

# Ironclad

Joe Roark

## PAUL ANDERSON'S FAMOUS SAFE



It is among the few artifacts in lifting history to have a special meaning, being in the company of the Cyr dumbbell, the Inch dumbbell, and the Apollon railcar wheels, all items whose exact weights are known, and whose images have been published over the years in the muscle literature. But this item, the safe that Paul Anderson used for his heavy lifting, had until recently an uncertain weight, and a photo of it has, to my knowledge, never been published, until now. Accompanying this article is a photo of the safe that Olympic champion Paul Anderson used as a component for his famous claim of a 12 June 1957 backlift of 6,270 pounds.

Much has been written about the safe, in vague terms with no specific dimensions being revealed. It was variously said to have been made of iron, or steel, or lead, or manganese.<sup>1</sup> It was huge, or large, or big according to writers who in most cases had only a mental image to draw upon.<sup>2</sup> Keep in mind, Paul had only one safe for his training and strength demonstrations, so the widespread discrepancies spread by various writers to describe his safe cannot be explained by the presence of another safe. Nor can the careless switching from 2300 pounds to 3500 pounds with all sorts of matter hanging off the safe...to the safe itself weighing 3,500 pounds without such attachments.<sup>3</sup>

On 7 September 1995, Bryan Frederick and I were in route to Atlanta to attend the Mr. Olympia contest, when we made a side-trip to Vidalia, Georgia, to ascertain the measurements of the safe and to take some photos of it. After parking across the street from Paul's

former house, we asked for, and received permission from Paul's son-in-law, Ed Schaefer, the current resident, to examine the safe. As we rounded the corner of the house and got a good look at the safe, we were disappointed because we knew by looking at this piece of metal that—even if it had been solid with no cavity, as safes obviously require—it would still not weigh 3,500 pounds. As a matter of fact, it weighed less even than 2,500 pounds (based on calculations later performed). The measurements we took that day of the Paul Anderson safe were as follows. Note that the safe is round, not rectangular.

Diameter: 24"

Height 20.5" from ground, though probably it had sunk into the earth a couple of inches, because this type of safe stood taller.

Diameter of safe door opening: 16"

Wall thickness: 4"

Circumference 70"

It is an object that can be straddled by a person of normal size. It was not large, or huge, or even big, as writers (some of whom obviously hadn't seen it) had described it. It is approximately the height of a normal chair-seat.

Paul acquired the safe, commonly known as a "cannonball" safe, from a junkyard, and he used it in his hiplifts, and later in his backlifts. He explained that the back of the safe had been cut away at some point.<sup>4</sup> Keep in mind that one of the reasons some cannonball safes were composed of manganese was that when manganese

bums (as when a thief tries to torch-cut through it) obnoxious, disabling, smoky fumes are produced. Also, ball-bearings were often inserted between the inner and outer walls of such safes so that in the event someone tried to drill into them the drill bit would—upon contact with the hardened, rounded bearings—undergo side-shank pressure and almost certainly break. The cannonball safe was used for valuable, small items, such as jewelry, and therefore a large cavity was not required. Further, because the space between the walls was partially filled with ball bearings and not manganese, the space affected therefore weighed less than had it been composed of solid manganese.

Based on conversations with several locksmiths, and the materials they have provided after seeing photos of Paul's safe and being informed of its dimensions, the following conclusions seem reasonable. The type of safe Paul used probably had a cavity no larger than 1.86 cubic feet, so obviously manganese at its weight of 475 pounds per cubic foot, in this case approximately 884 pounds, was being replaced by air inside the safe's cavity. If Paul had poured 1.86 cubic feet of concrete into the safe's cavity, he would be adding about 268 pounds to fill it, minus the space that the "weights" he also added to the cavity required (weights with a diameter smaller than the 16" opening of the safe's cavity) and minus the weight of the missing back wall of the safe.

#### Earle Liederman, Bless You

As is sometimes the case, the earliest reporting on an event is the most helpful. Liederman reported in *Muscle Power* magazine in February 1957—before Paul's June 1957 backlift attempt—about Paul's "...steel safe filled with cement which weighs 2300 lbs." Paul at this time was unaware of how much the table weighed because after interviewing him, Liederman wrote, "Since no one knows how much the heavy [backlift] platform weighs, the exact over-all weight remains guess work."<sup>5</sup> And writers have guessed and guessed since then, even though many of the facts were available, at least in regard to the extant safe, which, unknown to



**Bryan Frederick kneels beside Anderson's famous safe, holding a copy of Paul's autobiography, *A Greater Strength*, to provide additional scale.**

*Photo courtesy Joe Roark*

Liederman, was composed of manganese, not steel. [Remember that Paul had written in his autobiography, *A Greater Strength*, "I worked with my father to build the platform and lifting table. We had to know exactly how much the lifting table weighed before the lift, so after we nailed it together, we took it apart and weighed it...The table itself weighed eighteen hundred pounds."<sup>6</sup> [Do we not infer from this that very soon after the table was constructed it was then separated into pieces small enough to be weighed? If so, this weighing would have predated Liederman's interview with Paul.]

