



STANDING
AT THE
WATER'S
EDGE

*Bob Straub's
Battle for the Soul
of Oregon*

CHARLES K. JOHNSON

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For Ken,

Who dove into the choppy waters of Oregon politics—and made a difference that will long outlive him. This book is dedicated to all those like him, who put their heart and soul into public service.

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Why don't we learn in Oregon? We should be planning for the future, the long-range future, not just for today and tomorrow. The strength and success and best hope for Oregon's future economic development and well-being lies in our ability today to clearly foresee, plan for, and protect long-range needs. Our beach resource is a limited resource. The demand for it, the need for it, the value of its beauty is stronger and stronger every day...

A few individuals, a few shortsighted promotional type organizations... are beating the drums for this beach route as a way for them to make a quick dollar and destroy, in the process, their most valuable asset, which creates these business values. Gentlemen, they would sell out too quickly and too cheaply. They would use up an irreplaceable capital resource for the immediate income that it would produce. I can only say that I know of no successful business that operates on this short-sighted principle that'll long survive.

—State Treasurer Robert W. Straub

Recorded Testimony before the Oregon State Highway Commission
Hearing on the Cape Kiwanda – Neskowin Section Improvements to the
Oregon Coast Highway, November 29, 1967, Tillamook Elks Club Social
Hall, Tillamook, Oregon

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Foreword

This is a book about a fascinating man that a few Oregonians really knew and so many of us *thought* we knew. It is a long overdue biography of Governor Bob Straub.

Bob was a doer, not a talker. He had a vision for Oregon. He knew what needed to be done and he just went about doing it—with no fanfare, no study groups, and no blue ribbon committees. I guess that was one of the reasons I grew to like him so much. He was, in his style anyway, a conservative.

My first awareness of Robert W. Straub was when I became a freshman Republican member in the Oregon House of Representatives in 1959. Bob was already established over in the State Senate. He was a Democrat but not part of the power structure over there; however, this did not mean he was a shadow in that body. He made his presence known!

His star, however, really came into full light in 1964 when he upset incumbent State Treasurer Howard Belton, who was a highly respected figure in Oregon politics. Bob ran a very aggressive campaign promising to invest the state's money better and Oregonians came to his side.

Bob Straub was an exceptional state treasurer. He set the bar very high for those who came after him. He came up with the concept of investing state money in the stock market, which was considered risky in those days. In the 1960s, that was a bold step but it has paid off handsomely for our state funds. It made it possible for state employees to have secure pensions during times when the state budget was very restricted and, in turn, saved money to the benefit of all Oregonians. That took political courage and rare foresight.

Bob was a sincere and passionate advocate for the environment and led Governor Tom McCall on those issues in the early years. He was more in touch with the environmental concerns of Oregonians, such as protecting the beaches and cleaning up the Willamette River. He had so many innovative ideas including, for example, the Willamette Greenway plan. Tom McCall skillfully grabbed these concepts and made them his own, but it must be known from whence came the seed.

Bob and I ran against each other twice for governor. While we always remained personally cordial and respectful during those races, there was no mistaking his desire to win. He believed in himself and in his vision of Oregon, and he knew the frustration of watching government from the sidelines. A fearless competitor, he also understood and respected the difference between hard campaigning and destructive politics. I appreciate the deep civility with which he conducted himself in his campaigns and as a man. There are so

many memories. Among them: during debates Bob would say that he “chose to *come*” to Oregon and I would reply that I “chose to *stay*” in Oregon.

Bob handed me my first, and only, political defeat, in the race for governor in 1974. As I said at the time, the people gave me a mandate to go back into the family rug business. He was just too well known and popular and his style of government activism was in favor with the voters.

I would not have run again in 1978 if I had not felt Bob was vulnerable. From the first, he didn’t seem to be getting very good press as governor, maybe in reaction to the very different style he had from Governor McCall, and the public, the press, and even his supporters were having trouble getting access to him. Bob also had a full plate of difficult and controversial issues during his tenure, including a major drought and the continuing energy crisis, along with a lot of fighting over land-use planning and timber harvesting. Plus, years of government activism had left people feeling overtaxed.

My campaign positions on the issues matched the public mood better in 1978 than they had four years earlier. People were ready to slow down and put Oregon’s house in order. I defeated former Governor McCall in the primary and Governor Straub in the general election. It was the end of an era.

A marvelous thing about Bob Straub was that he was who he was—he could never be someone else. At times, he might have wanted to have Tom McCall’s way with words. Nevertheless, his warmth, great sense of humor, and frankness charmed people. It’s a mystery to me why it took so long for his campaign to realize that. I do not think I could have defeated him if he had allowed people to see him as he was.

After the election, I appreciated Bob’s mature approach in helping our administration make a smooth transition to office. Though there were things that I set out to change, I found state government in good shape from Straub’s stewardship. My unofficial slogan was, “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it.” For the most part, our agencies were serving the people very well.

As I said at the beginning, Bob Straub was a doer, not a talker. He has passed on to all of us the priceless inheritance of his life’s work. I always sensed that Bob and his family understood what an important contribution he made to the state and that he succeeded in making a lasting mark for both our finances and our livability. Oregon is fortunate that Bob Straub took the plunge into politics, and his successes are our legacy.

Victor G. Atiyeh
Governor of Oregon (1979-1987)

Introduction

Robert W. Straub is best remembered today as a warm and genuine human being, a first-rate state treasurer, and an average governor. He served a four-year term as governor after what are generally viewed now as the eight glorious years of Tom McCall. McCall was, without a doubt, the toughest act to follow in Oregon political history, so it is easy to see why these impressions linger.

