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Father's triumphant moment lives on

Bonnie Henry

Imagine if you could travel back in time and witness a pivotal moment in the life of someone you loved — someone no longer with you.

What if you could capture the exact moment, say, that your great-grandfather set foot on Ellis Island? Or the day he married the woman who would become your great-grandmother?

Mary-Lou Palmer has such a moment. It is a grainy, 30-second clip of her father running in the 1,500-meter finals in the 1912 Olympics.

What makes it all the more precious is the fact that her father, who also shattered several records while in college — including his own world record — never talked much about those glory days.

"He never told us anything," says Palmer, 84, a long-time Tucsonan. "In fact, my sister and I found a bunch of his medals in a big trunk. I told some kid my dad got them in the Revolutionary War."

Hardly.

As a sophomore and then as a senior at Cornell University, John Paul Jones, Class of '13, would claim two collegiate world records in the mile run — the last one run in 4 minutes and 14.4 seconds in 1913.

When Jones died in Tucson in 1970, the Cornell Alumni News put him on its cover — and back in time: A young man with a "C" slashed across his chest, straining toward that final and fastest mile in May of 1913.

Not long after that last race, Jones graduated with a degree in engineering, joined the Army during the Great War, married and became the father of Mary-Lou and her sister, Nancy, and brother, Casey.

Their father never ran again. Instead, he started a successful mechanical engineering business in the Cleveland area.

Like everyone else, he struggled to stay afloat in the '30s.

"He had to sell some of his medals during the Depression to eat," says Palmer, who still has a couple of them, as well as a pocket watch engraved with her father's name and time for a race he won back in 1911.

A sickly lad, young Jones first took up track at the elite Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, N.H. But when his father died in 1909, the family fortunes reversed.

"He worked in the laundry at Cornell," says Palmer. There was no track scholarship that she knows of, no "puff" courses for pampered athletes.

"He studied mechanical engineering and was president of the senior class," says Palmer.

Modest, perhaps to a fault, Jones didn't expect to run in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden, that year.

"He was only a junior and thought others

Courtesy of Mary-Lou Palmer

John Paul Jones, *running for Cornell University, broke his own world record in the one-mile run at a college meet at Harvard in 1913.*

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Moment of glory at Olympics part of family archive

would go, so he quit training," says Palmer.

But suddenly, there he was with the rest of his teammates, crossing the Atlantic in heavy seas — and suffering greatly from seasickness.

That may have contributed to his fourth-place finish in the 1,500-meter run.

Even so, John Paul Jones broke the previous Olympic record that day in the event. But then, so did all five of the top finishers.

In the early '50s, Jones retired and moved to Tucson but found he couldn't stand the leisure life. Soon, he was starting up another mechanical engineering firm and enlisting Mary-Lou's husband, Dick. to help run it.

A few months ago, the Palmers hired Steve Pender, owner of Family Legacy Video, to put together a memory video for their family of five children, nine grandchildren, two great-grandchildren and another "great" on the way.

After Mary-Lou mentioned to Pender that her father had run in the 1912 Olympics, he tracked down the old black-and-white clip through an archivist in Switzerland.

"Can you imagine what a thrill that was for me to see my dad, 21 years old and running in the Olympics?" asks Mary-Lou.

Yes, somehow, we can.

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