

# The Strange Saga of Galen Gough

Greg Travis

Excerpted from: *Galen Gough: The World's Miracle Strong Man* (Benton, KY: Greg Travis Pub., 1996)

**Editor's Note:** Greg Travis, editor-in-chief of the *Benton, Kentucky Tribune Courier* has produced a fascinating biography of professional strongman Galen Gough and we are grateful to Mr. Travis for allowing us to excerpt the following passages. There is, however, much more to the story of this strongman, movie star, preacher, and artist than can be told here. Gough, like most professional strongmen, exaggerated many of his claims, but his life was anything but boring. To order a copy of Travis' 312 page, heavily illustrated work, write him at 112 West Oaks Drive, Benton, Kentucky, 42025-8869. The price is \$19.95.



Galen Gough was born May 30, 1899, at his grandparents' small log home in Howard's Grove, Kentucky, and was described as a big, robust boy who was "smart as a tack" with an unquenchable "love for life."<sup>1</sup> Standing several inches taller and weighing a few pounds more than most of the other boys his age, the sandy-haired lad with the smooth complexion was by-and-large a cheerful youngster.

Marshall County residents simply assumed that Gough got his strength from his father who was considered quite powerful in his own right. Those who remembered his father spoke of the elder Gough's unique ability to handle with ease the large farm animals he would tend to as a veterinarian. A local writer claimed that Gough's father "when doctoring a balky mule could grasp the fore and back legs and flip the animal over his back" single-handedly.<sup>2</sup> In his early life, Dr. Gough, who was also an ordained minister, had been a farmer and a blacksmith.

The oldest of seven children young Galen carried with him that indelible Gough trait of strength which had been seen repeatedly in both his grandfather and father. Apparently, strength was of interest to Gough at an early age, for in 1935 he told the *Los Angeles Times*— in a full-page feature in the Sunday Magazine section— that as a child he did possess many of "the usual adolescent ambitions."

*I wanted, for instance, to become the world's strongest man. Jack Johnson, with his glistening black body of such tremendous power, was the world's heavyweight champion and like many other a youth at that time I wanted to become the "white hope" who could and would wrest the imaginary crown from his head. My body was much as those of my school mates except that at the age of 16 I was nearly 6 feet tall and weighed around 180 pounds.*<sup>3</sup>

Gough's youth was short-lived. While only in the eighth grade his caustic restlessness peaked and, according to various accounts, he simply got up from his seat one day, walked out of the small one-room school and proceeded to travel to Louisville to enlist in the United States Marine Corps. Soon, he was caught up in what came later to be known as World War One.

Gough may have tasted the tragedies of war in places like the soggy, death-stenched trenches of Belleau Woods, but it was at Vierzy, near Soissons, in the Battle of the Marne, that he experienced the harsh pain and agony associated with deadly combat. Previously wounded on several occasions, those injuries, though serious, would pale in comparison to the suffering he was about to endure.

In the midst of the organized disorder there came that all-too-familiar sound. The explosive projectile was falling hard and fast and it was headed straight toward Gough. With no time for retreat the bomb had found its mark. Instantly a piece of hot, burning lead split Gough's head open, piercing his brain. He collapsed lifelessly across the greenish-gray machine gun he was trying so desperately to man. The shrapnel from the German explosive had ripped apart Gough's mastoid section. As a result of the enormous blow to his skull, he was left with a paralysis on the right side of his body that ran from his head and face, to his shoulder and arm and all the way down his right leg to his foot.<sup>4</sup>

Time continued to pass. Everyone thought Gough was dead. By all rights he probably should have been dead. But dying on a distant field of war was not meant to be for Galen Gough, and after months of intensive medical treatment overseas he was returned to New York's Brooklyn Naval Hospital aboard the S.S. *Kroonland*.<sup>5</sup> Days of hospital confinement turned to months for the helpless Gough. Skilled medical experts at numerous U.S. and overseas hospitals tried repeatedly to offer words of encouragement, but each physician's attempts were met with little success. Over and over the phrase "hopeless invalid" came from the lips of the physicians, and it was expected that Gough would be bed-ridden, or at least strapped in a wheelchair the rest of his life.

Tom facial muscles ripped apart by the explosion, coupled with make-shift remedies, drastically changed his looks. Gone forever was the innocent countenance of his childhood. The wounds to his face and head were abominable, but his will to live endured. Gough's unyielding perseverance carried him through the agonizing months of hospitalization. Nearly one year after that frightful injury, he was finally going home. He was discharged as permanently and hopelessly disabled, but he was alive and headed back to western Kentucky as a Purple Heart veteran.

His once youthful body was ravaged and buckled. Behind his grafted left ear was an inch-and-a-quarter silver plate. His face

and mouth were twisted and he was unable to speak in an understandable voice. His eyesight and hearing were seriously impaired. And from time to time the pressure sure of the plate in his skull caused him to have spells—often described as blackouts. Life at home in Kentucky was hard for the war-ravaged veteran. Friends he knew before joining the service now crossed to the other side of the street before stopping to gawk and stare. Family members he loved and played with as a child were apprehensive of him, and children would run in fear anytime he came near them.

