

A group of nine young men are standing in a rowing boat on a body of water. They are holding long wooden oars. The scene is set against a dramatic sunset sky with warm orange and yellow tones. The water in the foreground is dark and reflects the light from the sky. The men are dressed in athletic wear, including tank tops and shorts. One man is kneeling in the center of the row, while the others stand. The overall mood is one of camaraderie and shared purpose.

The
BOYS IN
THE
BOAT

An Epic True-Life Journey
to the Heart of Hitler's Berlin

DANIEL JAMES BROWN

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Dawn row on Lake Washington



PROLOGUE

In a sport like this—hard work, not much glory, but still popular in every century—well, there must be some beauty which ordinary men can't see, but extraordinary men do.

—George Yeoman Pocock

This book was born on a cold, drizzly, late spring day when I clambered over the split-rail cedar fence that surrounds my pasture and made my way through wet woods to the modest frame house where Joe Rantz lay dying.

I knew only two things about Joe when I knocked on his daughter Judy's door that day. I knew that in his midseventies he had single-handedly hauled a number of cedar logs down a mountain, then hand-split the rails and cut the posts and installed all 2,224 linear feet of the pasture fence I had just climbed over—a task so herculean I shake my head in wonderment whenever I think about it. And I knew that he had been one of nine young men from the state of Washington—farm boys, fishermen, and loggers—who shocked both the rowing world and Adolf Hitler by winning the gold medal in eight-oared rowing at the 1936 Olympics.

When Judy opened the door and ushered me into her cozy living room, Joe was stretched out in a recliner with his feet up, all six foot three of him. He was wearing a gray sweat suit and bright red, down-filled booties. He had a thin white beard. His skin was sallow, his eyes puffy—results of the congestive heart failure from which he was dying. An oxygen tank stood nearby. A fire was popping and hissing in the woodstove. The walls were covered with old family photos. A glass display case crammed with dolls and porcelain horses and rose-patterned china stood against the far wall. Rain flecked a window that looked out into the woods. Jazz tunes from the thirties and forties were playing quietly on the stereo.

Judy introduced me, and Joe offered me an extraordinarily long, thin hand. Judy had been reading one of my books aloud to Joe, and he wanted to meet

me and talk about it. As a young man, he had, by extraordinary coincidence, been a friend of Angus Hay Jr.—the son of a person central to the story of that book. So we talked about that for a while. Then the conversation began to turn to his own life.

His voice was reedy, fragile, and attenuated almost to the breaking point. From time to time he faded into silence. Slowly, though, with cautious prompting from his daughter, he began to spin out some of the threads of his life story. Recalling his childhood and his young adulthood during the Great Depression, he spoke haltingly but resolutely about a series of hardships he had endured and obstacles he had overcome, a tale that, as I sat taking notes, at first surprised and then astonished me.

But it wasn't until he began to talk about his rowing career at the University of Washington that he started, from time to time, to cry. He talked about learning the art of rowing, about shells and oars, about tactics and technique. He reminisced about long, cold hours on the water under steel-gray skies, about smashing victories and defeats narrowly averted, about traveling to Germany and marching under Hitler's eyes into the Olympic Stadium in Berlin, and about his crewmates. None of these recollections brought him to tears, though. It was when he tried to talk about "the boat" that his words began to falter and tears welled up in his bright eyes.

At first I thought he meant the *Husky Clipper*, the racing shell in which he had rowed his way to glory. Or did he mean his teammates, the improbable assemblage of young men who had pulled off one of rowing's greatest achievements? Finally, watching Joe struggle for composure over and over, I realized that "the boat" was something more than just the shell or its crew. To Joe, it encompassed but transcended both—it was something mysterious and almost beyond definition. It was a shared experience—a singular thing that had unfolded in a golden sliver of time long gone, when nine good-hearted young men strove together, pulled together as one, gave everything they had for one another, bound together forever by pride and respect and love. Joe was crying, at least in part, for the loss of that vanished moment but much more, I think, for the sheer beauty of it.

As I was preparing to leave that afternoon, Judy removed Joe's gold medal from the glass case against the wall and handed it to me. While I was admiring it, she told me that it had vanished years before. The family had searched Joe's house high and low but had finally given it up as lost. Only many years later, when they were remodeling the house, had they finally found it concealed in

some insulating material in the attic. A squirrel had apparently taken a liking to the glimmer of the gold and hidden the medal away in its nest as a personal treasure. As Judy was telling me this, it occurred to me that Joe's story, like the medal, had been squirreled away out of sight for too long.

I shook Joe's hand again and told him I would like to come back and talk to him some more, and that I'd like to write a book about his rowing days. Joe grasped my hand again and said he'd like that, but then his voice broke once more and he admonished me gently, "But not just about me. It has to be about the boat."

PART ONE

1899–1933



What Seasons They Have Been Through



The Washington shell house, 1930s



CHAPTER ONE

Having rowed myself since the tender age of twelve and having been around rowing ever since, I believe I can speak authoritatively on what we may call the unseen values of rowing—the social, moral, and spiritual values of this oldest of chronicled sports in the world. No didactic teaching will place these values in a young man’s soul. He has to get them by his own observation and lessons.

—George Yeoman Pocock

Monday, October 9, 1933, began as a gray day in Seattle. A gray day in a gray time.

Along the waterfront, seaplanes from the Gorst Air Transport company rose slowly from the surface of Puget Sound and droned westward, flying low under the cloud cover, beginning their short hops over to the naval shipyard at Bremerton. Ferries crawled away from Colman Dock on water as flat and dull as old pewter. Downtown, the Smith Tower pointed, like an upraised finger, toward somber skies. On the streets below the tower, men in fraying suit coats, worn-out shoes, and battered felt fedoras wheeled wooden carts toward the street corners where they would spend the day selling apples and oranges and packages of gum for a few pennies apiece. Around the corner, on the steep incline of Yesler Way, Seattle’s old, original Skid Road, more men stood in long lines, heads bent, regarding the wet sidewalks and talking softly among themselves as they waited for the soup kitchens to open. Trucks from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* rattled along cobblestone streets, dropping off bundles of newspapers. Newsboys in woolen caps lugged the bundles to busy intersections, to trolley stops, and to hotel entrances, where they held the papers aloft, hawking them for two cents a copy, shouting out the day’s headline: “15,000,000 to Get U.S. Relief.”

A few blocks south of Yesler, in a shantytown sprawling along the edge of Elliott Bay, children awoke in damp cardboard boxes that served as beds. Their parents crawled out of tin-and-tar-paper shacks and into the stench of



Seattle's Hooverville

sewage and rotting seaweed from the mudflats to the west. They broke apart wooden crates and stooped over smoky campfires, feeding the flames. They looked up at the uniform gray skies and, seeing in them tokens of much colder weather ahead, wondered how they would make it through another winter.

Northwest of downtown, in the old Scandinavian neighborhood of Ballard, tugboats belching plumes of black smoke nosed long rafts of logs into the locks that would raise them to the level of Lake Washington. But the gritty shipyards and boat works clustered around the locks were largely quiet, nearly abandoned in fact. In Salmon Bay, just to the east, dozens of fishing boats, unused for months, sat bobbing at moorage, the paint peeling from their weathered hulls. On Phinney Ridge, looming above Ballard, wood smoke curled up from the stovepipes and chimneys of hundreds of modest homes and dissolved into the mist overhead.

It was the fourth year of the Great Depression. One in four working Americans—ten million people—had no job and no prospects of finding

one, and only a quarter of them were receiving any kind of relief. Industrial production had fallen by half in those four years. At least one million, and perhaps as many as two million, were homeless, living on the streets or in shantytowns like Seattle's Hooverville. In many American towns, it was impossible to find a bank whose doors weren't permanently shuttered; behind those doors the savings of countless American families had disappeared forever. Nobody could say when, or if, the hard times would ever end.

