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Heffernan, C. (2021). Building husky men: Strenuous masculinity in post-depression America. *European Journal of American Culture*, 40(2), 105-120. https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac_00044_1

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
European Journal of American Culture

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 01/06/2021

DOI:
[10.1386/ejac_00044_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac_00044_1)

Document Version
Author Accepted version

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Article Title:

Building Husky Men: Strenuous Masculinity in Post-Depression America

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Abstract

Examining American fitness entrepreneurs from the 1930s, the proposed article examines efforts to reform young, and white, masculine identities through new bodybuilding systems. Centered on Mark Berry, Bob Hoffman and Charles Atlas, three of the decade's most successful entrepreneurs, the article examines the communities, methods and discourses used to attract customers and create a highly specified form of self-fashioning. In doing so, the article highlights the masculine communities and multiplicities of masculinities operating during this decade for American weight trainers. Importantly all three entrepreneurs focused on a very specific kind of American body, and stemming from this, American masculinity. For Berry, "husky" men came to represent men of physical, moral and mental standing. The ability to withstand pain in exercise, to engage in strenuous activity and gain bodyweight was presented as a metric of one's success in the world. Likewise, Bob Hoffman focused on the "weight lifter", said to be an ambitious young man capable of succeeding in multiple terrains. Finally, there was Charles Atlas, who made "he men" using his system of dynamic tension. In highlighting the lengths young, white, often affluent, American men went to in order to achieve these identities, the article contributes to the growing interest in American masculinities and the fitness systems they used during times of considerable upheaval.

Keywords

American History; Bodybuilding; Masculinity; Great Depression; Food History; Social History.

The sphere of physical endeavor might very aptly be grouped into two classifications; those who just naturally seem to excel and those who must depend upon hard work and long training to achieve anything worthwhile ...

Mark Berry (1933a).

Writing in 1933, Mark Berry spoke of an enduring trend in American fitness; the idea that strenuous exercise and activity can act as a badge of honor for participants. The subject in question, a ‘twenty rep’ squat program, was popularized by Berry in the early 1930s during the Great Depression and became, in Berry’s words, the most effective means of building “husky” men (1933b). Berry, and his followers, linked the ability to endure pain in exercise, and build muscular bodies, to a new reformed sort of white American masculinity. A well-worn conclusion from previous historical research (Meyer, 2016) is that the Great Depression resulted in a crisis of masculinity among American men. While the extent of this crisis has been problematized, with scholars taking class, race and geographic considerations into account (Longmore & Goldberger, 2000), it is undeniable that many cultural commentators from the 1930s linked the economic downturn to failures among white American men.

In Berry’s writings, the suited world of office and factory work, combined with the excess linked to Wall Street, was blamed for a crisis in American masculinity. This crisis was found in weak, sickly middle-class male frames who understood neither the value of strength or hard work (Berry, 1933a). A return to physicality was presented as a natural corrective. Berry’s solution was simple. Men needed to increase their strength and physical bulk in the quickest time possible. To do this, they engaged in a rigorous training program and ate a surplus of food. This dual process allowed for an embodiment of Berry’s vision.

Seeking to bridge the gap between sport history and more general historical branches, this article offers a re-interpretation of 1930s American masculinity as told through the white male body. Cognizant of Ben Griffin's (2018) critique of hegemonic masculinity in history, the type of masculinity promoted in Berry's writings is not envisioned as an all-encompassing or hegemonic masculinity. Instead the article employs Griffin's (2018) use of communication communities, understood as groups with a shared set of norms and a shared engagement in the mechanisms through which individuals are socialized into particular sets of norms, values and expectations. Conceptualizing Berry's grouping as a communication community allows for the study of other simultaneous forms of masculinity in American culture that resembled but also differed from Berry's ideal. Adherence to Berry's "husky" ideal involved reading his writings, undertaking his ritualized form of exercise and spending quite a lot of money. The permeability of communication communities allows for a study of those men who engaged with Berry's teachings while acknowledging the fact that not all who read Berry proved as enthusiastic. Finally, such communities allow for the interaction and intermingling with other masculine groupings, such as those of Bob Hoffman and Charles Atlas, two other fitness entrepreneurs with largely similar practices and discourses.

For historians, Berry and his contemporaries offer an insight into some of the fringe masculine communities operating in 1930s America. Studies on post-Depression masculinities already exist in the American context, Josep Armengol's (2014) work being just one example, but few incorporate a study of men's bodies. Rather than an outside concern, the white, male body was at the very core of these constructs. Men who ascribed to Berry's system, or that of his competitors, monitored their diet, exercised regularly, took photographs of themselves and submitted them for public scrutiny. This was not a spontaneous act but rather an act of deep commitment to these programs. Studying Berry, his system, and its popularity in this way, the article examines the material and economic changes in post-Depression America which

prompted a re-evaluation of an ideal white male physique, and stemming from this, the ideal male personality. The purpose of this article then is twofold. In the first instance, the article argues that for a subset of relatively affluent, young and white American men, muscular physiques, built through strenuous physical activity, became a signifier of their masculine virility, strength and discipline. More than this, the article highlights some of the many ways in which masculinity, and the communities which sustain masculine ideals, can be studied in American history.