Searching for something meaningful to do with his life he reluctantly heeded the resurrected advice of his mother and submitted himself to the ministry. Despite what may have been honest and sincere attempts at preaching Christ's Gospel to the lost, Gough's pastorate didn't last. Pain from his war wounds continued to plague him, and he found himself laboring under the pressure of extreme nervous strain. Soon he began yielding to the temptations of life. Fighting and drinking became popular pastimes during his idle hours. It didn't take long for the business owners or patrons of the various McCracken County establishments he frequented to dub him "The Terror of Paducah."<sup>6</sup> Published accounts of his stopover at the local watering hole described the evening this way: "He had time for but a single drink when one of the Kentuckians wanted to know what he meant by that sneer. . . . After that, things began happening. Four men attacked the fighting parson at one time. He bounced them off the floor. More threw themselves upon him. He tossed them aside. Chairs, bottles and crockery began to fly."<sup>7</sup>

"Ex-Marine Runs Amuck, Whips Eighteen Men" read the headline in the local newspaper the next morning.<sup>8</sup> Newsmen had become all too familiar with Gough. They knew his new-found reputation. City editors were quick to send cub reporters out to follow up on stories involving the lighting parson. For instance, there's the story of the time when he stood atop a flight of steps leading from the street up to the Paducah Police Station and "hurled cop after cop down the steps."<sup>9</sup> Another well-remembered story involves the time he got into a bit of a "disagreement" with six Paducah police officers outside a popular night spot on Second Street near the river. By the time the skirmish had ended he had lifted each of the six officers several feet off the ground, hooked their belts to the rusty iron steps on the sides of some nearby telephone poles and walked away. In a 1938 magazine article, Paducah policemen who were on the force during Gough's exploits of the 1920s were interviewed about the local folk hero. They were quick to acknowledge his strength and to recall how his name was legendary in the "River City."

His exploits caused him to lose his ministry, and soon his problems worsened. In March of 1920, Gough was examined by



GALEN GOUGH, DRESSED AS A GANGSTER FOR ONE OF HIS MOVIE ROLES. NOTE THE FACIAL IRREGULARITIES.

— COURTESY GREG TRAVIS

Doctors H.B. Sights and R.B. Kirkpatrick in Paducah, and they determined that because of his war injury he was suffering from "Traumatic Psycho Neurosis" and thus unaccountable for his actions. The doctors went on to suggest that Gough required supervision and control for his own welfare and that he could best be provided for by commitment to a "mental institution."<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Gough was sent to a government hospital in the northeast, where the medical staff concurred with the Paducah doctors. Ironically, it was in the hospital that Gough began to heal himself. Years later, he recalled "I finally became interested in physical culture. It promised so much and seemed to be based upon sound principles. I took the study of it seriously. It represented my last hope... I started first with a reform in my diet, eating good natural food that facilitated digestion and put vitality into my sluggish body."<sup>11</sup>

Soon, his condition began to steadily improve. The prolonged days spent in the hospital were providing him the opportunity to begin rebuilding, restructuring and regaining not only his body, but his feeble spirit as well. Gone were the impetuous actions that had brought him such repelling notoriety at home. Physical culture was turning Gough into a new man. **[Ed. Note: Gough's accounts of his weakness and partial paralysis are at odds with the tales of his success as a barroom brawler. Perhaps he thought that a weak, paralyzed man who gained great strength through physical culture made a better story.]**

Gough describes his earliest training efforts thusly: "Using crude equipment as rocks lashed to sticks for barbells and ash cans full of gravel for weight lifting." Doctors kidded him about his so-called recovery, but he said nothing.

*When I still limped with my right foot, I used to put it in a pulley and work the pulley up and down with my good arm, just to exercise the paralyzed side. I had no strength in my hands. I used to hold a rubber sponge in my right hand and try to grip it to gain strength.*

*I had so little strength in my fingers that I could not go on with the art work I had taken in the vocational school in New York . . . I used to chew on a rubber sponge to develop strength in my jaws.<sup>12</sup>*

In no time his limited exercises had built his neck to 18 inches, up from 14 1/2 inches before he began his training. His biceps had reached 17 inches, which showed an increase in development of 3 inches. And his 5-foot, 10-inch body had grown in weight from 164 pounds to 223. Convinced he was well enough to take his life back into his own hands, one June day in 1920 Gough walked away from the United States Veterans Hospital in Philadelphia. Where he went after leaving the hospital is not clear.

Regardless of where he spent the next six months, Gough finally recognized he had a major problem on his hands. Authorities would be searching high and low for him—not as a suspect for a crime this time, but rather because he walked away from a mental institution. So, on December 10, 1920 the Marine veteran and former hospital patient traveled to Hampton Road, Virginia and re-enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. Gough described his reasoning for re-enlisting this way: “By doing this I established my sanity as far as the government was concerned. They wouldn’t want to admit they had a man with a screw loose serving as a recruiting sergeant. Then I bought myself out of the rest of my enlistment period on grounds of medical disability, just reversing the sales-talk I had used to get in.”<sup>13</sup>

Ready to take another step on his journey through life, Gough returned to New York. While there he continued his study of physical culture—picking up bits and pieces and storing them in the back of his mind. The next reports were of him heading south again aboard a speeding freight train—this time bound for Florida. There he hid in the swamps for months, finally making his way to his uncle’s house near Lake George. Resting in the company of family, Gough could now gather his thoughts and put them back in order. The refuge provided a greatly needed escape. “I realized (at that point) that my mind alone could make me whole again. Then and there I determined to use all my mental power to co-ordinate my physical powers and improve my pitiful condition” he said.<sup>14</sup>

Using homemade devices similar to those he had created while in the hospital, Gough commenced with his workouts—picking up where he had left off. From morning to evening, his thoughts were upon his exercises. Day-in and day-out he continued. With each week that passed he came up with new ways of lifting heavier weights. Intent upon conquering new goals he walked longer distances each day and lifted heavier weights for extended periods. Soon Gough found he was lifting 1200-pound weights with little or no strain.<sup>15</sup> Gough was amazed that in addition to his new-found strength, his handicapped speech amazingly disappeared. The lisp was still there as a result of his war wounds, but the major speech impediment was gone. At last Gough could communicate again in an understandable voice.