And perhaps that was the worst of it. Whether you were a banker or a baker, a homemaker or homeless, it was with you night and day—a terrible, unrelenting uncertainty about the future, a feeling that the ground could drop out from under you for good at any moment. In March an oddly appropriate movie had come out and quickly become a smash hit: *King Kong*. Long lines formed in front of movie theaters around the country, people of all ages shelling out precious quarters and dimes to see the story of a huge, irrational beast that had invaded the civilized world, taken its inhabitants into its clutches, and left them dangling over the abyss.

There were glimmers of better times to come, but they were just glimmers. The stock market had rebounded earlier in the year, the Dow Jones Industrial Average climbing an all-time record of 15.34 percent in one day on March 15 to close at 62.10. But Americans had seen so much capital destroyed between 1929 and the end of 1932 that almost everyone believed, correctly as it would turn out, that it might take the better part of a generation—twenty-five years—before the Dow once again saw its previous high of 381 points. And, at any rate, the price of a share of General Electric didn't mean a thing to the vast majority of Americans, who owned no stock at all. What mattered to them was that the strongboxes and mason jars under their beds, in which they now kept what remained of their life savings, were often perilously close to empty.

A new president was in the White House, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a distant cousin of that most upbeat and energetic of presidents, Teddy Roosevelt. FDR had come into office brimming with optimism and trumpeting a raft of slogans and programs. But Herbert Hoover had come in spouting equal optimism, buoyantly predicting that a day would soon come when poverty would be washed out of American life forever. "Ours is a land rich in resources; stimulating in its glorious beauty; filled with millions of happy homes; blessed with comfort and opportunity," Hoover had said at his inaugural, before adding words that would soon prove particularly ironic: "In no nation are the fruits of accomplishment more secure."

At any rate, it was hard to know what to make of the new President Roosevelt. As he began putting programs into place over the summer, a rising chorus of hostile voices had begun to call him a radical, a socialist, even a Bolshevik. It was unnerving to hear: as bad as things were, few Americans wanted to go down the Russian path.

There was a new man in Germany too, brought into power in January by the National Socialist German Workers' Party, a group with a reputation for thuggish behavior. It was even harder to know what that meant. But Adolf Hitler was hell-bent on rearming his country despite the Treaty of Versailles. And while most Americans were distinctly uninterested in European affairs, the British were increasingly worked up about it all, and one had to wonder whether the horrors of the Great War were about to be replayed. It seemed unlikely, but the possibility hung there, a persistent and troubling cloud.

The day before, October 8, 1933, the *American Weekly*, a Sunday supplement in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and dozens of other American newspapers, had run a single-frame, half-page cartoon, one in a series titled *City Shadows*. Dark, drawn in charcoal, chiaroscuro in style, it depicted a man in a derby sitting dejectedly on a sidewalk by his candy stand with his wife, behind him, dressed in rags and his son, beside him, holding some newspapers. The caption read "Ah don't give up, Pop. Maybe ya didn't make a sale all week, but it ain't as if I didn't have my paper route." But it was the expression on the man's face that was most arresting. Haunted, haggard, somewhere beyond hopeless, it suggested starkly that he no longer believed in himself. For many of the millions of Americans who read the *American Weekly* every Sunday, it was an all too familiar expression—one they saw every morning when they glanced in the mirror.

But the overcast didn't last, nor did the gloom, in Seattle that day. By late morning, seams began to open in the cloud cover. The still waters of Lake Washington, stretched out at the city's back, slowly shifted from gray to green to blue. On the campus of the University of Washington, perched on a bluff overlooking the lake, slanting rays of sunlight began to warm the shoulders of students lounging on a wide quadrangle of grass in front of the university's massive new stone library, eating their lunches, poring over books, chatting idly. Sleek black crows strutted among the students, hoping for a morsel of bologna or cheese left unguarded. High above the library's stained-glass win-

dows and soaring neo-Gothic spires, screeching seagulls whirled in white loops against the slowly bluing sky.

For the most part, the young men and women sat in separate groups. The men wore pressed slacks and freshly shined oxfords and cardigan sweaters. As they ate, they talked earnestly about classes, about the big upcoming football game with the University of Oregon, and about the improbable ending of the World Series two days before, when little Mel Ott had come to the plate for the New York Giants with two out in the tenth inning. Ott had run the count out to two and two, and then smashed a long line drive into the center field seats to score the series-winning run over the Washington Senators. It was the kind of thing that showed you that a little guy could still make all the difference, and it reminded you how suddenly events could turn around in this world, for better or for worse. Some of the young men sucked lazily on briar pipes, and the sweet smell of Prince Albert tobacco smoke drifted among them. Others dangled cigarettes from their lips, and as they paged through the day's *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* they could take satisfaction in a half-page ad that trumpeted the latest proof of the health benefits of smoking: "21 of 23 Giants World's Champions Smoke Camels. It Takes Healthy Nerves to Win the World Series."

The young women, sitting in their own clusters on the lawn, wore short-heeled pumps and rayon hose, calf-length skirts, and loose-fitting blouses with ruffles and flounces on the sleeves and at the necklines. Their hair was sculpted into a wide variety of shapes and styles. Like the young men, the women talked about classes and sometimes about baseball too. Those who had had dates over the weekend talked about the new movies in town—Gary Cooper in *One Sunday Afternoon*, at the Paramount, and a Frank Capra film, *Lady for a Day*, at the Roxy. Like the boys, some of them smoked cigarettes.

By midafternoon the sun had broken through, unfurling a warm, translucent day of golden light. Two young men, taller than most, loped across the grassy quad in front of the library, in a hurry. One of them, a six-foot-three freshman named Roger Morris, had a loose, gangly build; a tousel of dark hair with a forelock that perpetually threatened to fall over his long face; and heavy black eyebrows that lent him, at first glance, a bit of a glowering look. The other young man, Joe Rantz, also a freshman, was nearly as tall, at six foot two and a half, but more tautly built, with broad shoulders and solid, powerful legs. He wore his blond hair in a crew cut. He had a strong jawline,

fine, regular features, gray eyes verging into blue, and he drew covert glances from many of the young women sitting on the grass.

The two young men were taking the same engineering class and had a common and audacious objective that radiant afternoon. They rounded a corner of the library, skirted the concrete circle of Frosh Pond, descended a long grassy slope, and then crossed Montlake Boulevard, dodging a steady stream of black coupes, sedans, and roadsters. The pair made their way eastward between the basketball pavilion and the horseshoe-shaped excavation that served as the campus football stadium. Then they turned south again, following a dirt road through open woods and into a marshy area fringing Lake Washington. As they walked they began to overtake other boys heading in the same direction.

They finally came to a point of land located just where the canal known as the Montlake Cut—simply the Cut, in local parlance—entered Union Bay on the west side of Lake Washington. Perched on the point was an odd-looking building. Its sides—clad in weather-beaten shingles and inset with a series of large windows—slanted obliquely inward, rising toward a gambrel roof. When the boys moved around to the front of the building, they found an enormous pair of sliding doors, the upper halves of which consisted almost entirely of windowpanes. A wide wooden ramp ran from the sliding doors down to a long dock floating parallel to the shore of the Cut.

It was an old airplane hangar built by the U.S. Navy in 1918 to house seaplanes for the Naval Aviation Training Corps during the Great War. The war had ended before the building could actually be used, so it had been turned over to the University of Washington in the fall of 1919. Ever since, it had served as the shell house for the school's rowing team. Now both the wide wooden ramp leading down to the water and a narrow ledge of land to the east of the building were crowded with boys milling about nervously, 175 of them, mostly tall and lean, though a dozen or so of them were notably short and slight. A handful of older boys were there too, leaning against the building in white jerseys emblazoned with large purple Ws, their arms crossed, sizing up the newcomers.

Joe Rantz and Roger Morris stepped into the building. Along each side of the cavernous room, long, sleek racing shells were stacked four high on wooden racks. With their burnished wooden hulls turned upward, they gleamed in white shafts of light that fell from the windows overhead, giving the place the feel of a cathedral. The air was dry and still. It smelled sweetly of

varnish and freshly sawn cedar. Collegiate banners, faded but still colorful, hung from the high rafters: California, Yale, Princeton, Navy, Cornell, Columbia, Harvard, Syracuse, MIT. In the corners of the room, dozens of yellow-spruce oars stood on end, each ten to twelve feet long and tipped with a white blade. At the back of the room, up in a loft, could be heard someone at work with a wood rasp.

