

WASHINGTON RACING HALL OF FAME

Jim Seabeck

A large scale thinker and doer

by Jim Price

Some men and women lead small lives. Others start small and accomplish much, and a few accomplish little and make much of it. But Jim Seabeck? Think big all the way. Big hat. Lots of cattle. And lots of racehorses too.

Seabeck was a very large, muscular man who, for the better part of a century, did big things in a big way. He had big blue eyes and big hands and, yes, he wore a big hat. He was a man of his word who did business with a handshake. And from an insignificant village in the middle of the country, he migrated westward to leave indelible footprints on the history of Pacific Northwest racing and the world of livestock trading.

He did many other things that ranged from deep-sea fishing, gardening and ballroom dancing to business investments, public service and philanthropy. And when he was finished doing them, he was 98 years old. Colfax-area cattleman Clint Miller, a longtime close friend and fishing buddy, remembered Seabeck as a man of accomplishment. "He had a lot of things he wanted to do," Miller said. "And he did it."

Jim Seabeck also was a man of scale. He started in the livestock industry before he could vote and claimed to have sold millions of cattle, sheep, goats and horses. And after an afternoon at Santa Anita attracted him to racing, he campaigned dozens of running horses, won hundreds of purses in several states and served the industry in almost every possible capacity.

He was a Thoroughbred breeder. He was an owner. On occasion, he was a trainer. He was a racing commissioner. He spent six decades as a member of the organization known today

Seabeck and his Palomino Buck were familiar figures in the sales ring at Spokane's Stockland Union Stockyard.



as the Washington Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Association. He served a term as its president and spent nearly two decades as a board member. As a consequence of these endeavors, he was inducted into the Washington Racing Hall of Fame in 2010.

Early Days

James Paul Seabeck, Jim to some and J. P. to others, was born January 21, 1913, in Rockville, Sherman County, Nebraska. The family's four-room house had no electricity or running water. Both sets of grandparents were devout Polish Catholics, who had emigrated from areas absorbed by the German kingdom of Prussia. They were farmers.

His father, John Daniel Seabeck, tall and lean, had been born in Illinois, not long before Nebraska was opened up to homesteaders. The original family name was Pogrzeba. Seabeck, apparently, was the product of an immigration clerk's imagination. His mother was Mary Constance Smedra. Third among 11 children, she, too, had been born in Illinois.

By the time Jim came along, Rockville was near its peak, lying 15 miles south of Loup City, the county seat, almost one-third of the way to Grand Island, a railroad town

in the next county that pumped life into the lightly-populated center of the state. Truth told, Sherman County wasn't and isn't much. Now, fewer than 3,200 people call it home, barely half of its all-time high.

John Seabeck's father, Frank, had been a Union Pacific engineer. But he lost his job after a Grand Island roundhouse accident and turned to the land northwest of Loup City, an area dominated by Polish newcomers. After John's parents relocated several miles southeast, a bit south of Ashton, he began his own adult life as a farmer. The Smedras lived across the road.

After John and Mary married, they farmed a few years on property closer to Rockville, a village of 250 people. When they moved into town, he took over the butcher shop, slaughtering the animals, preparing the carcasses, cutting the meat and selling the finished product over the counter. He became the mayor, the town marshal and a school-board member.

Mary bore seven children, the last few in their square house with acreage on the north edge of town. When Jim, fourth-born, reached his maturity, he was not as tall as his father, maybe a bit over 6-foot-2, but had a broader frame with wide shoulders and his mother's large, heart-shaped face. Polish was the language of choice.

According to family lore, Jim completed his first business deal at the age of eight. He bought and raised a goat that, despite eating the upholstery in the family's Model T, lived long enough to be sold for a \$7 profit. There were adventures, too. His late brother, Frank, told of the time their father directed Jim, still only 12, to drive himself to Loup City to have his tonsils removed. The boy did it and made it back unscathed.

Westward Ho!

After three seasons each as captain of his high school football and basketball teams, Seabeck spent most of a school year at Grand Island Business College, staying until

Ron Crockett and Seabeck enjoy a moment during Seabeck's 2010 induction into the Washington Racing Hall of Fame.



the Depression-era money ran out and his cowboy gene kicked in. After working part-time in the W. C. Harris Company's Grand Island feedlot, he set out for Colorado, where he rode the range on that conglomerate's cattle ranch. Within months, the company sent him further west to its feedlot in Twin Falls, Idaho, and put him in charge of 40,000 cattle and 75,000 sheep. It was late 1932. He was 19 years old.