Exercise, Health and Gender in Twentieth-Century America

To understand how and why Berry and his contemporaries Bob Hoffman and Charles Atlas gained such influence in the 1930s, it is necessary to discuss the growth of physical culture in the early twentieth-century America. Berry, Hoffman and Atlas did not emerge from a vacuum, but instead marked an evolution of physical culture systems which had been linked to broader gender identities for several decades (Budd, 1997). Gail Bederman (1995) has discussed the manner in which the traditional white American conception of masculinity came under threat in the first decade of the twentieth-century. Acknowledging that although every era seems to present its own “gender crisis”, Bederman (1995) nevertheless cited this period as one of considerable anxiety and confusion. Influxes in migration, America’s increasing urbanization and the growth of female labor, challenged traditional identities of the bread winning American male. In response, many middle-class American men took to systems of physical culture and sport in a bid to reassert their masculinity. Crucially the early twentieth-century was also witness to the birth of ‘physical culture’, a mercurial term used to describe new kinds of exercise and physical activity. Understood in the British context by Michael Anton Budd (1997: 97) as a “late nineteenth and early twentieth century concern with the ideological and

commercial cultivation of the body,” physical culture and, those promoting it, encouraged a new wave of gymnasiums, workout devices and nutritional supplements in British and subsequently American life.

John Kassan (2001: 46) previously wrote that “the white male body became a powerful symbol by which to dramatize modernity’s impact and how to resist it.” For followers of Bernarr MacFadden, an eccentric American proponent of physical culture and alternative medicine, one’s participation in exercise and wholesome nutrition was an inherently political act. In his magazines and monographs, both of which were read widely in the United States by the early 1910s, MacFadden created and cultivated a community deeply distrustful of modernity and certainly of orthodox medicine. Through his *Physical Culture* magazine, whose readership exceeded 100,000 monthly readers by 1904 (Ernst, 1990: 22-45), MacFadden simultaneously held a platform for his views and a site for interacting with customers. Importantly, many of MacFadden’s writings on physical culture and exercise centered on normative gender identities. For men, MacFadden stressed the importance of a slender but muscular physique, one capable of performing athletic feats while also exhibiting discipline at the dinner table (Ernst, 1990: 55-70).

Where MacFadden’s physical culture interest was concerned with internal and external health, many of his contemporaries cared primarily about one’s outer appearance. In 1902 Alan Calvert established the Milo Barbell Company and began producing heavy dumbbell and barbell sets for individuals interested in increasing their muscularity and strength (Beckwith, 2006). Calvert’s contemporaries, including MacFadden, promoted light callisthenic regimens for health, Calvert allowed, and encouraged, the pursuit of large muscles and immense strength. This was made clear in Calvert’s health magazine, entitled *Strength*, first published in 1914. In *Strength*, and his own writings, Calvert promoted the idea of muscularity as a quest toward masculine perfection. Such thinking harked back to Greco-Roman antiquity when, Calvert

stated, strong and muscular bodies were the norm for men (1915). Calvert's *Strength* re-iterated this idea by its overwhelming focus on white bodies. The black body was, for many years, entirely hidden from such magazines. Where it was featured it was often as an afterthought and even by the mid-century the image of a black body on the front of a weightlifting or bodybuilding magazine was rare (Shurley, 2016).

Calvert's Milo Barbell and *Strength* magazine normalized the practice of gaining strength and, in effect, provided the backdrop for Berry's squat protocol. By the 1920s, Calvert's equipment was sold throughout the United States amidst a time of considerable upheaval. Heather Addison's (2003) work on American physical culture during the 1920s noted the growing importance of Hollywood and mass media in relation to health ideals and information. For women of a certain economic class and age, 'reducing' became a popular way to lose weight and establish one's association with modernity, flapper culture and the excess of the 'Jazz Age.' In this way the female body was physically molded through often extreme forms of diet and exercise to serve broader fashions. For men, weightlifting in the United States continued to grow, thanks in large measure to Calvert's company and its many imitators. Remarkably the male body, as forged through physical culture systems, remained largely static in its broader significance from previous decades. Where Sandow and Calvert linked one's muscularity to ideas of male perfection, discipline and sacrifice, those in the 1920s deviated little from these messages but instead heightened them.

In one of the few studies of mail order health courses in America during the 1920s, Ben Pollack and Jan Todd (2017) highlighted the manner in which entrepreneurs, like Earle Liederman, explicitly linked one's masculinity to their body. Despite the homoerotic undertones surrounding physical culture, found especially in images of half-naked physical culturists, fitness entrepreneurs employed a staunchly heterosexual message to their products and systems. In Liederman's case, the entrepreneur was particularly adamant that women found

muscular bodies attractive. Representative of several successful mail order sellers in America at this time, Liederman told men that their “whole future may depend” on whether or not they undertook his course. Other advertisements proved even more verbose

practically everything worth while [sic] living for depends upon STRENGTH - upon live, red-blooded, he-man muscle ... (Pollack & Todd, 2017: 408)

Where Liederman and his contemporary entrepreneurs changed the material conditions of the American health industry, others were changing the practices employed. At this point it is worth reiterating that although the practice of lifting weights was once associated with working-class cultures, physical culturists almost unanimously advertised towards the middle and upper classes. This is not to say that working-class physical culture did not exist – it thrived – but rather that the messages were directed elsewhere.