Joe and Roger signed the freshman crew registration book, then returned to the bright light outside and sat on a bench, waiting for instructions. Joe glanced at Roger, who seemed relaxed and confident.

“Aren’t you nervous?” Joe whispered.

Roger glanced back at him. “I’m panicked. I just look like this to demoralize the competition.” Joe smiled briefly, too close to panic himself to hold the smile for long.

For Joe Rantz, perhaps more than for any of the other young men sitting by the Montlake Cut, something hung in the balance that afternoon, and he was all too aware of it. The girls on the library lawn who had glanced appreciatively his way had had to overlook what was painfully obvious to him: that his clothes were not like those of most of the other students—his trousers not neatly creased, his oxfords neither new nor freshly polished, his sweater neither crisp nor clean but rather an old and rumpled hand-me-down. Joe understood cold reality. He knew he might not belong here at all, and he certainly couldn’t stay long in this world of pressed trousers, of briar pipes and cardigan sweaters, of interesting ideas, sophisticated conversation, and intriguing opportunities, if things did not go well in the shell house. He would never be a chemical engineer, and he would not be able to marry his high school sweetheart, who had followed him to Seattle so they could begin to build a life together. To fail at this rowing business would mean, at best, returning to a small, bleak town on the Olympic Peninsula with nothing ahead of him but the prospect of living alone in a cold, empty, half-built house, surviving as best he could on odd jobs, foraging for food, and maybe, if he was very lucky, finding another highway construction job with the Civilian Conservation Corps. At worst it would mean joining a long line of broken men standing outside a soup kitchen like the one down on Yesler Way.

A spot on the freshman crew would not mean a rowing scholarship, for there was no such thing at Washington in 1933, but it would mean the guarantee of a part-time job somewhere on campus, and that—combined with the little Joe had been able to save during the long year of hard manual labor

he had endured since graduating from high school—just might get him through college. But he knew that within a few short weeks only a handful of the crowd of boys gathered around him would still be contenders for the freshman crew. In the end, there were only nine seats in the first freshman shell.

The rest of the afternoon was largely consumed by the collection of facts and figures. Joe Rantz and Roger Morris and all the other hopefuls were told to step onto scales, to stand next to measuring sticks, to fill out forms detailing their medical backgrounds. Assistant coaches and older students carrying clipboards stood by eyeing them and recording the information. Thirty of the freshmen, it turned out, were six feet or taller, twenty-five were six one or more, fourteen were six two or more, six were six three or more, one was six four, and two “reached six feet five into the atmosphere,” as one of the sports-writers present noted.

Directing the proceedings was a slim young man toting a large megaphone. Tom Bolles, the freshman coach, was a former Washington oarsman himself. With a bland, pleasant face, a bit lean in the jowls, and given to wearing wire-rimmed glasses, Bolles had been a history major, was working on a master's degree, and had a distinctly scholarly look about him—a look that had spurred some of Seattle's sportswriters to begin referring to him as “the professor.” And in many ways, the role that lay ahead of him that fall, as it did every fall, was that of an educator. When his colleagues in the basketball pavilion or on the football field first encountered their freshman prospects each fall, they could assume that the boys had played the sport in high school and knew at least the rudiments of their respective games. But almost none of the young men assembled outside the shell house that afternoon had ever rowed a stroke in his life, certainly not in a vessel as delicate and unforgiving as a racing shell, pulling oars twice as long as the young men were tall.

Most of them were city boys like the boys lounging up on the quad—the sons of lawyers and businessmen—dressed neatly in woolen slacks and cardigan sweaters. A few, like Joe, were farm boys or lumberjacks or fishermen, the products of foggy coastal villages, damp dairy farms, and smoky lumber towns all over the state. Growing up, they had wielded axes and fishing gaffs and pitchforks expertly, and they had built up strong arms and broad shoulders doing so. Their strength would be an asset, Bolles knew, but rowing—he understood as well as anyone—was at least as much art as brawn, and a keen

intelligence was just as important as brute strength. There were a thousand and one small things that had to be learned, mastered, and brought to bear in precisely the right way to propel a twenty-four-inch-wide cedar shell, carrying three-quarters of a ton of human flesh and bone, through the water with any semblance of speed and grace. Over the next few months, he would need to teach these boys, or those few among them who made the freshman team, every last one of those thousand and one small things. And some big ones as well: Would the farm boys be able to keep up with the intellectual side of the sport? Would the city boys have the toughness simply to survive? Most of them, Bolles knew, would not.

Another tall man stood watching quietly from the broad doorway of the shell house, dressed impeccably, as he always was, in a dark three-piece business suit, a crisp white shirt, a tie, and a fedora, spinning a Phi Beta Kappa key on a lanyard he held in one hand. Al Ulbrickson, head coach of the University of Washington rowing program, was a stickler for detail, and his style of dress sent a simple message: that he was the boss, and that he was all business. He was just thirty—young enough that he needed to draw a line of demarcation between himself and the boys he commanded. The suit and the Phi Beta Kappa key helped in that regard. It also helped that he was strikingly good-looking and built like the oarsman he had been, the former stroke oar of a Washington crew that had won national championships in 1924 and 1926. He was tall, muscular, broad shouldered, and distinctly Nordic in his features, with high cheekbones, a chiseled jawline, and cold slate-gray eyes. They were the kind of eyes that shut you up fast if you were a young man inclined to challenge something he had just said.

He had been born right here in the Montlake district of Seattle, not far from the shell house. And he had grown up just a few miles down Lake Washington on Mercer Island, long before it became an enclave for the wealthy. His family, in fact, had been of very modest means, straining to make ends meet. In order to attend Franklin High School, he had had to row a small boat two miles over to Seattle and back every day for four years. He had excelled at Franklin, but he never really felt challenged by his teachers. It wasn't until he arrived at the University of Washington and turned out for crew that he came into his own. Finally challenged in the classroom and on the water, he excelled in both areas, and when he graduated in 1926, Washington quickly hired him as the freshman crew coach, and then as head coach. Now he lived and breathed Washington rowing. The university, and rowing, had made him



Al Ulbrickson

who he was. Now they were almost a religion to him. His job was to win converts.

Ulbrickson was also the least talkative man on campus, perhaps in the state, legendary for his reticence and the inscrutability of his countenance. He was half Danish and half Welsh by ancestry, and New York sportswriters, both frustrated and somewhat charmed by how hard they had to work to get a decent quote out of him, had taken to calling him the “Dour Dane.” His oarsmen also found the name apt, but none of them was likely to call him it to his face. He commanded enormous respect among his boys, but he did so almost entirely without raising his voice, almost, in fact, without speaking to them. His few words were so carefully chosen and so effectively delivered that every one of them fell like a blade or a balm on the boy to whom they were delivered. He strictly forbade his boys from smoking, cursing, or drinking, though he was known occasionally to do all three himself when safely out of

sight or earshot of his crews. To the boys, he seemed at times almost devoid of emotion, yet year after year he somehow managed to stir the deepest and most affirmative emotions many of them had ever known.

As Ulbrickson stood watching the new crop of freshmen that afternoon, Royal Brougham, the sports editor at the *Post-Intelligencer*, edged close to him. Brougham was a slight man, whom many years later ABC's Keith Jackson would call "a jolly little elf." But if he was jolly, he was also crafty. He was well acquainted with Ulbrickson's perpetual solemnity, and he had his own names for the coach: sometimes he was the "Deadpan Kid," sometimes the "Man with the Stone Face." Now he peered up at Ulbrickson's granitic face and began to pepper him with questions—probing, pestering questions—determined to find out what the Husky coach thought about the new crop of freshmen, all this "tall timber," as Brougham put it. Ulbrickson remained quiet a long while, gazing at the boys on the ramp and squinting at the sunlight on the Cut. The temperature had climbed into the high seventies, unusually warm for an October afternoon in Seattle, and some of the new boys had taken off their shirts to soak up the sun. A few of them sauntered along the dock, bending over to hoist long, yellow-spruce oars, getting the feel of them, contemplating their considerable heft. In the golden afternoon light, the boys moved gracefully—lithe and fit, ready to take something on.