While in Idaho, he became acquainted with Novia George Church, a green-eyed blonde whose family, recently arrived from reservation land in Oklahoma, farmed in Clover, just west of town. The youngest of four girls, she and Jim met on a blind date. Over time, they became a couple.

More than two years later, Tacoma's Carstens Packing Company, in the aftermath of a substantial expansion, hired Seabeck as its back-gate junior cattle buyer. Only unmarried men, he had been told, would be considered. Nonetheless, on June 8, 1935, Jim and Novia stood before a justice of the peace and said their wedding vows. After a honeymoon dinner of baloney, bread and milk, they squeezed into his Model A, his lanky, long-haired mongrel between them, and headed for the Pacific Northwest.

Novia liked to tell how they slept on the ground, under the car, and she would wake up to find him frying bacon and eggs over a fire. That aroma, she said, reminded her of those mornings for the rest of her life. They reached Tacoma with \$17 in their pockets.

The young couple's deception held up long enough that, within a year, when Jim was 23, Carstens, now the West Coast's largest meat-packing firm, promoted him to chief buyer for its entire livestock division. He held that job for almost two decades, doubling as general manager at the end. He became good friends with brothers Tom and Phil Carstens, who had taken over the firm after the death of their father.

The Seabecks bought a home in Lakewood, just south of Tacoma. They produced four daughters. When Jim wasn't working or traveling, he and Novia gardened



Jim and Novia in front of their first home, a rental house in Tacoma.

and went dancing. She liked to sing and play the piano. Both, in their fashion, were smart dressers. According to the girls, their mother never went out in anything but a dress. He always topped off his coat and tie with a big hat, usually a Stetson.

"Mom was very classy, always in a dress, even to go to the grocery store," said Connie Gable, the third oldest daughter. "She loved to draw, usually in charcoal, and she loved horses, but they made her sneeze." Gable has many fond memories of those years. "Sometimes, I got to go on cattle-buying trips to Portland, Yakima and Twin Falls, even though I was just a little girl," she added. "When Dad was home, we tried to do family things. He was an avid gardener. He loved sweet peas, petunias and geraniums, but we girls would have to pick the blossoms so they would bloom more."

Under Racing's Spell

On March 2, 1940, while Seabeck was looking at cattle in California, he saw Seabiscuit record his legendary victory in the Santa Anita Handicap. As he told *Tacoma News-Tribune* columnist John McGrath

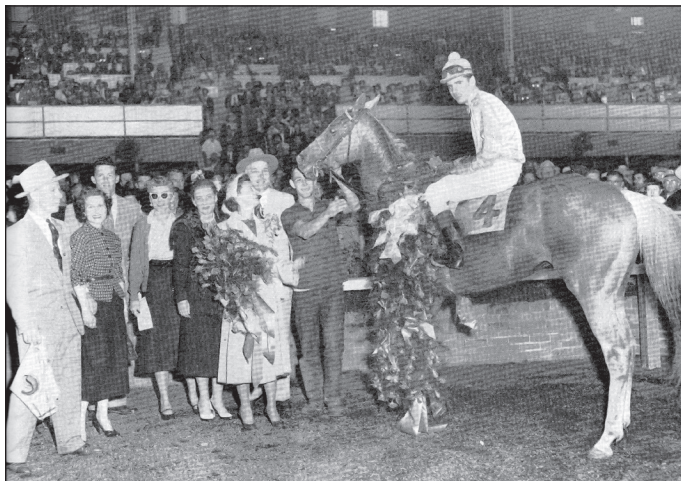
during a 2003 interview, "After watching Seabiscuit that day," he said, "I knew I had to own a racehorse."

In 1946 he bought his first Thoroughbred, a weanling named Olimpo Jr. Once the horse reached the races, Seabeck was hooked. Olimpo Jr. won 24 races and earned \$22,710, a fine sum for the time. Three years later, Seabeck and Phil Carstens, who managed the company's Spokane processing plant, acquired a yearling named Ocean Mist at Keeneland. They paid \$700, maybe a bit more, and turned the handsome but intractable little chestnut over to trainer Jack Mihalcik.

Ocean Mist, by Ocean Wave out of the Jamestown mare Catty, raced in top company in California, as well as at Longacres. He won twice for their C&S Stable as a two-year-old, put up four wins and seven seconds as a sophomore and three wins the next year with a Seattle Handicap victory and a close third in the Longacres Mile. Then he peaked as a five-year-old in 1953.

