he drove into the lot in his pick-up, Dennis became excited and said to me, "It's the same guy I saw on "That's incredible." Physical first impressions are important to iron gamers, and we all agreed later that when we saw the old man and shook his wedge-like hand we were struck by how thick and strong he looked. About 5'9" tall, he probably weighed in the neighborhood of 215 pounds, and he had the solid, weather-beaten look of a man who had spent a lot of time outdoors, working. He looked the exact opposite of atypical, frail man of eighty-three. He had on a Stetson hat and was wearing jeans and a western shirt under a thick jacket of the kind made for football players. His hand was wide and hard and thick-fingered, and I think we all began to wonder if we had, indeed, come upon a man who could actually tear a quarter in half. He actually reminded me a good deal of my pecan-breaking grandfather, who in his mid-eighties, put a doctor to his knees when the doctor shook hands with Papa and, following standard geriatric protocol, asked him to "squeeze as hard as you can."

Once we were seated in the café, we began to introduce ourselves all around, and the old man told us that he first started bending coins when he was a young man. He said he had an uncle who could bend a dime in his fingers, and that this inspired him to keep trying until he could do it himself. Finally, with a few more years under his belt of digging postholes and milking twenty cows each morning and evening, he bent a dime—and then he worked on a quarter until it, too, submitted. He told us that his uncle was fairly tall but "not heavy-built like I am," adding that even as a young man he'd been unusually heavily-muscled. "When I took my shirt off the muscles used to just stand out all over me, even in

my armpits," a comment that reminded me of the comment Dr. John Theophilus Desaguliers made about the strange appearance of the English phenomenon Thomas Topham, who was said to have armpits "full of muscles and tendons."<sup>14</sup>

The old man, who spoke and acted like the old Texas cowboy and outdoorsman that he was, had a ready smile and a friendly manner, and it was clear that he was known to the people in the café. As we talked he told us a few more things about his unusual background, which included a horrific episode when, at the age of seven, he witnessed his father being dragged out of a jail cell and lynched by a mob of men angry about a gunfight in which two law officers had died. His father was in jail because of his involvement in the notorious "Christmas Tree Robbery" in Cisco, Texas, which ended up in a deadly shoot-out. "My daddy was a bank-robbing, moon-shining fool," the old man said, "and if my grandfather hadn't taken me to raise, I don't know what would have happened to me."

During our long talk at the café I explained to the old man that Dennis Rogers was one of the greatest benders and breakers of metal in the strongman game, and we showed him a couple of things Dennis had bent. He seemed interested, and impressed, and he told us more or less how he tore the quarters—but we didn't ask him to tear one as we wanted to have our video-cameras at the ready so that, if he could really tear one, we'd be able to record it for proof and posterity. However, just as we'd finished our meal and begun to relax, he reached into his coat pocket, brought out a quarter and without saying a word began to bear down on the coin, groaning deeply with the effort. To our absolute amazement, the quarter began to open, and inside of ten seconds he pitched it onto the tabletop and leaned back in his seat, smiling. I picked it up and saw that it was torn about % of the way through, and it seemed clear that he could have torn it all the way had he wished to do so. We were all talking and yelling at once, and then he showed us his left thumb, which had a deep impression at the tip where he had pressed against the edge of the coin. We all examined the quarter, and I knew Dennis was looking—as was I—for any sort of sign that it had been gripped with pliers or treated in some way, but we found nothing.

As our heart-rates were beginning to return to the high-normal range and as the news of what the old man had done percolated through the large room, a teenager who worked in the café as a busboy came up and,

with the obliviousness of youth, handed the old man a quarter and asked him to bend it so he could see it for himself and show it to his girlfriend. And before I could stop him, the old man grabbed the quarter, buried it in his heavy paws and began again to twist on the coin and groan until he opened it just as he had opened the first one—torn about ¾ of the way through and with the halves of the coin spread well apart. Once again, we saw the deep, dark indentations on his left thumb, and so before a whole horde of townsfolk came to the table with quarters to bend we got up, paid the check, got in our respective vehicles and followed the old man to his home a few miles out into the countryside. As we rolled into the yard of his modest home, a hound dog tied to one of the yard's many trees heralded our arrival.

