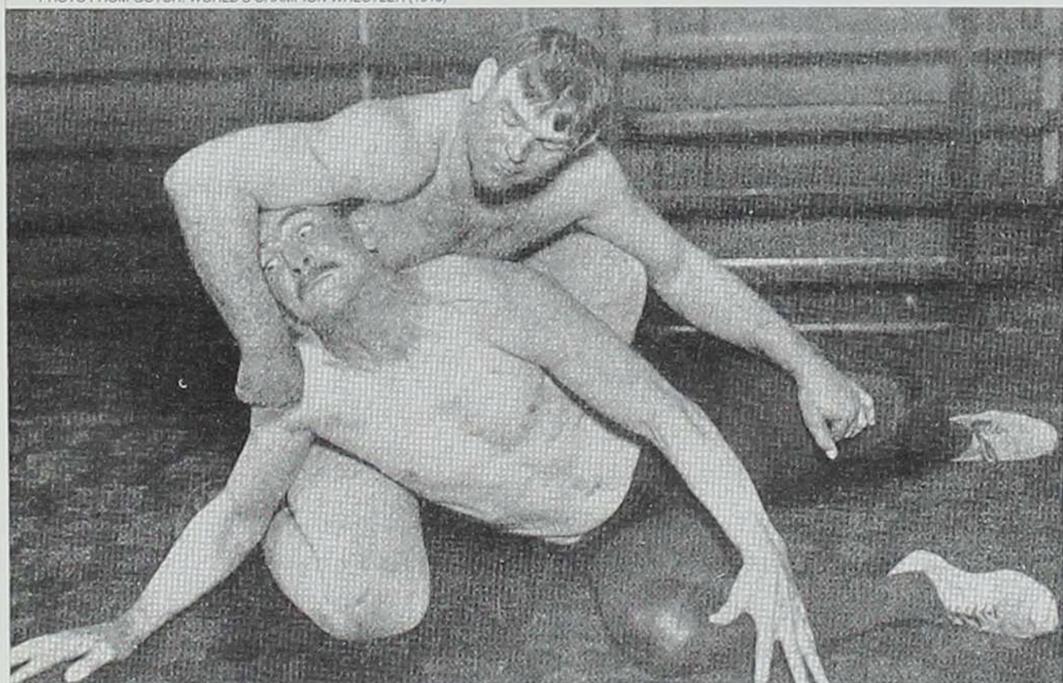


Wrestling in Iowa

PHOTO FROM GOTCH, WORLD'S CHAMPION WRESTLER (1913)



Frank Gotch employs the headlock on Martin "Farmer" Burns.

The Legacy of Frank Gotch and Farmer Burns

by Clare L. Kernek and Leah D. Rogers

Iowa's strong wrestling tradition rests heavily on the popularity and success of professional wrestler Frank Gotch, the undefeated world champion. He and his teacher, Martin "Farmer" Burns, another Iowa farm boy turned pro wrestler, are credited by those later involved with team college wrestling programs with having been hugely influential in the sport's development. In addition to the clubs organized by Burns where young men learned the fundamentals, pro wrestlers like Gotch were celebrities who generated interest in the sport. Cornell College coach Paul Scott remembered from his boyhood the excitement generated in West Liberty when touring pros would come to town. Before the bouts at the local opera house, he recalled, the local boys would engage in wrestling matches of their own.

In his own era, there was no star bigger than Frank Gotch, whose fame extended far beyond the wrestling or sports world. Gotch biographer Mike Chapman explained that in terms of celebrity he was not just the Dan Gable of his time, he was "more like a Michael Jordan." By the time he died in 1917 at the age of 39,

Gotch "had become the best-known athlete in the country." According to writer Mac Davis, "babies had been named in his honor, as had buildings, toys [and] farm implements. . . . The word 'Gotch' was a synonym for quality and strength."

Born on a farm south of Humboldt, Iowa, in 1878, Gotch did not begin wrestling with the intention of making it his career. In the late 19th century in Iowa, impromptu wrestling matches were a common form of entertainment in rural communities. According to Cornell coach Barron Bremmer, "there was a lot of pride generated by the local wrestlers. Someone would say they had an unbeatable guy, and someone from another community would challenge them."