In the early 1920s, a German émigré and former prisoner of war, Henry ‘Milo’ Steinborn, became a cause célèbre for American men interested in physical culture, muscularity and strength. Moving to America at a time when anti-German sentiment was still found in American society, at least in certain quarters, Steinborn’s popularity in a field typified by its nationalism appears puzzling. The attention to Steinborn was not due to his charisma or sales technique but rather from the unusual manner in which he exercised, specifically, how he squatted (Calvert, 1924). Previously American men had been instructed to squat on the tips of their toes. Steinborn, on the other hand, squatted with both feet firmly planted on the floor. It was a slight change but one which allowed far greater weights to be loaded across one’s back. Steinborn’s strength - he performed a back squat with over 500 lbs. - inspired American men and weightlifters to change their technique and experiment with heavy weight lifting (Strossan, 1989: 1-22). After Steinborn, the technique one employed when squatting implicitly told of

their broader desires. Those still squatting on their tippy toes were associated with bygone ideas of the male body. Squatting flat footed indicated a desire for strength above all else. Many American men were taken by Steinborn's way of exercising. This in turn, help changed perceptions of the ideal male body in health magazines. Whereas previously many American trainers attempted to build lean and muscular physiques, those interested in strength displayed a much greater affinity to overall bulk – an aesthetic soon referred to as “husky.” One such individual influenced by Steinborn was Mark Berry.

Building Husky Men

Berry began to experiment with the new flat-footed squat and, in doing so gained a substantial amount of bodyweight. Understood by John Fair (1998) as a highly respected health writer and as one of the leading organizers of early American weightlifting, Berry's conversion was promoted through fitness periodicals like *Strength* or *The Strong Man*. Critically Berry began writing about his new strength and bulk gaining protocol soon after the economic downturn of 1929. While the ‘Great Depression’ negatively impacted some fitness entrepreneurs, including Earle Liederman whose business went bankrupt, it proved to be a boon for others writing on health.

Previous work on the Depression in American life has focused on the manner in which American men, in particular, experienced a crisis of confidence with the capitalist system and man's place within it (Armengol, 2014). Felt particularly strongly among white populations, a point discussed by Stephen Meyer (2016), the Depression and economic climate of the 1930s encouraged a partial rethinking of white American masculinity. At a time when unemployment was rising, and continued to rise for many years, sport and physical culture became an important means of self-fashioning, of gaining control in uncertain times and, as examined by

Michael Kimmel (1996) in a different era, of returning to masculine archetypes defined by physical strength or power. The most successful fitness entrepreneur of the 1930s, Charles Atlas, echoed Liederman's advertisements from the 1920s in explicitly targeting fragile masculine tropes, especially among the middle-class (Toon & Golden, 2002). This, as Atlas's business partner Charles Roman later attested, was in direct response to the Great Depression. Speaking candidly to the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1942, Roman explained that during times of prosperity "everyone is too busy making and spending money to worry about five more inches on the chest" but that "during a depression the unemployed have more time for exercise. Also, they figure maybe the reason they are out of work is because they lack physical power" (Zolotow, 1942).

Berry, and the periodicals which published his writings, routinely linked body size and strength to one's economic and social destiny. Turning to Berry's writings in *Strength* and *The Strong Man*, it is important to stress that Berry's ideas were introduced to already existent communities. Kim Beckwith and Jan Todd's (2005) work on *Strength* magazine, the primary magazine Berry wrote for, depicted *Strength* as one of the first American periodicals to concern itself exclusively with weightlifting. Begun in 1914 by Alan Calvert, *Strength* concerned itself almost entirely with one's outer appearance and strength. Absent were the encompassing health discourses found in other physical culture periodicals such as those of Bernarr MacFadden which stressed inner and outer physical harmony.

Tapping into an already existent community, Berry advanced a new ideal among his audiences, namely, the "husky" man. Defined against the "body culturists and athletes" with a "half-starved appearance", the "husky" man was described as overtly strong, carrying some additional bodyfat and, stemming from this, the husky man presented "a much finer appearance to the world in general, than many highly athletic fellows who are too finely drawn and look terribly scrawny in street clothes" (Berry, 1933b). Berry's experience with Steinborn's

squatting technique led him to promote a system of heavy squats and voluminous eating to produce the desired “husky” effect. In effect, exercisers were encouraged to choose a weight they could usually squat ten times in succession with a barbell across their back. Instead of ten repetitions, Berry instructed clients to use deep breathing and long pauses so as to squat the weight twenty times continuously (Berry, 1934a).

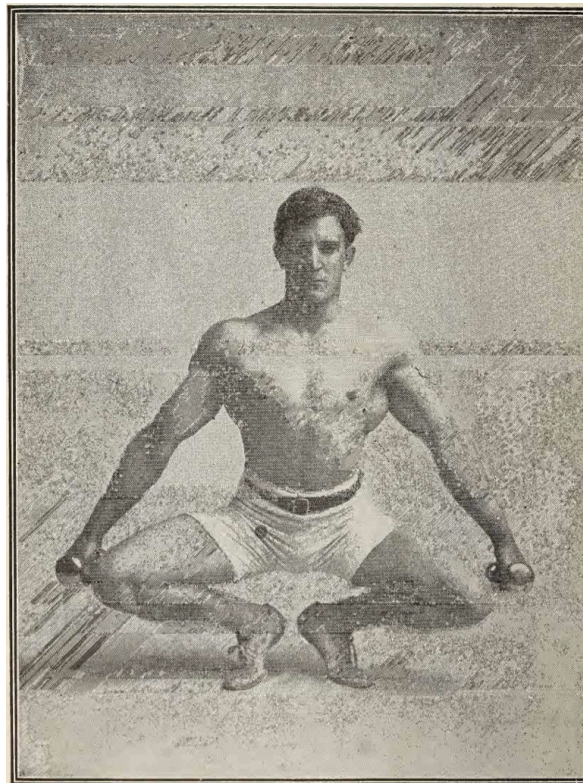


Fig. 1. The older style of squatting (Attila, 1913)