Soon we were inside, and he was showing us several magazines and clippings that spoke about his tearing of quarters and about his long-time friendship with the actor Robert Duvall, who has had major roles in films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Secondhand Lions*, and the *Godfather* trilogy as well as in the acclaimed television miniseries, *Lonesome Dove*, in which Duval played an old Texas Ranger whose mannerisms and speech he supposedly "borrowed" from the old man for that role. He also mentioned that he had a small role in one of Duvall's most recent films, *The Disciple*, and when I reviewed the film later there he was, sure enough. What's more, he showed us photos of a visit he and his wife had made to Duvall's Virginia farm, as well as two magazine articles in which Duvall speaks about his respect for the old man, who he'd known for almost 30 years. For example, Duvall said this in 2003, "I saw him recently and, at 82, he ripped five quarters in half with his hands. Literally." The old man also gave all of us one of his "business cards," which features a drawing of a quarter ripped almost completely apart.<sup>15</sup>

As we continued to talk, I read some passages and showed him some photos from several books I'd brought, including Willoughby's *The Super Athletes*, and Joe Hood—throwing caution and his dentist's advice to the winds—even bent a penny in his teeth for the old man to keep. During all this time Joe McCoy and Dennis had been video-taping our conversation, but everyone—the old man included—knew that

what we really wanted was to record him tearing a quarter or two. When I asked him if he'd tear one for the cameras, he said he'd try, but that he didn't want to "mess up his thumbs." I should add here that before we got to the cafe we four "questers" had talked about the need to verify what we hoped to see, and so I'd put an unobtrusive mark on a quarter in the hope that he wouldn't notice it. We thought about simply telling him that we had to see him bend a coin we'd marked so there could be no question about what he did, but Joe Hood believed that we should take the more polite, "Southern," approach—and we all agreed that this was the proper thing to do. In any case, when I gave him the tagged coin he looked at it and quickly said that it looked like it had been marked, saying it in such a way that indicated his feelings had been hurt by our skepticism. So rather than insist that the old man bend a marked coin I did the easy thing and gave him an unmarked quarter. And then the moment came. Joe McCoy stood to one side with his video-camera, Dennis stood directly in front, and the old man began to crank on the coin, once again groaning as he did so. As before, in just a matter of seconds the coin was opened up and flipped into the air. As the old man was grinding on the coin, Dennis Rogers kept saying, "There it goes, there it goes." and After the coin had been flipped Dennis added, "History was just made."

We left soon afterward, as we had a long way to go to get back home, and on the way south we swung from absolute amazement that we'd been fortunate enough to discover one of nature's wonders, to analyzing step by step what we had seen to be sure we hadn't been scammed in some way. During the early part of the trip home we were, for the most part, true believers—as excited as children who'd just seen their first elephant. Both Dennis and Joe Hood vowed to begin training to match the old man as soon as they got back home, and I

got a horse-laugh by intoning with mock seriousness that I could probably have done it myself in my "younger days." The more we talked, however, the more we had to admit that since the old man didn't bend a marked coin it was possible that he might have switched the quarters in some way for ones that were either treated or already broken. We dismissed



The Quarter Master gave us all his business card as we left that day, and headed back to Texas.

the "treated" theory, however, as he gave the quarters to us, and it would be easy enough to have them analyzed at one of the university's labs. As for the possibility of a switch, several of us recalled that he had had one of his hands in his pocket just before he tore each of the coins, which might have allowed him to palm the whole quarter and substitute a quarter that had been either weakened or torn.

To be completely honest, although most of us tended—and certainly wanted—to believe that we had, as Dennis said, seen history being made, we knew in good conscience that we couldn't claim we knew with absolute certainty that the old man had torn the quarters fair and square. So back and forth we went between happiness—at having been present at the tail-end of the career of a man who'd apparently been able to do a controversial feat for more than sixty years—and dismay at not having insisted that he bend a marked coin so we would know for sure.

I spoke often to Joe Hood and Dennis Rogers in the days after we returned to our respective homes, and we continued to analyze what we'd witnessed as we waited to see the videotape. When Dennis called me after his first viewing, however, he said it really didn't settle anything as it was impossible to really see the coin coming apart since the old man's wide fingers were so close together. Joe told me soon after we got back that he'd already made his thumbs so sore that he'd had to stop practicing, and Dennis also reported similar discomfort. I even called former national weightlifting and powerlifting national champion Mark Henry, who may well have the greatest pure gripping strength in the world, and told him about what we had seen. He was amazed, but not daunted, yet a few days later he called to say that he'd had to stop trying as his hands were, in his words, "completely ruined." And this is from a four hundred pound giant who closed the #3 Ironmind gripper all four possible ways the first time he ever saw one and who also—after I asked him if he thought he could squeeze a can of soda with one hand hard enough so that the can would split in some way—got a can and squeezed it until it burst.

As the days went by, only Dennis, with his bulldog tenacity and inventive mind, continued to work on at least bending a quarter. Soon, he said that if he put a pair of very small pliers on the edges of the quarter his leverage was increased and he could bend the coin. Even so, he said he didn't believe he could ever build the strength he needed to bend—much less tear—a twenty-five-cent

piece. I'd asked all the men who were on the trip to keep the news about our "quest" to themselves as I wanted to tell the story first to the readers of *Iron Game History*, but I'd lost a bit of my original enthusiasm since I wouldn't be able to write the sort of definitive piece I wanted to write.