Unable to hide from the public any longer, one sunny day he ventured from his uncle’s home to St. Augustine. The Brown & Dryers Carnival was playing a show date on the outskirts of the town and Gough eager to mix with people again, decided to visit the gala festivities. An ever-popular attraction of the early carnivals and sideshows was the oversized wrestler who would challenge any-and-all comers to try to stay in the ring with him for a specified period of time. Seldom, if ever, did a challenger overcome the house wrestler,

but this day was to be different. The champion wrestler was soon to meet his conqueror. Knowing his own strength, as well as his recently-tested will power to overcome adversities, Gough answered the giant wrestler’s call for someone from the crowd, and in only two minutes Gough had pinned the carnival wrestler to the mat, shattering the showman’s huge, hairy arm in the process.

Bisch Turner, a friendly man who was putting on the sideshow, witnessed the encounter and immediately offered Gough the carnival’s strongman position—now vacant due to the broken arm. Gough accepted the job on the spot and Turner agreed to pay him \$1 a day and furnish his meals. In addition to his work at the sideshow as a wrestler and strongman, Gough did odd jobs around the carnival grounds before and after the shows.<sup>16</sup>

Wearing a thick, coarse beard to help conceal his twisted and scarred face, Gough, tipping the scales now at 250 pounds, traveled across the south with the Brown & Dyers Carnival. In the sports arena he would wrestle all comers. But, after the matches, he would make a quick exit off the rear of the platform and return donned in a gold-and-black, leopard-skin suit as the strongman for an adjoining sideshow. Gough said of his early carnival days:

*We didn’t have much money for new equipment so we kept straightening out the bar after every act. It had been bent and straightened out so much it was ready to shred. [One day] I had the center of the bar in my teeth with three men hanging on each side, their feet off the floor, when it split. Steel splinters were rammed into the roof of my mouth. I couldn’t holler, and the fellows kept right on tugging. It was awful. I had to have a couple of teeth pulled out with pliers. It left me sick for days and after that I gave up the sideshow idea.*<sup>17</sup>

Out of a job, Gough decided to enter the thrilling world of daredevil antics. One of his main stunts was to hang by his teeth on a rope suspended from a plane. Gough explained: “I had to demonstrate to the pilot that I could lift a 500-pound weight with my teeth before he would ever take me up.”<sup>18</sup> Once, high above an enthusiastic crowd of spectators staring motionless toward the heavens, Gough even walked from the wobbling wing of an airplane to the wing of another airplane while in mid-flight.<sup>19</sup>

Trouble continued to haunt him, however, and while in Toledo, Ohio, trying to join up with a traveling vaudeville troupe, he was interrogated by local police and ultimately arrested on “suspicion.” The account of the arrest passed down through the years is that a leery storekeeper, assuming that Gough was a thug because of his unusual looks, immediately summoned the police. Refusing to go peacefully, Gough protested, and the longer he objected to the arrest the more violent he became. Reports say Gough nearly tore the Toledo jail down before he was released.<sup>20</sup> The Toledo spectacle didn’t sit well with many people and apparently Gough landed in an observation ward.

Upon his release, and faced with the sudden cut in his finan-

cial status, Gough decided he would take up prize-fighting. Sad to say, however, the fighting never really progressed past a few fights in barrooms. His fighting led him to Toronto, Canada, where he landed a job with the local Elks Club doing an act called a “resisto” performance, in which he would “resist” the efforts of a half-dozen men. Struggling frantically, the opponents would try to remove Gough from the stage, but never succeeded.

Moving to other adventures, Gough then found himself wrestling a bear in a traveling carnival for a living. Gough said at the time that with himself, the bear, an ossified man a mummy and his partner all sleeping in the rear compartment of a small truck, it got too stuffy for him—adding that the hot Florida weather didn’t help the situation.<sup>21</sup>

Sometime in those early years of travel he began to be billed as “The World’s Miracle Strong Man.” It was a title that the promoters loved. But as the account of his extraordinary life continued to spread far and wide, even more vivid and exciting honors came his way. Within months of his association with the Brown & Dyers Carnival the young Calvert City native was hailed as “The Strongest Man on Earth,” “The World’s Most Sensational Strong Man,” and “The Daringest Daredevil in the World.”<sup>22</sup> Billings that would later come along included, “The Roughest, Toughest, Fightingest Daredevil in the Business; “The World’s Iron Man;” and “The Hercules of modern Days.”

Setting a course that would allow him to conquer more fields and display his new-found strength, Gough began weightlifting in earnest. Within two years he had broken numerous standing records by true heavyweights of the profession. By 1925 he was openly accepting challenges from any and all opponents, but, as the faded, yellow newspapers clippings report none could triumph over him.

To further substantiate Gough’s claim as the “World’s Strongest Man,” Dr. John Hewins Kern, the friend he had made several years earlier in New York, agreed to witness Gough’s latest feats of strength. Afterwards, in a book on physical culture, Kern wrote that Gough was, “one of the strongest men the writer has ever met.”<sup>23</sup> [Ed. note: Travis is referring to Kern’s book, *Vigorous Manhood*, published by the Charles Renard Corporation in 1925. Kern relates having seen Gough tear four decks of cards at one time, bend heavy steel bars, and, most amazing, bite a standard Yale key in half.]

During the years between 1922 and 1927 Gough toured every state in the union performing his spectacular feats of strength, and the press splashed his story across the front pages of newspapers from New York to Los Angeles and from Detroit to Dallas.