At Vancouver's Exhibition Park, he won the Premiere's British Columbia Championship in record time. In Seattle, on August 30, he went off as the second choice in the 19th running of the Longacres Mile. He and jockey Ray Fugate trailed by 11 lengths through the first quarter mile as former Washington Futurity winner Better Wave built a clear lead over Washington Derby winner Moby Dick. Fugate urged his mount into action leaving the backstretch. They raced by the pacesetter at midstretch and outfinished Moby Dick, the favorite, by more than a length. Ocean Mist had run the eight furlongs in 1:36 2/5. He earned \$9,175 and paid \$8.40 to win. Then, he shipped to Sacramento, where he claimed second money in the \$10,000-added Governor's Cup at the California State Fair.

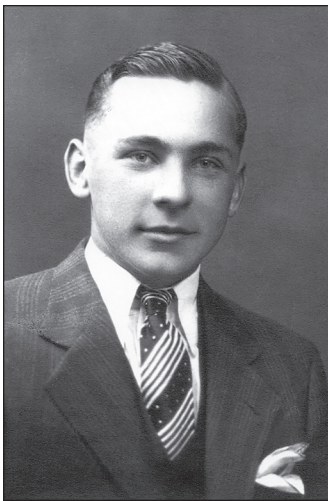
After surviving a concussion, the tough little gelding won races until he was ten and completed his career with 18 victories, 19 seconds and 13 thirds from 95 starts. Although his earnings of \$64,702 don't amount to much by today's standards, by



In 1953, C & S (Carstens and Seabeck) Stable's Ocean Mist won the 18th running of the Longacres Mile, then a \$12,325 event. The two men sporting hats are the winning trainer Jack Mihalcik (far left) and Seabeck (near Ocean Mist).



*One of the Seabecks' favorite runners was their homebred Charity Line. The multiple stakes-winning, Washington-bred son of *Golden Doubles is shown in the Playfair winner's circle after one of his 19 victories. Standing between the Seabecks is Marguerite Crawford of Turbulator fame.*



Seabeck's high school graduation photo (left). Pictured above, on the porch of the four-room family home in Rockville, Nebraska, are three of the seven Seabeck siblings.

2014, inflation would have increased their buying power to \$530,010.13.

In 1954, Seabeck and Carstens sent out the Northwest's best two-year-old, Better Not Bet. Also on the small side, the gelded bay son of George C. Newell's stallion Better Bet out of their \$450 mare Singing Clown, won all of his first five starts to earn \$18,060, a state juvenile record.

Trained by Mihalcik and ridden by Grant Zufelt, Better Not Bet followed an easy maiden victory at Longacres with a romp through the slop in the \$4,000 Breeders Purse. He was 45 cents to the dollar in the \$4,350 Washington Stallion Stakes and won by almost five lengths. In the \$11,860 Washington Futurity on September 5, he went postward at the same odds, led right from the start and crossed the wire with a three-length lead after six furlongs in 1:10 flat. On September 19, backed down to two-to-five in the \$4,650 Spokane Futurity at Playfair Race Course, Better Not Bet and Newell's New Check duelled side-by-side before he prevailed by a head.

In January of that year, Tom and Phil Carstens had sold their company to Hy-Grade Food Products. Left without a job, Seabeck opened Riverside Meat, bought dressed carcasses from packing companies and cut them up for retail. Five years later, in 1959, he, the Carstens brothers and Lee Benton bought the Twin Falls Livestock Commission Company. And after a quarter-century, Jim and Novia returned to Idaho, along with the two daughters still at home.

Their company became the largest livestock auction venue in Idaho and, after Seabeck, the managing partner, developed a feedlot as well, they sold out in April 1964. The Seabecks moved to Spokane, where he had leased the historic Stockland Union Stockyard, and, according to their youngest daughter, Kristi, settled into property in the Spokane Valley, where they had a large yard, a swimming pool, fish ponds, a barn and a pair of corrals.

"From Idaho on, there always was a mare with a foal, including Starting Line, who foaled Hope Line and Charity Line," she said, "and horses were always a part of our life growing up."

Stockland sprawled over 7.5 acres close to rail lines and five major packing facilities, including the former Carstens plant, on the eastern edge of the city, blocks away from Playfair. Seabeck ran the operation until his lease expired in 1981. He auctioned hogs and sheep and, in particular, feeder cattle to buyers all over the West and Midwest, particularly Idaho potato baron, J. R. Simplot, who also had a huge cattle operation.

Ted Kerst, a long-term Hygrade cattle buyer who had met Seabeck as a high school student, bought the business, although Seabeck stayed on, helping out, for almost 20 years. But in 1999, with most of the packing plants gone, Kerst moved the operation west to Davenport, a farming town where he already owned a stockyard.