But these generalizations do not do justice to Straub and what he has meant to Oregon. For one thing, Bob Straub was more than merely first-rate as state treasurer; he was a national leader and the best that Oregon has ever seen. His investment reforms were revolutionary and vigorously opposed by the state's large banks, which had profited from the previous system. Under Straub's persistent leadership, Oregon was an early pioneer of state investment using the "prudent man" approach, as it was called in those days. Government funds were invested as any prudent investor would his or her own money in stocks, bonds, real estate, mortgages, and private loans. Straub was a state investment innovator. To keep political favor from influencing investment decisions, Straub had the good sense to establish an appointed Oregon Investment Council, which selected private money managers from throughout the country, based on their performance, to invest Oregon's money. The system of using outside money managers was unique to Oregon at the time and, as carefully implemented by Straub, his fellow members of the state's investment council, and their successors, worked extraordinarily well for decades.

Straub's reforms have saved Oregon taxpayers billions of dollars over the last forty years and helped tens of thousands of state and local employees to retire comfortably. The investment program was so successful that it was imitated in states, counties, municipalities, and school districts across the country and is accepted as standard government financial policy today.

Mark Hatfield, as a partisan Republican governor when Democrat Straub upset fellow Republican State Treasurer Howard Belton in 1964, was not an early fan of the brash newcomer. But he came to appreciate Straub's financial vision and, in later years, frequently referred to him, without irony or hyperbole, as "the Alexander Hamilton of Oregon."¹

Regarding Straub's alleged leadership failings, the Tom McCall we know today—a heroic figure who, to reverse his own hilariously self-effacing quote to the contrary, *is* viewed as a "giant statue framed against a red sky"²—might not have reached his epic potential without his rival Bob Straub aggressively pursuing a strong environmental agenda and pressing McCall hard in their

two gubernatorial races. When looking back on those heroic days, admiring the “giant statue” of McCall etched against a flaming sky, a discerning eye can see, looming on the edge of the light, another enormous figure. It is upon these twin pillars of Tom McCall and Bob Straub that the Oregon Story of the 1960s and ’70s is built.

During their first campaign in 1966 and throughout McCall’s first term as governor, Straub repeatedly took the initiative with environmental proposals. From supporting preservation of public beaches to the Willamette Greenway proposal, Straub frequently had McCall playing catch-up—which the veteran television commentator and his crack staff did brilliantly. The popularity of environmental protection as an issue grew stronger as each man tried to better the other in their battle of ideas.

We can never know whether McCall would have shown the same level of environmental leadership without his rivalry with Straub. McCall’s legacy culminated in the development of Oregon’s crowning achievement of the period: the creation of a system of statewide land-use planning designed to protect farm and forest land. Governor Straub, succeeding McCall, had the thankless and very complex task of implementing this groundbreaking legislation. Bob Straub weathered the backlash of developers and other aggrieved landowners. He and his administration firmly established many of the environmental gains made during the McCall years, while preparing the state for its transformation from a timber- to a high-tech-based economy. One thing we know for certain is that the Straub-McCall rivalry, and bipartisan agreement on environmental values and wise economic growth, helped make these achievements possible.

And this leads to the final element of Straub’s legacy. Bob Straub always kept the goal of a better state first and foremost in his mind. He was an intensely competitive man and not above petty thoughts, but when it came right down to it, his goal was to have good public policy regardless of public credit or partisan advantage. During the fourteen years that Straub was the Oregon Democratic Party standard bearer, he did not stoop to low political tactics. Even during his extremely aggressive younger days in politics, when the political campaign was over he did his best to make government run efficiently and well. What some felt was a weakness for Straub—his directness and lack of political guile—was in fact one of his greatest strengths. It is easier to appreciate now, after years of watching the tragic destructiveness of government leaders making decisions based on popular gimmicks that will help them, or hurt their opponents, in their next political campaigns, that honesty and bipartisan cooperation are essential for good government to flourish. Honest discourse with the public is difficult when office holders

know that unpopular honesty will be used as a lever against them, regardless of the consequences to good government.

In these pages I hope to show you a man who was decent, kind hearted, and strong willed; a frequently awkward political figure who had to overcome stuttering in public speaking; a man who periodically suffered from severe bouts of depression, yet always earnestly did his best for his dearly loved wife and family, his friends, and his chosen state; a visionary whose modest manner and rough-hewn exterior sometimes caused more polished contemporaries to underestimate him. Bob Straub was an Oregon original, in good company with the other charming oddballs and unlikely prophets who have made the politics of this state so creative and interesting.

Please allow me to make one final admission: I am not an impartial observer. I was raised a Bob Straub believer.

My father, Ken Johnson, was Bob's unofficial campaign manager on his first statewide campaign to become Oregon's state treasurer in 1964 and was appointed Straub's deputy after he won. Dad was Straub's chief strategist in his first two (bitterly disappointing, from my young perspective) races against Tom McCall for governor and his pro forma reelection as treasurer. I learned much of the political history of that period from the savvy, but clearly biased, perspective of my father during dinner table conversations.

Being involved in politics at this optimistic and exciting time hooked me forever. Our family hobby, other than some summer backpacking and mountain climbing, was distributing literature for Straub and other Democratic candidates or gathering signatures for ballot measures. My brother and I went to political rallies at an age when other kids in Oregon were learning how to ski, or hunt, or fish. We believed we were changing the world for the better. And we were.

