

Historical Threads

Alma Richards, 1912 Olympic Champion from Parowan

by Jay M. Jones

Alma Richards, born 20 February 1890 in Parowan, Utah, became the first Olympic champion from Utah.

The ninth of ten children of Morgan and Margaret Adams Richards, Alma grew up in Parowan until his father was elected as Utah's first state auditor after statehood in 1896, when the family moved to Salt Lake City.

With a one-term limit then applied to that office, Morgan Richards returned with his family to Parowan. Alma, known by friends as Pat, finished 8th grade and went to work herding livestock. Parowan did not have a high school at that time.

About three years later a chance encounter at the railroad town of Lund, Utah made a huge impact on the life of Alma Richards.

The railroad from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles was completed in 1905, and regular passenger service between those cities was established. However, derailments or problems with the tracks occasionally caused unscheduled delays. It may have been during one such delay that Thomas Trueblood, a well known and well traveled educator and orator from the University of Michigan found himself at the hotel in Lund.

At the same time, a storm in the area caused Alma Richards to seek shelter at the same hotel. While waiting for the storm to clear and the train to move along, Alma and Professor Trueblood had time to talk. Alma expressed an interest in seeing the world. Professor Trueblood told him that continuing his education would be the best way to open the door to his dreams.

As an 18-year-old, Alma began his high school career by enrolling at the Murdock Academy in Beaver in the fall of 1908, where his sister's husband taught music. In the spring of 1909, Murdock Academy competed at the state high school track meet in Salt Lake City, receiving two team points. One point came from Alma Richards, who placed third in the shot put.

The following winter, Professor Trueblood was taking a year off from the university and embarking on a world tour, giving speeches and lectures throughout the United States, Europe, and the Orient. He made another trip on the Salt Lake to Los Angeles railroad.

Learning that Professor Trueblood had scheduled events in Salt Lake City and Provo, committees at the Branch Normal School in Cedar City and the Murdock Academy arranged for him to give presentations in their towns on his way to Los Angeles.



Brigham Young University Lee Library University Archives; UAP 2

Alma Richards in the high jump event at BYU. Courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

The 10 December 1909 issue of the Iron County Record announces Trueblood's visit to Cedar City to give a Shakespearean recital: "The presence of a man of such wide fame and the rendition of the wonderful play 'Julius Caesar' by such an eminent actor and authority is indeed a treat; and no man or woman, boy or girl can afford to miss it."

The following spring Murdock Academy won the state high school track and field championship with 32 points, 16 of which came from Alma Richards, who won first place medals in both the shot put and the high jump. He placed second in the broad jump as well as the pole vault.

The defending champions from Salt Lake High School placed second in the meet with 22 points. The Branch Normal School of Cedar City placed fourth in the statewide competition of 23 schools, led by Sherman Cooper with a record-setting leap of 22 feet 8 inches in the broad jump.

The following year, Alma Richards enrolled at Brigham Young High School. Although still in high school, because of his age he competed with the Brigham Young college team, where he dominated many of the field events.

Coach Eugene L. Roberts recognized the potential of Alma to compete at the national and international level, especially in the high jump. He secured money from the college to send Richards to the Olympic trials in Chicago, where he won the high jump event to earn a place on the Olympic team.

In the book "Alma Richards: Olympian", Larry R. Gerlach describes Alma's jumping style: "Richards, without benefit of early technical instruction, had intuitively developed a unique method in which he approached the bar

straight on like a broad jumper, leaped with his body erect, and cleared it almost vertically with little of the usual full-body horizontal layout, his legs crossed in a squatting, fetal-like position under him.”

The 1912 Olympic Games were held in Stockholm, Sweden. Alma Richards won the high jump event with an Olympic record of 1.93 meters (about 6 feet 4 inches), with second place going to Hans Liesche of Germany who cleared 1.91 meters, and George Horine of the United States finishing third at 1.89 meters.