During this interim, I rolled back my memory tapes and made a list of experienced men who had told me they didn't think a U.S. quarter could be bent using only the hands, much less torn. The list is impressive, and it includes Vic Boff, Mac Batchelor, John Grimek, Bob Peoples, Bob Samuels, the Mighty Atom, Slim Farman, Joe Assirati, and David Webster. I also called several active top benders and breakers to ask them if they thought it was possible for a man to bend a U.S. quarter. The first man I called was Mike "The Destroyer" Roy, from Quebec. Roy is a professional strongman who specializes in feats of hand and arm strength, and he has performed at some of the annual dinners of the Association of Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen as well as at the Arnold Classic. Roy said that no one of whom he had knowledge could do such a thing, and that he doubted it was physically possible. An important consideration is that Roy is one of only two men I know who, most experts believe, have bent pennies (Canadian pennies, in his case) double with just their two hands, and he says he does it rarely as it "destroys the Destroyer's hands."

The only other man who can double up a penny—sometimes, at least—is "Stanless Steel" Plasken, a performing strongman from New York who says that the feat is at the absolute limit of his strength. He says that the bending of a penny leaves his hands sore for a week even though he pads the coin slightly with a piece from a grocery store paper sack. Plasken doubts that a quarter can be bent in the same way. Another man with whom I recently spoke is the great John Brookfield, one of the true Grandmasters of hand strength. John said that some years ago he trained for awhile in hopes of being able to bend coins, but that although he could "put a good crimp" in a penny he finally had to quit the training as his hands just simply wouldn't tolerate it. "When I hyper-extended one of my thumbs I knew I might permanently damage my hands if I kept it up," John told me, adding that he didn't believe a quarter could be fully bent with two bare hands and that he was absolutely certain one couldn't be torn apart in this way. Pat Povalaitis, the reigning king of the nail-benders, agrees with the other top hands, saying that he doesn't believe it's ever happened—unless the coin is held in a vise-like

grip by the teeth. He added that he had "dabbled with it, but found it very painful."

Where, then, did that leave us in our quest to understand just what we had seen in Oklahoma? None of us—and none of the experts to whom I spoke—were convinced that the bodybuilder Mike Dayton had been able to bend quarters. And Dennis Rogers had recently learned from Joe "The Great" Rollino—about whom it has been written that back in the days when he performed as a professional strongman he could bend quarters almost double with his bare hands—that he primarily used his teeth to make the bends. Rollino, now in his one hundredth year, is a wonderful old man who learned the strongman profession from Coney Island performer Warren Lincoln Travis. Last year, Dennis asked Rollino exactly how he had bent the quarter he had given Dennis, and Rollino explained that he first placed it in his "jawteeth" and bent it back and forth to "crease it" before finishing it off by putting his two hands between his legs and bending it further.<sup>16</sup>

So the question remained. Had the old man in Oklahoma torn the coin or had he not? I had begun to reconcile myself to the probability that we would never know with certainty, but then one day the phone rang. It was Dennis, talking a mile a minute. What he finally managed to make clear was that his son had just been lying on the floor in front of the TV set, watching the video of the old man tearing the quarter, when all at once he casually remarked to his father, "Hey, Dad, the quarter's already ripped." So Dennis dropped to the floor, got right down at ground level, and looked closely as they ran the tape back and forth until he finally saw it, too. Dennis told me that his son is proficient in magic, and so tended to watch such things with a more knowing eye, but still Dennis wanted to make sure—so he took the tape to a friend who works in local law enforcement as a specialist in the analysis of film and videotape. After his friend digitally enhanced the film so it could be viewed in super-slow motion it became absolutely clear that the coin the old man "tore" had already been torn before he exerted any pressure on it. All he did was open it up. Because Dennis was directly in front of the old man, the camera caught the torn coin being turned so that the tear was between the old man's thumbs—as can be seen in the photos accompanying the article. Dennis got a DVD of the footage to me right away, as well as a couple of blow-up stills of the telling moment when the tear can be clearly seen. One of those photos is reproduced on the next page. And for those of you who'd like to

have a DVD of the "tearing," Dennis has included the telltale footage on a recently-made and light-hearted compilation of legitimate feats and various "illusions" entitled *Crazy, but Powerful*. The DVD can be ordered from: [www.dennisrogers.net](http://www.dennisrogers.net).

Straightaway I called Joe Hood to tell him the news, but at first he wasn't all that willing to believe we knew for certain that the coins had been switched. I didn't want to believe it, either, but I'd grown more skeptical the more I thought about what we'd seen in Oklahoma—and about the possibly related fact that when Joe had called the Dallas Police Department to ask if they had any record of the car-jacking incident no such incident had been reported. But in time even Joe had to agree with the rest of us that this interesting and colorful old man had had a pretty easy time pulling the wool over the eyes of four supposed experts. The two of us, and Dennis, too, began to laugh at ourselves and at the entire incident as we knew we'd been like theater-goers who, in order to make a stage-play more real, engage in a psychological technique called, "the willing suspension of disbelief." In other words, we wanted so much to believe we'd witnessed an 83-year old man tear several quarters in half with his bare hands that we were easy marks.