This book is my attempt to recapture some of those feelings and remind all of us just how important it is that we act on them. Bob Straub's life is an example of how one person with good ideas, a good heart, and tremendous determination, working with other like-minded people, truly can change at least one small corner of the world for the better.

Bob Straub stood at the water's edge of Oregon politics, and casting aside his fears and personal difficulties, dove in. We honor him and those like him, each in our own way, by doing the same.

Lessons of the Prune Orchard

You cannot dream yourself into a character; you must hammer and forge yourself one.

James A. Froude, English historian (1818–1894)

Watching Bob Straub striding through the mud in his work boots on his farm in the West Salem hills in Oregon, you had no clue that he began his years as a city boy.

Pounding in fence posts, cutting firewood with his chainsaw, or planting trees on his land further west, in Willamina, were Bob's meditations, reflecting a work ethic and a love of the outdoors he learned from his parents and carried as a personal touchstone throughout his life.

Bob Straub chose to see himself as a simple man of the soil, but the maze of fascinating contradictions that make up any person's life seem particularly complex in his case. Growing up the youngest in a rough-and-tumble household of competitive, prankster brothers, a father who was "a disciplinarian," who "insist[ed] on a high level of performance," and a loving, "very religious ... but tolerant" mother,¹ Straub's upbringing was, on its surface, not atypical for the son of a self-made professional in the early part of the 1900s. But the hurts he suffered growing up, both physically and emotionally, and how he succeeded in overcoming them are a compelling story made even more so by his becoming an important public figure.

Given Straub's rural predilections, it is somewhat ironic that he was born and spent his first nine years in the civilized, "citified" household of an eminent San Francisco lawyer. When their youngest son, Robert William, was born on May 6, 1920, Thomas and Mary Straub and their family lived in a pleasant row house on the corner of 11th Avenue and Anza Street, in the Richmond District. Thomas Straub, a stern father and respected attorney, represented Pacific Gas & Electric, a rapidly growing Northern California utility company, eventually serving as their chief counsel. Mary Tulley Straub sustained home and hearth for Thomas and their five children with a flourish and a kind heart. The infant Bob already had three brothers: Thomas, Jr., referred to as "Tom" or "TJ" to distinguish him from his father, age nine, Frank, age six, and Jim, age two, and, a sister—the apple of her father's

eye—Jean, age four. Young Jean promptly named him “Bib,” a childish mispronunciation that stuck with him as his friendly nickname within the family for the rest of his life.

It was a close-knit family and the years in San Francisco were good, Jean recalled: “My earliest memories in childhood were of bicycling and skating with my brothers on the hilly San Francisco streets. We used to sail down the hills through intersections and we almost always took our dog Jack,” an energetic and friendly old-style cocker spaniel with a curly brown coat and a docked tail. “We enjoyed the city—going to the zoo, swimming in an enormous pool. Every Saturday our parents would take us to Luca’s, an Italian restaurant. It had wonderful Italian pasta and sourdough French bread. I spent a lot of time with my little brothers Jim and Bob.”²

But life wasn’t always idyllic for the kids. A disturbing incident when Bob was around four years old, and an older brother’s reaction to it, illustrates the tenacity of the family character. One day Jean and Jim, eight and six at the time, with little “Bib” tagging along, were out roaming with Jack and came to the Fleischmann pool, a huge indoor public saltwater pool perched on a cliff over the Pacific, at the end of Golden Gate Park, about a mile and a half from home. As Jean remembers it, “We wanted to go in, but we couldn’t bring our dog. A man, who was very nice, said, ‘I’ll keep your dog for you, kiddies. You go in and have fun.’ So we left Jack with the man while we went inside to look around. When we came back out, the man was gone. He stole our dog.”³

The children were crushed. But older brother Frank just couldn’t accept that Jack was gone. He spent every afternoon and all day on weekends on his bike combing the city looking for the dog. Frank continued this personal mission for several months.

One Saturday morning, Frank called home to his father and said, “I found Jack!” He had spotted the dog with a man he didn’t know and followed them to a second-story flat. Frank was calling from a pay phone on the corner, keeping the dog thief’s place in sight.

“I’ll be right there,” Thomas said, and hopped into their 1916 Cadillac touring car. It was the same car they took on camping trips, with running boards, folding panels, racks and curtains on the inside—a sort of early prototype of the minivan. Jack liked to lie on the running board and put his head on the front fender, feeling the wind whip past him. Leaving Frank waiting below, Thomas walked up to the second floor and knocked on the door. When the man opened the door, Jack clearly recognized Straub, jumping up and barking with friendly excitement. Thomas Straub said, “I’ve come to pick up my dog.” The other man stared back at him and said, “That isn’t your dog; it’s ours.”

Straub took Jack's new family to court. The alleged dog thief told the judge that Jack was a rare and expensive breed that he'd imported from Italy a few years before. The dog disappeared and now they had finally found him. Thomas Straub told the judge that he had rescued Jack from the pound and had him for several years. The judge quickly pronounced his verdict. He told the other man, "I'm sorry sir, but I've known Mr. Straub for many years and if he says that the story he told me is true, then I believe him."⁴

Thomas Jefferson Straub had grown up in a family where honesty, and a lot of hard work, was expected of children from a very early age. He was born in 1879 in Liberty Township, Montgomery County, Kansas and raised there in the "poor God-forsaken, dry wheat land country" around Cherryville.⁵ This is in the southeast corner of Kansas, to the north of what is now Oklahoma, then Indian Territory. Thomas' father, Francis Straub, was a Civil War veteran from Wisconsin, born in 1846 of immigrant Swiss-German parents.⁶ Francis had suffered permanent damage to his feet from frostbite at the notorious Andersonville Confederate prison camp. After the war, Francis settled on the free land offered veterans, in the Kansas prairie.