A You-Tube video, “Olimpic Games in Stockholm, 1912” shows motion pictures taken during the competition. The video lasts about 2 ½ hours, with the high jump event featured at the 1:08:52 point in the video. The final three jumps shown are the medal winning efforts by Horine, Liesche and Richards with his unconventional style. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2370Gw5zY4&t=4190s>

Following the success of Richards in the 1912 Olympic Games, BYU Coach Roberts wrote for the Salt Lake Telegram: “[Alma] comes from a family of athletes. Morgan Adams, Utah’s greatest pole vaulter, is Mr. Richards’ first cousin. Mr. Adams was vaulting 11 feet 10 inches when the world’s record was but two or three inches higher . . . Utah lost an opportunity in not sending this boy [Adams] to the tryouts in 1904, as he would have made the olympic team.”

Following the Olympic Games, Alma continued his education and his track and field career at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He excelled, not only in the high jump, but also the broad jump, discus, and shot put.

In the National AAU meet in San Francisco in August 1915, Richards competed with 16 top athletes from across the United States in the decathlon, which consists of ten events held during two days. Richards placed first in the high jump and second in the shot put, broad jump, pole vault and discus to take first place overall.

Alma’s dream of competing in the decathlon in the 1916 Olympic Games did not take place, as the games were not held due to World War I.

Alma was drafted for military service and left for officer training in California in August 1917. During a furlough in 1918 he was married. The 3 April 1918 edition of the Parowan Times included this note: “Morgan Richards gives the information that his son Alma has taken unto himself a wife in California, and will be in Salt Lake City this week to introduce her to his parents.”

Richards was sent to Europe in October 1918, arriving in France one week after the armistice was signed. He stayed in France long enough to compete in games for the American Expeditionary Forces, where he won several medals.

After the war, Richards taught school and coached at Parowan for one year. He competed in an all-servicemen’s meet in Salt Lake City in October 1919 at the state fairgrounds. He won the high jump, pole vault, and grenade throwing events.

At the 1920 Olympic trials in Boston on July 9, Richards was among 19 competitors in the decathlon vying for 6 spots on the team that would go to Antwerp, Belgium. Although he won the high jump, shot put and discus events and was third in the broad jump, he did not do well in other events and withdrew from the final three events.

Richards attended the University of Southern California Law School, graduating in May 1924. While attending law school, he taught science and ROTC at Abraham Lincoln High School in East Los Angeles. After graduation and passing the bar, he continued teaching at Lincoln until 1926.

According to Gerlach: “The choice of education as a career consciously or subconsciously called to mind the pedagogic example of his father and the fortuitous encounter with Thomas Trueblood that changed his life. He now would follow their example by providing inspiration, encouragement, and support to youngsters at a pivotal time in their lives.”

In 1926 Richards transferred to Venice High School in the west Los Angeles area, where he taught math and science, remaining there until his retirement in 1953.



Alma Richards, 1912 Olympic champion. Wikipedia photo.

In the fall of 1953, during one of his frequent visits to the Los Angeles Athletic Club, Alma happened to meet Edith Mendyka, a Berlin native and star member of the German national women's handball team that competed in the 1936 Olympics.

Medyka was able to contact Hans Liesche, the silver medal winner in 1912. Richards and Liesche maintained friendly correspondence until Richards' death in 1963.

In his book about Richards, Gerlach notes: "In twenty-two years of competition, Richards amassed some 245 medals, trophies, and ribbons testifying to his place as the finest multi-event track and field athlete of his generation."

Gerlach quotes a fine tribute found in a letter from Harry Anderson, a former student who became assistant chief of the Los Angeles Fire Department. When he learned of Richards' hospitalization a few days before his death, Anderson wrote:

"You won't remember me but I was a student at Lincoln High School in one of your Physiology classes. I haven't forgotten the impression you made on me. . . . I am sure that most teachers feel that their efforts are not appreciated at the time but as I look back on the years I am sure that you helped me on to what little success that I have had and to the enjoyment of each day as we live it. Again many thanks for being an inspiration to me when I sorely needed one."

After memorial services held in Los Angeles and Parowan, Alma Richards was buried in the Parowan cemetery.

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