

Preface: Robert S. Hunter

Every person who does research on the history of rowing in Canada before 1933 owes a huge debt to Robert S. Hunter, the author of *Rowing in Canada since 1848*¹.

Robert Sinclair "Bob" Hunter used primary sources such as documents of the Canadian Association of Amateur Oarsmen, print sources which were contemporary to the events he describes, letters from correspondents who gave him information about rowing in their areas, plus first-hand interviews with some of the great names of Canadian rowing who were still alive, and his own personal experiences.

In spite of the occasional typo and inaccuracy, his book remains the basis of much of what we find on line or in print relating to the early history of rowing in Canada. Too often he is not credited, so I want to make it clear that I relied heavily on Bob Hunter in the early chapters of this history. Without his work, my task would have been much more difficult.

Thank you Bob Hunter.

He was born in Kaslo British Columbia on March 27, 1903. He died young, of a heart attack, aged 45, on March 25, 1950 in Laguna Beach, Orange County, California. California Death Records give a Social Security Number, so he was an American citizen at the time of his death.

We can fill in some of the gap between 1903 and 1950. Both the 1911 and 1921 census records show him living with his parents Samuel and Agnes in British Columbia. Although his parents remained in British Columbia, he must have moved to Ontario shortly after the 1921 census, because Bob went to the University of Toronto that year, and graduated from University College in 1925. It was at university that he took up rowing.

This was a great time to row for Varsity. At the Canadian Henley in 1920, an Argonaut R.C. crew made up of University of Toronto men, won both the Junior and Senior Eights. The next year, University of Toronto, this time rowing in their own colours, again took the Junior and Senior Eights. In 1922 and 1923, University of Toronto won the Senior Eights for the third and fourth times in a row. Bob Hunter was not a member of any of those crews. His one and only appearance in a Varsity eight was in the crew which represented Canada at the 1924 Olympics in Paris, France. They won the Silver medal, being beaten by the U.S.A. crew. Hunter describes that Olympic experience in his book. Patrick Okens, in his 1999 Masters thesis, *Blues Before Sunrise: Rowing at the University of Toronto*, also touches on it.

Pictured below is the University of Toronto eight which represented Canada at the Paris Olympic Games in 1924.

Bob Hunter is in five-seat.

That photo, from *Rowing in Canada Since 1848*, was taken on the Royal Canadian Henley Regatta Course, probably at the Canadian Trials. The photographer is standing on the dock of the second shellhouse of the St. Catharines R.C.. To his left was the steep bank where the second grandstand would be constructed in 1931. In the upper right of

¹ Robert S. Hunter, *Rowing in Canada Since 1848*. (Hamilton; Davis-Lisson, 1933).

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VARSDITY EIGHT TO OLYPMICS 1924

I. Campbell, L. Wallace, A. Bell, W. Langford, R. Hunter, W. Snyder, J. Smith, B. Little, N. Taylor.

the photo, we can see the back side of the first grandstand. The grey building near the top to the right of centre is the gate-yard building where shells had been stored during Regattas since 1903. In 1936, it would become the fourth shellhouse of the St. Catharines R.C..

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"Où est Folies Bergères?"

