

History

by: Jim Ojala, PLU Crew 1965-1969

Naming of the Sleipne... (or is it Sleipner?)

Roger Hansen's account of the arrival of the "Sleipne" at American Lake is a good one—and an accurate portrayal of what happened. Arne Ness and I did disagree about the spelling of the name, a contest between a stubborn Finn (me) and a stubborn—but right—Norwegian (Arne). Professor Toven was the person who suggested the boat's name and spelling. We wanted to choose something that related to PLU's Nordic heritage. The full story behind the name goes a bit further: according to Norse legend, Sleipne, the horse which Odin rode, had eight legs, moved swifter than the wind over land and water and struck terror in the hearts of his enemies wherever he appeared. What better name to call a boat carrying a crew of eight Lute rowers? I remember Arne saying that there was a Norwegian hovercraft ferry named "Sleipner"—and no doubt he had truth on his side, although Toven held his ground when questioned about the correct spelling of the name.

There is a story worth telling about how we managed to buy the "Sleipne." Prior to 1969, all of the boats rowed by PLU and UPS crews were old Pocock cedar eights handed down by the University of Washington. How old? The best shell PLU had was the "Husky Clipper," the same boat the Huskies rowed when they won a gold medal at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin in front of Adolph Hitler. Some of the other boats in the Tacoma fleet were the "Progress Golden Jubilee," the "Evergreen Clipper" and the "Winlock W. Miller," all of which dated from the 1940s. The most ancient eight we had was a relic from the 1920s with a hull completely covered with canvas and painted a bright red—we dubbed her the "Red Hornet"—I don't believe anyone ever knew what her original name was. That boat had wooden ribs supporting the inside of the hull, sported three-legged riggers and must have weighed close to 350 pounds. Yet, we rowed all of these boats daily, and even used them for racing.

In 1967 the UW asked for the "Husky Clipper" back; they wanted to restore her and put her on display. For years thereafter she hung in the HUB on the Washington campus; today, she can be found suspended from the ceiling of the George Pocock Memorial Rowing Center in Seattle. To compensate us for our loss, the Huskies passed on an old eight of theirs to Green Lake Crew, and Green Lake Crew turned over to us the oldest eight in their boathouse, the "Loyal Shoudy." The only trouble was, we had no way to transport the shell to Tacoma. Today, shell trailers are omnipresent, and transporting boats is taken for granted. Not so in 1967: when crews traveled, they brought their oars but not their boats. You rowed in the shells that the host crew provided. Generally, there was a blind draw for boats. Sometimes, the home crews kept their best boats for themselves and gave you the leftovers. Karl Drlicka and his Oregon State crews complained loudly about the boats they had to row in when they visited us on American Lake. We told him that's all we had, and that more or less settled the matter.

Anyway, we could not figure an affordable way to transport the “Shoudy” to Tacoma. The lowest bid we received for trucking it down was \$300—a princely sum to us. Know that in those years the crew received virtually no money from the school, from Tacoma Amateur Rowing Association, from anyone. The rowers and their parents paid for everything out of their own pockets. The LVRC charged members annual dues (\$10 or so). To cover gas for turnouts, everyone had to cough up a dime a day. We had no school vans to use; rowers’ vehicles sufficed. We traveled to and from American Lake in a motley array of jalopies: Norm Purvis’ 1951 2-door Ford Sedan spray-painted robin’s egg blue, Jim Wiitala’s “Little Nash Rambler” and Rich Holmes’ 1959 Ford hardtop convertible, to cite a few. When the crew traveled to away regattas, we borrowed our parents’ cars and gas credit cards and slept on Frat house floors or in empty dorm rooms or at fleabag hotels (does anyone but me remember our trip to Vancouver in the Spring of ’67 to race UBC, and the hovel we stayed in?—that was the time the seaplane almost hit us out on Coal Harbor and UBC’s varsity sank at the finish line). Those were also the days when the crew had no adult coach (we coached ourselves) and no launch (we coached each other mostly from inside the shells or from the cox’ns’ seats).