When Ulbrickson finally turned to Brougham and replied, it was with a single, none-too-helpful word: "Pleasing."

Royal Brougham had come to know Al Ulbrickson pretty well, and he did a quick double take. There was something about the way Ulbrickson delivered the response, a note in his voice or a glint in his eye or a twitch at the corner of his mouth, that arrested Brougham's attention. The following day he offered his readers this translation of Ulbrickson's reply: "which in less guarded terms means . . . 'very good indeed.'"

Royal Brougham's interest in what Al Ulbrickson was thinking was far from casual—much more than just a desire to fill out his daily column with yet another terse Ulbrickson quote. Brougham was on a quest—one of many he would launch in his sixty-eight-year career with the *Post-Intelligencer*.

Since he had started at the paper in 1910, Brougham had become something of a local legend, renowned for his uncanny ability to extract information from storied figures like Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey. His opinion, his connections, and his tenacity were so well regarded that he was quickly

becoming something of a ringmaster of civic life in Seattle, sought out by grandees of all stripes—politicians, star athletes, university presidents, fight promoters, coaches, even bookies. But above all, Brougham was a masterful promoter. “Part poet, part P. T. Barnum,” Emmett Watson, another legendary Seattle scribe, called him. What he wanted to promote above all else was Seattle. He wanted to transform the world’s view of his gray, sleepy, logging-and-fishing town into something far grander and more sophisticated.

When Brougham first arrived at the *Post-Intelligencer*, Washington’s crew program had consisted of little more than a handful of rough-and-tumble country boys lurching around Lake Washington in leaky, tublike shells, coached by what appeared to many to be a red-haired lunatic named Hiram Conibear. In the intervening years, the program had advanced a great deal, but it still got little respect beyond the West Coast. Brougham figured the time was right to change all that. After all, for grandness and sophistication nothing could match a world-class rowing team. The sport reeked of classiness. And crew was a good way for a school, or a city, to get noticed.

In the 1920s and 1930s, collegiate crew was wildly popular, often ranking right up there with baseball and collegiate football in the amount of press it received and the crowds it drew. Outstanding oarsmen were lionized in the national press, even in the era of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Joe DiMaggio. Top sportswriters like Grantland Rice and the *New York Times*’s Robert Kelley covered all the major regattas. Millions of fans diligently followed their crews’ progress throughout the training and racing seasons, particularly in the East, where something as minor as a coxswain’s sore throat could make headlines. Eastern private schools, modeling themselves after elite British institutions like Eton, taught rowing as a gentleman’s sport and fed their young-gentlemen oarsmen into the nation’s most prestigious universities, places like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. The most devoted fans even collected trading cards of their favorite crews.

By the 1920s western fans had begun to take a similar interest in their own crews—spurred on by a heated rivalry, which dated back to 1903, between two large public universities, the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Washington. After years of struggling for funding and recognition even on their own campuses, the crew programs at both schools had finally begun to have occasional successes competing with their eastern counterparts. Recently crews from California had even won Olympic gold twice. Both schools could now count on tens of thousands of students, alumni, and excited

citizens to turn out for their annual dual regattas in April, when they battled for preeminence in West Coast rowing. But western coaches were paid a fraction of what eastern coaches made, and western crews still rowed mostly against one another. Neither school had a penny for recruitment, nor virtually anything in the way of well-heeled patrons. Everyone knew that the center of gravity in American collegiate rowing still lay somewhere between Cambridge, New Haven, Princeton, Ithaca, and Annapolis. Royal Brougham figured if it could somehow be shifted west, it might land squarely in Seattle and bring the city a lot of much-needed respect. He also knew that, given the way things were going, it might very well land in California instead.

As Al Ulbrickson studied his new freshmen at the shell house in Seattle that afternoon, five thousand miles to the east, a thirty-nine-year-old architect named Werner March worked late into the night, hunched over a drafting table in an office somewhere in Berlin.

A few days before, on October 5, he and Adolf Hitler had stepped out of a black, armored Mercedes-Benz in the countryside west of Berlin. They were accompanied by Dr. Theodor Lewald, president of the German Olympic Organizing Committee, and Wilhelm Frick, Reich minister of the interior. The spot where they emerged from the car was slightly elevated, about a hundred feet higher than the heart of the city. To the west lay the ancient Grunewald forest, where sixteenth-century German princes hunted stags and wild boars and where Berliners of all classes nowadays enjoyed hiking, picnicking, and foraging for mushrooms. To the east, the ancient church spires and peaked rooflines of central Berlin rose above a sea of trees turned red and gold in the crisp autumn air.

They had come to inspect the old Deutsches Stadion, built in 1916 for the ill-fated Olympic Games of that year. Werner March's father, Otto, had designed and overseen construction of the structure—the largest stadium in the world at the time—but the games had been canceled because of the Great War, the war that had so humiliated Germany. Now, under the younger March's direction, the stadium was undergoing renovations in preparation for the 1936 Olympics, which Germany was to host.

Hitler had not originally wanted to host the games at all. Almost everything about the idea, in fact, had offended him. The year before, he had damned the games as the invention of "Jews and Freemasons." The very heart of the Olympic ideal—that athletes of all nations and all races should commingle and

compete on equal terms—was antithetical to his National Socialist Party's core belief: that the Aryan people were manifestly superior to all others. And he was filled with revulsion by the notion that Jews, Negroes, and other vagabond races from around the world would come traipsing through Germany. But in the eight months since he had come to power in January, Hitler had begun to change his mind.

The man who, more than any other, was responsible for this transformation was Dr. Joseph Goebbels, minister of public enlightenment and propaganda. Goebbels—a particularly vicious anti-Semite who had engineered much of Hitler's political rise—was now systematically dismantling what remained of a free press in Germany. Just over five feet tall, with a deformed and shortened right leg, a club foot, and an oddly shaped head that seemed too large for his small body, Goebbels did not look the part of a powerbroker, but he in fact was among the most important and influential members of Hitler's inner circle. He was intelligent, articulate, and remarkably cunning. Many who knew him in social settings—among them, the American ambassador to Germany, William Dodd; his wife, Mattie; and his daughter, Martha—found him “delightful,” “infectious,” “one of the few men in Germany with a sense of humor.” He had a surprisingly compelling speaking voice for so small a man, an instrument that he wielded like a rapier when he addressed large crowds in person or spoke on the radio.

That very week he had assembled three hundred Berlin journalists to instruct them on the provisions of the Nazis' new National Press Law. First and foremost, he had announced, to practice journalism in Germany one would henceforth have to do so as a licensed member of his press organization, the Reichsverband der Deutschen Presse, and no one would be licensed who had, or was married to someone who had, so much as one Jewish grandparent. As for editorial content, no one was to publish anything that was not consecrated by the party. Specifically, nothing was to be published that was “calculated to weaken the power of the Reich at home or abroad, the community will of the German people, its military spirit, or its culture and economy.” None of this should be any problem, Goebbels had calmly assured his audience of dumbstruck journalists that day: “I don't see why you should have the slightest difficulty in adjusting the trend of what you write to the interests of the State. It is possible that the Government may sometimes be mistaken—as to individual measures—but it is absurd to suggest that anything superior to the Government might take its place. What is the use, therefore, of editorial

skepticism? It can only make people uneasy.” But just to make sure, the same week, the new Nazi government had enacted a separate measure imposing the death penalty on those who published “treasonable articles.”

Goebbels had his sights set on far more than controlling the German press, however. Always attentive to new and better opportunities to shape the larger message emanating from Berlin, he had seen at once that hosting the Olympics would offer the Nazis a singular opportunity to portray Germany to the world as a civilized and modern state, a friendly but powerful nation that the larger world would do well to recognize and respect. And Hitler, as he listened to Goebbels, and knowing full well what he had planned for Germany in the days, months, and years ahead, had slowly begun to recognize the value in presenting a more attractive face to the world than his brown-shirted storm troopers and his black-shirted security forces had displayed thus far. At the very least, an Olympic interlude would help buy him time—time to convince the world of his peaceful intentions, even as he began to rebuild Germany’s military and industrial power for the titanic struggle to come.

