



BY DAVID KIEFER

THE IMMORTAL 21

*Back in 1930,
Stanford
pulled off
a heist for
the ages.*

When Sharon Ward was a little girl growing up in Southern California’s San Gabriel Valley, she would tug on her father’s shirt and sit on his lap.

“Tell me the story of the Axe again,” she would say.

And, Warren Gage, who loved to spin a good yarn and recite Robert Service poems, would oblige. It was so real and vivid. You see, Warren didn’t just tell the story, he lived it.

In the spring of 1930, Gage was a student at Stanford University and listened to his fellow Sequoia Hall residents grumble about the long-ago theft of the Stanford Axe.

It all began in 1896 when Will Irwin wrote a yell – ‘Give ‘Em the Axe’ – to inspire Stanford’s sports teams. The symbol was brought to life when students bought a large broadax and painted the 10-pound, 15-inch blade with a red block ‘S.’

The Axe was unveiled at a bonfire rally on April 13, 1899, and used to decapitate a straw man dressed in the blue and gold ribbons of Cal’s colors,

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to great applause. Two days later, it was paraded at a Stanford-Cal baseball game in San Francisco. Cal fans were not amused and, after the game, a mob surrounded the guardians and wrested the Axe loose.

A citywide chase followed, through Chinatown, involving horses and buggies, street cars, the police, and a stakeout at the Ferry Building. The handle was sawed off during the bedlam and a Cal student, Cliff Miller, stuffed the blade in an overcoat pocket and made it across the bay undetected.

Nearly 31 years later, a group of students at Sequoia Hall, under the leadership of Don Knopp, were convinced the Axe should return to Stanford. The problem? It was kept in a Berkeley vault and removed only for an annual rally at the Greek Theatre.

A detailed plan was hatched, and 21 Stanford students set the scheme in motion on April 3, 1930. Gage was the linchpin.

The plan was to recapture the Axe on the steps of Berkeley's American Trust Company bank as it was unloaded after the rally from an armored car. The 21 would station themselves in front of the bank and behind the vehicle. Gage was to pose as a photographer.

The plan nearly went awry when the shop demanded a \$50 cash deposit to rent a camera, but finally was convinced to accept a check. Fearing damage from a possible brawl, Gage replaced the lens with the bottom of an ink bottle.

As the armored Studebaker reached the bank, the doors opened, and Gage shouted, "Let's have a good shot at the Axe!"

The guardians stepped aside for a photo as five pounds of flash powder – far above the usual amount – exploded, temporarily blinding the Cal guardians and distracting an armed guard.

The 21 pounced. From the top of the car, Howard Avery dropped on the unsuspecting Axe custodian, grabbed the Axe and passed it, within seconds, through several friendly hands until it was stuffed under the sweater of Bob Loofbourow. As chaos ensued, Loofbourow calmly walked through the crowd and into a getaway car, with Gage and his camera in tow.

Believing he had the Axe, Avery was swept into the bank with the mob, but escaped as a canister of tear gas was launched, repressing the crowd and allowing the Stanford students to reach a second car. The remaining 21, now mixed with Cal students, yelled, "Let's go up the

Campanile and organize a pursuit party!" to buy more time.

Angry Golden Bears ventured to cross the bay at what is now the Dumbarton Bridge, but were met by Red Okkre, a Stanford student working at the toll station. Rather than let them through, Okkre raised the drawbridge, causing further delay.

Safely home, the 21 were hailed as heroes. A triumphant telegram even was sent to President Herbert Hoover, a Stanford alum.

The 21 – Gage, Avery, Knopp, Loofbourow, Gerald Bettman, Glenford Brunson, John Coons, William Eberwine, Louis Ferrino, Robert Gordon, Eric Hill, Abe Jensen, Matt Lehmann, George Likens, Art Miller, Henry Powell, Edward Soares, Gordon Snodgrass, Robson Taylor, James Trimmingham, and Raymond Walsh – were awarded with a block 'S' and charms with a small gold axe.

"All of the guys took a lot of pride in the event," said Stan Gage, Warren's son. "It was part college hi-jinks, but it was also something that Stanford valued. Now, you talk about the Immortal 21, and they really go blank."

The Axe is now awarded to the winner of the Big Game. Meanwhile, the tale of the Immortal 21 becomes fainter.

"My brother and I were raised on that story," Sharon said. "My dad told it to the grandkids. But I think it'll be one of those things that will probably die."

But not for Sharon. She was left with a special keepsake from her late father – a charm with a small gold axe.



**Raymond Walsh (left) and
"photographer" Warren Gage**