Transporting the Shoudy

To get back to the “Shoudy”: one day Norm Purvis and I were sitting in Jon Olson's office spittin’ and whittlin’ and trying to figure out what to do next about the “Shoudy.” All of a sudden, Mr. Olson exclaimed “Why don’t you row it down?” Norm and I thought it was a grand idea, but Mr. Olson asked us not to use his name—he was afraid that if President Mortvedt found out that he suggested the idea, he would lose his job. For sundry reasons Mordvedt was vehemently opposed to rowing at PLU and was looking for any excuse he could find to throw us off campus. As a result of Jon's insistence on secrecy, I was generally credited with coming up with the idea. Not true.

For the next two months we laid our plans: a training schedule was established; tide charts were consulted; the Coast Guard and Navy were contacted; we even obtained a parade permit from the Seattle Police Department so that we could legally carry the shell from Green Lake to Lake Union. To make everything official, we scheduled the event with the University and dubbed it our “First and Last Annual Fall Recreational Outing.” When someone in the student affairs office asked what that meant, we answered that we were planning to go to Seattle and have a long row as a way of keeping fit.

The day before the “Rowdown”—which is what all of us eventually ended up calling our escapade—the Seattle Post-Intelligencer blew our cover. The aunt of George Wood worked at the P-I and mentioned our plans to Royal Brougham, the P-I's Sports Editor. Brougham called Dick Erickson at the UW and asked him what he thought. Dick thought it was the greatest stunt he’d ever heard of. So, the P-I decided to jump on the PLU Crew bandwagon. Their Friday, 15 December 1967 edition featured on its front page directly under the bannerline a cartoon depicting PLU crew cutting through the waters of Puget Sound. There was also a brief story outlining our plans. In the cartoon, the boat’s name was misspelled: they called it the “Loyal Shoddy.” The cartoonist depicted a flag flying from the shell’s bow. It read “PLU or Tippecanoe.”

The night before I had spent all night in the typing room on the top floor of Tinglestad pecking out an overdue term paper for Dr. Schnackenberg's European history class. When I dragged myself out of the room about the time the cock crowed, my next-door neighbor asked me whether I'd seen our picture on the front page of the paper. I said "What!!!???" and spent the rest of the day answering questions and dodging bullets. The first call came from Dean Leasure: he wanted to cancel the whole caper, but didn't dare now that the P-I had turned it into a cause celebre. Later the Sports Information Director called, extremely upset.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he yelled into the telephone. "The biggest sporting news in PLU's history and I have to read about it in the morning paper! Don't do this to me again."

For all of that day we were the talk of the campus. That night everyone went to bed, but few of us had any real sleep.

The next morning we leaped out of our warm beds at 4:00 a.m. and into six inches of cold, newly fallen snow. All of the Puget Sound region was blanketed with a beautiful coat of white especially for us and our row.

We arrived at the Green Lake boathouse well before dawn and found waiting for us two people from the P-I: Bill Knight, a sportswriter, and Cary Tolman, a photographer. Brougham was sending them along to chronicle our journey. The PLU squad was made up of Norm Purvis, Jim Wiitala, Bill Brinkmeyer, Rich Holmes, Bob Torget, George Wood, Jim Bartlett, Gary Van Hoy, Rolf Morstad, Roger Hansen, Bob Sullivan, Mike Kido and me (I hope I haven't left anyone out). We took the "Shoudy" down from her rack, adjusted our stretchers and riggers and set off for Lake Union with the eight on our shoulders. Before we left the Green Lake facility, Bob Sullivan attached a makeshift flag fashioned out of a pillowcase and a clothes hanger on the "Shoudy's" bow. It read "PLU or Tippecanoe." Our route took us through the Wallingford District, where we crossed 45th in front of the old Food Giant store (today it's a QFC). When we arrived at Lake Union, the ramp down to the water was so slick with ice and snow that we more schussed down it than walked down it.

