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The Whitworth Rock

BY JANET HAUCK

Who would have imagined that two young college students almost had a hand in changing the course of human history as we know it? It happened sixty-one years ago this month, but to this day, the memory of the incident surrounding the "Whitworth Rock" still brings a twinkle to Jack Starrett's eye. Anyone who attended Whitworth College in Spokane during that spring of 1942, or even lived in Spokane for that matter, would have had a good chance of hearing about the "rock" or reading an account of it in the local papers. Here is how the incident is said to have unfolded.

"This was during the construction of Graves Gym," Jack said in a recent conversation in his Spokane home. Graves Gymnasium was the third building to be built on the Whitworth College campus, the first since the two original buildings were erected in 1914. Understandably, there was a bit of excitement surrounding its advent. "It was just in the early stages, when they were piling up the ground, laying the groundwork for the superstructure. There was a lot of work being done turning over dirt, and so forth," said Jack.

Jack Starrett was a sophomore in college that year. According to the school newspaper, nominations had just been announced for student body officers, and preparations were being completed for the All-Awards Banquet. The merger of Spokane Junior College with Whitworth College was just taking place, and the "war set-up" was an ongoing topic of discussion. In the midst of all this activity, a mysterious incident was taking place.

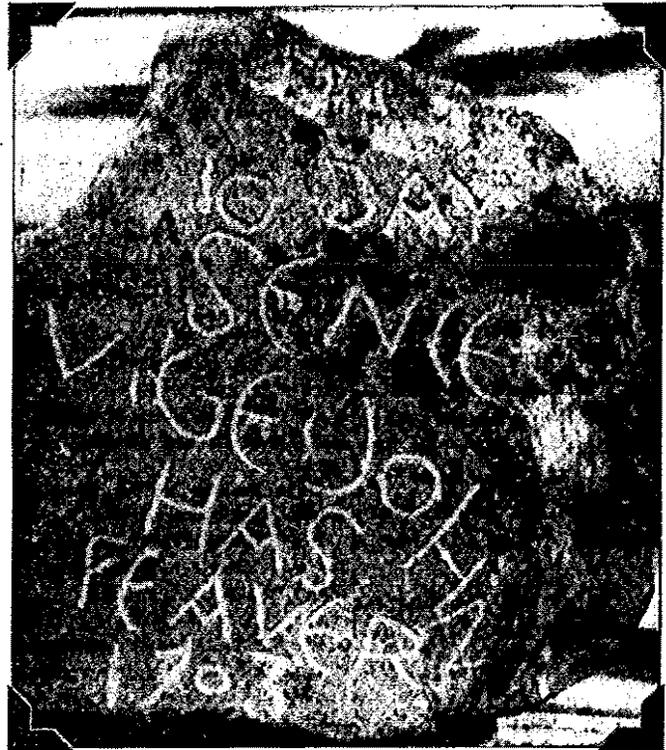
"This fellow, named Sydney, was an artist and a very clever man," Jack remembered. "He just had all kinds of



