

Ottley Coulter and the Evolution of Twentieth Century Weight Lifting

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The life of Ottley Coulter provides a window to a period of great change in American society. As a child, vaudeville and the circus were the dominant sources of entertainment to reach Coulter's Parkman, Ohio. Their majesty and vitality seduced Coulter as he saw the life of the strongman as a lucrative and exciting escape from his mundane world. Abandoning his training in civil engineering, he literally ran off and joined the circus, first as a strongman and then incorporating hand balancing and other feats to better market himself.

While Coulter expanded his repertoire by lifting barbells with his teeth and being run over by automobiles industrialization and urbanization were changing how Americans approached recreation. The growth of motion pictures and the evolution of

trusts in vaudeville undermined the foundations of Coulter's world, and he realized that circus life could no longer support his family. He briefly returned to his father's mill and then worked in a railroad freight yard, but he had so powerfully inculcated the visions of his youth and the majesty of the strongman that he could not stay away from physical culture and its promotion.

In the January 1915 issue of *Strength*, Coulter called for the standardization of weight lifting. Having toured much of the country with various acts, he had seen how weight lifting had become rife with charlatans and other unsavoury types. Through the use of common rules and certification practices, all claims could be verified. Coulter wrote that these standards should be created by "...those who thoroughly understand lifting and have the sincere desire for the promotion of the sport at heart." Coulter was such a person, and would later help create the standards of weight lifting with the American Continental Weight Lifters Association, with whom he would serve as treasurer and vice-president.

Coulter needed to reconcile his deep interest in physical culture with his financial responsibilities, a recurrent theme throughout his life. He sold a variety of devices, equipment and courses through the rapidly growing mail order industry. With the formation of the ACWLA, Coulter endorsed a line of training equipment certified by the new organization. These frequent attempts to commercialize and capitalize on the growing interest in physical culture seem in conflict with the nobler agenda of a "sincere desire for promoting the sport at heart." Yet Coulter never abandoned his genuine interest in the promotion of physical culture. He answered virtually all inquiries, many of which led to extended correspondence. These relationships frequently departed from commercial interests, with Coulter trading physical culture memorabilia with his clients.

Never succeeding in the commercial aspects of physical culture but unable to abandon it for a more conventional life, Coulter revealed in his middle years a pernicious doubt of the value of his life's endeavors: "I was given half interest in [his father's feed] business and forfeited it to leave home to exhibit as a professional strong man. I consider this the height of intelligence in reverse."

Despite these words by a man haunted by his inability to actualize the dreams of his youth, Coulter's contributions to the world of physical culture are significant. A prodigious collector and prolific writer, Coulter provides a window into a changing American society. His perspective is unique: trapped between the world of his youth and a modern society which denied his dreams, he persisted. This persistence led him to a variety of money making schemes which would become increasingly exotic as he aged. Neither a success nor the failure he once purported it to be, Coulter's life was one of grappling with change. His struggle to moor himself amidst a rapidly modernizing America was emblematic of his generation.