"He was a good operator and a very good judge of cattle," Kerst said. "He had just a real good strong eye and real good work ethic. Jim's word was good and he was always willing to help everybody to do right." And how was he at judging horses? Kerst laughed. "Oh, better."

Seabeck bred three durable horses with related names that provided most of his later success at the racetrack. With Playfair entering its boom years, the trio won almost four dozen races among them.

The "Line" Brothers

Hope Line, a 1966 son of Hopemont, won 15 of 77 starts and banked \$41,264. Charity Line, a 1969 son of Golden Doubles, became the track's best homegrown star of the early 1970s. He campaigned until he was eight to earn \$53,007 from 19 victories in 86 starts. Faith Line, a foal of 1973, didn't win an added-money race but did earn \$31,067 with 10 victories among his 43 placings. Hope Line and Charity Line were produced out of Seabeck's Boss-sired mare Starting Line. Spy Legend was the dam of Faith Line, a son of Meme's Papa.

Despite Novia Seabeck's allergies, she began visiting the track more often in 1968 as Hope Line carried her red silks through a fine two-year-old campaign. The bay gelding capped his season on September 29 with a shocking surprise in the \$12,285 Spokane Futurity. Even though he was second choice in the betting, multiple stakes winner Good

Hunting was considered a lock. Nonetheless, Hope Line, ridden by Lyle Murray, led most of the way and outlasted Good Hunting, a half-brother to Northwest great Travel Orb, by a pair of lengths. The next summer at Longacres, he won a division of the Boeing Stakes.

When it was his turn, Charity Line left few honors unclaimed.

As a two-year-old, he already had won three races when he went postward for the Spokane Futurity, which in 1971 carried a record purse of \$18,480. Veteran jockey Richard Wright, a two-time Playfair champion, quipped to Seabeck as he left the paddock "I'll see you in the winner's circle." Under vigorous left-handed whipping, Charity Line outfinished Palouse Lad to win by a head. They had covered the Playfair Course in 1:19 1/5 on a sloppy track. Charity Line paid \$10.80 to win and earned \$13,480.

As a three-year-old, Charity Line spent the summer at Longacres, visited Spokane for an easy victory in the Pacific Northwest Handicap, and then returned to Seattle, where he won two distance races in top company. Back in Spokane for the Spokane Derby Trial, he failed to gain his usual forward position and was well beaten. However, when the 69th running of the sophomore classic unfolded on October 8, he cruised to a six-length victory under jockey Ken Doll. He had carried highweight of 122 pounds over 1 1/8 miles in 1:51 2/5.

One week later, Charity Line became the only horse to win all of the track's three major events, turning back lifelong Oregon-bred rivals Rulers Whirl and Tall Ben by two lengths in the 27th Playfair Mile. The longtime Portland Meadows and Playfair stars received so much backing that Charity Line, timed in 1:37 2/5, went off at nine-to-one and paid \$20.40. Jerry Taketa, headed for his third straight riding title, had picked up the mount when Doll left town.



Besides his success in livestock and race-horses, Seabeck loved fishing and is shown here with the record-breaking marlin he caught while angling off Cabo San Lucas.



Seabeck's final stakes winner was Charlie's Pride, who won the 2006 Portland Meadows Mile. The gelded son of Indian Charlie raced for Seabeck and Gene Barber, was trained by Robert Pierce and was ridden to his three-length win by Anne Sanguinetti.

Narrowly beaten for the track's two-year-old honors the year before, Charity Line was a unanimous pick for horse of the meeting, champion three-year-old and best handicap horse. Seabeck later said that season was his most enjoyable.

In later years, Seabeck bred his fine racemare Pretty as Picture, an earner of \$84,050 in the mid-1980s, to Black Mackee. Their offspring, Miss Manito, not only became a stakes winner of \$50,084 for J.C. Marshall, but produced black-type winners that earned nearly \$700,000.

Second Mile

Seabeck wasn't finished. In this century, he and big-time Kentucky cattle dealer Gene Barber formed a partnership to race Charlie's Pride, a fragile giant that didn't race until the end of his four-year-old year. Veteran trainer R.G. (Glenn) Pierce then saddled him to win four straight, capped on April 8, 2006, by a three-length triumph in the \$27,000 Portland Meadows Mile. And once they had become friends, Barber telephoned Seabeck almost daily for the rest of Jim's life.