Sydney Eaton,
1942 Yearbook Photo



Jack Starrett,
1942 Yearbook Photo

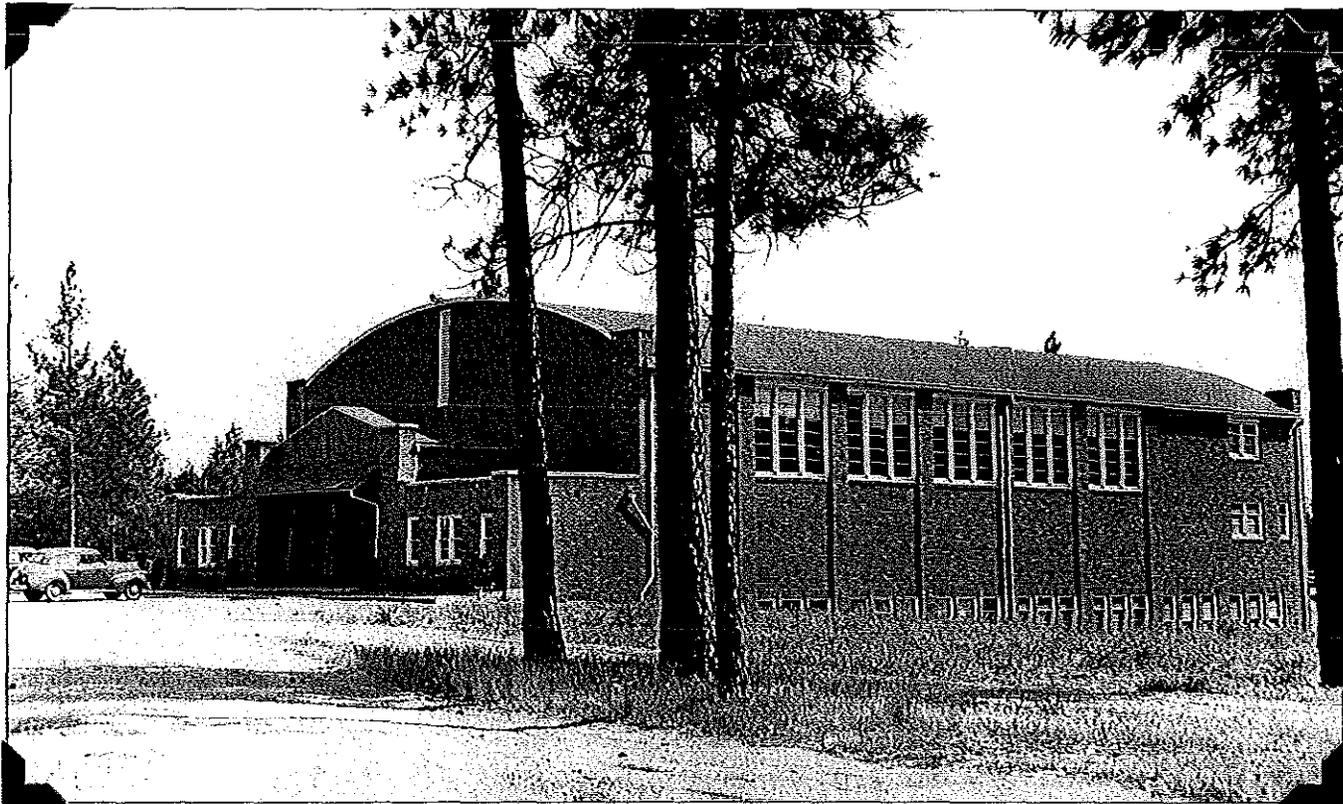


"10 DAY SENCE VIGE. JOHN HAS FEAVER. 1703."
So said the rock that started it all.

talent." Sydney Eaton was a post-graduate student, living on campus and studying to complete his senior examinations that spring. As a founding member of the Alpha Psi Omega Dramatic Fraternity at Whitworth and someone who liked to draw as a form of entertainment, Sydney would indeed seem to have been a gifted individual.

"And he got this idea," Jack continued. "In the old dorm, which was called...Whitworth Hall...he had a room right across from me, and I would hear this little pecking going on. Chip, chip, chip, chip, chip. And I got curious. It went on day, after day, after day. And I couldn't stand that. Finally, I went up and knocked on his door.

"I said, 'Syd, what's going on in there?' There'd be dead silence. Finally, he'd come to the door, and he'd open the door just a little crack, and peek out. And he'd say, 'This is a private project,' and that's it, and he'd slam the door in my face."



Sydney and Jack's plan was to let the rock be "discovered" by the workmen who were clearing ground for Whitworth's new Jay P. Graves Gymnasium, completed in 1942.

By this point in our conversation, Jack's wife, Joyce, had entered the room. Now she spoke up. "He was a very interesting, strange man...an artist." Joyce knew this for a fact because she had also been a student at Whitworth at the time, and, not insignificantly, Jack's love interest as well.