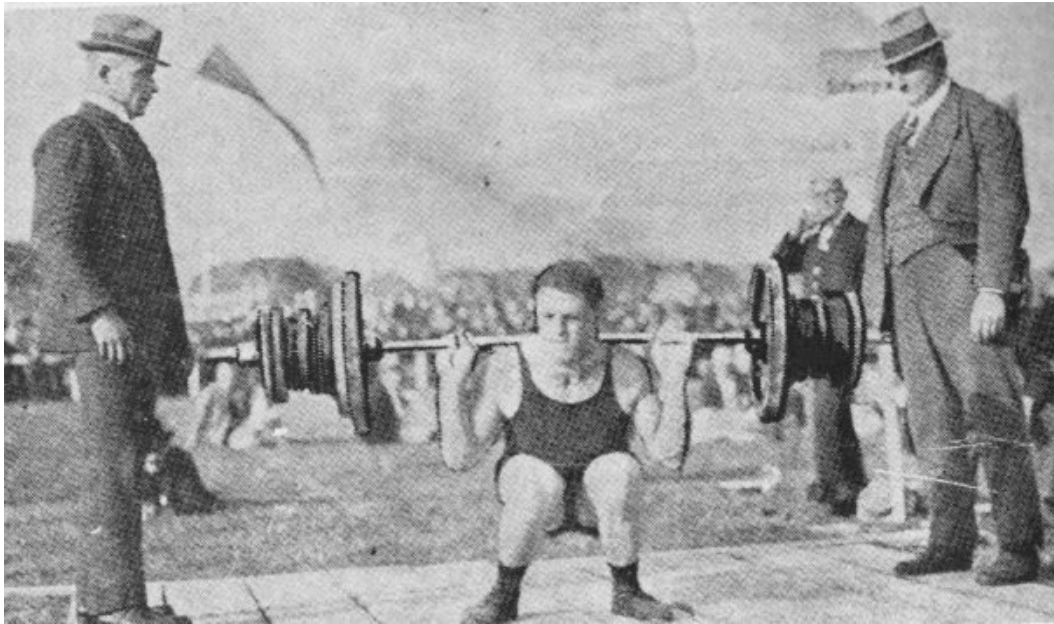


Fig. 2. Milo Steinborn squatting c. 1920s America. Courtesy of H.J. Lucher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, Milo Steinborn Collection.

First writing on his new squat program in 1930, Berry continued in this vein for the next decade and, in time, co-opted several followers. Berry's first well publicized 'student' was Rudolph Gambacorta, a young Italian American immigrant. Following Berry's instructions, which centered on squatting with an "exhausting weight", Gambacorta increased his bodyweight by thirty pounds in a matter of weeks ('Gambacorta Still Gaining', 1932). The messages surrounding Gambacorta's transformation and Berry's system more generally were illustrative. In particular, Berry's recording hinted at a reoccurring preoccupation within the magazine's pages surrounding one's masculinity. This was found in continued claims that Berry's system would transform individuals into 'real' men. A common and repeated claim was that Berry's system was not open to women because "more or less because we felt this form of exercise would never appeal to ladies" (Berry, 1932a). Aside from distinguishing themselves from women, Berry's "husky" men were also defined against those who did not exercise at all or those exercisers more concerned with developing a lean physique. These latter, "half starved", men were mocked for their perceived feminine worry regarding their appearance and the

excessive diets they used to achieve it (Berry, 1933b). Berry’s “husky” men ate merrily, engaged in difficult forms of exercise and maintained a large physical presence. Again, the class consequences of this identity must be stressed. At a time when many Americans were struggling to eat or find work, Berry promoted a gluttonous approach to food, the purchasing of expensive weight training equipment and engaging in tiring labor. His was a monied, or particularly monied, class. Berry’s masculine archetypes were defined against others in word and image, as evidenced by the below advertisement from 1933 (Berry, 1933c). In it, the “husky” man, unafraid of hard work, is contrasted with the confused man afraid of strenuous exercise. That the latter is shown in ragged clothes reiterates the connection Berry and others infused between one’s work ethic and prosperity.

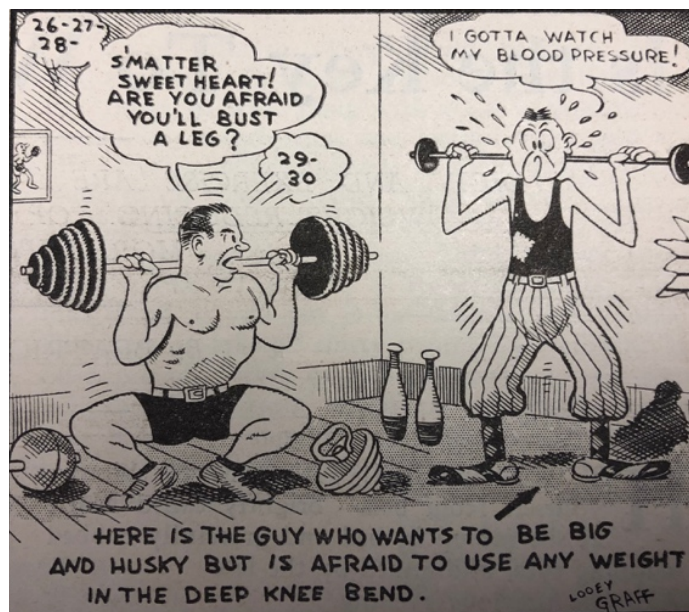


Fig. 3. Berry’s Comparisons of the Systems.