In a certified letter from Paul to me on 24 January 1990, he wrote about the safe. [Please notice that he claims the safe itself weighed 3,500 pounds; 1200 pounds more than the figure he gave to Liederman.] So, how much did it weigh when all those other "hangings" were added? Four thousand, seven hundred pounds? If that were the case, then the wooden platform used in the backlift could not have weighed more than 1,570 pounds for the total to end up as claimed. This would mean that nothing else was added to the table during the backlift attempt, yet Paul says things were added. So for every item added to the table, that much weight must be subtracted from the weight of the platform for the total to remain accurate, or at least consistent. As Paul's words to me are examined, keep in mind that he is describing the safe as it remains today.

“It weighed 3500 pounds. Someone had tried to break into it, or perhaps lost the combination, for the back was cut out, so I filled it full of weights to bring it up to a greater poundage. The walls on it were very thick, and I was surprised at how few weights I could get into it. I then poured in concrete to stabilize the weights and add a little more poundage. My Dad had built the platform for me, and it weighed well over a thousand pounds, and the other poundages were made up of official weights.”<sup>7</sup> Does one assume “official weights” to refer to barbell plates? If so, where were all the chains, axles, transmissions and other assorted pieces? Paul does not mention them in the letter.

Another problem has to do with the platform. If something weighs more than 1800 pounds, for example, would a person not usually say so, rather than saying it weighs “more than a thousand pounds”? In Paul’s updated autobiography, the weight of the platform is given as “about 1800 pounds,” which, of course, is “more than a thousand,” but using this reasoning, if Paul had squatted with 1100 pounds, would he have described the amount as “more than 300,” since there would have been the same 800 pound difference?<sup>8</sup> Language requires the use of gradations, and “generally speaking” should be within the boundary of the next gradation.

Please note that Paul put weights into the cavity first, then added concrete to stabilize the weights, and add “a little more poundage.” Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that most, or a large part, of the cavity was not filled with concrete, but with weights. Does Paul mean to imply (as he seems clearly to do) that the safe, before he added weights and concrete, weighed 3500 pounds? If so, what was the total weight after adding those items? Further, when John Little interviewed Paul for *Muscle & Fitness* regarding the backlift, Paul mentioned that his father built the platform, then described the small amount of material on the platform. “I had just about the platform and the safe, an old manganese safe that I used for the basic weight and that was just about it. I didn’t have to add many weights.”<sup>9</sup> But Little’s piece refers to a “steel” safe full of lead placed on the lifting table and says that Paul “...then loaded the remaining surface of

the table with transmissions and other heavy auto parts before crawling under the table.”<sup>10</sup>

Again, if only the safe and the table were used, and Paul did not have to add many other weights, what is the origin of the claim that “the conglomeration of scrap on the table was beyond belief,” as Bob Hoffman supposedly told Judd Biasiotto?<sup>11</sup> And how can Paul’s other words be explained when in his autobiography, *The World’s Strongest Man*, he relates, [emphasis mine]: “It was an old safe. And it was heavy. *When I had filled it with every piece of junk I could find*, and after I welded it shut, and added slots for the belt connections, I found myself with 3,500 pounds to struggle against.”<sup>12</sup> [So the safe did not weigh 3500 before adding concrete and weights.]

In his updated autobiography, *A Greater Strength*, Paul mentions inserting only weights and concrete, with the same 3,500-pound result.<sup>13</sup> Compare this to the early report by Liederman, who though erroneously referring to the safe as being made of steel, accurately gives its total, loaded weight as 2300 pounds.

However, in March 1956 Larry Lawson asserted in *Ironman* that for a hiplift Paul used “an old safe filled with concrete—3500 lbs. For two reps using a ‘half-harness’.” Later in the same article he writes, “The combined weight of safe and weights was calculated with a high degree of accuracy at 3500 pounds.”<sup>14</sup>

So any lift, by anyone, (including Paul doing his hiplifting) using this safe involves approximately a 1,200 pound error if the weight of the safe by itself was figured (as Paul sometimes figured it) to be 3500 pounds, instead of the actual 2300 pounds.