Francis Straub met Elizabeth Wilkinson, a Canadian of Scots-Irish descent, in Kansas and they married in 1871. Thomas the third of four children—the second son, with a twin sister, Catherine. Francis Straub was said to be a severe father, who wasn't afraid to dole out physical punishment to his boys if they didn't obey him.⁷ Thomas appears to have been a diligent student, a very hard worker, and someone who learned by the example of his hard-working parents to be prudent with money.

In May of 1898, at age nineteen and fresh from high school, Thomas followed in his father's footsteps and enlisted in the Army for the Spanish-American War—joining the 20th Kansas Volunteer Infantry. The country was responding to the drumbeat in the newspapers calling for "freedom for Cuba" from corrupt Spanish rule. Many young men joined to become part of the liberating force. The 20th Kansas Regiment's fate was not to liberate Cuba, however. Instead they languished for months in San Francisco, with poor supplies and, for a time, without uniforms. The daily newspapers of San Francisco referred to them facetiously as "Kansas scarecrows," and reporters wrote "humorous" pieces about them.⁸ Though Camp Merritt's conditions were squalid, the lengthy stay allowed Thomas to fall in love with the city and he vowed to come back and live there some day. Eventually, he went with several regiments of soldiers who were shipped through Hawaii to occupy the recently surrendered Philippines. Arriving on December 6, 1898, they soon discovered that the Filipinos were not nearly as delighted to see them as they might have expected. The Spanish had surrendered to the Americans to avoid



Thomas Straub

being defeated by Filipino forces that had them pinned in the garrison within Manila. It soon became clear that the Americans weren't going to allow the Filipinos self-rule—that didn't happen until forty-eight years later, in 1946.⁹ A couple of months after he arrived, a Filipino insurrection began.

Caught up in this suddenly fierce fighting, the 20th Kansas Regiment proved brave under fire and distinguished itself as the most aggressive of the American forces. Their commander, Colonel Frederick Funston was made Brigadier General when the 20th Regiment left the Philippines in September 1899, “after eight months in the trenches, on the firing line and leading charges over swamps and through jungles on the other side of the globe.”¹⁰ On a much less heroic note, General Funston was charged by Private Charles Brenner, also with the Kansas Regiment, with ordering the killing of all Filipino prisoners after one battle. The Army chose not to investigate further because “it is not thought that his charge is very grievous under the circumstances then existing, as it was very early in the war, and the patience of our men was under great strain.” In addition to these charges, there were reports of village burnings, civilian massacres, and widespread civilian death from disease and starvation in unsanitary detainment camps.¹¹

It is unclear exactly what Private Straub saw and participated in outside of the recorded battles during his nine months in the Philippines since he almost never spoke of it, but toward the end of his life he told his grandson he had been a member of “Funston’s raiders.” He had “tramped through

the jungles” trying to catch the nationalist leader Aguinaldo. “We went into villages and we did things you can’t even imagine,” Thomas said.¹² The “Fighting 20th” Kansas Regiment returned home to a hero’s welcome. They had fought in nineteen battles and lost 68 men from fighting and illness, with 129 wounded.¹³ Thomas Straub no doubt benefited from the good feelings the people in his community had for the returning soldiers, though soon after he returned, he suffered another shock when his twin sister, Catherine, died from typhoid during an epidemic. At twenty-one, Thomas J. Straub had seen and felt the effects of the death of friends, family, and nameless strangers firsthand both overseas and at home. His life experiences had already forged a very hard and determined young man.

Not long after returning from war, Thomas became acquainted with the Tulley sisters, taking an instant liking to Mary—and she to him. Mary, three years his junior, had just finished high school and planned to get a degree at Baker University to become a school teacher.¹⁴

Mary Ellen Tulley was born in Coffeetown, Kansas, and raised in a well-established family in Independence. Her father, Mark Tulley, was a merchant, known for his integrity and honesty, who sold fine china, silverware and crystal. In a curious foreshadowing of Bob Straub’s future career, Mark Tulley, was later elected State Treasurer of Kansas in 1906, serving three two-year terms. The Tulleys, like the Straubs, were staunch “Kansas Republicans,” meaning, according to Bob Straub’s later description “they were unyielding, unbending, undeviating, conservative, consistent Republicans,” and they raised their children to be the same.¹⁵

Thomas also decided to study to become a teacher, completing two years of “History, English, and Plane Geometry” at Kansas State Normal School (now Emporia State University), but he never taught and instead began saving money to go to law school. He “was very lucky to get a job” as a registrar of property deeds “that paid him some good money.”¹⁶

In 1907, when Thomas had saved enough money, he enrolled in the Bachelor of Law degree program at the University of Michigan Law School—the largest law school in the country, with a sterling reputation.¹⁷ During his three years there he supplemented his savings in both typical and unusual fashion—as a law clerk and as a semi-professional boxer. He exchanged letters regularly with Mary Tulley, who was teaching elementary school, wooing her with words from nearly a thousand miles away.¹⁸

After completing Law School in 1910,¹⁹ undaunted by the massive earthquake that had struck San Francisco three years earlier, Thomas was still determined to move there. He traveled by train to the Bay Area to look for work. As a thirty-one-year-old law graduate, with years of work experience

and a strong level of self-possession, he was soon hired as an associate counsel for the newly merged private utility company, Pacific Gas & Electric. He telegraphed Mary to come out and join him. She telegraphed back, "If you want me, I'm in Kansas. You come here."²⁰ Thomas knew better than to question such a plain message. He went back to Kansas and they were married in Independence.