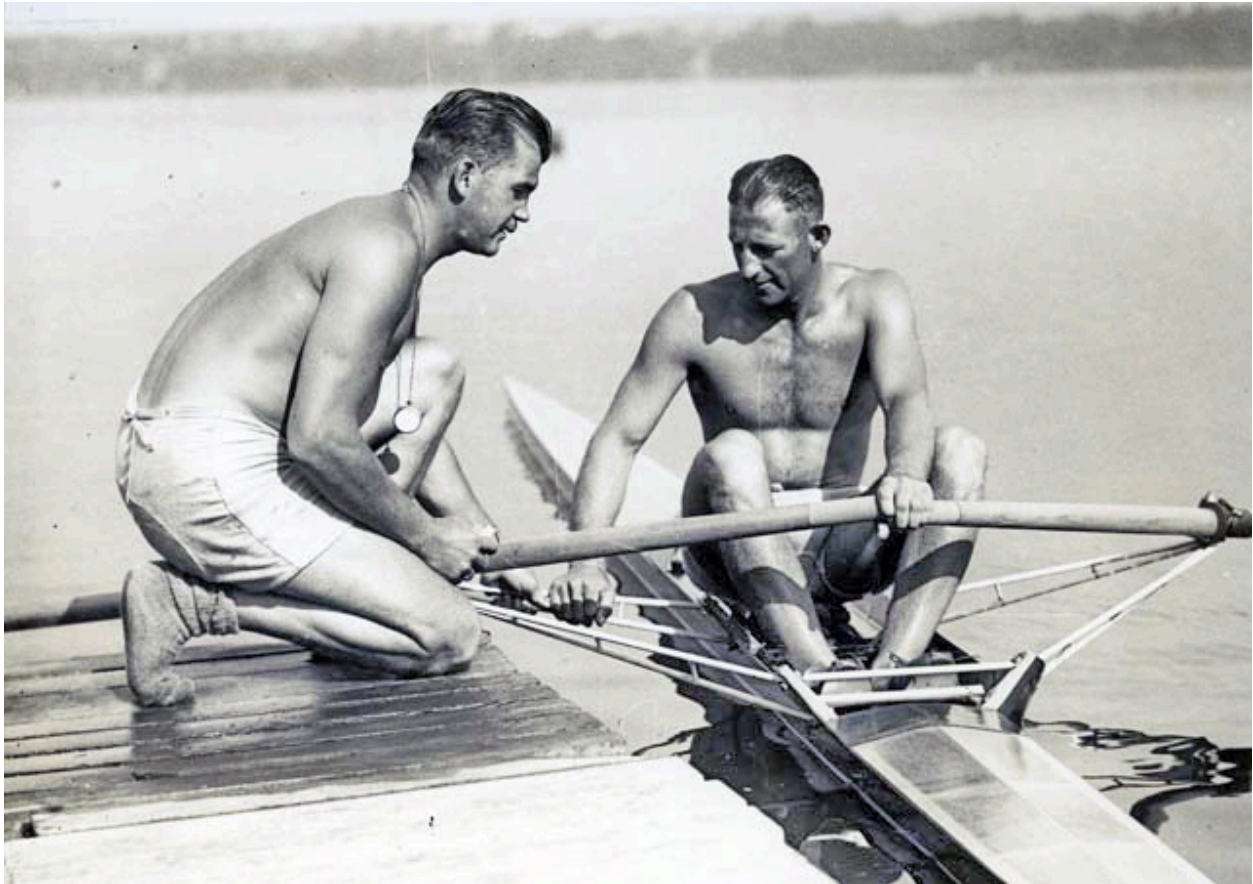
Bob came from the wilds of Kaslo, B.C., to Victoria College in 1921. Vic. Water Polo and Rugby. Varsity Intermediate Rugby and Junior Rowing. The summer of 1924 saw him, in Paris, a member of Varsity's Olympic Crew. First "T" for rowing. Last fall he saw the light and came to U. C. to graduate. Member Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity.

from *Torontoensis*, 1925, p.31 [University College graduates]

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After his graduation from University College in 1925, Hunter lived in Hamilton, Ontario. He coached at the Leander B.C., and on August 23, 1930, he married Lois Eleanor Thomson. It is not surprising that in the heart of the Depression, that the occupation of both Bob and Lois is given as “none” on their marriage certificate.

In the photo below, Bob Hunter offers some advice to Bob Pearce during a training session at the first British Empire Games in 1930, in Hamilton. Pearce came to the Games alone, without a coach, and Hunter was willing to assist the Australian sculler.



Brown Bros. Ltd. photo. Image courtesy of Local History & Archives. Hamilton Public Library. record # 32022189115518.

The extent of the esteem in which he was held by the Leander B.C. may be seen by the fact that that Club christened a boat in his name in 1930.

Hunter's employment situation changed around this time. Westdale Secondary School opened its doors in September, 1931. It was made up of three schools under one roof: the Collegiate, the Commercial School and the Technical School. Hunter's name appears in the 1932 Westdale yearbook, *Le Raconteur*, as a member of the faculty of the Technical School. He taught there until the end of the 1943-44 school year. While there, in addition to coaching the Leander B.C. Olympic-bound eight, he coached the Westdale

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eight. Unfortunately, this was the era of the mighty Bloor C.I. eights, so at the 1932 Canadian Henley, the new school's crew finished fourth in the High School Eights race.

In 1932, Lois gave birth to a daughter, Barbara.

That was the year that Hunter's Leander eight represented Canada at the Los Angeles Olympics, finishing third and winning the Bronze medal. That experience is also described in his 1933 book. His third attempt at an Olympic medal occurred in Berlin, Germany, in 1936. Again, he coached a Leander B.C. eight, but they did not qualify for the final. (One member of that crew was a man who would be involved with the Royal Canadian Henley Regatta for more than half a century: Claude Saunders.)

Although his history of Canadian rowing was published in 1933, judging by the detail in it, he had been preparing it for many months, perhaps years.

The 1936 edition of *Le Raconteur*, mentions that Hunter was still encouraging rowing at Westdale, although the coaching was left to Leander B.C. coach, Earl Eastwood.

In 1939, he was elected to the Executive Committee of the Canadian Association of Amateur Oarsmen and served until 1941

In 1940, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and became Flying Officer Hunter. He was one of three Westdale teachers to enlist. Each was given a brief write-up in the 1941 yearbook. Here is his:

Mr. Hunter donned a uniform in December last. Attached to the R.C.A.F. as physical instructor, he was shortly assigned as supervisor of recreation at the Intermediate Training Field at Dunnville. We understand that he has been so successful in arranging amusements for his charges that it is difficult to pry them away from Dunnville for an evening lest they should miss something. We have every confidence in Pilot Officer Hunter's ability to keep the R.C.A.F.'s off hours replete with entertainment.