Once boated, we headed out through the Ship Canal and into the Ballard Locks. Two power boats accompanied us, one belonging to Gary Van Hoy's dad, the other other belonging to Ole Olson, a friend of my father's from Boeing. Four spare oarsmen, a spare cox, the two P-I reporters and my dad accompanied Mr. Van Hoy and Ole. They trailed behind us as we rowed past Shilshole, around West Point and into Elliott Bay. Halfway across Elliott Bay, we were caught in a violent riptide. Waves began rolling over us from every direction and the shell began flooding. Finally we had to call a "way enough!" When we restarted, the bow four rowed while the stern four bailed with buckets. Ole Olson moved his launch in front of the "Shoudy's" bow to break the waves. Every few strokes Norm Purvis, rowing bow, looked around to see how close we were to catastrophe, and once or twice we nearly ran into Ole's prop. Cary Tolman snapped an

unforgettable photograph of the scene: in it, the “Shoudy” is being inundated by a large wave; it looks like we’re a submarine surfacing in the Arctic Ocean.

It was a miracle that we made it to Alki Point. There, the four spare oarsmen and spare coxswain switched places with some of the crew and, after warming up on hot chocolate, we continued south. At Saltwater State Park we rowed into shore, beached the “Shoudy” and dried ourselves out in front of a roaring fire prepared by some of the parents. The four of us who had rowed all the way from Lake Union gave up our seats to the four men who had rested and, reconstituted, PLU Crew rowed on.

Just as our flotilla was approaching Commencement Bay, a squadron of National Guard LSTs hove into view. One of them pulled up near the boat, and someone aboard shouted “Are you PLU crew? We’ve been looking for you.” In those days the PLU/UPS boathouse was on the grounds of Camp Murray (every month we paid rent to Major Murphy—\$15). The Washington National Guard was out on training maneuvers that day and decided to go looking for their errant tenants. They found us and offered us a lift the rest of the way. Just off the southern tip of Vashon Island, one of their boats lowered its front ramp to water level, and the crew tried to back into the improvised dock with no success. There was no way for the two odd vessels to hook up out there in the middle of Puget Sound.

It was decided that we should rendezvous at Point Defiance, and everyone headed for the old boathouse there. After what the newspapers variously estimated as 43 to 55 miles of rowing, PLU crew pulled into the dock at Point Defiance and fell into the arms of friends, girlfriends and family. One last task remained, however. We had planned to row the boat through the Tacoma Narrows to Steilacoom, where we were going to store it inside the fenced perimeter of a utilities station. The next morning we intended to walk it from there to American Lake, put it into the water by the Flying Service and row it across the lake to the crewhouse.

The National Guard solved our problem for us. They drove one of the LSTs onto the beach and lowered the ramp, whereupon PLU marched the “Shoudy” aboard. The ramp was raised, and four of us rode with the guardsmen and the “Shoudy” through the Narrows and under the bridge in the light of a full moon. The rest of the crew met us at Steilacoom, where we unloaded the “Shoudy,” stashed it for the night and headed back to campus for hot showers, hot food and warm beds.

The next morning a horde of us piled into someone’s car and drove north toward Seattle in search of a Sunday P-I. At Sea-Tac Airport we found what we were looking for. We had been promised good coverage; what the P-I gave us was astonishing. The story of the “Rowdown” ran across the top of the front page and took up many columns in the inside pages. The headline read: “The Tough Crew—Seattle to Tacoma.” Bill Knight began his account so:

"It was a conquest of epic proportions, conceived of necessity, born of a strange mixture of humor and lunacy and carried out with the amazing dedication which has become a

hallmark of rowing...The Pacific Lutheran University crew rowed an eight-oared shell from Lake Union to Tacoma yesterday, an unlikely voyage on an unlikely day which saw these bizarre developments:

“They almost swamped and nearly had to turn back during a choppy crossing of Elliott Bay when bailing became more important than rowing.

“They suffered the agonies of hands and feet left numb by the chilling cold.

“Finally, they got an assist in the final stretch late in the day by, of all things, a combat landing craft run by the Tacoma National Guard...

“But this fantastic band of amateurs made it their own 55-mile version of Mission Impossible. It was a storybook voyage, one which all of the participants will remember as their own personal saga of the sea.”