In a very interesting development, Paul’s daughter, Paula Schaefer, perhaps weary of the guesswork about how much that thing in her backyard actually weighed, decided to have the safe weighed. Hello science, goodbye guessing! Randall Strossen, in his book *Paul Anderson: The Mightiest Minister*, does not include a photo of the safe, but does mention that Paul’s daughter had it weighed. There was no photo of that historic happening, no mention of the type of scale used—except that a wrecker was employed—and no date as to when it

was weighed. What's more, no explanation was given as to why the first weighing was recorded at 2375 pounds, and the second was 2240 pounds, a discrepancy of 135 pounds. Strossen settled on a middle figure of 2307.5 pounds, which he describes as ". . . too close to the 2,300 pound reference point to be a mere coincidence." He also mentions the weight of the 180-pound stand-base for the safe, though not even Paul ever mentioned this as having been part of the lift—either hip or back. (This type safe could be purchased with or without a base, because the height of the safe itself would require a person opening it to kneel to turn the combination tumblers. Some customers may have had a ledge upon which to place the cannonball safe, or may have placed it atop another safe.) In any case, the safe resting on a base would certainly have been "top-heavy," particularly if used in the hiplift.

Interestingly, Strossen was against weighing the safe. "Why not weight the thing, and be done with it, you might wonder. Simply because weighing the safe would prove virtually nothing about the lift since the exact configuration of both the safe and the other items on the table is not known." Continuing, Strossen adds, "It also seemed to me . . . that weighing the safe, under these conditions was disrespectful, and would be as undignified a ceremony as having a loved one autopsied in public."<sup>15</sup> It seems strange that Strossen urged Paula to not have her father's safe weighed, arguing that it would serve no useful purpose, while at the same time wishing the platform were still around so *it* could be weighed. Obviously, the whole is equal to the sum of its parts, so the more parts we have, and weigh, the more closely we approach the total weight involved in Paul's backlift. One suspects that the weighing of the actual safe, while supporting those who have suspected its weight was much lower than the 3500 pounds usually claimed, surely had the opposite effect on those who have steadfastly held to the 3500 pound figure, and who now are in the position of either accepting reality or continuing to assert that the June 12, 1957 backlift of 6,270 pounds somehow still is accurate in spite of the overwhelming evidence that the poundage must now be reduced by approximate-

ly 1200 pounds, down to around 5,070 pounds.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "Paul officially backlifted a table with a lead safe and auto parts which weighed 6,270 pounds." Pete Vuono, "Pioneers of Power: Paul Anderson," *Powerlifting USA* (March 1984): 68; "For the centerpiece he used an old iron safe, filled with cement." Julius Johnson, *The Toccoa Record* (6 October 1994): 2-C; "On that day, Anderson placed a steel safe full of lead. . ." John Little, "Paul Anderson: The Strongest Man Ever?" *Muscle & Fitness* (May 1993): 149.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Judd Biasiotto and Amy Ferrando, "The Greatest Athlete of All," *Powerlifting USA* (November 1988): 33, which describes the safe as both large and huge. "In a state of complete confusion, Anderson removed the large safe which weighed approximately 250 [sic] pounds from the table." In a letter to me dated 24 January 1990 [line 244] Paul Anderson used the word "big" to describe the safe.

<sup>3</sup> Larry Lawson tells one of the earliest versions of how Anderson added extra weight to the safe in 1956. Lawson writes, "One day he fastened as many weights as he could to an old steel safe filled with concrete. The combined weight of safe and weights was calculated with a high degree of accuracy at 3500 pounds." Larry Lawson, "Paul Anderson Modern Superman—and how He Trains," *Ironman* (March 1956): 13.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Paul Anderson to Joe Roark, 24 January 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Earle Liederman, "The Stupendous Strength of Paul Anderson," *Muscle Power* (February 1957): 57.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Anderson with Jerry B. Jenkins and James R. Adair, *A Greater Strength*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1990) 78-79.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Paul Anderson to Joe Roark, 24 January 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, *Greater Strength*, 78.

<sup>9</sup> Little, "Paul Anderson," 149.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Biasiotto and Ferrando, "Greatest Athlete," 33.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Anderson, *World's Strongest Man* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1975). 34.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, *Greater Strength*, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Lawson, "Paul Anderson," 10.

<sup>15</sup> Randall Strossen, Ph.D. *Paul Anderson: The Mightiest Minister* (Nevada City, CA: Ironmind Enterprises, 1999), 98.