It was such a challenge that started Gotch on his professional wrestling path. By the age of 20, while still living and working on the family farm, he had earned a reputation in his neighborhood as a tough wrestler to beat, and was chosen by the town boys to go up against a chicken picker who was looking to "wrestle all comers." Bets were placed, and Gotch returned to his farm "toting some silver dollars that looked

mighty big to me," according to his biography.

The historic meeting between Gotch and his future teacher occurred several months later in December 1899 when Farmer Burns was touring around the Midwest offering \$25 to any locals who could last 15 minutes against him. Gotch traveled with some friends to Fort Dodge to try his chance at the prize money. Although Burns, holder of the 1895 national heavyweight title, did manage to pin his young challenger within the allotted time, he was impressed by Gotch's performance. After the match at the opera house, he announced to the crowd that Gotch was the most talented amateur wrestler he'd ever seen in his life. "If he will go with me," Burns declared, "I will make him champion of America in a few months."

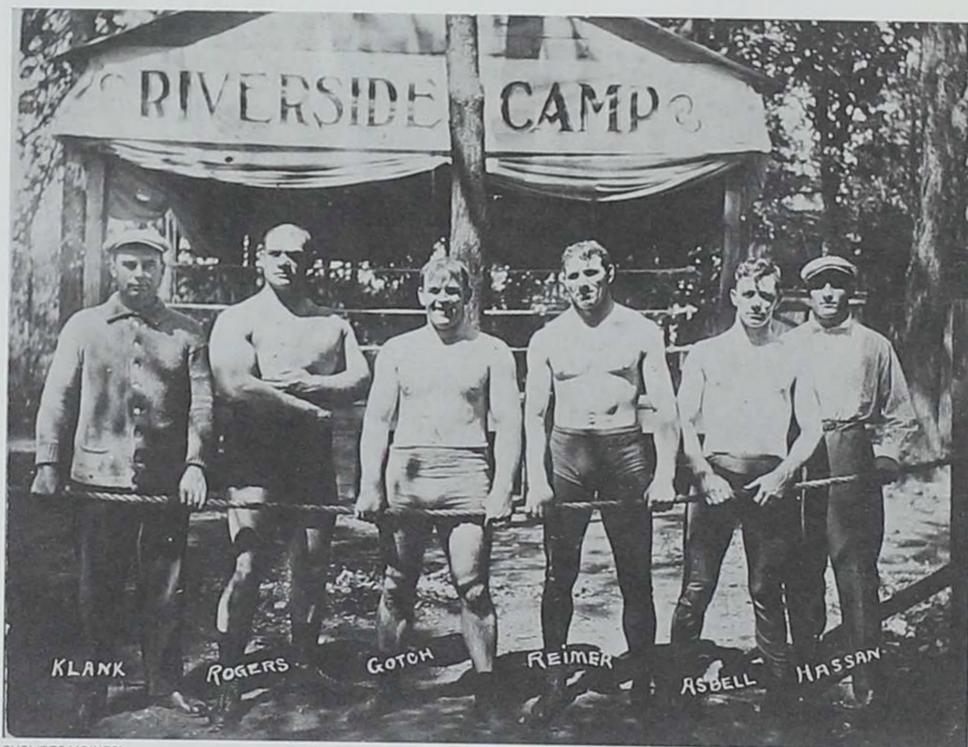
Although Gotch was naturally gifted with a rare combination of power coupled with amazing speed and agility, he would later give much of the credit for his success to his partner and trainer, Farmer Burns. Gotch later remarked, "I had wrestled side holds with the big lads of the neighborhood and played rough and tumble at the auction sales, but what I didn't know about wrestling of the Farmer Burns kind would fill a mighty large volume."