During his travels in the mid-1920s he also picked up what would become his “signature” stunt—allowing a vehicle, from an automobile to a semi-truck, to run over him. Among Gough’s other feats of strength were the following:

- ✪ A tug of war with 40 men pulling on ropes tied to each arm;
- ✪ A tug of war with a team of horses tied to one arm and a five-ton truck pulling on the other arm (history records that once when he performed this stunt “the rear wheels of the truck spun and the horses strained motionless in their

tracks.”)<sup>24</sup>

- ✪ Dangling from a rope tied to an airplane while holding on to the rope with nothing but his teeth while carrying 50-pound weights in each hand;
- ✪ Wrapping iron bars around his arm;
- ✪ Taking a steel wagon wheel and making a bracelet out of it;
- ✪ Popping steel bands wrapped around his biceps;
- ✪ Shattering a 4” by 4” board over the crown of his head by grasping both ends with his hands and pulling down;
- ✪ Performing numerous “resisto-strength” stunts; (this included making himself so heavy and stationary that large groups of men were unable to budge him from his position);
- ✪ Allowing 14 men to hang from an iron bar he held in his mouth:
  - ✪ A tug-of-war against four men with just the strength of four of his fingers;
  - ✪ Tossing around a huge, 10-foot barbell made from two full beer barrels, one on each end of a heavy iron pipe;
  - ✪ Biting keys in half;
  - ✪ Biting five-eighths inch spikes in half;
  - ✪ Bending a 14” piece of one-half inch thick iron rod over the back of his neck;
  - ✪ Driving 20-penny spikes into a board with his bare hands;
  - ✪ Lifting 600 pounds by just his teeth;
  - ✪ Performing lifts of 4,001-pounds (a test of strength that broke Warren Lincoln Travis’ previous record. Gough’s endeavor took place at Spanish Fort, an early amusement park in New Orleans. It was witnessed by Captain Payne and Lieut. Samuel Levy, both of the United States Service.);<sup>25</sup>
  - ✪ Lifting the front half of a Model A Ford with just one hand;
  - ✪ Lifting entire automobiles;
  - ✪ Having a car placed on a lift: standing under the car; having the lift slowly lowered and then holding up the automobile in the air;
  - ✪ Placing a mouthpiece in his teeth that had been made fast to a tree and then letting 20 men try to pull him loose;
  - ✪ Permitting any man of any size to whip his body repeatedly with a large iron bar;
  - ✪ Wrapping a semi-steel slab, 2 1/2 inches wide and 1/2 inch thick, around his arm in 10 seconds, a feat that was reportedly never duplicated; and
  - ✪ Juggling a 300-pound anvil, pitching it in the air, catching it on the drop, then tossing it back in the air and catching it again.<sup>26</sup>

Similar stunts were performed by other strongmen of the day, but the fact that Gough had previously been a hopeless invalid made his accomplishments doubly impressive. Between his vaudeville engagements, Gough fulfilled booking contracts at such annual attractions as the Florida State Fair, the Indiana State Fair, and the Wisconsin State Fair. In Massachusetts he garnered tremendous press coverage when he played the Boston Gardens.

While the nation's leading newspapers were splashing his story and picture on page one, magazines and supplements were also hurriedly featuring full page articles about him. Numerous books told of his successful recovery: radio was touting his name: and movie newsreels kept the rest of the world up to date on his antics. Unfortunately vaudeville, which had been such a significant part of the American culture during the first decades of the 1900s, was slowly dying out. So with a head full of new ideas, Gough returned home to Kentucky.

In a front-page article in February 1927, *The Tribune-Democrat* welcomed him home from Chicago. The story went on to tell how Gough had been playing the vaudeville theaters and that he was now in Benton for three months of intensive physical training in preparation for a wrestling match with John Pesek, one of the world's champion grapplers.<sup>27</sup> According to the article, the forthcoming wrestling match was the result of a claim made in St. Louis by Gough that strength was superior to wrestling science. Gough boasted "he was able to break any hold that any wrestler might try to take upon him." The news story further reported that Gough's challenge had been accepted and that Pesek, who at the time had only recently won the right to meet Stetcher of Iowa for the Diamond Belt, had demanded a demonstration in a St. Louis gymnasium. The try-out contest was held, and Pesek, the press reported, was unable to hold his challenger by any methods—Gough's predictions were correct. However, Pesek stated that he believed he could defeat Gough in a formal match.<sup>28</sup>

The *Paducah Evening Sun* also gave Gough front-page coverage on his return, plus it included the following signed statement from John Pesek concerning Gough's wrestling abilities:

*To whom it may concern:*

*I, John Pesek, will personally verify that I do not believe any wrestler in the world (excluding myself or Stetcher) will ever hold Galen Gough, professional strong man, to the mat on taking hold, but that Gough will break the hold.*

*In a private test Gough proved to me that he is what he claims to be and is the strongest man I ever met . . . He breaks holds applied by me that I have held on the best of champions . . . However, I believe in a contest that I will defeat him, but not without my best efforts.*<sup>29</sup>

Massive headlines welcomed Gough's return to western



GOUGH PREPARES TO LIFT TWO BARRELS OF OERTEL'S BEER AS A PUBLICITY STUNT.

Kentucky in the spring of 1927. After years of rejection, the people of Marshall and surrounding counties were cautiously beginning to embrace the World War I veteran. "Galen Gough Home to Train for Big Wrestling Match" "Ex-Marine, Disabled in World War, Now One of the Strongest Men in the World Is at Home in Benton;" and "Galen Gough of Benton, War Veteran, Will Wrestle Pesek" were but a few of the headlines proclaiming his recovery from hopeless paralysis and his return home as "The World's strongest Man."

Gough's fame continued to grow in the cities throughout his native western Kentucky. He also began writing weekly articles for the Paducah newspaper explaining the secrets of physical culture and how the average person could improve his/her health and increase bodily strength at the same time. He called his column "'Steps to Supremacy of Strength, Exercise and Diet in Physical Culture'" by Galen Gough, World Renowned Strong Man Director of Physical Culture." The weekly articles included tips on health, strength, dieting, fasting, and exercise.