Le Raconteur, 1941, p.52

He rejoined the faculty of the Westdale Technical School for the 1943-44 school year.

Right, Bob Hunter, in the white shirt, is seen at the 1944 Canadian Henley Regatta with Tom Alison, President of the Argonaut R.C. and former President of the CAAO, and Joe Wright, Sr..



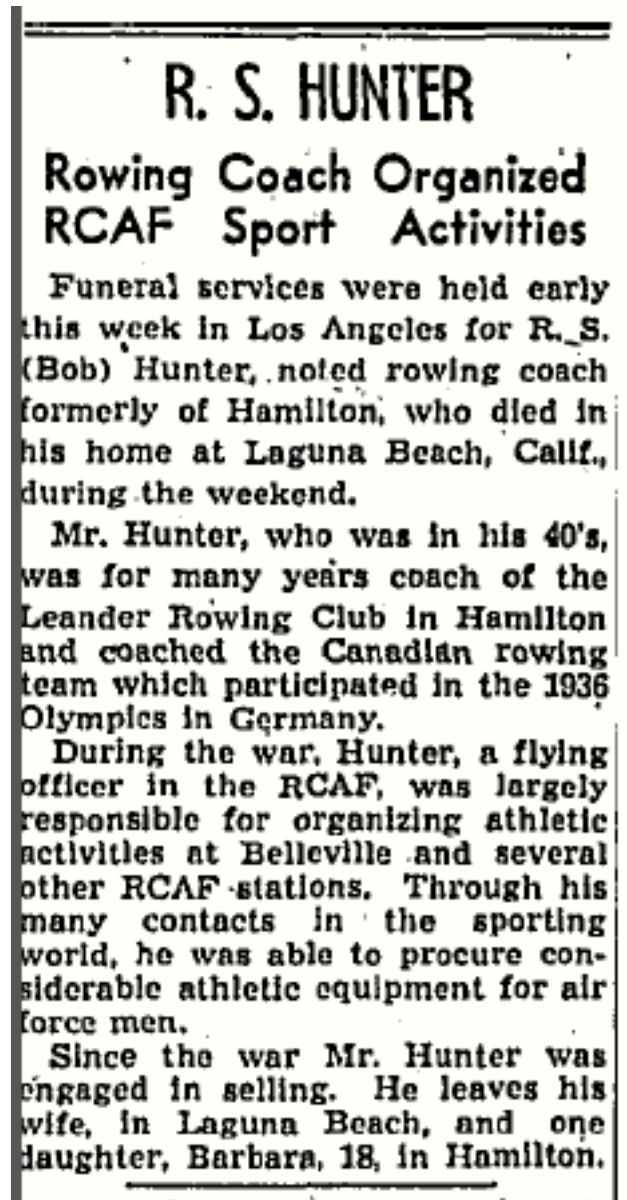
St. Catharines Museum - S1944.25.16.1.

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Since his mother was born in the United States, it is not surprising that a Canada border crossing manifest shows that Bob visited his aunt in Laguna Beach, California, between 1928 and 1931. However, on February 19, 1945, he crossed the border at Port Huron, Michigan, alone, with the declared purpose of residing permanently in the United States. His last permanent address, and that of his wife, is given on the crossing manifest as "Roseland, Port Nelson, Ontario," which were neighbourhoods in Burlington. Since he was no longer employed at Westdale S.S., his occupation on the crossing manifest is given as "none."

Another border crossing manifest, this one issued at San Ysidro, California, a month later, March 19, 1945, adds a bit more to his story. His occupation on this one is given as "teacher," his residence is listed as 565 Anita St., Laguna Beach, and his office was located at 1445 Fourth Ave., San Diego. And what did he do there? He was a "Representative of the Royal Canadian Air Force stationed in San Diego, Calif." That manifest also reveals that Lois was still living in Port Nelson, Ontario.

At right is Robert Hunter's obituary from the *Globe and Mail*. Although it skims over his achievements as an oarsman and coach, and contains one inaccuracy - he coached at the Leander Boat Club, not Rowing Club - it adds some facts to his story that are not found in any other source.



"R. S. HUNTER." *The Globe and Mail (1936-2016)*, Mar 29, 1950, pp. 24. ProQuest, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.torontopubliclibrary.ca/docview/1291301654?accountid=14369>.

He was on the Canadian rowing team at three Olympic Games, once as a competitor and twice as the coach, and he wrote the definitive history of rowing in Canada. These were outstanding contributions to Canadian rowing.

I repeat: Thank you Bob Hunter.

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PLEASE NOTE: This History is a work in progress. I will post chapters as I finish them and I will make changes to chapters which are already posted as I become aware of new information, or have errors pointed out to me. This version was completed on August 25, 2022. If you find errors or omissions, use the Contact link at <http://goldmedalphotos.com/> to point them out to me. Stan Lapinski.