Soon after viewing the tell-tale tape, Dennis called a friend of his who's a successful professional magician, and told him the story about the old man and the ripped quarter. "He laughed and laughed," Dennis told me, "and said that this coin-switch was a very standard magician's trick. He asked me several things about the "performance," and particularly if the old man had pitched the coin up in the air when he finished, since this is a tactic used to draw the eye away as the original coin is being put into his pocket." Mark Henry laughed about it, too, saying that we four were classic marks—just like a lot of the people who go to pro wrestling matches and trick themselves into believing that all the spectacular blows and kicks and falls are exactly what they seem to be.

Perhaps the moral of this story is that just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so too—sometimes—is strength. We four men went on a quest to see something we very much wanted to see—and for a time we were willing to believe that we had seen it. We had willingly suspended disbelief. Our love of the iron game—and particularly of the romantic aspect of prodigious feats of strength—muscled our objectivity to the side to such an extent that looking back at it now makes



This still, and the enlargement above, taken from the digital videotape shot by Dennis Rogers, clearly shows that the quarter was torn before the old man began to exert any pressure.

me smile all over again. Even so, neither I nor any one of us who went begrudge one minute of the time we spent—or the money we spent—driving to Oklahoma to meet the old Quarter Master. In fact, we all decided that no real purpose would be served by revealing the old man's name. He may well be dead by now, as he had a heart attack about two weeks after we were there to visit him. I certainly have no intention of calling him to tell him that we now know he didn't really tear those quarters, and I'd just as soon he went on taking pleasure in how he "fooled those Texas boys." But whether he's still doing his coin trick to amuse the good folks down at the local WalMart or to entertain the angels way in the middle of the air, we wish him no harm. He'd obviously been dining out on his stunt for years and years, and we all hope he dines out for many more. And who can say for certain that when he was in the fullness of his prime he wasn't so cock-strong that he really *could* tear a quarter in two? We do know that one part of his story is true: his father was indeed lynched, and as Joe Hood says as he looks back at what happened, "I think of a humorous old man who just wanted to 'be somebody,' and I think of a heartbroken young boy staring up at his father hanging from a tree on a dark Texas night in 1928."

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "El Paso Retiree Single-Handedly Takes on Gun-Wielding

Thief," *Amarillo Globe News*, 11 December 2003.

<sup>2</sup> David P. Willoughby, *The Super-Athletes* (NY: A.S. Barnes & Co, 1970): 225-226. See also: David P. Willoughby, "Strength Through the Ages: Cyclops Bienkowski Breaking a Coin," *Strength & Health* (March 1962): 42.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Joe Weider, 14 December, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Willoughby, *Super-Athletes*, 225-227.

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Edmond Desbonnet, "The Man Who Breaks Coins," *Strength & Health* (n.m.1948): 20 & 37. Clipping in David P. Willoughby "Coin Breakers" file. Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>6</sup> David P. Willoughby, "Sampson & Cyclops—The Coin Breakers," *Iron Man*, p. 28-29, 53. Undated clipping in David P. Willoughby "Coin Breakers" file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, The University of Texas at Austin. Willoughby's point can be extended to coin-bending because it seems odd that so few of the true giants of strength history—Louis Cyr, Apollon, Herman Goerner, Arthur Saxon, Mac Batchelor, etc.—have ever claimed that they could bend or break coins, even though some of them had great hand strength.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28. See also: C. A. Sampson, *Strength* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co. 1895), 129.

<sup>8</sup> Leo Gaudreau, *Anvils, Horseshoes and Cannons: The History of Strongmen*, Vol. 1. (Alliance, NE: by the author, 1975), 177.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Calvert, *The Truth about Weight Lifting* (Philadelphia: by the author, 1911), 73-74.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Calvert, "The Mat," *Strength* (October 1924), n.p. Clipping in David P. Willoughby, "Coin Breakers" file, Todd McLean Physical Culture Collection, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>11</sup> Untitled, undated clipping from *Muscle Power* in David P. Willoughby "Coin Breakers" file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Tom Lincir, December 7, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Charles McMahon, *Feats of Strength and Dexterity* (Philadelphia: I.W. Klopp Co, 1927;), 52-54.

<sup>14</sup> Willoughby, *Super-Athletes*, 40-41.

<sup>15</sup> Jon Chase, "Quote, Unquote: Robert Duvall," *FHM Magazine*, (May 2003): 76.

<sup>16</sup> Dennis Rogers interviewed Joe Rollino in August of 2005 at Slim "The Hammerman" Farman's home.