The year 1927 was one of ups and downs for Gough. Not only had he performed triumphantly before throngs of cheering and supportive friends and fans, it was also the year he received his first really "big break." Bernarr Macfadden publisher of both nationally-recognized physical culture magazines and books on health and fitness printed a series on Gough in his periodicals. The articles

described him as "The Modern Hercules Who Defies the World in Feats of Strength."

Bernarr Macfadden, the "father of physical culture"-wild hair and all—had become a household name. His publications were successful among health-conscious people across America. The most famous in his long list of magazines was *Physical Culture*. In September of 1928 Gough was featured in that periodical in an article detailing his life story and his many accomplishments.<sup>30</sup> Macfadden knew Gough would be a tremendous asset to his company, so the details were soon ironed out and near the end of that year Gough joined Macfadden Publications. As Physical Culture and Strength Development Editor of the numerous publications, Gough immediately began writing a weekly column for MacFadden's *New York Evening Graphic*. Its staff was made up of a combination of highly competent old pros as well as young cubs who were to become household names in later years—among them, Walter Winchell, Ed Sullivan (with whom Gough became good friends), John W. Vandercook, Fulton Oursler, and Grace Perkins.<sup>31</sup>

Gough found himself right at home working for the *Graphic* and in January 1929, the newspaper's magazine section carried a full-page feature about his remarkable recovery. Banner headlines described him as "A New Sandow Whose Strength Grew Gut of a

Body Crippled in War!" The article, written by Joseph Applegate, featured a huge picture of Gough tearing Manhattan telephone books in half and a second picture of him being run over by a seven-ton, *New York Graphic* delivery truck.<sup>32</sup>

Soon, Gough began using 30-day liquid fasts to purify his body—a formula he once said he got “from bears, alligators, snakes and other creatures who hibernate with no harm to their physical well-being.” Eating no food and drinking only water, he would continue to perform his feats of strength throughout the month. By these actions he sought to prove the value of fasting and that he could retain his strength despite going without nourishing meals of any kind.

In the spring of 1930, Gough started writing for another New York publishing firm, and he was immediately given his own department and named director of the Health Service Bureau of the magazine, *Psychology*. Gough’s monthly articles for the magazine were lengthy, yet informative. In them he would elaborate on his own experiences and tell how readers could overcome similar obstacles in their lives. The editor of the magazine touted Gough’s strength printing such banner headlines as “Let the World’s Strongest Man Teach You How to be Strong.”

But problems with drinking and fighting were again surfacing—so Gough returned to the Brooklyn Naval Hospital. There he hoped to find solace. Hospital administrators, now eager to accommodate and cooperate with the renowned ex-Marine, allowed him to rest and recuperate. During his stay he also received some medical attention for his scars. But, as he remembered, the facial work was somewhat lacking.

No matter how hard Gough tried, his roller coaster ride through life didn’t seem to want to stop while he was on top. For years problems hid around every corner. Sadly, 1931 would also have its share. By then he was out of the hospital, and most of that year Gough could be found tossing wrestlers at Revere Beach, Massachusetts, and working with a vaudeville show in Boston. During the long summer months, he was introduced to a local, prominent socialite by the name of Virginia Dodge Taylor. Although the relationship between Gough and Taylor may have started on a friendly basis, it didn’t end that way.

On August 3, 1931 Gough filed a \$25,000 lawsuit in Suffolk County Superior Court charging that “Mrs. Taylor expressed love for him and admiration for his physical prowess and his robust physique for the purpose of inciting him to fight Charles Merriman, a local man. And, that as a result of the slashing he received from a razor wielded by Merriman, he was incapacitated.”<sup>33</sup>

Once again the newspapers had a “field-day” at Gough’s expense. *The Boston Post’s* headline screamed, “Strong Man Sues Heiress: charges Mrs. Taylor Invited Him To Fight Man Who Injured Him —Asks for \$25,000”<sup>34</sup> The embarrassing case lasted for months with no settlement. As might be expected, the “Bean Town” incident, and the substantial coverage it received in the New York papers, didn’t sit well with his publishers and ultimately cost him his job as a writer and an editor.<sup>35</sup> So Gough left Boston for California. With the carnival, circus, and vaudeville days behind him, he saw only one thing to do—pack his bags and head for Hollywood.

His tough looks, the source of so many of his problems, landed him assorted small parts in numerous releases, but two of the first films he appeared in were classic Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer pic-

tures. In 1930 he was an extra in the prison epic *The Big House* with Wallace Berry and Chester Morris. Within two years time Gough had associated himself with one of the premiere studios in Hollywood and had appeared in two of the biggest movies in the history of film. He had offers coming in regularly for work as an extra.

While in California Gough also found time to author a weekly column in Hollywood’s *Filmograph*—publication devoted to recording the various studios’ weekly activities. He called his new column “Reconditioning Movie Stars” and it was modeled after his former *New York Evening Graphic* feature. Along the way he acquired two honorary degrees which he no doubt believed would add more credence to his articles. One of the degrees was a “Doctor of Psychology” and the second was a Doctor of Metaphysics.”