Hitler had stood hatless at the Olympic site that afternoon, listening quietly as Werner March explained that the horse-racing track adjoining the old stadium prevented a major expansion. Glancing for a moment at the race-track, Hitler made an announcement that astonished March. The racetrack must “disappear.” A vastly larger stadium was to be built, one that would hold at least a hundred thousand people. And more than that, there must be a massive surrounding sports complex to provide venues for a wide variety of competitions, a single, unified *Reichssportfeld*. “It will be the task of the nation,” Hitler said. It was to be a testament to German ingenuity, to its cultural superiority, and to its growing power. When the world assembled here, on this elevated ground overlooking Berlin, in 1936, it would behold the future not just of Germany but of Western civilization.

Five days later, Werner March, stooping over his drafting table, had only until morning before he must lay preliminary plans in front of Hitler.

In Seattle, at about the same hour, Tom Bolles and his assistant coaches released the freshmen. The days were already beginning to grow short, and at 5:30 p.m. the sun sank behind Montlake Bridge just to the west of the shell house. The boys began to straggle back up the hill toward the main campus in small groups, shaking their heads, talking softly among themselves about their chances of making the team.

Al Ulbrickson stood on the floating dock, listening to the lake water lap at the shore, watching them go. Behind his implacable gaze, wheels were turning at an even faster rate than usual. To some extent he remained haunted by the more or less disastrous season of 1932. More than one hundred thousand people had turned out to view the annual contest between California and Washington, crowding along the shores of the lake. A strong wind was blowing by the time the main event, the varsity race, was set to start, and the lake was frothy with whitecaps. Almost as soon as the race got under way, the Washington boat had begun to ship water. By the halfway mark, the oarsmen in their sliding seats were sloshing back and forth in several inches of it. When the Washington boat neared the finish line, it was eighteen lengths behind Cal, and the only real question was whether it would sink before crossing. It stayed more or less afloat, but the outcome was the worst defeat in Washington's history.

In June of that year, Ulbrickson's varsity had attempted to redeem itself at the annual Intercollegiate Rowing Association regatta in Poughkeepsie, New York, but Cal had trounced them again, by five lengths this time. Later in the summer, the Washington varsity had ventured to the Olympic trials at Lake Quinsigamond in Massachusetts, to try once more. This time they were eliminated in a preliminary contest. And to top things off, in August, in Los Angeles, Ulbrickson had watched his counterpart at Cal, Ky Ebright, win the sport's most coveted award, an Olympic gold medal.

Ulbrickson's boys had regrouped quickly. In April of 1933, a fresh and reconstituted varsity crew promptly exacted its revenge, sweeping the Olympic champion Cal Bears from their home waters on the Oakland Estuary. A week later, they did it again, defeating Cal and UCLA on a two-thousand-meter course in Long Beach, California. The 1933 Poughkeepsie Regatta had been canceled due to the Depression, but Washington returned to Long Beach that summer to race against the best crews the East had to offer: Yale, Cornell, and Harvard. Washington edged second-place Yale by eight feet to emerge as de facto national champion. That varsity crew, Ulbrickson told *Esquire* magazine, was by far the best he had ever put together. It had what newspapermen called "plenty of swift." Given that recent history, and the promising look of some of the freshmen walking away from the shell house that evening, Ulbrickson had plenty of reasons to be optimistic about the upcoming season.

But there remained one particularly galling fact of life. No Washington coach had ever even come close to going to the Olympics. With the bad blood

that had lately arisen between the Washington and California crew programs, Cal's two gold medals had been bitter pills to swallow. Ulbrickson was already looking forward to 1936. He wanted to bring gold home to Seattle more than he could say—certainly more than he would say.

To pull it off, Ulbrickson knew, he was going to have to clear a series of imposing hurdles. Despite his setbacks the previous year, Cal's head coach Ky Ebright remained an extraordinarily wily opponent, widely regarded as the intellectual master of the sport. He possessed an uncanny knack for winning the big races, the ones that really counted. Ulbrickson needed to find a crew that could beat Ebright's best and keep them beat in an Olympic year. Then he was going to have to find a way to again beat the elite eastern schools—particularly Cornell, Syracuse, Pennsylvania, and Columbia—at the Intercollegiate Rowing Association regatta in Poughkeepsie in 1936. Then he might well have to face Yale, Harvard, or Princeton—schools that did not even deign to row at Poughkeepsie—at the Olympic trials. Yale, after all, had won gold in 1924. The eastern private rowing clubs, particularly the Pennsylvania Athletic Club and the New York Athletic Club, would also likely be in the mix at the 1936 trials. Finally, if he made it to Berlin, he would have to beat the best oarsmen in the world—probably British boys from Oxford and Cambridge, though the Germans were said to be building extraordinarily powerful and disciplined crews under the new Nazi system, and the Italians had very nearly taken the gold in 1932.

All that, Ulbrickson knew, had to start here on this dock, with the boys who were now wandering off into the waning light. Somewhere among them—those green and untested boys—lay much of the stock from which he would have to select a crew capable of going all the way. The trick would be to find which few of them had the potential for raw power, the nearly superhuman stamina, the indomitable willpower, and the intellectual capacity necessary to master the details of technique. And which of them, coupled improbably with all those other qualities, had the most important one: the ability to disregard his own ambitions, to throw his ego over the gunwales, to leave it swirling in the wake of his shell, and to pull, not just for himself, not just for glory, but for the other boys in the boat.



Harry, Fred, Nellie, and Joe Rantz, circa 1917



CHAPTER TWO

These giants of the forest are something to behold. Some have been growing for a thousand years, and each tree contains its own story of the centuries' long struggle for survival. Looking at the annular rings of the wood, you can tell what seasons they have been through. In some drought years they almost perished, as growth is barely perceptible. In others, the growth was far greater.

—George Yeoman Pocock

The path Joe Rantz followed across the quad and down to the shell house that afternoon in 1933 was only the last few hundred yards of a much longer, harder, and at times darker path he had traveled for much of his young life.

His beginnings had been auspicious enough. He was the second son of Harry Rantz and Nellie Maxwell. Harry was a big man, well over six feet tall, large in the hands and feet, heavy in the bones. His face was open and ordinary, its features unremarkable but pleasant and regular. Women found him attractive. He looked you straight in the eye with a simple, earnest expression. But the placidity of his face belied an unusually active mind. He was an inveterate tinkerer and inventor, a lover of gadgetry and mechanical devices, a designer of machines and contraptions of all sorts, a dreamer of big dreams. He thrived on solving complex problems, prided himself on coming up with novel solutions, the kinds of things other people would never think of in a million years.

Harry's was an age that spawned bold dreams and audacious dreamers. In 1903 a pair of tinkerers not unlike Harry, Wilbur and Orville Wright, climbed aboard a device of their own invention near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, and flew ten feet above the sand for twelve full seconds. In the same year, a Californian named George Adams Wyman rode into New York City aboard a motorcycle that had carried him all the way from San Francisco. He was the first person to cross the continent on a motorized vehicle, and he had done it in

only fifty days. Twenty days later, Horatio Nelson Jackson and his bulldog, Bud, arrived from San Francisco in their battered and muddy Winton, becoming the first to accomplish the feat in an automobile. In Milwaukee twenty-one-year-old Bill Harley and twenty-year-old Arthur Davidson attached an engine of their own design to a modified bicycle, hung a sign on the front of their workshop, and went into business selling production motorcycles. And on July 23 of that same year, Henry Ford sold Dr. Ernst Pfenning a shiny red Model A, the first of 1,750 that he would sell in the next year and a half.

In an age of such technological triumphs, it seemed clear to Harry that a man with enough ingenuity and gumption could accomplish almost anything, and he did not intend to be left out of the new gold rush. Before the end of the year, he had designed and built from scratch his own version of an automobile and, to the astonishment of his neighbors, proudly maneuvered it down the street, using a tiller rather than a wheel for steering.