In 1932, *Strength* magazine explicitly addressed the material sources said to be affecting its readership. Devoid of practical solutions, the article’s unnamed author promised readers that the only response to economic hardship was to build one’s health and character for brighter days. A lack of physical power was said to have defined the ‘Jazz Age’ (Berry, 1933c). In

effect, Berry ascribed to those ideas which stated that the Depression was partly caused by men's physical weakness. A necessary antidote was a return to strength. This was not a simple matter and was one that required significant capital. Calls for a return to personal responsibility were, as Sue Currell (2006), commented, common throughout the 1930s. Where Berry, and *Strength* differed was in the explicit connection between one's body and their work ethic.

In Berry's case, a common complaint he expressed about his middle-class readership was that during a time of considerable economic hardship, they were unwilling or unable to work on transforming their physique. This was clearly shown in Berry's 1932 article in *Strength* magazine entitled "If only you try" (Berry, 1932b). In it, Berry despaired at the letters he received from individuals who, in Berry's mind, were wasting his, and their, time by failing to work hard. Men who failed to "try", who failed to do the requisite hard work, were not objects of pity in Berry's writings, but of scorn. How, Berry wrote, could they expect to transform their lives if they could not commit themselves fully to a course of training? Such men were the antithesis to his "husky" men who, even if unemployed, were assumed to give full effort to everything they did (Berry, 1932b). Although never acknowledged, Berry's writings echoed those emanating from mainland Europe during the 1930s which sought to link individual and national salvation to physical fitness (Hau, 2017).

Berry's own derisory opinion aside, it is important to note the regularity with which Berry's correspondents re-iterated his sentiment. In the case of *Strength*, whose circulation figures no longer exist, Berry was inundated with letters from readers with similar feelings or those seeking help in remaking themselves into "husky" men. In time letters came from outside the United States, with New Zealand (Berry, 1934a) proving one unlikely port, but the majority of letters came from young, white American men interested in building their physiques. Individuals like J. Blair from New Jersey, then aged twenty, wrote to discuss the large bodyweight gains he experienced using Berry's system. Accompanied with photographs and

measurements of their bodies, such letters, which became a staple of Berry's columns, served to demonstrate the highly specified identities forged within his magazine articles (Berry, 1934b). Adamant that there were few "American men who do not care to look husky" (Berry, 1933b), Berry offered a platform for individuals to display their bodies – provided they paid for the magazine - and, crucially, to link their newly developed physiques to broader masculine signifiers like hard-work, discipline and ruggedness. In Blair's case, he excitedly told of a twenty-pound weight increase in less than three months. Others told of forty-pound increases in a similar time frame., For those welcomed into Berry's community the process was simple – train consistently with heavy weights, grossly increase your bodyweight and strength, take photographs of your body as evidence and write to Berry's magazine. For Berry this was far from superficial. If anything, such transformations represented a vocation

For some time I have been carrying on a campaign towards the enlightenment of muscle culturists on the gaining of bodyweight; without the least bit of back patting it might be said that considerable success has been registered ... (Berry, 1932c)

No submission had the same impact as John Hise's contributions from 1932. Unemployed and based in Illinois when he first wrote to Berry, Hise told of a forty-pound weight gain in three months (Berry, 1933d). Hise's own story acted as a microcosm for the common American man Berry sought to address. Impacted by the downturn, Hise built his physique and, soon after, transformed his life. Owing, it was said, to his newly discovered strength, Hise found work in the fitness industry as a writer and also as a farmhand (Berry, 1933d). For readers of *Strength and Strong Man*, both of whom featured Hise's articles, this message was made clear in Hise's bombastic statements about his new sense of purpose and *joy de vivre*.

In a little over twelve months, Hise's bodyweight from 185lbs. to 250lbs. (Berry, 1934c). Where Rudolph Gambacorta was Berry's first public celebration, Hise became Berry's favored example. That Berry forgot Gambacorta, an Italian-American immigrant, in favor of Hise, a young, white American man, may substantiate Jacqueline Reich's (2010) claim that white immigrant masculinities held a secondary status in 1930s America. Aside from his diligence when it came to Berry's programming, Hise was even more outspoken regarding his newfound masculine self. In his first letter to Berry, Hise expressed his gratitude for the former's system before criticizing those who failed to train adequately or eat enough meat. Regarding the latter, Hise commented that "if they grieve over meat eating have them hang a picture of Mahatma Ghandi in their rooms, saying that is what I want to be like" (Berry, 1933d).

Over the next several years, Hise continually returned to the trope of "Ghandi-ites", afraid of gaining weight and working hard (Berry, 1933d). Hise's derogatory depiction of Ghandi introduced a further component into Berry's husky ideal, that is, a white male body defined not only against "half starved" white men, but also against people of color (Berry, 1933b). Hise, with Berry's open endorsement, would later criticize those "old-timers" who discounted the value of Berry's system. In time, both Berry and Hise added to the list of supposed benefits. Accordingly, readers were told that not only would they gain weight, but their digestion and mental clarity would improve, they would be immune from common illnesses or that others would immediately appreciate their physique. This last point had long existed in Berry's mind. In 1930, Berry claimed that "the legs have a lot to do with the personality and the man with the firm step and erect carriage will leave a lasting impression on your mind" (Berry, c. 1930). Writing to *The Strong Man* at this time, another Berry reader, Floyd MacPherson, conceded that "you are right about the deep knee bend, they are pretty near a cure all" ('Gained 74 Pounds', 1932).