Civic, Livestock Causes

Seabeck wasn't just active at the sales arena and the racetrack. He served widely in the cause of both industries and various civic activities.

He spent a decade (1987-96) on the Gonzaga University board of regents and 38 years as a board member for the LMA-American Livestock Association, including a term as president. He put in five years as president of the Western Meat Packers Association. He was also a member of the Southern Idaho Livestock Hall of Fame, which he had helped found.


He judged annual livestock shows in Denver, Portland, Auburn and Toppenish, Washington, and Billings, Montana. He was an avid supporter of the Spokane Junior Livestock Show, which presents a Jim Seabeck Award to 4-H clubs and FFA chapters. He developed a feed yard in Lebanon. He gave regularly and generously to parish causes.

Believed to have been an original member of the WTBOA, he spent most of the 1950s and '60s as a board member. He became president in 1954 and acted several years as the group's secretary. In 1993, he began

a six-year term on the Washington Horse Racing Commission.

On the racetrack, by his own accounting – and he had a fine memory and an inclination to keep track of things – horses he campaigned won 672 races, the last of them in 2008, in 13 states and British Columbia. He said he had auctioned about 8.8 million animals.

May I offer you my congratulations
for a job well done.


J. P. (Jim) SEABECK
 Owner

... Service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy in this world.

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Hobbyist, Family Man

In 1998, at 85, he took up golf. In 2003, on the 50th anniversary of Ocean Mist's victory, Emerald Downs named him honorary steward for the Longacres Mile. In 2008, at age 95, he successfully renewed his driver's license.

He fished for salmon out of Stuart Island, British Columbia, and for marlin off the Baja California coast at Cabo San Lucas. He hunted birds. He and Novia traveled to almost four dozen countries. He invested in restaurants, particularly Cattlemens, a California chain co-founded with Pete Gillham, who had crossed his path during Seabeck's second tenure in Twin Falls.

And his daughters say, despite his frequent absences, Jim Seabeck was very much part of a loving family.

"In 72 years, you're going to have ups and downs," said Kathleen Obschlager, second daughter and the family historian.

A lifelong love of information has led Jim Price to a long career in a variety of media-related fields that include horse racing, professional baseball, daily newspapers and collegiate athletics. His experience includes 14 years as publicist and track announcer at Spokane's Playfair Race Course, along with several years at Portland Meadows and tours of duty in California, Arizona, Nevada and Chicago's Arlington Park. He spent more than a decade as an editor and writer for The Spokesman-Review. In retirement, he has served on the Spokane Historic Landmarks Commission and has written and lectured on local horse racing and baseball history. In addition, he has completed research for a biography of the jazz singer Mildred Bailey. In 2014, he received the WTBOA's Mark Kaufman Media Award.

"Sometimes he was gone for days and weeks, but when he came home, she was on a pedestal, and he was on a pedestal. And he was extremely generous, doing a lot of things people don't know about."

Her youngest sister, Kristi Koivula, echoed that. "As soon as he walked in the door, he was number one. Dad was bigger than life, a fair man but, as a parent, also strict. Getting good grades was important. Dressing up to go to church was very important. Sunday dinners were very important. And Mother was certainly proud to have her name associated with some horses that were good winners."

After a quarter-century in the Spokane Valley, Jim and Novia Seabeck built a retirement home she had designed on Spokane's South Hill. She died on November 26, 2007. Three years later, a broken ankle slowed him down and led to his death on March 9, 2011. Their family, including the oldest daughter, Marlene Tenzler, had expanded to number 10 grandchildren, 20 great-grandchildren and four great-great-grandchildren.

Late in life, considering the demise of Playfair and Yakima Meadows, Seabeck turned pessimistic about racing's future. In particular, he was frustrated by the lack of progress as the industry wrestled with competition from alternative gaming and the reality of off-track betting options that had begun to support the sport in other states.

"Washington has been very slow," he said,

suggesting that an aggressive stance might have better sustained the state's breeders, horse owners, the tracks and the racing fans.

Ralph Vacca, retired from decades as general manager of the WTBOA, sympathized with Seabeck's feelings, while recognizing they reflected his nature and his well-developed loyalty to the eastern part of the state.

"He was a forward thinking, out-of-the-box guy, a mover and a shaker," Vacca said, "a little bit out in front of the pack. He was progressive at a time when the politicians were more conservative. So people in the industry on the West Side believed 'we can't expand gambling.' But Jim was a thinker and a doer, someone who would call up and say 'We've got to do this, and we've got to do that.'"

And for Jim Seabeck, doing things is what he did. ■