Bill's account of the day ran on for many more paragraphs, and was followed in the P-I by several other lengthy stories over the next week. Other papers in the region—the TNT and The Seattle Times in particular—gave the Rowdown spectacular coverage. News of it even went out over the wire services, and various newspapers across the country carried the story. A number of months later, “Rowing News”—an NAAO publication which was then the national rag for amateur rowing—ran a cover story on the event. Two summers later, Jim Puttler and I were at Nationals in Philadelphia rowing on the Schuylkill in a coxed pair. Many times, when we introduced ourselves to Easterners as being from PLU, people would respond, “Oh, you’re the crew that rowed that boat to Tacoma.”

The amount of good will earned on that December day is incalculable. Many at the time said it was one of the most publicized stories about PLU ever, although such claims were probably hyperbolic. Bill Knight was right about one point, though: all of us who took part in the events that day have never forgotten the experience.

By now you probably wonder what any of this has to do with the “Sleipne.” Well, the answer is “A lot!”

Immediately after the Rowdown, members of the crew began conspiring about how we could buy a new eight. Bill Knight promised to help us raise money, and we decided to approach the Pockocks. Royal Brougham called me at home over the Christmas holiday and invited PLU crew to the P-I's annual “Man of the Year in Sports” banquet at the Olympic Hotel in Seattle. We were featured in the program and all of us appeared onstage in our rowing garb, where I recounted our story to the assembled multitude (i.e., I hogged the spotlight).

The next day I dropped by the Pockock shop on Lake Union and met George Pockock for the first time. He remembered me from the night before and said that what PLU crew had done was one of the finest things he had ever heard of. We shook hands about ordering a boat for the following year, although PLU crew didn't have one red cent to hand over as a

down payment. In fact, together with UPS, we still owed the Pococks hundreds of dollars for the oars we used (we were paying them \$10 a month against the outstanding balance). Ignoring economic reason, George and Stan Pocock set about building PLU an eight.

Over the next few months we tried to raise the missing funds (\$3,500 in those days for a Western red cedar eight). Howard Heath from Heath-Techna donated \$100, Ben Chaney from Chaney Lumber \$50, George Schmidt from Olympia Brewing another \$50. Governor Dan Evans even bought a button reading "I'm pulling for PLU Crew" for \$2.00. Still, it wasn't nearly enough.

In the winter of 1968-69, in the face of that shortfall, my parents came up with a proposal: Why not have PLU crew parents sign a note from a bank and borrow the money? Surely the crew would be able to keep up with monthly payments. Letters went out and Jim Puttler's parents, Ralph Neils' parents and my parents agreed to co-sign a loan. The Parkland branch of the now-defunct National Bank of Commerce agreed to advance the funds, and the deal was completed. As Roger Hansen wrote, the boat was christened (mischristened?) "Sleipne" and PLU crew had its first new shell after six years of rowing in the UW's cast-offs (which were, by the way, some of the most famous boats ever built by Pocock Racing Shells).

PLU Crew's first varsity letters

Now that I've expounded this long about PLU crew's early days, I'll add one more story, this one about how the oar in the "PLU" on PLU crew letter jackets came to be. After several years of lobbying by crew members, PLU Athletic Director Mark Salzman finally agreed in the spring of 1966 to let the crew award varsity letters. He was insistent, however, that members of the crew not receive the standard "PLU" varsity letter, because oarsmen (there were no woman rowing at PLU in those ancient times) in his opinion were not true varsity athletes and therefore should not wear a normal "PLU" varsity letter or be considered members of the PLU Lettermen's Club. The group of us debated the issue, and the problem was solved when Doug Linvog, who was PLU Commodore at the time, suggested that we put an oar through the PLU, and Salzman agreed. As a side note, according to Stan Pocock, at the UW in former times many oarsmen coveted a JV letter—a "UW" with an oar across it—more than they did the traditional "UW" varsity letter.