Where Berry's masculine community existed primarily in *Strength* and *The Strong Man*, others took notice. This was seen in Peary Rader's echoing and endorsement of Berry's system and Hise's masculine bravado. A Nebraska janitor in the 1930s with an interest in weightlifting, Rader founded *Iron Man*, a bodybuilding magazine, in 1936. Initially called *Your Physique*, Rader's magazine, and influence, grew. Like Berry, Rader was impressed with Hise's transformation, insights and bravado. Two years after founding *Iron Man*, Rader co-opted Hise to write for his magazine on the value of high repetition squatting and its relation to one's character. By 1936, Rader wrote of Hise and his transformation in mythical terms

Joseph C. Hise of Homer Ill., after years of barbell exercise suddenly gained 29 lbs. in one month? How did he do it? By a system of deep knee bends with heavy weights and the drinking of a gallon of milk a day and all the meat he wanted along with his regular meals. Also a sufficient amount of rest ... ('Did You Know?', 1936)

In other issues, Rader cited Hise as a role model for male readers struggling to find purpose in their lives ('Advanced Workout Program', 1936). When writing in *Iron Man*, Hise continued to preach a gospel of strong masculinity both physically and mentally. In one article for *Iron Man*, Hise criticized those struggling to motivate themselves during times of economic hardship. Rather than contemplating "suicide because your soul transmigrates you at the wrong historical period", Hise encouraged men to act, transform their bodies and their futures (Hise, 1936). The body was presented as the first and pivotal step towards prosperity. Like the discourses found in Berry's articles in *Strength* and *The Strong Man*, Rader's periodicals attempted to connect with the same masculine community fostered by Berry. In this sense, Hise played a key role in expanding this community to include Rader and his readership. Within a decade, Rader began to write on high repetition squats with an air of authority.

Published in 1946, Rader's *Master Bodybuilding and Weight Gaining System*, proved to be one of the most popular exercise manuals of the decade. Explicitly aimed at men seeking to reform their physiques following the Second World War, Rader's short pamphlet reiterated Berry's assertion that a strong man was a "real" man both physically and mentally (Rader, 1946). Acknowledging the importance of Berry and Hise, Rader targeted a new generation of weightlifters. In this way Rader continued, reiterated and transformed Berry's masculine community into his own community. Where Berry targeted men impacted by the Great Depression, Rader turned towards those who either served in the Second World War or had been rejected from enlistment on health grounds. In either case, and a point recently discussed by Christina Jarvis (2004), the Second World War heightened men's anxieties about their bodies in much the same way the Depression had done from 1929. Rader's anxiety to continue the program beyond Berry's reach spoke to the appeal his discourses, and indeed the appeal that Berry's masculine community, had.

Rejecting the Husky Body? Dissent and Different Systems

Returning to Griffin's (2018) article on communication or masculine communities, Griffin distinguished the multiplicity of communities from the often-binary depictions found in R.W. Connell's hegemonic masculinity thesis. While American scholars have previously highlighted the malleability of masculine archetypes, George Chauncey's (1994) pioneering study being an example, there has, at times, been a reluctance to examine several masculine communities which simultaneously co-exist. Griffin's communities allow for the multiplicity of communities and masculine platforms to exist. Berry was not the only outlet for American men interested in fitness. Different, although equally important, were the discourses espoused by other health writers and entrepreneurs. This was certainly the case with Bob Hoffman and

Charles Atlas, who linked their own forms of exercise to a new sense of masculine self-fashioning. Both fostered similar but decidedly distinct forms of masculine communities from Berry.

Hoffman, whose life was previously covered by John Fair (1999), was an individual anxious about maintaining a masculine image. This often took the form of exaggerated claims surrounding his athletic and strength feats alongside a noted compulsion to discuss and advertise his virility. A veteran of the Great War, Hoffman began marketing and selling his own workout equipment in the early 1930s. At a time when barbells and dumbbells were still difficult to acquire for exercisers, Hoffman's well-made and reasonably priced sets quickly grew in popularity. Returning briefly to John Fair's (1999: 55-80) biographical notes, Hoffman's York Barbell company was one of the decade's great success stories, growing exponentially in the face of economic stagnation. Even the onset of the Second World War did little to dampen Hoffman's success, a point evidenced by York Barbell's gross profits of \$1 million in 1946 (Fair, 1999: 117). A relative newcomer to weightlifting, Hoffman was a notable critic of Mark Berry.

Such was Hoffman's disdain for Berry that after Berry failed to win a gold medal as coach of America's 1932 Olympic Weightlifting team at the Los Angeles Games that Hoffman physically attacked Berry on the team bus. This many explain why, when Hoffman purchased Alan Calvert's Milo Barbell Company in 1932, which included *Strength* magazine, Berry proved reticent about joining Hoffman. Likewise, Hoffman's many overtures to publish Berry's writings were continually rejected by Berry. Such animosity encouraged Hoffman's own magazine from the 1930s, *Strength and Health*, to criticize Berry's system and promote a different style of training (Fair, 1999: 55-56). The other obvious motivation was economic. As discussed by Dominic Morais (2013), an important component of such sporting entrepreneurship, was the ability to market distinguishable forms of exercise.