Burns was an experienced teacher who in 1893 had started a gymnasium in Rock Island, Illinois, just across the Mississippi from Scott County, where he resided. He also worked with wrestlers, including Gotch, at his farm near Big Rock in Scott County. After the two joined forces, Gotch indeed experienced swift success. He was undefeated in 1900, his first year with his new trainer, and in 1901 brought home \$35,000 in winnings (over \$800,000 in today's dollars) from a six-month stint wrestling miners in the Klondike. Upon his return, he had a string of undefeated matches, including one against his teacher. Although he lost his first bid for the national title in a hard-fought match against six-time winner Tom Jenkins, considered one of the strongest grapplers in history, he finally reached his

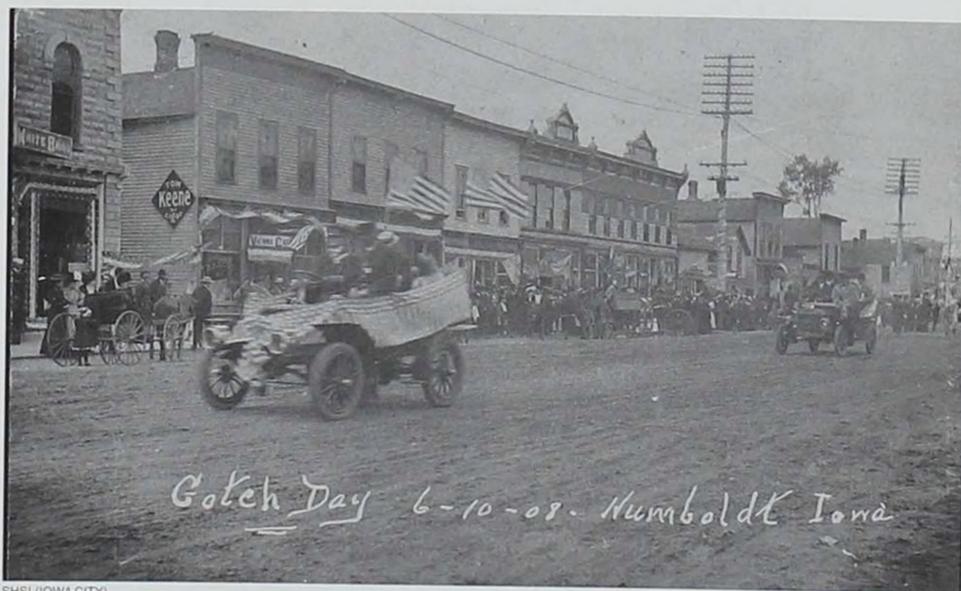
Top: The Riverside Training Camp in Humboldt (Gotch's hometown) drew wrestlers and onlookers. From left: Emil Klank, Yankee Joe Rogers, Gotch, Jess Westegaard, and two unidentified men.

Middle: A parade in Humboldt celebrates "Gotch Day," 1908.

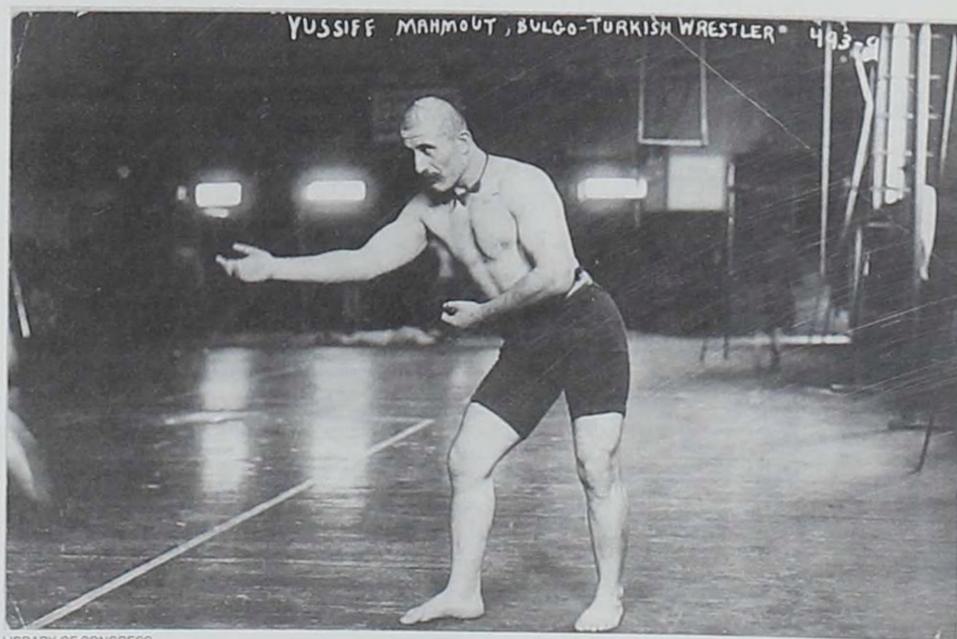
Bottom: Gotch's international opponents included Bulgarian Yussiff Mahmout. Gotch defeated him easily.