He had gotten married over the telephone in 1899, just for the novelty and wonderment of exchanging vows in two different cities by means of such an exciting new invention. Nellie Maxwell was a piano teacher, the daughter of a no-nonsense Disciples of Christ minister. The couple's first son, Fred, was born later in 1899. In 1906, looking for a place where Harry could make his mark on the world, the young family had left Williamsport, Pennsylvania, headed west, and settled down in Spokane, Washington.

In many ways Spokane was not then far removed from the rough-and-tumble lumber town it had been in the nineteenth century. Located where the cold, clear Spokane River tumbled in a white froth over a series of low falls, the town was surrounded by ponderosa pine forest and open range country. The summers were crackling hot, the air dry and perfumed with the vanilla scent of ponderosa bark. In the autumn towering brown dust storms sometimes blew in from the rolling wheat country to the west. The winters were bitter cold, the springs stingy and slow in coming. And on Saturday nights all year round, cowboys and lumberjacks crowded the downtown bars and honky-tonks, swilled whiskey, and tumbled, brawling, out into the city's streets.

But since the Northern Pacific Railway had arrived, late in the nineteenth century, bringing tens of thousands of Americans to the Northwest for the first time, Spokane's population had quickly soared past a hundred thousand, and a newer, more genteel community had begun to sprout alongside the old

lumber town. A thriving commercial center had taken root on the south side of the river, replete with stately brick hotels, sturdy limestone banks, and a wide variety of fine emporiums and reputable mercantile establishments. On the north side of the river, tidy neighborhoods of small frame houses now perched on neat squares of lawn. Harry and Nellie and Fred Rantz moved into one of those houses, at 1023 East Nora Avenue, and Joe was born there in March of 1914.

Harry immediately opened an automobile manufacturing and repair shop. He could fix pretty much any sort of car that sputtered or was dragged by a mule up to his garage door. He specialized, though, in making new ones, sometimes assembling the popular one-cylinder McIntyre Imp cycle-cars, sometimes fabricating new vehicles entirely of his own contrivance. Soon he and his partner, Charles Halstead, also secured the local sales agency for much more substantial cars—brand-new Franklins—and with the town booming they quickly had as much business as they could handle, both in the repair shop and in the sales office.

Harry arose at four thirty each morning to go to the shop, and often he didn't return home until well after seven in the evening. Nellie taught piano to neighborhood children and tended to Joe on weekdays. She doted on her sons, watched over them carefully, and made it her business to keep them away from sin and foolishness. Fred went to school and helped out at the shop on Saturdays. On Sunday mornings the whole family attended Central Christian Church, where Nellie was the principal pianist and Harry sang in the choir. On Sunday afternoons they took their ease, sometimes walking downtown for ice cream, or driving out to Medical Lake, west of town, for a picnic, or strolling through the cool and shady refuge of Natatorium Park, among cottonwood trees down by the river. There they could take in entertainment as lazy and familiar as a semiprofessional baseball game, as carefree as a ride on the dazzling new Loeff Carousel, or as stirring as a John Philip Sousa concert at the bandstand. All in all it was a most satisfactory life—a slice, at least, of the dream Harry had come west to live.

But that wasn't at all the way Joe remembered his early childhood. Instead he had a kaleidoscope of broken images, starting in the spring of 1918, when he was just about to turn four, with a memory of his mother standing by his side, in an overgrown field, coughing violently into a handkerchief, and the handkerchief turning bright red with blood. He remembered a doctor with a black

leather bag, and the lingering smell of camphor in the house. He remembered sitting on a hard church pew swinging his legs while his mother lay in a box at the front of the church and would not get up. He remembered lying on a bed with his big brother, Fred, perched on the edge, in the upstairs room on Nora Avenue, as the spring winds rattled the windows and Fred spoke softly, talking about dying and about angels and about college and why he couldn't go east to Pennsylvania with Joe. He remembered sitting quietly alone on a train for long days and nights, with blue mountains and green muddy fields and rusty rail yards and dark cities full of smokestacks all flashing past the window by his seat. He remembered a rotund black man, with a bald head and a crisp blue uniform, watching over him on the train, bringing him sandwiches, and tucking him into his berth at night. He remembered meeting the woman who said she was his aunt Alma. And then, almost immediately, a rash on his face and chest, a sore throat, a high fever, and another doctor with another black leather bag. Then, for days stretching into weeks, nothing but lying in a bed in an unfamiliar attic room with the shades always pulled down—no light, no movement, no sound except occasionally the lonely moaning of a train in the distance. No Ma, no Pa, no Fred. Only the sound of a train now and then, and a strange room spinning round him. Plus the beginnings of something else—a new heaviness, a dull sense of apprehension, a burden of doubt and fear pressing down on his small shoulders and his perpetually congested chest.

As he lay ill with scarlet fever in the attic of a woman he did not really know, the last remnants of his former world were dissolving in Spokane. His mother lay in an untended grave, a victim of throat cancer. Fred had gone off to finish college. His father, Harry, his dreams shattered, had fled for the wilds of Canada, unable to cope with what he had seen in his wife's last moments. He could only say that there had been more blood than he had imagined a body could hold and more than he would ever be able to wash from his memory.

A little more than a year later, in the summer of 1919, five-year-old Joe found himself on a train for the second time in his life. He was heading back west this time, summoned by Fred. Since Joe had been sent to Pennsylvania, Fred had graduated from college and, though only twenty-one, secured a job as superintendent of schools in Nezperce, Idaho. Fred had also acquired a wife, Thelma LaFollette, one of a pair of twin sisters from a prosperous eastern

Washington wheat-farming family. Now he hoped to provide his little brother with something like the safe and secure home they had both known before their mother had died and their grief-stricken father had fled north. When a porter helped Joe off the train in Nezperce and set him down on the platform, though, he could barely remember Fred, and he knew not what to make of Thelma. He thought, in fact, that she was his mother and ran to her and threw his arms around her legs.

That fall Harry Rantz abruptly returned from Canada, bought a lot in Spokane, and began to construct a new house, trying to piece his life back together. Like his older son, he needed a wife to make the new house a home, and like his son he found just what he was looking for in the other LaFollette twin. Thelma's sister, Thula, at twenty-two, was a lovely, slender, elfin-faced girl with a whimsical pile of black curls and a fetching smile. Harry was seventeen years her senior, but that was not about to stop him, or her. The basis of Harry's attraction was obvious. The basis of Thula's was less so, and somewhat mysterious to her family.

The elder Rantz must have seemed a romantic figure to her. She had lived thus far in an isolated farmhouse surrounded by vast fields of wheat, with little to entertain her beyond the sound of the wind rustling the bone-dry stalks each autumn. Harry was tall and good-looking, he had a glint in his eye, he was relatively worldly, he was full of restless energy, he was abundantly creative in a mechanical sense, and most of all he seemed to be a kind of visionary. Just by talking about them he could make you see things off in the future, things nobody else had even thought of.

Matters proceeded apace. Harry completed the house in Spokane. He and Thula slipped across the state line and married on the shores of Lake Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in April 1921, to the great displeasure of Thula's parents. In a stroke Thula became her twin sister's mother-in-law.

For Joe, all this marrying meant another new home and another adjustment. He left Nezperce and moved in with a father he hardly knew, and a young stepmother he knew not at all.

For a time, it seemed as if something like normalcy was returning to his life. The house his father had built was spacious and well lit and smelled sweetly of fresh-sawn wood. Out back there was a swing with a seat wide enough for him and his father and Thula to ride three at a time on warm summer nights. He could walk to school, cutting through a field where he would sometimes filch a ripe melon for an after-school snack. On some

vacant land nearby, he could while away long summer days by digging elaborate underground tunnels—cool, dark, subterranean retreats from Spokane’s sometimes searing dry heat. And as the old house had been when his mother was alive, the new house was always filled with music. Harry had kept Nellie’s most precious possession, her parlor grand piano, and he delighted in sitting at it with Joe, belting out popular tunes, as Joe gleefully sang along: “Ain’t We Got Fun” or “Yaaka Hula Hickey Dula” or “Mighty Lak’ a Rose” or Harry’s favorite, “Yes! We Have No Bananas.”