The chief counsel at Pacific Gas & Electric, a Mr. William Bradford Bosley,²¹ took Thomas under his wing and was soon grooming him to be his successor. PG&E was growing rapidly and expanding its system of gas and electricity throughout Northern California, providing an array of complicated legal challenges for their law department. Straub proved thorough, exacting, and efficient.

Because Thomas had been stimulated by his education and had always been a compulsive and inquisitive reader, he began to develop friendships with some of the intellectuals who were part of the San Francisco landscape. He became friends with the Hermann family, whose daughter, Rena, had married one of the most notorious radicals in the country—Tom Mooney—a leading organizer of the International Workers of the World, also known as the "Wobblies." Thomas Straub may have been offering the Mooneys legal advice, which they desperately needed during those years, as both Tom and Rena Mooney were charged with participating in a highly publicized railroad bombing during a labor dispute. The family argued Tom Mooney's innocence for years and many prominent Americans agreed and joined in the campaign for clemency.²² Straub didn't see his unofficial involvement with this legal issue as in conflict with his private sector employment. He was intellectually curious and open to discussing ideas with anyone—and was displaying a central Straub family trait: an admiration for "pluck" or "toughness," as Bob Straub would later describe it, even in, or perhaps especially in, defiant or independent ways. But when Mr. Bosley, a staunch conservative member of the local legal establishment, caught wind of Straub's involvement with Tom Mooney, this didn't sit well with his boss.

Bosley told Thomas Straub to be very careful with associating with the wrong kinds of people—that it could lead him to trouble.²³ The time, especially during and shortly after the First World War proved to hazardous for radical thinkers, with over ten thousand people rounded up and imprisoned during the infamous Palmer raids, merely for expressing what were deemed by the US government as treasonous beliefs and sedition against elected officials.²⁴

Straub took Bosley's warning seriously and was much more careful after that. Thomas Straub nevertheless continued to read voraciously and remain informed, a characteristic he successfully instilled in all of his children. He was

particularly fond of the writings of nineteenth-century social theoretician and philanthropist John Ruskin,²⁵ something that revealed Thomas' appreciation of the aesthetics and harmony of nature, and a noblesse oblige sense of duty toward the well being of all people. In addition to the Mooney case, Straub seemed notably affected by the legal unfairness of the infamous Sacco and Vanzetti case, in which two anarchists were executed in Massachusetts on extremely flimsy evidence, which became an international *cause celebre*. Thomas would occasionally offer the opinion, even years later, that the court decision was a travesty and a miscarriage of justice.²⁶ With these conversations and personal opinions, the attorney for Northern California's largest private utility company nevertheless passed along to his children his personal egalitarian belief that America's justice system should be fair and impartial for all and that it was, at times, desperately in need of reform.

Aside from this slight brush with radicalism, young Thomas Straub took an interest in more traditional civic service. Emulating his mentor Bosley's continued association with the Hastings College of Law, Straub became a lecturer for the San Francisco Law School, established in 1909 as a night school for working students. As someone who had to work his way through law school, he appreciated the chance to give back to others in the same position.²⁷ Straub served on a number of boards and commissions of various types, both substantial and ceremonial, from local school boards to state societies, throughout his life, setting an example of public service that Bob Straub, no doubt, took to heart.

The Straubs epitomized the prominent, solidly upper-middle-class American family of the early part of the twentieth century. "Mother and father loved to host parties and worked closely together to entertain dinner guests."²⁸ They worked beautifully and effortlessly as a team and followed the common pattern of division of labor by gender. Stern and cool with his boys, Thomas was expansive and understanding with others and well respected and admired in the community.

As a new bride in San Francisco, Mary had given up her career as a schoolteacher and became an outstanding homemaker and loving mother. She was "famous for unbelievably delicious cooking."²⁹ She not only enjoyed entertaining friends and neighbors, but also "never missed a beat to be worthwhile" with her children as well. She was careful and elaborate in creating unique birthday celebrations, writing personalized jingles and doggerel poetry for everyone at the party and leaving notes at each person's place setting.³⁰ She never failed to send birthday cards and thank you letters. Mary was careful with money, keeping close track of every single amount spent on groceries.³¹ Thomas was more given to making grand expenditures,



Mary Tulley Straub

though for a reason, such as his tailor-made suits, which were essential to creating a masterful image in court. Mary did have a fondness for beautiful china, something she learned to appreciate from her father's store in childhood. Mrs. Straub embroidered and crocheted, did a lot of sewing and was, all in all, an accomplished homemaker. She was also a loving mother, much more emotional than her more distant husband with her children. When Thomas was home, everything went exactly as he said. When he was gone, the house was full of laughter and fun.

