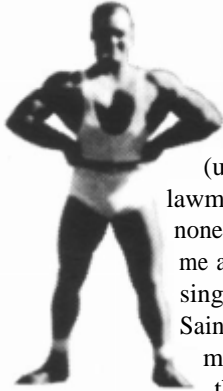


WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Police Chief Joe Peters: Lawman as Strongman

by Al Thomas, Ph. D. *Kutztown University*



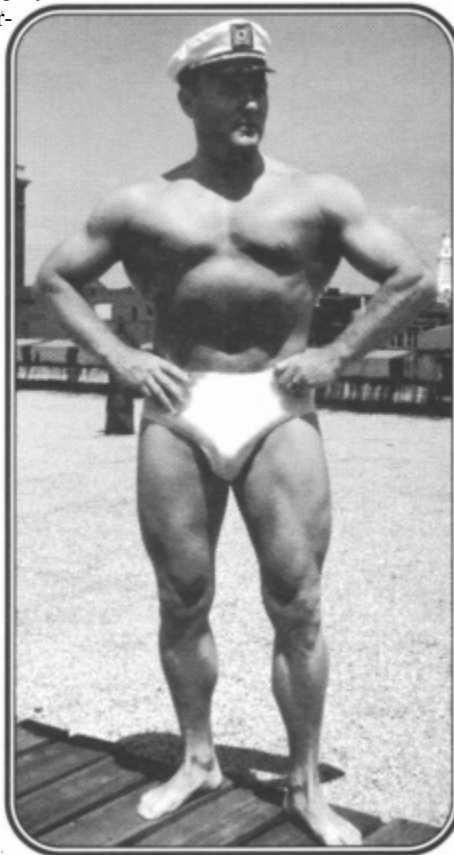
As a boy who dreamed of kicking some retributive sand into malefactors' faces along the beaches of my personal underworld, I used to thrill when (using only their might and main) real, live lawmen brought down evil-doers. For instance, none of Louis Cyr's great strength feats moved me as much as the legendary stories as to how he single-handedly cleaned up Montreal's tough Sainte-Cunigonde District during his service as a magistrate in that city's police department. I thought it was grand when he collared one bad egg and then grabbed another in his mighty paw, using the two combined heads as battering rams against their whole thuggish rout of trouble-making accomplices. [Ed. Note: These stories about Cyr apparently were fabricated by George F. Jowett. See *IGH*, Volume One, Number Two]

Moving from legend to reality, the same boy would have resonated to the following (July, 1943) *True Detective Magazine* story about a (far from humdrum) reality that is, even today, almost as exciting as the aforementioned account from the canon of Cyrilian legend-myth: "A riot call had come into the Schenectady, New York, Police Headquarters. A score of men in a tough section of the city were reported to be battling one another with an assortment of murderous weapons such as tire irons, crowbars, and Stillson wrenches. It began to look as though property along the entire block might be wrecked.

"A matter of minutes later, a single police prowl car arrived at the scene. Out of it stepped a brawny, broad-shouldered, though mild-looking young patrolman. His blue eyes surveyed the action calmly through rimless glasses. Even before he had spoken a word, the bloody and embattled rioters, to a man, threw down their weapons and meekly surrendered. 'Aw, they were tired, anyway,' modestly admitted the young patrolman. But that's not how his fellow officers, nor any other resident of Schenectady, would explain the phenomenon. In their estimation, the rioters were scared silly, for the young patrolman was Joe Peters, Jr., strongest cop on the force—or anywhere in the world for that matter. Capable of Gargantuan and almost unbelievable feats of strength, Patrolman Peters, at twenty-six, has the reputation of being a 'one man gang'. . . . There was the time a 215-pound buddy of his was badly burned in a

machine shop accident. Rescuers who brought him home couldn't get him up a long, narrow flight of stairs, and put in a call for Joe Peters. Joe picked the injured man up in his arms like a baby and walked upstairs with him."¹

Clearly, Joseph A. Peters, Jr., was quite a man, and today, half a century later at seventy-five, he still is. The son of a Schenectady (N.Y.) Chief of Police—Joe, junior, our subject, also went on to become that city's Chief of Police, retiring after a distinguished career of 42 years in law enforcement. Chief Peters (Joe to the weightlifting fraternity) is a graduate of the FBI National Police Academy in Washington, D.C. and Quantico, Virginia, and attended the National Resources Conference at Union College for the academic year 1953-1954.



Page 18 The photo at the top of the page shows Joe Peters at 22. The photo above was taken 30 years later.

In 1959, he was appointed a fingerprint consultant by Paul D. McCann, Director of the New York State Department of Correction, and in 1964, attended the National Institute on Police and Community Relations at Michigan State University, along with countless seminars and workshops on police organization and management. In addition, he contributed articles to various publications, including national and international health magazines, and he wrote a groundbreaking study on the value of physical fitness for police in *The FBI Enforcement Bulletin* (Vol. 33, No. 9, Sept., 1964). He has lectured at many police conferences under the auspices of the FBI and also at Police Training Schools throughout the Northeast. In addition to his law enforcement service, Joe has been extraordinarily active in all manner of community service, the listing of his chairmanships of various agencies and funds being enough to cover half a page in his biography. He was also Chairman of the Adirondack District of the A.A.U. in Weightlifting for 25 years and staged the Eastern States Weightlifting Championships and Mr. Atlantic Coast Physique Contest for 22 years. Granted all his muscle and strength—your typical "musclehead" or lifter, Joe Peters is not.