That spring eleven men were awarded the first PLU crew varsity letters ever issued: Bill Leonard, Curt Pearson, Paul Joos, Rich Moe, Doug Linvog, Clyde Emilson, Blair MacFarland, Rick Brown, Rich Holmes, Norm Purvis and me. In 1969 Norm and I both earned our fourth varsity letters, the first PLU rowers to do so. In those days we rarely had enough upperclassmen to boat an eight, so, often, frosh filled several or more seats in the varsity boat. We also rarely had enough true heavyweights. For two years, I was the only heavyweight in the varsity heavyweight boat—everyone else was a lightweight. Nonetheless, we raced the heavyweight varsities from all of the schools that we faced and, though usually outweighed by 25 to 30 pounds per man, beat more than a few of

them. We liked to tell ourselves that what counted most was how well you rowed and how big your heart was, not how much you weighed.

Various Memories

Those of us who rowed in those long-ago Dark Ages at PLU carry with us today special memories of the experience. Absolutely nothing was given to us; we paid for and sweated for and earned everything we had. The experience of rowing was total, often taking us away from our studies and friends. Many times, rowers had to give up their oars by the time they were juniors or seniors or they would never have graduated—the sacrifices demanded were too great. PLU had some fine crews in those years. At various times, we beat boats from UBC, Seattle U., Western Washington, Oregon State, Oregon, Santa Clara, St. Mary's, Southern Cal and many other schools. And, in the 1960s, we never lost a Meyer Cup. In 1967 and 1968, PLU had what I still believe was the finest men's lightweight varsity eight on the West Coast. OSU at the time claimed to have been undefeated for ten years. In 1967, on the Willamette at Corvallis, PLU's lightweights beat them, only to be disqualified by a homer referee. A week later OSU's 150s visited us at American Lake and bested our 150s by less than a second, the two crews rowing in the "Winlock W. Miller" and "Husky Clipper" in what was the "Clipper's" last race before being retired. One year later, PLU came from nearly a length down in the last twenty strokes to pass OSU at the finish line of the varsity lightweight final at Western Sprints on Andrews Bay (Seward Park, Seattle). It seemed to take forever before the officials announced the results: OSU the winner in a photo finish. As the crews sat in their shells at the finish line awaiting the decision, OSU's crew hung their heads in defeat. They celebrated in joyous disbelief when they were declared the winners. I had sprinted on foot along the shoreline the last 200 meters of the race and was certain that we had won. Santa Clara's coach, who had stood on the finish line, assured me that OSU had indeed come in first, though not by much. Had that race been one or two strokes longer, or had PLU started its sprint a few strokes sooner... Oh, the "what ifs." How they multiply as we grow older. One member of that Lute lightweight boat was Jim Farwell, a former Santa Clara oar serving in the Army at Fort Lewis. He later coached at Santa Clara and played a pivotal role in establishing close ties between the PLU and Santa Clara rowing programs. PLU crews stayed at SCU during 1968 Spring Break on a rowing tour of the Bay Area (PLU Crew's first trip to California), and PLU hosted SCU's crews when they came up to Seattle for the Western Sprints a month or so later. Exchanges continued for some time after, but by now I'm sure they're a thing of the past. Tragically, Jim passed away from cancer a few years ago, far too young.

For most of the 1960s, PLU crew survived on its own, without adult coaching, with sporadic encouragement from the University and without outside financial support. The rowers and their parents sustained and built on the program that Paul Meyer and volunteers from PLU and UPS began in the early 1960s. Save for Paul Meyer through the Fall of 1965, and for J.R. Goerke in the Spring of 1966, PLU crew had no official "coach" until the 1970s. The Commodore served nominally as "coach" though in fact every man on the squad coached every other man every day we were on the water.

There are many other stories to tell from those halcyon days. Roger Hansen has told one or two, and I've now told more than my share. I hope that others will join in bringing that era back to life.

Best regards to everyone associated with PLU crew,

Jim Ojala, PLU Crew 1965-1969

P.S. I've just completed working with Stan Pocock on publishing his memoir. It's called "Way Enough! Recollections of a Life in Rowing" and is the perfect accompaniment to "Ready All," the memoir of his dad, George Pocock. On 17 April 2000 it will become available for sale for the first time. If you're interested in learning more about the book, we're putting together a web site: www.wayenough.com. You may also e-mail me at jim@wayenough.com or at jhojala@home.com.