In the case of Hoffman and *Strength and Health*, Berry's system was depicted as irrelevant and potentially dangerous. Conceding in 1933 that such a program may be beneficial for some experienced weight lifters, Hoffman promoted his own system based on different protocols. Readers of *Strength and Health* were told that the exercises used by Olympic weightlifters were the best bodyweight gaining exercises a young man could do. The promotion of Olympic weightlifting marked Hoffman's overarching goal of transforming the United States into a preeminent weightlifting country (Fair, 1998). Unlike Berry, whose writings focused on the individual, Hoffman continually spoke of national health, individual responsibility and pride in one's body. Writing in *Weight Lifting*, his 1939 monograph which underwent several editions, Hoffman claimed the ultimate purpose of his program was to advance American weightlifting and the American nation (Hoffman, 1939: 1-2). Hoffman claimed that through weightlifting, men could transform themselves physically and mentally. Unlike Berry's proteges, concerned with themselves, Hoffman's followers would, in his own mind, help revitalize the American nation. Although differing with Berry regarding his program's ultimate utility, Hoffman, and his writers, nevertheless employed many of the same techniques as *Strength* or *The Strong Man*.

Where Berry had Gambacorta or Hise as success stories, Hoffman's *Strength and Health* cited a host of young American men who built an "impressive physique through Olympic lifts"(Miller, 1932). One of the most prominent and repeated transformation stories was Joe Miller, from New York, who claimed a thirty-pound weight gain following Hoffman's system (Miller, 1932). Hoffman also regularly spoke of his own successes with the program and how he had found an "easy way to get fit" (Hoffman, 1933a). Hoffman, like Berry, stressed the need for efficiency and regularly promoted his systems over all others. This was a tactic Hoffman's other contributors engaged in. In 1934, Harry Good published the following cartoon in *Strength and Health*. Said to typify the average Berry user, Good's article began by

reiterating the successes produced using Hoffman’s system before critiquing Berry’s protocol (Good, 1934a). The unnamed protagonist’s zeal for Berry’s system is contrasted with his later demise.



Fig. 4. Harry Good’s Satirical Cartoons (Good, 1934b).

Hoffman’s prescriptions also deviated from Berry’s “husky” ideal. In *Strength and Health* Hoffman promoted a strong and muscular man who was defined by his athleticism. Likewise, in *Weight Lifting*, Hoffman spoke of “weight lifters” as a catch all term for those men willing to undertake his style of training (Hoffman, 1939: 1-12). Where Berry spoke of the “husky” man as a sort of antidote to the economic uncertainty plaguing American men, Hoffman instead focused on the “weight lifter”, whose overall athleticism, strength and power help continue American hegemony (both sporting and spiritual) (Hoffman, 1933b). It was for this reason that

Hoffman wrote of himself as “a builder of men”, a man who dealt only with the “ambitious young man” eager to build “physical superiority” (Hoffman, 1939: 4-9).

This difference did little to harm Hoffman’s popularity. His magazine, *Strength and Health*, founded in 1932, welcomed dozens of readers’ enquiries each week on the topic of improving their strength and musculature. Dominic Morais (2015) previously cited the manner in which Hoffman relied on his magazine to increase his company’s brand. Anxious readers were told to follow Hoffman’s exercises and purchase his equipment. Such brand loyalty meant a potentially far greater participation cost to his community than Berry’s. Nevertheless, Hoffman was hugely successful. By 1939, Hoffman was a leading figurehead of American weightlifting and bodybuilding. In terms of readership, there is little to suggest that Hoffman’s prime target audience differed from Berry. Like *Strength* or *The Strong Man*, no copies exist of Hoffman’s readership figures but, given the submissions to *Strength and Health* alongside the magazine’s own cover images, it appears that the young, somewhat affluent, white men drawn to Berry’s writings also gravitated toward Hoffman and his system.

In one of the few studies of Hoffman’s racial beliefs, Jason Shurley (2016) highlighted the fact that although Hoffman himself was an early proponent of African-American weightlifters, his magazine was conservative when it came to publicizing their exploits. John Davis, an African American weightlifter who won a gold medal at the 1938 Olympics and several subsequent games, was coached by Hoffman but rarely featured on his magazine covers. Part of the reasoning behind this decision appears to have been the audiences Hoffman wished to appeal to. Notably more silent on the issue of race, Hoffman established his own masculine community based on the link between one’s physical bulk, their personality, and their value as an American.

In this matter, Hoffman was not alone. Charles Atlas was another successful entrepreneur from this time who explicitly cultivated a male following. Previous work on Atlas,

such as that conducted by Elizabeth Toon, and Janet Lynne Golden (2002), has noted Atlas and his business partner, Charles Romans' efforts to link strength and muscularity to one's success in marriage, business and life. It is arguable that Atlas proved the most adept in targeting young men. Atlas was one of the first physical culture entrepreneurs to regularly feature advertisements in comic books. Speaking in 1942 Roman (Zolotow, 1942) claimed that Atlas' success stemmed from the Great Depression which, he believed, led many men to believe a lack of physical power had contributed to their difficulties. When times were prosperous, according to Roman, few individuals cared about their physical prowess. During times of economic hardship, the body became a means of distinguishing oneself from others. Whether or not Roman was correct, Atlas' business flourished during the 1930s and early 1940s. Specifically targeting young men and adolescents, Atlas promised to "make a man" out of clients through his system of "Dynamic Tension", a bodyweight exercise system Atlas devised in the 1920s with the help of Bernarr MacFadden and Dr. Frederick Tilney (Reich, 2010).