Under the tutelage of his weightlifting father, Joe started in with the York Barbell courses of training in February of 1934. Accompanied by his father he took his first trip to York "to see the Champions" in 1937: "My most memorable moment in the game was when I first traveled down to York in the spring of 1937 and met Bob Hoffman and all the York national champions."² This visit is nostalgically recounted by Harry Paschall in the May, 1957, *Strength & Health*: "Ever wonder what happens to

Strength and Health Boys Club members when they grow up? . . . Captain Joe Peters was one of the original *Strength and Health* boys 25 years ago; he became one of the strongest and best-built men in the country during the late 1930s and early 1940s, and today his own boy [Joseph A. Peters, III] is a Boys Club member and Captain Joe is still a perfect physical specimen and this month's Cover Man."³ It is clear that the first Chief Peters trained-up his son well, whose Iron Game heroes were those of just about any boy who entered the Game in the early 30s: John Grimek, Eugene Sandow, and George Hackenschmidt.

Joe and his wife of 51 years, Bernice, have five children and twelve grandchildren. "I am currently using the 'Rotation for Recuperation' system of training. I repeat the Monday workout on Friday and the Wednesday workout the following Monday. This type of training program keeps me from over-training and from becoming bored, yet it keeps me strong and healthy and is a big help in slowing down the aging process. I also follow a good mixed diet, plus supplements." When asked about the modern game, Joe replied, "The reasons for the decline in American lifting are many, but the first and foremost reason is that we need another leader like Bob Hoffman. My opinion of the modern bodybuilding scene is that it is false because of the part played by steroids in the development achieved by the current bodybuilders."⁴

Joe's competitive bodybuilding career dates back to 1938, when he took best chest honors at the Eastern States Championships; he won the same sub-division at the first Mr. America Contest, in 1939, in which he was also a finalist (the contest being won by Bert Goodrich). As strong as he was muscular, Joe set the national record in the "two arm hold-out in front, raised from below," in 1939, with 93 1/2 pounds, the previous record being 80 pounds; he has done 105, unofficially. In 1945, he pressed 260 pounds, equaling the New York State record of Frank Lisarelli. He did a straight-arm stiff-arm pullover with 110 pounds for ten reps and did three reps in the two-arm barbell curl with 185 pounds. In 1944, he cleaned and pressed two 102-pound dumbbells together overhead for five reps, and five years later, he did a one-arm military press of 131 pounds, after only five weeks of training in this lift.⁵

Joe also had an impressive 15-year career as a performing strongman. As part of his exhibition, he bent a 6 1/2 inch spike in half. Tore a New York City phone book and a deck of cards in half. Cleaned and pressed a 180-pound man overhead. Juggled a 150-pound New York Olympic barbell, and after catching the barbell at arm's length overhead with the right hand, he did a "lie down and get up," holding the barbell at arm's length on a straight arm. ("I performed this as follows: With two hands I would flip snatch the bar to arms' length, then drop it to the crook of the arms. Then from the crook of the arms, I would throw the barbell overhead and catch it in the right hand on a stiff arm. While holding the bar at arm's length in the right hand, I would then do a 'lie down' to a flat-on-my-back position and then get up while holding

this weight on a stiff arm,"⁶

Either in stories or photos, or both, Joe has appeared in *Strength & Health*, *Physical Culture*, *Your Physique*, and *Muscle Power* magazines. He appeared in *Strength & Health*: December, 1934. February, 1939. January, 1945. February, 1946, (a cover). April, 1948. June and July, 1948. May, 1957 (a cover). February, 1964. March, 1972. He also had a photo (1940) and a cover (1946) in *Physical Culture*. In 1947, he had Lon portraits in both *Muscle Power* and *Your Physique*. Textual commentary about Joe, as well as photo coverage, appears in Bob Hoffman's books *The Big Chest Book* and *Broad Shoulders*. Joe has worked as an artist's model for several outstanding artists, having posed for Matt Smith and Walter L. Greene, among others, and has also posed for sculpture and art classes at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs (N.Y.)⁷

The claim was often made for Joe that he had America's (some said the world's) greatest differential between the girths of his chest and waist. (His normal chest was said to be 53 inches; expanded, 55 inches. His waist was 31 1/2". Such claims, of course, are impossible to authenticate, but it would have seemed outrageous to me a boy—back when I first saw the "big Captain" in the mid-40's—and hardly less so to me now, as an "older gent", to have entertained any serious dispute as to the validity of this claim. This guy had, and still has, one huge chest; forget arguments about inches. As a young teenager, I remember arriving at a York function after a long hitch-hike and seeing my first Iron Game celebrity of the day, the big Captain: a barrel of a man in a snap-brimmed Dick Tracy hat, looking as big to my young boy's eyes as anybody five-ten had ever managed to look.

Embodied as it was that morning in Joe Peters, the LAW—abstract and shadowy as it so often seems—seemed about as abstract and shadowy as an oak tree, and I couldn't help thinking that, with policemen like this around, it must have been a heck of a lot easier (and in their very best self-interest) for "Schenectadians" to be law-abiding than it was for most of us miscreants, who didn't have such formidable reminders of the inadvisability of naughtiness, much less honest-to-goodness felonies.

As the passing decades have demonstrated, Joe Peters has proved himself as big and strong in the worlds of family and law enforcement and community service as he ever was in hoisting barbells and bending spikes. Our Game hasn't had a better friend or model for its youth than the Big Chief from Schenectady.

¹"One Man Gang", *True Detective* (July, 1943): 12.

²Letter by Joe Peters to Al Thomas. n.d.

³Harry Paschall, "Captain Joseph A. Peters, Jr.", *Strength and Health* (May, 1957): 12-13.

⁴Letter by Joe Peters to Al Thomas, n.d.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.