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goal of becoming the American heavyweight champion in a rematch in 1904. The national media took note of wrestling's new star as Gotch's success continued in "catch-as-catch-can" matches from coast to coast. In 1906 he won an international tournament in Canada, where he swept aside the competition from 50 different countries "like chaff before a hurricane," as one contemporary account described it.

Gotch's greatest matches were his legendary contests against George Hackenschmidt, the "Russian Lion," for the world title. Historian Mike Chapman describes Hackenschmidt as "perhaps the most feared wrestler of any generation" who had "defeated Jenkins easily in his only other trip to America." Before their first meeting on April 3, 1908, in Chicago, Farmer Burns advised Gotch to try to wear "Hack" down by leaning heavily on the back of his opponent's neck with his forearm, instead of trying for a fall. In preparation, Gotch embarked on a demanding training regimen that included wrestling for several hours a day and running for miles through the countryside around Humboldt. The strategy worked. After two grueling hours of struggle between the men, the defending world champion, considered unbeatable by many, surrendered in a whisper: "Mr. Gotch, I give you the championship." Frank Gotch became the first American to claim the title.

After his victory over Hackenschmidt, Gotch's celebrity reached new heights in America and throughout Europe, due not only to his mastery on the mat, but also to his role in a play about wrestling in which he toured throughout Europe. According to Chapman, "Crowds of 5,000 to 10,000 came just to see him." Gotch was considered the "champion of champions," easily defeating the great Polish wrestler Stimilaus Zbyszko before a packed house in Chicago's Coliseum in 1910.

In 1911, anticipation was high for a rematch between Gotch and Hackenschmidt. Gotch set up a training camp by the river in Humboldt, in an area now known as "Gotch Park." Chapman writes: "A Chicago paper sent a reporter to Humboldt to watch Gotch train. The reporter saw twice the city's regular population down by the Des Moines River cheering Gotch's every move in the training camp.