Accordingly, advertisements for Atlas' courses appeared in comic books, physical culture magazines and general interest periodicals. His most famous advertisement entitled, "The Insult which made a man out of Mac", showed a young man who, bullied in front of his girlfriend at a local beach, transformed himself through Atlas' system, returned to the beach and defeated his tormenter (Toon & Golden, 2002). The comic strip ended with Mac's foe struggling in the sand while Mac left with his girlfriend. Implicitly and explicitly, the message was clear – muscles made the man. Specifically, muscles made the white heterosexual man. Other Atlas advertisements promised to "make a man" out of students in just seven days or turn them into "he men" (Toon & Golden, 2002). The first of Atlas' mail order lessons claimed that "others will see, by your bearing, that you have personality, reserve power and magnetism" (Atlas, 1936: 2-12). Importantly, Atlas' business was directed, albeit implicitly, at white,

relatively affluent, American men. In time pamphlets featured African American, African or Asian customers but the majority of advertisements targeted, and featured, young white men (Atlas, 1936: 2-5).

Like Hoffman and Berry, Atlas linked his system, titled “Dynamic Tension”, to a masculine community and form of identity building. Similarly, Atlas discredited other systems, claiming his to be the best despite borrowing the terms found in other systems. For several years Atlas encouraged men to be the “husky whose hired” rather than the “weakling whose fired” (Atlas, 1936: 11). Tapping into the “husky” ideal, Atlas used Berry’s language for his own ends. In time Atlas’ attacks on other entrepreneurs, and plagiarism of their methods, led Bob Hoffman to title Atlas’ product as nothing more than “Dynamic Hooey” (Good, 1934b). Berry also wrote derisively of Atlas’ system although not in the same terms as Hoffman (Berry, 1934e). Each entrepreneur made explicit efforts to denigrate the other and distinguish their own systems, and communities. Nonetheless Atlas’ course, advertisements and public exhibitions created a distinguishable community, similar to but distinct from those fostered around Hoffman and Berry’s. In Atlas’ case, his offices in New York served as both a literal and symbolic hub of devotion.

Charles Gaines and George Butler (1982) found that many of Atlas’ clients visited his offices in New York during this time to meet Atlas, obtain health advice and even receive a memento from their visit in the form of an iron bar Atlas would bend into a pretzel shape. Far more common however was for Atlas to receive bags of fan mail. So voluminous was the mail that Atlas supposedly established an entire division in his business devoted to responding to letters. The letters contained revealed the power of Atlas’ discourses and the ideals created. “R.B.” wrote to Atlas at this time, informing him that “I got my girlfriend through you.” “J.C.S.” expressed how it “never ceases to amuse me to see the expression on their [his friends] faces when they grab my arm in a friendly gesture and feel the muscle there.” Another student

claimed that, “today I feel no man can rule or oppress me.” Finally, “M.H.” from Texas informed Atlas that “my body will show anyone how I am today” (Gaines & Butler, 1982: 144-150.)

Like Hoffman and Berry, informal rules existed for Atlas and his would be “he men.” To join the community, and receive praise for doing so, men needed to purchase Atlas’ courses, exercise vigorously in the hope of transforming their body, use Atlas’ carefully chosen language and write letters expressing their gratitude. All three men promoted a somatic form of masculinity in response, it would seem, to the Great Depression and its aftermath. All three created their own masculine communities which existed simultaneously, borrowed from one another and, ultimately, promoted the same end. Their co-existence speaks to the variability of masculine constructs in 1930s America. Those writing into Berry, Hoffman or Atlas, moved through various roles in their everyday lives. Writing to these physical culturists allowed, always temporarily, for individuals to inhabit an overtly masculine space defined by the body.

Conclusion

Returning to the quote outlined at the beginning of the article, Berry’s assertion that hard work made the man was, in the context of the 1930s, almost in direct relation to the uncertainty caused by the economic crash. Through *Strength* and *The Strong Man*, Berry told countless young men of the benefits of high repetition squats, a system of exercise praised for its difficult nature. At a time when many men were unemployed or, at least faced the prospect of it, Berry preached redemption through strength and muscularity. Becoming a “husky” man, would, in Berry’s eyes, forestall future calamity and provide some sense of control back into men’s lives. His recurring promotion of “husky” men and numerous success stories helped to forge an intimate bond between Berry and some of his readership.

Berry cited the importance of strength, purpose, self-discipline and direction for young, white, male bodies. Aware of the recent problematization of hegemonic masculinities in history, this article framed Berry's writings, and his clients' responses, within the context of a communication community which shared norms, behaviors and expectations. Contributing to and joining Berry's community necessitated a strict regimen of training, an engagement with his products and a physical transformation into the "husky" ideal. This evolving and permeable community existed simultaneously with similar groups which likewise sought to elevate rigid forms of masculinity. Rather than an ideal from which others copied, Berry's masculine community co-existed simultaneously with those created by rivals like Bob Hoffman or Charles Atlas. Although Hoffman and Berry had clear national and personal preferences for their strength philosophies, their followers did not always interpret the messages as their teacher's intended. Hoffman's higher-minded ideals did not always translate to the letters from those subscribing to his regime. There was, nevertheless, an awareness of their messages.

All three cited new methods of embodying masculinity. Berry's however, was arguably the most extreme and highlighted the lengths to which anxiety's over the male body encouraged unusual and at times, harsh, practices to be undertaken on a voluntary basis. A common theme throughout the letters sent to Berry (1932b) was the desire to "to gain weight, no matter how." This desire led individuals to transform their bodies to the excess, face physical hardship and attempt to find kindred spirits in Berry's articles. The "husky" ideal was not an abstract theory, but rather, an embodied being forged through countless hours of training and a radical approach to one's diet.

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