Jack nodded in agreement. "It wasn't rudeness. It was just his way, you know. So, anyway, this continued on for another week, and I was just dying of curiosity to know what was going on in there. So finally, he let me in. He said, 'If you come in, you're going to have to participate in this.... My hand is getting numb from chipping on this rock.' And I looked over there, and sitting on the desk of his room was this big, big rock...about the size of a football.

"And already he'd started chiseling some inscriptions. And he had a book beside him of Old English letters, so he knew how to do it in Old English. And he started chipping, and as far as he'd gone in the chipping, it said, '10 DAY SENCE VIGE.' That's 'voyage' in the Old English. 'JOHN HAS FEAVER.' Then I got to chip in...to relieve his hand, the problem he was having with ten-

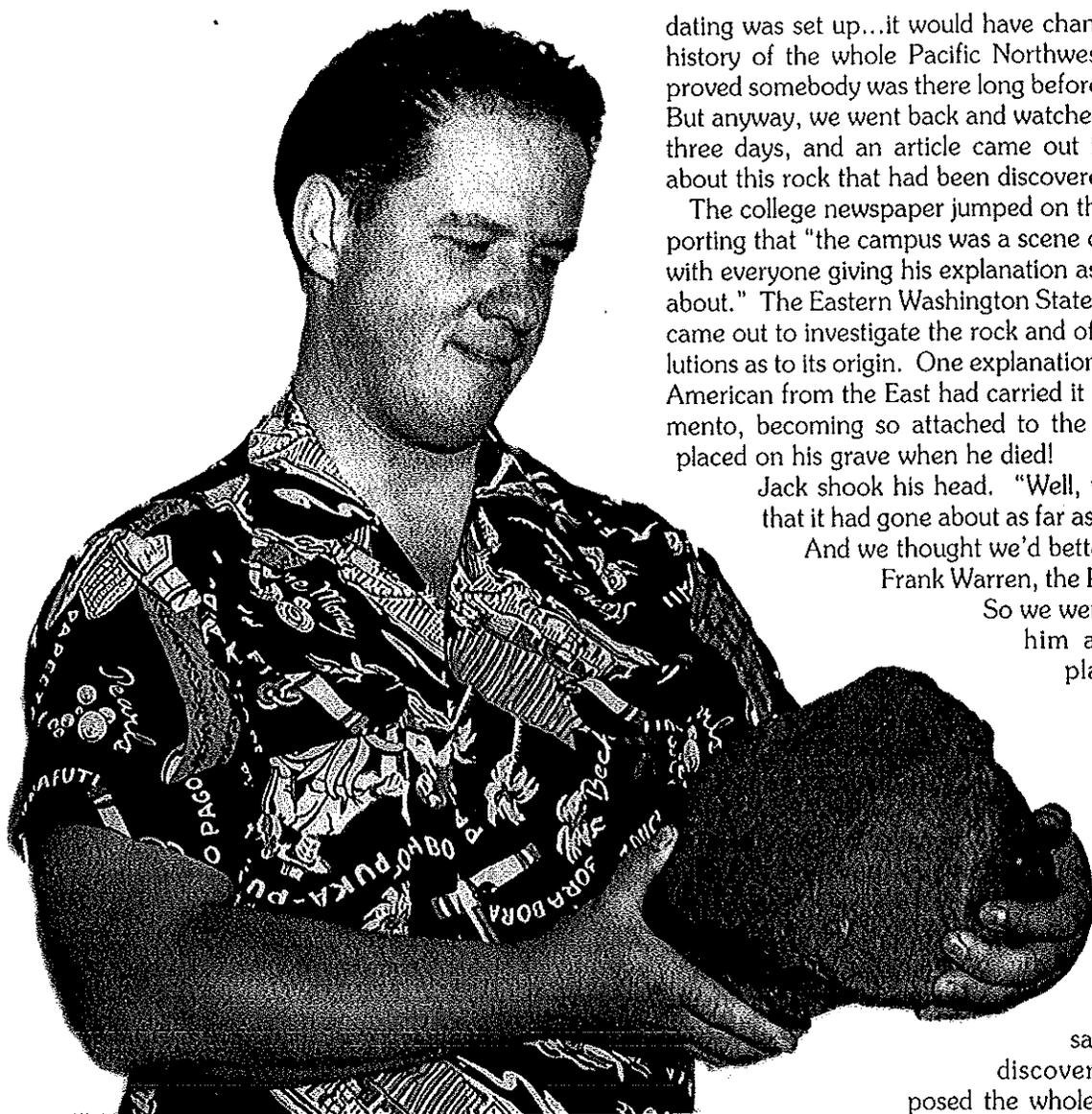
donitis. And I put in '1703,' and chipped that in with a hammer and a nail punch.