Just prior to his numerous California activities he had managed to write his first book—*Health Psychology: Mental and Physical Coordination*. The book, dedicated to his friend and business manager W. J. Schoonmaker, was published by Psychology Publishing of New York.<sup>36</sup> It was a book of principles about “dynamic power, strength and mental vigor through controlled resistance and directed thought.” It also carried personal testimonies about Gough’s strength by such professionals as Bernarr Macfadden; Carl Easton Williams, editor of *Physical Culture* magazine; Dr. Henry Knight Miller, editor of *Psychology* magazine; and John Pesek, the professional wrestler.<sup>37</sup>

Although *Health Psychology* was only somewhat successful when first published, it was instrumental in creating yet another set-back in his life. *True* magazine reported the events this way:

*A young girl read both the weekly articles and his book and promptly declared herself in love with him. He took her under his wing, taught her how to tear up small directories and built up her reputation in films and newspapers as Hollywood’s strongest woman. [Her former boyfriend] cashed several checks using Gough’s name and was jailed, and when Gough returned for the hearing he found the girl had moved into his apartment. Gough recalled that ‘she cried and kept getting more and more hysterical until I told her she could stay . . . When I suggested we have a couple of drinks she was all set to celebrate. When she had three or four drinks in her she began to talk about what she really wanted and that was \$1,000. Her boyfriend, the forger, needed it for his defense and she was trying to get it out of me. I tried to toss her out of the apartment, but when she began struggling and kicking me I left her and walked out. The next day I was arrested for assault with intent to kill. What the papers didn’t do with that story: “Strong Man Versus Strong Woman,” “Doctor Attacks Girl,” “Girl Throws Strong Man Out,” were some of the headlines. She had me charged with everything on the docket from kidnapping and moral charges to attempt to kill. She even got through an indictment on the latter charge,*

*but I was finally tried on simple assault. I pled guilty to trying to toss her out of my apartment and took a few weeks in jail to repent.*<sup>38</sup>

This time Gough's troubles almost got the best of him. He roamed the country wildly—all the while questioning both his future and his past. In 1933 he ended up in Havana, Cuba. After several characteristic fights with the natives, Gough was labeled as an undesirable. The repeated run-ins with the Cuban authorities nearly sent him before a firing squad. Fortunately for him he managed to escape—but he was still suffering from severe manic depression. Even the fact that he barely got away with his life didn't cheer him up.<sup>39</sup>

Back in the states, Gough knew he had to come up with something bizarre that would both capture and hold the attention of the press and the public. So, while in Louisville, Kentucky, he announced that he would live in a large, steel cage and exist solely on Oertel's Beer for 30 days—all the while performing his repertoire of incredible strength stunts. Just as with his water fast, Gough was to eat no food. But this time he would drink no other liquids either. To add more credibility to this latest endeavor, a group of Legionnaires from the Jefferson Post of the American Legion were hired to guard him around the clock. Standing watch in shifts, the duty of the sentries was to keep a 24-hour surveillance. At the end of the 30 days they would testify to the fact that he had lived solely on the Louisville beverage.

Commenting on the uniqueness of the feat, John F. Oertel, Jr., president of the Oertel's Company, said: "We don't want anybody to get the idea that we are advocating beer as an exclusive diet. We want to establish accurate scientific evidence that good beer will supply nourishment, sustain strength, keep the body in perfect condition and at the same time, not be in the least fattening."<sup>40</sup> Gough responded with these comments: "I am going to prove that Oertel's Beer will give you more energy, more pep, more vitality. I am going to prove that Oertel's Beer will keep your body in perfect condition."<sup>41</sup> Gough dropped more than 20 pounds during the 30-day trial. But, as promised at the outset of the stunt, when the month passed he allowed an 8,000 pound truck to drive over his body.

In 1934 Gough made his way back to California for another shot at the movies. Again he landed small parts in several pictures. Later, joking about his movie appearances, Gough said: "as long as I was a gangster, a pug, a wrestler or a strongman I was all right, but as soon as my role required acting, I was terrible."

In any case, he continued to attract tremendous press coverage for his miscellaneous antics, most especially his beer fasting. In Hollywood, Gough was registered in the plush Biltmore Hotel and, just as in Louisville, he was assigned 24-hour bodyguards to be sure he didn't eat. As before, he continued to perform his feats of strength on a daily basis while touting the qualities of the new beverage—Eastside Beer. When the stunt was over Gough had consumed 1,080 steins of the beverage. Universal Newsreels picked up on the stunt and included it in its movie newsreel packages. Newspapers and news magazines were also quick to feature the story.

While living in California, Gough decided he couldn't tolerate looking in the mirror and seeing his twisted face any longer.

It was time for more plastic surgery. Of the successful operation he said "The mental effect of being able to smile like a regular human being is amazing. I feel like a different man: I no longer hesitate about meeting people, and my whole outlook on life has changed."<sup>42</sup>

Bucked up by his new appearance, Gough returned to Benton, Kentucky, in late 1936 and began writing a weekly feature for *The Tribune-Democrat* entitled "Health and Happiness." The articles highlighted many of the strongman's previous teachings on physical culture. In another regard, however, he went from one extreme to the other, and this big career change came immediately following the famous Los Angeles beer fast. What happened is that within a few weeks of his return to Kentucky he founded the Fidelity Temperance League and adamantly shunned all requests from previous "beer fast" sponsors.

As founder of the League, Gough wrote the following creed and had it published in the local newspaper: "To promote Temperance as a moral issue . . . as the direct means of encouraging strength of courage and character. . . to disregard all influences which breed immorality. . . to give aid to the morally weak. . . to particularly persuade young people against patronizing the liquor interests . . ."<sup>43</sup>

It's unclear exactly what caused Gough's change of heart. It could have been that he got several stern lectures from his father, the Baptist minister, about the evils of drinking. Regardless, Gough did change his ways and spoke out the rest of his life against the destructive powers of intoxicating liquors, touting his temperance campaign to everyone who would listen.

As always, large crowds turned out at every opportunity to see and hear the legendary Gough. Newspapers reported that many of the crowds throughout western Kentucky were so large that spectators had to be turned away at the doors.<sup>44</sup> After lecturing for a while, Gough would often interrupt his program for strength exhibits such as bending iron rods, straightening horseshoes or pitching an anvil in the air. Gough refused to make anyone pay to hear his temperance talks, but with any monies that were raised through other means, he bought pamphlets and literature for his cause. Although it failed to reach the national prominence that he had hoped it would his Fidelity Temperance League continued.