Thula considered the music that Harry and Joe enjoyed coarse, she was not particularly happy to have Nellie’s piano in her house, and she disdained to join in. She was an accomplished violinist, far out of the ordinary in fact, her talent so highly valued in her home that growing up she had never had to do the dishes for fear that her fingers would be damaged by soap and water. She and her parents all harbored the conviction that someday she would play in a major orchestra, in New York or Los Angeles perhaps, or even in Berlin or Vienna. Now in the afternoons, when Joe was at school and Harry was at work, she practiced for hours on end—lovely classical pieces that rose and fell and floated out through the screened windows and drifted across the dusty, dry city of Spokane.

In January 1922, Harry and Thula had their first child together, Harry Junior, and in April 1923, they had a second son, Mike. By the time Mike was born, though, family life had begun to fray in the Rantz household. The age of the big dreamer was passing into history before Harry’s eyes. Henry Ford had figured out how to manufacture his automobiles on a moving assembly line, and soon others were following suit. Mass production, cheap labor, and big capital were the watchwords of the day now. Harry found himself on the cheap-labor side of the equation. For the past year, he had been living and working weekdays at a gold mine in Idaho, then traveling 140 miles on twisting mountain roads home to Spokane each Friday in his long, black four-door Franklin touring convertible, returning to Idaho again each Sunday afternoon. Harry was glad to have the work. It meant a steady income, and it made use of his mechanical skills. For Thula, though, the change meant long, dismal weeks alone in the house, with nobody to help out, nobody to talk to at night, nobody to sit down to dinner with except for three clamoring boys—an infant, a toddler, and a strangely guarded and watchful young stepson.

Then, not long after Mike was born, during one of Harry’s weekend visits, in the middle of a dark, moonless night, Joe suddenly awoke to the smell of

smoke and the sound of flames crackling somewhere in the house. He snatched up the baby and grabbed Harry Junior by the arm, yanking him out of bed and stumbling out of the house with his little half brothers. A few moments later, his father and Thula also emerged from the house in singed night-shirts, bewildered, calling out for their children. When Harry saw that his family was intact, he dashed back into the smoke and flames. Several long minutes passed before he reappeared, silhouetted against the fire at the garage entrance to the house. He was pushing Nellie's piano—the only thing of hers he had left from their marriage. His sweat-slick face was a mask of anguish, his every muscle straining as he leaned into the big piano, moving it by brute strength inch by inch through the wide doorway. When the piano was finally out of harm's way, Harry Rantz and his family gathered around it and watched, awestruck, as their house burned to the ground.

Standing in the glare of the flickering light, as the last remnants of the roof tumbled into the fire, Thula Rantz must have wondered why in God's name Harry had chosen an old piano as the one thing he would risk his life to save. Joe, now nine, standing by her side, felt again what he had first felt in his aunt's attic in Pennsylvania five years before—the same coldness, fear, and insecurity. Home, it was beginning to seem, was something you couldn't necessarily count on.

With no place else to go, Harry Rantz packed his family into his Franklin touring car and headed northeast, to the mining camp where he had been working as a master mechanic for the past year. Founded in 1910 by a character named John M. Schnatterly, the mine was located in the far northern panhandle of Idaho, squarely on the Idaho-Montana border, where the Kootenai River flowed south out of British Columbia. Originally the business had been named the Idaho Gold and Radium Mining Company, after Schnatterly claimed to have found a vein of radium worth millions. When none materialized, the government ordered Schnatterly to stop calling it a radium mine, so he blithely renamed the concern the Idaho Gold and Ruby Mining Company, the rubies apparently being small garnets that were occasionally found among the mine's tailings. By the early twenties, the mine still had not produced much, if anything, in the way of gold, or rubies, or even garnets for that matter. That, however, did not keep Schnatterly from importing a steady stream of well-heeled eastern investors, feting them on his luxury yacht as he transported them up the Kootenai to his mining camp and ultimately bilking

them out of millions of investment dollars. Along the way he alienated more than a few people, managed to get into three gunfights, and collected three gunshot wounds for his efforts before finally dying a fiery death when an explosion rocked his yacht. Nobody could say for sure whether it was an accident or revenge, but it had the smell of the latter.

Virtually all of the company's three dozen employees and their families lived in Schnatterly's mining camp, Boulder City. Its various ramshackle buildings—thirty-five small, identical, rough-hewn cabins with attached out-houses, a blacksmith shop, a machine shop, a bunkhouse for single men, a church, a water-powered sawmill, and a modest homemade hydroelectric plant—clung to the mountainside along Boulder Creek, linked together by a network of wooden sidewalks. A one-room schoolhouse sided with cedar shingles stood among pines on a flat piece of land above the camp, but there were few children, and the school was sparsely and irregularly attended. A rutted dirt wagon road plunged from the schoolhouse down the mountainside through a long series of tortuous switchbacks before straightening out and crossing a bridge over the Kootenai to the Montana side of the river, where stood the company store and a cook shack.

It was a dismal settlement, but to Harry it was a tinkerer's paradise and the perfect place to try to forget Spokane. With his prodigious mechanical aptitude, he happily set about repairing and maintaining the water-driven sawmill, an electrically driven rock-crushing plant, a forty-five-ton Marion steam shovel, and the mine's many assorted vehicles and odd pieces of machinery.

For nine-year-old Joe, Boulder City offered an astounding cornucopia of delights. When his father operated the huge steam shovel, Joe perched happily on the rear end of the machine and took merry-go-round rides as Harry spun the steam-belching behemoth around and around. When Joe tired of this, Harry spent a long evening in the company shop constructing a go-cart. The next afternoon Joe laboriously dragged it all the way up the wagon road, to the top of the mountain, pointed the contraption downhill, climbed in, and released the brake. He raced down the road at breakneck speed, careening around the hairpin turns, whooping at the top of his lungs all the way to the river and across the bridge. Then he climbed out and began the long trek back to the top of the mountain and did it again and again until it was finally too dark to see the road. Being in motion, outdoors, with wind in his face made him feel alive—it brushed away the anxiety that since his mother's death had seemed to be nibbling continuously at the corners of his mind.



Joe with Harry, Thula, Mike, and Harry Jr. at the Gold and Ruby mine

When winter closed in and the mountainside was deep in powdery snow, his father got out the welding equipment and built Joe a sled on which he could sluice down the wagon road at even more terrifying speeds. And eventually Joe discovered that when no one was watching he could take Harry Junior up the mountain, help him into an ore car at the top of a rickety trestle that ran alongside Boulder Creek, give the car a shove, hop in himself, and again rattle down the mountain at terrifying speeds with his little half brother in front of him, shrieking in delight.

When he wasn't hurtling down the mountain, helping out at the mill, or attending the one-room school above the camp, Joe could explore the woods or climb among the 6,400-foot-tall mountains in the Kaniksu National Forest just to the west. He could hunt for deer antlers and other treasures in the woods, swim in the Kootenai, or tend the vegetable garden he nurtured on a small plot of ground inside the picket fence surrounding his family's cabin.

For Thula, however, Boulder City was about as forlorn a place as could be found on earth. It was unbearably hot and dusty in the summer, wet and muddy in spring and fall, and filthy pretty much all year round. Winter brought the worst of it. Come December, bitterly cold air flowed down the

Kootenai Valley from British Columbia, made its way through every crack and crevice in the walls of her flimsy cabin, and sliced through whatever layers of clothing or bedding she tried to take refuge in. She was still saddled with a screaming infant, a bored and complaining toddler, and a stepson whom, as he grew older and more difficult to control, she was starting to think of as an unwanted reminder of her husband's previous and all too precious marriage. It did not help that to pass the time Joe plucked incessantly at a ukulele, singing and whistling the campy tunes that he and his father enjoyed so much. Nor did it help that when Harry came home from work he often tracked grease and sawdust into the cabin. That came abruptly to an end one chilly mountain evening when Harry came trudging up the hill in his greasy overalls at the end of the day. When he entered the cabin, Thula took one look at him, shrieked, and pushed him back out through the front door. "Take those filthy things off, go down to the creek, and wash yourself off," she commanded. Sheepishly, Harry sat down on a log, took off his boots, stripped down to a pair of white cotton long johns, and hobbled barefoot down a rocky trail toward Boulder Creek. From then on, regardless of temperature or time of year, Harry dutifully bathed in the creek and came into the house carrying his boots, with his overalls draped over his arm.