Though Mary was not as strict in disciplining the children as her husband, she was very religious. She was raised and remained a faithful Methodist all of her life. Thomas was not in any way religious and would not join her at church. They left the decision up to the children, from an early age, as to whether they would go to church themselves. As they grew older, most of the children, including Bob, "took the pattern of Father, but would go to church occasionally because they loved Mother and wanted to keep her company."³² Thomas and Mary generally encouraged their children to be independent and develop their own ideas of how they wanted to live.



Straub children in San Francisco
from left: Jean, Tom (above), Bob (below), Jim, and Frank

In 1929, after the stock market crash and bank foreclosures caused upheaval for the entire country, Thomas and Mary made a drastic decision. Mary's sister Margaret and her husband Sam Urner were in trouble. They owned a prune and apricot orchard on San Antonio Road in Los Altos, California. Unfortunately, it would be more precise to say that the bank owned the orchard and was about to foreclose on them. To help them, the Straubs decided to buy the farm and move their family out of the city and forty-seven miles south into what was then farm and forest country.³³

The decision wasn't just a humanitarian gesture, but reflected Thomas and Mary's desire to breathe fresh country air again—and get out of the chilly San Francisco fog. During their time in San Francisco, they had continued to enjoy outings in the country, including camping in Redwoods out of their Cadillac touring car. In fact, just before moving to Los Altos the family spent two summers in the mountainous woods of nearby La Honda, camping in big tents the first year and then cabins the next. Thomas had a side job outside of PG&E representing a railroad tie company based there, so he arranged for his family to stay in the forest camp, along with the Urners, and even the kids' ill-tempered old grandfather, Francis, who came out all the way from Kansas. Those summers were idyllic and became legendary within family lore.

The kids ran through the woods, playing in the creek and chasing each other around with salamanders, which they called mud puppies or waterdogs. They picked blackberries and huckleberries and ate outdoors, at great long tables to accommodate everyone. Jean fell in love with a baby pig from a neighboring ranch and adopted him, naming him Louie after the farmer, Louie O'Neill. Louie—the pig, not the farmer—would wander under the table and bite people's toes.³⁴

Thomas saw another major benefit to moving to the farm, even though it meant a significant new commute for him. He was concerned that his boys were growing up too soft. Having worked physically hard in his younger years, he felt it would be good for his sons do the same. The orchards required many hours of strenuous toil. After contracting with a local family to tend to the apricots, he relied on his sons to work in the larger prune orchard. And it was hard, sweaty, backbreaking work, on top of their regular house chores and school work: pruning trees; picking, packing and drying fruit; hoeing weeds; and irrigating the orchard in the dry months.

That first year was a major adjustment for the boys, but the harvest was extremely important, as the Straubs were able to send large bags of prunes and apricots to family members throughout the country, who greatly appreciated having the food at a time when many were going hungry.³⁵ As time went on and the food value of the crop became less critical, Thomas had the boys replace the dead trees with native redwoods—a conservation lesson that Bob later followed himself on his own property.³⁶

When they first arrived, they found the farmhouse was a little small for the large family, so Thomas decided the boys should live in the garage, which was a large, separate two-story building that they split into rooms for them. It was part of his scheme for having them become more independent. The boys loved it. They could hatch their own plots out there and slip out undetected for mischief at all hours of the night. Thomas took a sly pleasure in knowing they were up to no good; as long as their chores were done, they weren't directly disobeying his or Mary's wishes, and he didn't know the details.³⁷ He felt it was a sign of their independence, which, along with the healthy dose of hard labor in the orchards, was helping them develop the "pluck" they would need to be successful men.

He was most concerned about his eldest son, Thomas J. Straub Jr., known as Tom or T.J. T.J. rarely found favor from Father and could do no wrong with Mother, who would console him if his feelings were hurt.³⁸ Of all the children, T.J. was the most disrupted by the move to Los Altos. He had been attending a good private college prep school in San Francisco and was now missing his senior year, forced to finish at the local rural public high school



The Straub's "garage," in Los Altos, converted into a separate dwelling for the four Straub boys

in Mountain View. The sibling rivalry the other boys felt toward Tom didn't help matters. He could be high-handed with his brothers and they resented him for it.³⁹ They were quick with the "smut talking," as they called it—talking bad about someone, not necessarily swearing or using foul language—and the "high and mighty" Tom was the butt of a lot of it, especially from his nearest brother in age, Frank, who was the master of under-the-breath sour comments. Jim could do a fair imitation of Tom's "sissy" talking, giving the younger boys hours of guilty enjoyment at Tom's expense.⁴⁰

Tom's prize possession was a Model T that he had bought with money he earned. One day he was very excited about a big date he had that night with a really special girl. Frank decided to play a nasty prank on him. He organized his younger brothers to join him in peeing on the engine block. For good measure, he smeared limburger cheese all over it. Once it heated up it is said to have made quite a stench.⁴¹

Other than in exacting envious revenge on his older brother, or, perhaps because of it, Frank was the model child in following his father's wishes. He always completed his chores on time, without complaining, did his schoolwork, and was generally the most dutiful of all the Straub children. He is the one who seemed to take his father's dictums of hard work and tough-mindedness most to heart.