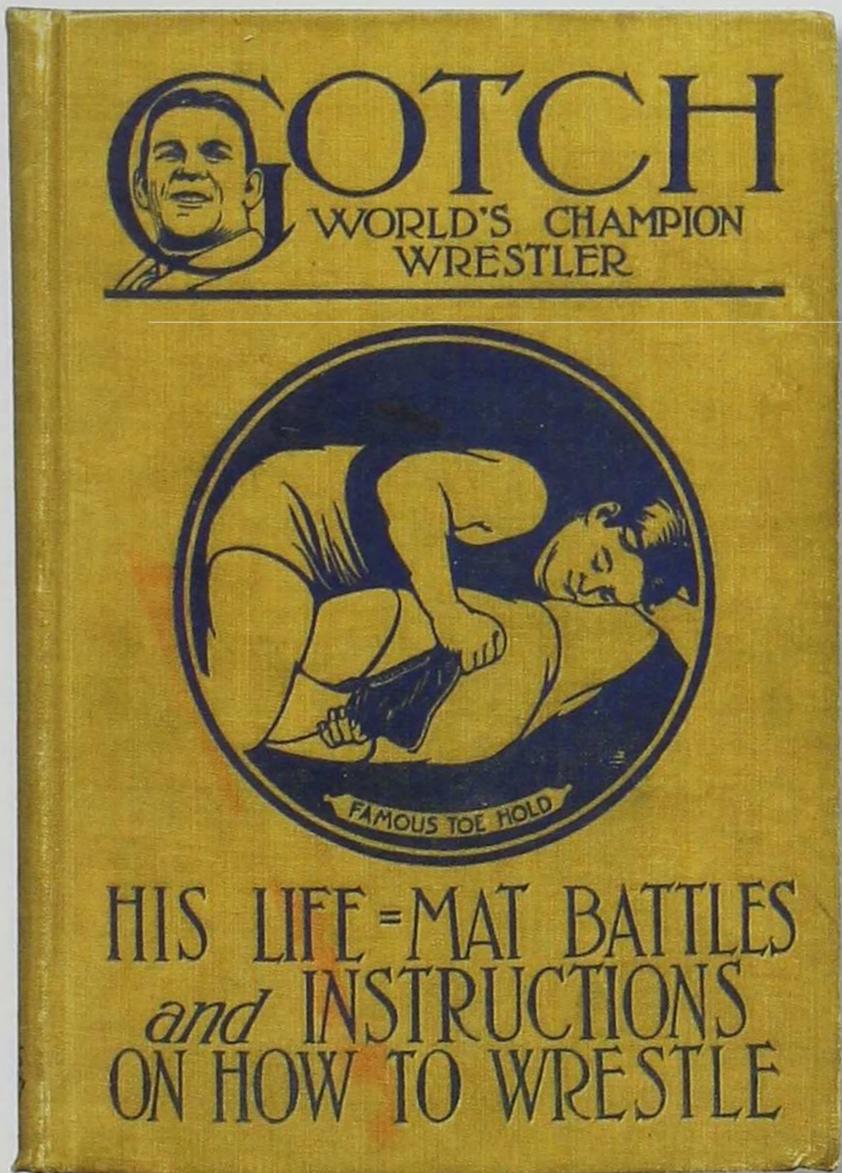
"The return bout was held in the new Comiskey Park, twenty-eight thousand attended, a record crowd for an athletic event in Chicago. [That afternoon] several thousand persons jammed the street by the Morrison Hotel where Gotch was staying and wouldn't leave until the champion made a speech. Total receipts came to \$87,953, of which \$21,000 [roughly \$460,000 today] went to Gotch for his relatively easy win."

Despite his world championship status and international celebrity, Gotch still described himself as "an Iowa farmer," and he remained in Humboldt for the rest of his life. He bought large portions of farmland and built a nice home for himself and his wife in town, as well as a new farmhouse for his folks.

At the same time that he was increasing his farm holdings and pursuing private business interests, Gotch continued wrestling for several more years before retiring as the undefeated world champion. He had lost only one match since winning his title, and had lost just twice in championship matches in his life. At his peak he went nearly eight years without losing even a single fall, let alone a match. Gotch possessed an unusual combination of tremendous strength and surprising speed and agility for a man of his size, 5 feet 11½ inches, and 212 pounds. He was known for being "amazingly fast and catlike in movements." In addition, he was a quick thinker on the mat, and diligent, seemingly indefatigable in his training. He honed his skills until he had mastered every hold, and also "mastered leverage to the nth degree."

Not long after his retirement, Gotch died at the age of only 39 in the upstairs bedroom of his house in Humboldt, on December 17, 1917. Uremic poisoning was listed as the cause of death. The event was reported in newspapers all over the country, and editorials were written in tribute to the man considered the greatest wrestler of all time. Of course, the loss was felt most keenly in Iowa, where "the whole state went into mourning," according to one editorial. Humboldt, the writer reported, completely shut down on the day of his funeral, so that the thousands of mourners could "bid a final farewell to the farm boy who had been the greatest wrestling champion in history."

Gotch's career coincided with the peak of professional wrestling as a legitimate sport in America. The start of its development separate from amateur wrestling is dated to 1888 and the founding of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), when weight classes were established along with rules that barred professional athletes from their sanctioned competitions. Gotch was the last clear-cut world champion, and was still considered to be so when he died. However, others claimed the title in the years following his retirement, and Gotch himself never claimed it after Earl Craddock won a title bout in the spring of 1917, several months before Gotch's death.



PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES); BOOK: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Left: "All the world admires an honest battler," wrote *Chicago Daily News* reporter George S. Robbins in his 1913 biography. "And that is why Frank A. Gotch has attracted the largest wrestling crowds in modern times [and] has done more than any other influence to make wrestling popular in America."



Gotch (center) masters his opponent at the Riverside Training Camp in Humboldt.