Growing up, Thula had always been treasured by her family, not only for her beauty—which exceeded that of her twin, Thelma, by a wide margin—and for her extraordinary talent with the violin, but also for the refinement of her taste and the sensitivity of her nature. She was so exquisitely sensitive, in fact, that everyone in her family believed her to possess "second sight," an idea that was dramatically reinforced when they read the newspaper on the morning of April 15, 1912. The night before, Thula had awakened suddenly, screaming about icebergs and a huge ship sinking and people calling out for help.

Thula was educated and artistic and determined to seek finer things than a wheat farm had to offer. Now that she was marooned in Boulder City, her few social companions consisted of the ill-educated and hardscrabble wives of sawyers and miners. Increasingly, she was painfully aware that she was about as far as she could imagine from any means of fulfilling her dream of sitting proudly front and center, as first violin in a major symphony orchestra. She could hardly even practice. In the winter her fingers were too cold to dance up and down the fingerboard; in the summer they were so cracked and sore from the dry Idaho air that she could hardly hold the bow. Her violin mostly sat on

a shelf these days, calling out to her, almost mocking her as she washed endless piles of dishes and dirty diapers. This was the kind of thing her sister, Thelma, had been raised to do, not her. Yet Thelma now lived comfortably in a nice house in Seattle. The more she thought about the unfairness of it, the more tensions mounted in the cabin.

Finally one warm summer afternoon, those tensions boiled over. Thula was pregnant with her third child. She had spent much of the afternoon on her hands and knees, scrubbing the cabin's pinewood floor, and her back was throbbing with pain. As dinnertime approached she began the nightly routine of laboring over the hot woodstove, feeding kindling into the firebox, trying to get enough flame to draw a draft up the chimney. Smoke billowed out from under the cooktop and clawed at her eyes. When she finally got a fire going, she set about trying to cobble together an evening meal for Harry and the boys. Between her limited budget and the scant selection of foods available at the company store, it was hard to put a decent meal on the table every night. It was even harder to keep it on the table long enough for her children to eat a square meal. Joe was growing like a weed, and he inhaled food as fast as Thula could make it. She worried constantly that her own boys wouldn't get enough.

She began shoving pans around on the stovetop angrily, trying to make room, not sure what she was going to cook. Then suddenly she heard a shout from outside the cabin, followed by a long, painful wailing sound—little Mike's voice. Thula dropped a pot on the stove and bolted for the front door.

Joe was outside, down on his hands and knees, tending his vegetable garden that afternoon. The garden was a kind of sanctuary for him, a place where he, not Thula, was in charge, and it was a source of enormous pride. When he brought a basket of fresh tomatoes or an armful of sweet corn into the cabin, and then saw them on the dinner table that night, it made him feel that he was making a contribution to the family, helping Thula, maybe making up for whatever he might have done most recently to annoy her. Working his way down a row in the garden that afternoon, pulling weeds, he had turned around to find eighteen-month-old Mike following him, imitating him, happily plucking half-grown carrots out of the ground. Joe turned and bellowed at him in rage, and Mike unleashed a heart-rending scream. A moment later Joe looked up at the porch and saw Thula, red faced and seething. She ran down the steps, snatched Mike up from the ground, whisked him into the cabin, and slammed the door behind her.

When Harry came home from work later that evening, Thula was waiting for him in the doorway. She demanded that Harry take Joe out back, out of her sight, and give him a good hiding. Instead Harry merely took Joe upstairs, sat him down, and gave him a good talking-to. Thula exploded in the face of what she saw as lax discipline. Feeling trapped, growing desperate, she finally declared that she would not live under the same roof with Joe, that it was him or her, that Joe had to move out if she were to stay in such a godforsaken place. Harry could not calm her down, and he could not abide the thought of losing a second wife, certainly not one as lovely as Thula. He went back upstairs and told his son he would have to move out of the house. Joe was ten.

Early the next morning, his father led him up the wagon road to the shingle-sided schoolhouse at the top of the hill. He left Joe sitting outside on the steps and went in to talk to the male schoolteacher. Joe sat and waited in the morning sunlight, drawing circles in the dust with a stick and staring morosely at a Steller's jay that had perched on a nearby branch and begun screeching at him as if scolding him. After a long while, his father and the teacher emerged from the schoolhouse and shook hands. They had struck a deal. In return for a place to sleep in the building, Joe was to chop enough kindling and split enough wood to keep the school's huge stone fireplace stoked day and night.

So began Joe's life in exile. Thula would no longer cook for him, so every morning before school and again every evening he trudged down the wagon road to the cookhouse at the bottom of the mountain to work for the company cook, Mother Cleveland, in exchange for breakfast and dinner. His job was to carry heavy trays of food—plates heaped high with hotcakes and bacon in the morning and with slabs of meat and steaming potatoes in the evenings—from the cookhouse to the adjoining dining hall, where miners and sawyers in dirty coveralls sat at long tables covered with white butcher paper, talking loudly and eating ravenously. As the men finished their meals, Joe hauled their dirty dishes back to the cookhouse. In the evenings he trudged back up the mountain to the schoolhouse to chop more wood, do his schoolwork, and sleep as best he could.

He fed himself and made his way, but his world had grown dark, narrow, and lonely. There were no boys his age whom he could befriend in the camp. His closest companions—his only companions since moving to Boulder City—had always been his father and Harry Junior. Now, living in the schoolhouse, he pined for the times when the three of them had formed a kind of

confederation of resistance to Thula's increasing sourness, sneaking out behind the cabin to toss a ball around among the pine trees or to roughhouse in the dust, or sitting at the piano, pounding out their favorite songs whenever she was safely out of earshot. Even more he missed the times he'd spent alone with his father, sitting and playing gin rummy at the kitchen table while Thula practiced on her violin, or poking around under the hood of the Franklin, tightening and adjusting all the parts of the engine as his father explained the purpose and function of each of them. Most of all he missed the times he and his father would sit out at night on the cabin's porch and stare up into the astonishing swirls of stars shimmering in the black vault of the Idaho night sky, saying nothing, just being together, breathing in the cold air, waiting for a falling star to wish upon. "Keep on watching," his father would say. "Keep your eyes peeled. You never know when one is going to fall. The only time you don't see them is when you stop watching for them." Joe missed that, something terrible. Sitting alone on the schoolhouse steps at night and watching the sky alone just didn't seem the same.

Joe grew rapidly that summer, mostly vertically, though the treks up and down the mountain quickly built up muscle mass in his legs and thighs, and the constant swinging of an axe at the schoolhouse and the hoisting of trays in the cookhouse began to sculpt his upper body. He ate ravenously at Mother Cleveland's table. Yet he still always seemed to be hungry for more, and food was seldom far from his thoughts.

One autumn day the schoolteacher took Joe and the rest of his students on a natural-history field trip into the woods. He led them to an old, rotten stump on which a large white fungus was growing—a rounded, convoluted mass of creamy folds and wrinkles. The teacher plucked the fungus off the stump, held it aloft, and proclaimed it a cauliflower mushroom, *Sparassis radicata*. Not only was it edible, the teacher exclaimed, but it was delicious when stewed slowly. The revelation that one could find free food just sitting on a stump in the woods landed on Joe like a thunderbolt. That night he lay in his bunk in the schoolhouse, staring into the dark rafters above, thinking. There seemed to be more than a schoolroom science lesson in the discovery of the fungus. If you simply kept your eyes open, it seemed, you just might find something valuable in the most unlikely of places. The trick was to recognize a good thing when you saw it, no matter how odd or worthless it might at first appear, no matter who else might just walk away and leave it behind.