Soon his life changed in another way, when he met the woman who became his life. Martha Louise Key had taught the eighth grade for two years in the local school when she met Galen at a revival at his father's church. Galen spoke that night about the evils of strong drink, and after a brief courtship they were married. Soon thereafter they left the area to spread the temperance gospel and drum up business for his strongman shows.

The Goughs traveled through Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin during the first half of 1937 performing his truck run-over stunts. Various other reports said that during his time with the Hell Drivers, Gough himself would climb behind the wheel of a car, gun it up to 70 miles per hour and then deliberately turn it over.<sup>45</sup>

In Texas, Gough combined efforts with the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* to stage a benefit show for "The Star-Telegram Free Milk and Ice Fund." One article about the forthcoming show carried the headline, "Come Gut and Beat Mr. Gough." It explained that someone from the audience would be invited to take a steel bar 7 1/2

feet long and lash the strong man's bare arms and shoulders with all his might. It also outlined many of Gough's other stunts such as the spike-studded board the tug-of-war and letting men swing from a bar that he would hold in his mouth.

The Goughs continued their stay in Fort Worth, Texas, and in December 1937 a son, Wallace Key Gough, was born. "Papa Gough," as he was referred to in print, was excited about Wally's birth and immediately began to instill in the baby his physical culture teachings. Regardless of what the world might have thought of him as a strongman, Gough was determined to turn his son into the worlds strongest baby. Within days, the infant could stand on his own in his father's hand at an arm's length away. Within weeks he could swing on a trapeze and even chin himself on a walking stick that his father and mother would hold high in the air.

Newspaper, magazine, radio, and newsreel reporters were beating down a path to the Gough's door. It seemed that everyone wanted the latest reports on the boy wonder. But, with Gough's nose for news being what it was, reporters didn't have to beat too long or too hard. Wally's picture and story began appearing across the country. Gough knew then that he not only had a special son, but a special attraction. They hit the road and from coast to coast advertisements began touting the two of them as being "together in one great show."

At first Wally was dubbed "The Superboy," "The Strongest Baby in the World," and "Galen Gough II". But it was the title "Little Hercules" that stuck with him. While they were in Chicago in June 1938, the *Chicago Tribune* carried an article explaining some of the baby's stunts. It reported that the baby could chin himself twice on a cane being held by his parents.

Meanwhile, Gough was still garnering tremendous press coverage of his own. *True: A Man's Magazine* had just carried a lengthy feature titled "Galen Gough Challenges the World," detailing his long and phenomenal career from near death in the war to his rise to stardom as a professional strongman.<sup>46</sup> The feature also showed Gough in numerous photographs over the years. Elma Holloway, an author from Pasadena,

California liked what she saw and read about Gough and included him in her 1938 book, *Unsung Heroes*. The book was a compilation of short biographies about 24 people who had overcome enormous difficulties in their lives to reach positions of leadership and authority in their respected fields. Gough shared a spot in the book with such noted people as Alvin York, William O. Douglas, Glenn Cunningham, William S. Dutton,



WALLY GOUGH, DUBBED "LITTLE HERCULES" BY HIS FATHER, RESISTS THE PULL OF TWO PONIES IN THIS PUBLICITY PHOTO.

William Allen White and Patrick J. Hurley.<sup>47</sup> The book was so popular that it was reprinted in 1939.

With Martha and Wally at his side, Gough set his sights back on southern California. The fame of "Little Hercules" was growing and in Los Angeles the youngster was offered an assortment of jobs advertising products. One of his endorsements was for "VIG," a new Vitamin B-1 drink that, according to its ads, had a "million-dollar taste" that children would like and be "good for them" too.<sup>48</sup>

During the early 1940s, Gough found a new interest in judo. And, as always, he set out to be the very best at it. He studied, worked, practiced and before long became such an expert in the field that he authored a detailed and illustrated book titled *Simplified Self Defense Thru an Improved System of Americanized Jiu-Jitsu and Judo*. With World War II raging, and Gough being the loyal veteran that he was, he turned his energies to the cause at hand. Being the skilled master that he was in Jiu-Jitsu and Judo, Gough waged a crusade to retrain American soldiers in the art of self defense. "The Japanese have been masters of their system for 2,000 years. For every offensive thrust, there is also a defensive maneuver. The Japanese know the defenses of their own system, but not mine."<sup>49</sup> After carefully hearing him out, the Army finally concurred and with the strongman's direction, rewrote and reissued its basic field manual for unarmed combat. It was reported by those close to him that "one of Gough's proudest possessions" was a letter from the Adjutant General's office "soliciting his help in the revision" of the Army publication.<sup>50</sup> Little came of his work in terms of income, however.

Twenty-four years had passed since Gough's near death experience in 1918. The world had seen many changes and many tragedies, but Gough pressed on. For the next several years he waked at odd jobs around the movie studios, performed his strongman routine when he could, and often accepted an assortment of small jobs in an effort to support his family. Wally and Jill [his daughter born in 1942] continued to grow and Martha stuck by her husband's side. The years during the mid-1940s may have been hard on the strong-

man and his family, but a love for one another and an unyielding dedication to survive would soon put Gough on top once again.

One morning, as he sat with his wife at the breakfast table discussing their future plans, he picked up a pencil and began to sketch on a small piece of writing paper. She knew that from the earliest days of his youth he had wanted to use his artistic talents in some form, so she calmly suggested, "Why don't you paint a picture?" Soon the 300-pound giant was

—COURTESY GREG TRAVIS

letting an inner part of himself come forth like never before.

