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Breaking Chains and Bending Iron

The "Strong Man"

Athletic performances such as escape artists or tightrope walkers are some of the oldest fairground attractions. However, the epitome of the fairground athletes is the "strong man". In the 19th century, this figure became firmly established at fairgrounds and folk festivals.

"Hercules" or "Samson" were the most common names for weightlifting acrobats. They amazed the audience by hitting heavy sledge hammers on their bodies or driving carpenter's nails into wooden beams with their bare fists. Lifting weights, breaking chains, bending iron or catching cannonballs were just some of their impressive tricks. In the 20th century, tearing up telephone books or blowing up hot water bottles until they exploded came up. Through a combination of real power, illusion and clever staging, these skills were made believable.

The popularity of the "strong men" reached its peak in the 1920s and 1930s. After the Second World War, they became less and less popular and rarely appeared at fairgrounds.

Fun Fact

Women As Weightlifting Acrobats

It's not just men who performed as strength acrobats. Around 1900, Charmion (Laverie Vallee, née Cooper, 1875 -1949) hit the headlines. She was one of the first women to show off her muscular body in public.

She lifted heavy weights, bent iron bars and wrestled with men. With her performances, she earned her own income and made an international career.