The younger three kids, Jean, Jim, and "Bib" continued to be something of a happy pack when they first moved down to Los Altos. Her task was to look out for her little brothers, who, at Jim's instigation, were looking for ways to get into trouble. Jim, two years older than "Bib," was the family layabout and mischief maker. Everyone agrees he was very intelligent, but he resisted discipline and frequently found his father's disfavor and punishment. He and

Bob used to have great fun with a go-cart they built. They and their friend, Ordway Manning, who was Bob's age, would pull it to the top of a big hill on their way to elementary school each day and then ride it back down on the way home.⁴² They found even more challenging and dangerous precipices to plunge down and frequently had to repair the cart, and themselves, after crashes. As the children got older, Jim remained incorrigible—refusing to do his chores and skipping school.⁴³ He and Bob used to spend hours hanging out with a hobo at the back of the ranch. Though Jim was the widest reader in the family, he also learned to like drinking, leading to more run-ins with his father and more disapproval. Eventually, his drinking became a serious problem.

One infamous incident of Jim's wild behavior as a boy involved the Straub's Slovenian neighbors, the Janovics, who were hired to manage the Straub's apricot orchard. During one Sunday in apricot harvest season, Helen Janovic, the mother of the family, burst into the local Methodist Church where Mary was attending the morning service. Hurrying over to her, she said urgently and loud enough for others around her to hear: "Miss Mary, come quick. Mr. Jim, he drive fast. He no stop. Go 'round corner." Jim had been driving the farm truck crazily through the orchards, spinning out in the soft, squishy dirt and coming really close to the people on ladders harvesting the fruit. No one was hurt, but Jim was in serious trouble—again.⁴⁴ Bob enjoyed Jim's pranks and wild behavior and took part in some of it, but he was mostly cautious about initiating anything and couldn't completely enjoy doing things he knew would get them into trouble. He was responsible and conscientious, though not as much as Frank, who didn't partake in Jim's shenanigans.

Bob was a thinker. He thought about what he wanted to do and who he wanted to become. As his sister, Jean, said years later, "He came into life being a thoughtful person."⁴⁵

His reflective nature didn't stop him from demonstrating that much-admired Straub spunk from time to time. Shortly after they arrived on the farm, young Bob, all of ten years old, showed a little entrepreneurial spirit. Mary Straub found out about it from Mrs. Parker, a proper old gal who owned a Cadillac Victoria and looked as formidable as the car she drove. The Straubs' house was about four hundred yards from the main road. Mrs. Parker came to the door one sunny day, saying, "Mary, I don't know if you know what is going on outside. Your youngest son has a stand under the almond tree," she continued. "He's selling your apricot jam and it's very popular." Bob had struck gold with his mother's massive jam hoard in the basement, giving an early clue to his future knack for business.⁴⁶

After they moved to Los Altos, Bob developed a problem with a corneal ulcer in his eye, probably from irritation from the dust and dirt of the orchards. He spent a lot of time by himself, being home schooled by his mother for long stretches.⁴⁷ She and Bob became very close and he absorbed a lot of her good, warm qualities. Like all of the children, he was encouraged to read, and he derived great pleasure and learned much from books on a wide variety of subjects. It was something he continued to do for the rest of his life. But it was also during this time that his natural shyness increased and he began stuttering—a speaking problem that he struggled to overcome throughout the rest of his life.⁴⁸

When Bob began attending Mountain View High School, a wonderful caring English teacher, Carolyn Woods, took an interest in the tall, shy boy in her classroom. She could see from his writing that he was a deep, clear thinker. She saw tremendous potential in Bob and suggested he tackle the stuttering problem head on, encouraging him to join the debate team. He did and, with painstaking hard work, drilling and recitation, he became very successful in competitive debating.⁴⁹ This was an enormous accomplishment and made real the family advice that he could find success in life with persistence.

Bob, like his brother Frank, took to the hard physical work and chores of the ranch, deriving pleasure and a sense of accomplishment from completing difficult labor. The boys didn't get paid for the work they did on the ranch, so had to look for employment elsewhere to earn money. As a youngster Bob worked as a sub-contractor for future U.S. Senator Alan Cranston, six years his elder, on a paper route in Mountain View.⁵⁰

Bob got a job working digging ditches and moving pipe for PG&E's Gas Department in Grass Valley, California the summer after he turned sixteen. He was lonely there away from his family, but felt the accomplishment of surviving the demanding labor and making it on his own. While in Grass Valley, he wrote a touching, and telling, letter to his mother:

Friday P.M.

Mamma, I have been trying to think of some way, some sure concrete way, to assure you of my ever deep love and adoration. I realize now, by writing it is impossible to make you believe just what you mean and in how many ways the thought of you is the strongest influence. The only way you will ever be able to know what good you have done is for me to so act and live that you can see the impression you make.

Lovingly, Bob⁵¹

Bob was already thinking about service to the community. What would be the most useful thing for him to do? He acknowledged later that, though



Christmas card photo from Los Altos, featuring this note from Mary Straub: “A Merry Christmas to you all, from My Darling Tom, my five angel children and the old lady, who, as you see, is fast getting to the foot of the line. Lots of Love, Mary.

N.B. Won't fail to notice Jack, our good old faithful dog.”

From left, Thomas, Thomas Jr. (T.J.), Frank, Jean, Mary, Jim, Bob,
and (below) Jack.

his parents were both Republicans, he became interested in politics in high school and went in a different direction. Bob was influenced by the New Deal, as he acknowledged later: “I was impressed with the involvement the government took under Roosevelt’s leadership to deal with the very obvious, terrible economic and social problems that existed all over the country and I’ve been a Democrat ever since.”⁵²

As Bob mastered his stuttering problem and gained confidence in his public speaking through his time on the debate team, his grade point average showed marked improvement. He was earning mostly As by his senior year.⁵³ This upswing in self-confidence was so dramatic that Bob decided to run for student body president that year—and won.⁵⁴ Miss Woods, his English teacher, suggested he consider getting a degree at a top university somewhere in the East, where he could further establish his independence. He chose Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, because of its bucolic setting and its Ivy League reputation. Much to his surprise, he was admitted.