As he poured out his soul, his first creation, "The Christ"—a portrait of the head of Christ—was conceived in less than a day. The piece was so good that California art collector Clarence Greenwood paid \$1,500<sup>51</sup> for half interest in it and declared, "I feel that this painting is destined for immortality."<sup>52</sup> In the meantime Gough's wife had secretly carried three more paintings to Felix Landau, proprietor of a nearby art gallery. Landau was overwhelmed by what he saw in Gough's paintings and told Mrs. Gough that he would give her husband an immediate one-man show if he could cane up with 25 more paintings. Within weeks Gough met his goal.

As expected Landau was impressed with the new creations and he honored his end of the bargain. A date was set for the show, the media were notified and invitations were sent. As collectors and art lovers filled the gallery, praise of Gough's work flooded the building. In 1949 the *Los Angeles Examiner* said Gough "set this town agog with his sensational paintings."<sup>53</sup> As the Gough originals continued, so did the rave reviews. Frank Perls, head of the Associated American Artists, one of the largest and most important galleries in the West said, "His work is stirring and brilliant. He has tremendous imagination and natural spontaneity. It is to be hoped that he doesn't read a book on painting and forget how to paint."<sup>54</sup>

Joseph Chabot, a well-known painter and art instructor and head of Chabot Galleries, said of Gough, His work is exceptional, expressing vitality, refreshing color sense and complete honesty of approach. It is representative of the best in true primitive art."<sup>55</sup>

Saddened on many occasions by the circumstances that plagued his life, Gough sought throughout the years to find that lasting peace within. By the time of his death, in 1962, he had finally found a portion of that peace through his painting.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Interview with Leota Williams, 7 April 1993.

<sup>2</sup>Joe Creason, "The World's Strongest Artist," *The Courier Journal Magazine* (11 January 1953): 8.

<sup>3</sup>Galen Gough, "Up From an Invalid's Bed," *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine* (17 February 1935): 4.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.; and Galen Gough, "It's Terrible to be Ugly," *The American Weekly* (2 October 1949): 5.

<sup>5</sup>Gough, "Invalid's Bed," 4.

<sup>6</sup>Gough, "Terrible," 5.

<sup>7</sup>George Stamford "Galen Gough Challenges The World," *True: A Man's Magazine* (February 1938), 74.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Bill Ladd, "Galen Gough has Switched to Murals," *The Louisville Courier-Journal* (17 November 1948).

<sup>10</sup>Stamford, "Challenges," 73.

<sup>11</sup>Gough, "Invalid's Bed," 4.

<sup>12</sup>Stamford, "Challenges," 75.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Joe Creason, "The World's Strongest Artist" *The Courier-Journal Magazine* (11 January, 1953): 7.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Arthur H. Howland, "The Miracle of Galen Gough" *Psychology: Health, Happiness, Success* (September 1920): 36.

<sup>17</sup>Stamford, "Challenges," 75.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 113.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Joe Howard, 14 April 1993.

<sup>20</sup>Stamford, "Challenges," 113.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Creason, "World's Strongest Artist" 7.

<sup>23</sup>Flora Kaiser, "This Paralyzed Ex-Marine is Now One of the Strongest of Men," *The St. Louis Globe-Democrat Magazine* (6 March 1927).

<sup>24</sup>Personal files of S. Rayburn Watkins, Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>25</sup>Howland, "Miracle," 79.

<sup>26</sup>A compilation of feats from selected newspaper articles and eyewitness accounts of Gough's performance.

<sup>27</sup>"Galen Gough Home To Train for Big Wrestling Match," *The Tribune-Democrat* (18 February 1927): 1.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>"Galen Gough of Benton, War Veteran, Will Wrestle Pesek," *The Paducah Evening Sun* (21 February 1927): 1.

<sup>30</sup>"From Hopeless Paralysis to Herculean Strength," *Physical Culture* (September 1928): 57.

<sup>31</sup>William E. Lickfield, *The New York Graphic: The World's Zaniest Newspaper* (1964), inside jacket.

<sup>32</sup>Joseph H. Applegate, "A New 'Sandow' Whose Strength Grew Out of a Body Crippled in War!" *The New York Graphic* (5 January 1929): 1

<sup>33</sup>"Strong Man Sues Heiress," *The Boston Post* (4 August 1931).

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Gough, "Terrible," 5.

<sup>36</sup>Galen Gough, *Health Psychology; Mental and Physical Coordination* (New York: Psychology Publishing, 1930).

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Stamford, "Challenges," 116.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>"Physical Culture Director and Lecturer Starts Test Tuesday to Prove Person Can Live Solely on Beer; Plans Feats of Strength," *The Courier-Journal* (12 November 1933): 1.

<sup>41</sup>"Legionnaires Guard Gough to Prove That He Lives Solely on Oertel's Beer," *The Courier-Journal* (17 November 1933): 1.

<sup>42</sup>"Film Strong Man Loses Old Scars," *Los Angeles Examiner* (16 January 1936).

<sup>43</sup>"Galen Gough Speaks at Sinking Springs," *Murray Ledger & Times* (2 July 1936).

<sup>44</sup>"Record Crowd Hears Gough in Benton," *Murray Ledger & Times* (9 July 1936).

<sup>45</sup>Interview with Martha Gough, August 1992.

<sup>46</sup>Stamford "Challenges," 117.

<sup>47</sup>Elma Holloway, *Unsung Heroes*, 1938.

<sup>48</sup>VIG advertisement.

<sup>49</sup>Personal files of S. Rayburn Watkins, Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Creason, "World's Strongest Artist," 7.

<sup>52</sup>Ezra Goodman, "Cripple, to Strong Man, to Painter," *The St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (27 March 1949).

<sup>53</sup>Kay English, "Primitive Artists Open New Galleries Monday," *The Los Angeles Examiner* (11 September 1949).

<sup>54</sup>Goodman, "Cripple to Painter."

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.