

STURDY JOHN BRAGAW,

The Gigantic Octogenarian of the
Town of Gravesend.

**Stories of His Remarkable Strength and Wonderful
Skill – An Interesting Character to Whom the
Camera is a Mystery and the Trolley Not Far
Removed From the Miraculous**

A Picturesque personality to the visitors at Ulmer park is a man to be seen daily about there who, though stooped with age, still towers over the men of average size about him. To the majority he is remarked upon as one who must have secured a vacation from exhibiting as a giant in one of the Coney Island shows. He has never thought, however, of exhibiting himself outside of the limited area comprised in what is known as Gravesend Beach, where he has lived for nearly sixty years. He is John Bragaw, formerly a fisherman and storekeeper on the beach, but now retired on the money he secured for his homestead when the avenue on which the trolley runs was cut through it. His actual height is 6 feet 11 inches and his weight 267 pounds. He is built symmetrically and his hands would be a prize to a first baseman on a professional team, while the shoes he wears are 15 inches long by actual measurement and broad in proportion. Though 84 years old he is still active in his movements, and to the ordinary observer looks to be not more than 60 years of age. In addition to his more than ordinary height and weight John has a reputation for strength that is notable, and many instances are related of his exercise of this power that are worthy of recording. He was born in Dutch Kills, Queens County, of good old Holland stock, eighty-four years ago, and, is the only survivor of a family of eleven children, all of whom possessed the same characteristics of largeness and strength as himself, though in a lesser degree. Sixty years ago he moved to Gravesend and took up his residence on the beach, where he followed the bay and kept a little store where the fishermen and boatmen might get such supplies as they needed, the most of their purchases being of liquors, which seemed then, as now, to be necessary either as bait

or solace for fishermen. John always had the reputation of being a fair dealer and as a result he did pretty well. He would, as was almost the custom in those days, indulge in occasional dissipation, his period lasting several days, and then he would play pranks which testified his strength and were in the nature of practical jokes, never prompted by ill nature or malice.

On one occasion, when the proprietor of a local hostelry had ordered him out of his place, John went out good naturedly enough, but shortly after came back, carrying a struggling, kicking colt under his arm. He shoved the big doors of the hotel open with his foot and landed the colt right in the barroom, to the utter destruction of everything outside of the bar and the thorough fright of the hotel keeper and the loungers, who were loungers no longer as soon as the colt was given possession. No one dared enter the barroom until big John went in and, grasping the excited colt, carried him out again into the open and let him go.

On another occasion it is said that he was assaulted in the neighborhood of his store by a crowd of drunken loafers from the city and, turning about, pulled up a hickory sapling growing at his side, using it as a mammoth club to such effect that a half dozen of his assailants were driven out into the bay and were nearly drowned in their efforts to regain their boat. He was frequently called on in days past to lift heavy weights and to indulge in wrestling bouts in order to decide the wagers made on his strength and prowess, and his friends were always sure of the money placed on him, though champions came from a distance of many miles to test his strength and skill. He never practiced the arts of wrestling, trusting to his strength for victory, catching his opponent about the waist and throwing him as one would a bag of flour. He was not desirous of these contests and, as he said, merely indulged in them to please his friends. He never used his strength to anyone's harm, and it may be said of him that while he had a giant's strength, he never used it cruelly, like a giant.

Mild in speech and manner on all occasions, even when indulging in dissipation, he bred no fear in those who knew him, and to-day no man has more friends in the town than has John Bragaw.

Not long ago Theodore Krombach, an amateur photographer living in the Eight ward and a friend of John's, induced him to have his picture taken. I was a trying time for John, as it was the first picture he had ever posed for in his four score and four years of life. He was like a little child, curious to know how a thing like a

camera could take a picture of him and anxious to see how it worked. In fact so anxious, that twice he spoiled Mr. Krombach's efforts by coming forward to look in the lens after he had been properly posed. The photograph here presented is the final result. His companion is a man of ordinary height (5 feet 7 inches), so that Mr. Bragaw's comparative height may readily be judged.

When John Bragaw goes over the river he will be missed by many as one of the kindest hearted men they have ever met, and one who never knew an enemy.



His innocence on general subjects outside of his own environment is refreshing to people who have seen the world. When the trolley was first introduced he was almost frightened at it. It was a marvel to him. He examined the car and the machinery almost as a baby would a new toy and asked more questions than the most skilled scientist could answer. When it came to the question of how the power got into the machinery he gave up his pursuit of knowledge in disgust, for he could not be made to believe that the tin copper wires pulled the cars along as he thought they ought to. John Bragaw attributes his long life and continued strength to the moderate use of stimulants daily and occasional relaxation. He has followed no rule of living and has a maxim that what is one man's meat is another man's poison. As seems to be the rule, John chose his opposite as a life partner, and his wife was a woman under 5 feet in height but with a will power that supplemented her husband's easy methods. She was the better half so far as the management of the house was concerned, and John always acknowledged with a good natured laugh that her tongue was stronger than his muscle. He survives her and has no children.