In the summer of 1937, after his senior year in high school, Bob's sister, Jean, was graduating from Stanford and preparing for a trip with two girl friends to Europe. As was understood in the Straub family, girls received different treatment from boys. "I had a 'Kings X'," Jean said later. "I wasn't favored by my mother, but I was by my father."⁵⁵ In addition to having college paid for, she also received a car to drive and piano to practice upon, Jean had already taken two ship cruise trips with her older cousin Bernice: one on the Inland Passage to Skagway, Alaska (playing a lot of pinochle), and another through the Panama Canal to New York City.⁵⁶ This time, Bob was the designated driver for Jean and her friends Harle Garth and Ruth Given across the country to New York City, where their ship awaited. It was Bob's first big road trip and he planned to make the most of it. After taking the young ladies to their berth, Bob drove Jean's car, nicknamed "Judy," to Colorado, where his brother Frank was finishing a degree in chemistry from the University of Denver. Together they drove south, through the mountains of the Sierra Madre in Mexico, though neither knew more than a few words of Spanish. Bob was very impressed by the Indians, dressed in pure white, walking for miles along the dusty roads. He and Frank made it to Mexico City, with its centuries-old Spanish buildings tilting sideways, built upon the ruins of the Aztec capital. They returned north along the Pacific Coast, back to Los Altos. Bob was mesmerized by his experience. It was the beginning of his life-long love of Mexico and its people.

Knowing he would have to pay his own way, Bob needed to earn some money for college, so he took a job in a logging camp in Camino, California, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. It was hard work and a little lonely—Bob wasn't much of a roughneck or a hard drinker, like many of the men up there. Complaining about the maniac driving of his coworkers in one letter home to his parents he confesses:

I think I feel the qualms of homesickness more and more as I grow older. It normally should be the other way I suppose. But the older I get, the more of life I learn. And the more I learn the greater is my love for home.⁵⁷

A later, unintentionally self-revealing letter to Jean, responding to her word that she had sold her car, 'was both whimsical and poignant.⁵⁸ Lamenting the loss, young Bob reflects:

Upon thinking it over, I wonder if it wasn't better you sold Judy. Remember Judy had lived a pretty hard life and maybe she had wanted to just break down for a long time but simply couldn't do it—to you. Now that she is out of your hands she can act as she feels and not feel bad about breaking down. You know the way sometimes something will be just tearing you

apart internally and yet you carry on and never let anyone know it. But if you could break down when you feel that way, you feel much better. So with Judy, it must be. Remember the time we went about 100 miles to Paso Robles over lonely mountain roads in Judy without any gas? You even slept you were so sure she would make it. No—it is probably for the better.

In the same letter to Jean, Bob apologizes for not writing more compellingly:

I realize, Jean, that my letters are completely lacking in interest and suspense and everything else which should be embodied in a good letter. For all that I'm sorry but it's awfully hard to write anything up here. It's dark about 7 p.m. now so I have little time to write or read anymore. I think though that in a week or two I'm going to Sacramento and get a secondhand Coleman lantern. Then I'll completely ignore my roommate's ignominious (sic) looks. It worries me to think that I'm slipping mentally like I feel I am. Also if I read at night I can have something to occupy my brain all next day.⁵⁹

From the forlorn tone of the sensitive eighteen-year-old Bob Straub's letters, one might assume this was one of the worst times of his young life. At the time, it may have been. Later he looked back with pride at the toughness of enduring the camp, its hard work and its deprivations, both physical and mental. It was from his forest work camp employment, the discipline he learned in the prune orchard, and other similar experiences that Bob Straub discovered his core of inner strength and the endurance to persevere for the rest of his life.

“Chuck Johnson has captured the Bob Straub I knew both professionally and personally. His work is one bookend—Brent Walth’s biography of Tom McCall is the other—for the Tom and Bob Show that made Oregon history in the 1960s and 1970s.”

FLOYD J. MCKAY, former Oregon journalist and historian

“*Standing at the Water’s Edge* is an emotionally deep study of one of Oregon’s colorful political characters, Bob Straub, whose accomplishments and failures Johnson captures beautifully. It is a warm, witty biography that doesn’t take short cuts with the truth—an important book about an exciting period in Oregon’s history, and a fascinating read.”

BARBARA ROBERTS, Governor of Oregon (1991-1995)

“Bob Straub was a doer, not a talker... Oregon is fortunate that Bob Straub took the plunge into politics, and his successes are our legacy.”

VICTOR G. ATIYEH, Governor of Oregon (1979-1987)

Standing at the Water’s Edge chronicles the life of a unique—perhaps unlikely—political figure in Oregon history: Governor Robert W. Straub. A man of intelligence, creativity, and fascinating contradictions, Straub overcame personal challenges and inevitable comparisons to his charismatic predecessor and friendly Republican rival, Tom McCall, to have a lasting impact on Oregon and the nation.

Standing at the Water’s Edge explores Straub’s significant legacy, particularly his influence on McCall and his leadership in financial and environmental matters. The book reveals much of Straub’s warm personal story along with his secret struggles, including a battle with depression while governor. It also captures the flavor of Oregon’s political “golden age” of the sixties and seventies, describing why and how it ended.

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