"So the idea was to bury it and age it, which we did. We took it down to a creek nearby. Allowed it to sit for about three or four days, and the moss began to accumulate. Well, after about two weeks, it had a very, very ancient-looking appearance. So we brought it back, and I said, 'What are you going to do with it now, Syd?'

"He said, 'We're going to set it here and let it be "discovered" by the workmen when they're turning over the dirt, and so forth,' which we did. We put the rock in such a place that if they plowed or took their shovels and worked around, they'd be sure to turn this thing over and find it. Well, it took about two weeks. It got buried again, and then we had to unbury it...to excavate it out and plant it in another place.

"Finally, one day he walked by me, and he said, 'It's been found.' I said, 'It has?' And he said, 'Yup. It's been found.' And he pointed up towards Ballard Hall.

"Right at the bottom of the steps at Ballard Hall, there was a group of students and a group of faculty, and there were newspaper reporters standing around taking pic-



Despite the admonition he received for his hoax, Sydney Eaton seems proud of his handiwork.

tures of this rock, which was sitting on a table. And here they had all this going on, and we looked and we thought, 'Boy, this is more than we even bargained for.' You know, it was just wonderful."

Jack's wife, Joyce, interjected, "Wasn't Al Culverwell there? He was a history teacher."

Jack agreed. "Al Culverwell was in charge of it. And he was pointing out the merits of this rock to the newspaper reporters from the *Spokesman-Review*. And then flashbulbs were going off, and so on. And...the way the

dating was set up...it would have changed the course of history of the whole Pacific Northwest. It would have proved somebody was there long before Lewis and Clark! But anyway, we went back and watched for about two or three days, and an article came out in the newspaper about this rock that had been discovered."

The college newspaper jumped on the bandwagon, reporting that "the campus was a scene of buzzing activity, with everyone giving his explanation as to what it was all about." The Eastern Washington State Historical Society came out to investigate the rock and offered different solutions as to its origin. One explanation was that a Native American from the East had carried it out West as a memento, becoming so attached to the stone that it was placed on his grave when he died!

Jack shook his head. "Well, we finally decided that it had gone about as far as we could let it go.

And we thought we'd better tell Dr. Warren, Frank Warren, the President, about it.

So we went in and talked to him about it and explained what happened. Well, he was kind of shocked about the whole thing.... He called the newspaper, and they came out with another article that said, 'Student hoax discovered.' [T]hey exposed the whole thing and talked

about it.

And we weren't punished severely, but he...admonished us and said that could have been a very serious thing, if it had gone back to the Smithsonian Institute like they had planned it. They had planned to take it back to the Smithsonian."

The fact that Jack hadn't been punished severely for his part in the hoax is significant, because it so happens that the Joyce Starrett of today is actually Joyce Warren Starrett: The President Warren who had "admonished" Jack was none other than Joyce's father! To see these two sitting here over sixty years later, both with twinkles in their eyes, is testimony to the lighter side of this very unusual bit of history. ☺

Janet Hauck is the library archivist at Whitworth College in Spokane.