Isaiah Chase was finally released from the Colorado State Penitentiary on a cold December day in 1935. It is unknown whether Nancy Walters had the money or the means of transportation to visit over the previous two years, but she may have been there to greet him as the iron doors opened. There, with flint-faced guards lingering nearby, perhaps mother and son were reunited.

He was now one month shy of his twenty-second birthday. As he stepped outside and took in the brisk mountain air, did he allow himself to feel a glimmer of hope? If so, that hope would be shadowed by bleak reality. In the Dust Bowl just east, nature itself rebelled with drought and wind after farmers spent years over-plowing and over-grazing the prairie. Experts met in Pueblo that month and estimated that the Southern Plains lost 850,000,000 tons of topsoil. It had blown away, blotting out the sun and further crippling the economy. One in four Americans were unemployed at the height of the Depression. It was worse for Isaiahs demographic -50% of African Americans couldnt find work. And here he was an ex-convict. Still, hope doesnt stop glimmering when the sun turns black. There were 18 lynchings in 1935, yet it would be the last year in American history where such numbers climbed higher than 8...

Americas redemption, a long time coming, was coming along. Isaiahs was too.

YOUNG JOE LOUIS
Early in 1936, a professional boxer calling himself Young Joe Louis began appearing on undercards in and around Walsenburg, Colorado.

He fought as if making up for lost time.

Prone like any novice to throw wild roundhouses and slap a lot, this unknown fighter tried his best to win. Whats more, he tried his best to knock his opponents over the ropes and into those abandoned mine shafts littering the landscape. His best wasnt so good at first. He won a four round fight at St. Marys auditorium in Walsenburg on January 30th that was booed by a crowd that felt the other guy won. Four days later he scored a knockout in the third round of a six-rounder at Raton, New Mexico. After that he earned a draw and then beat an Italian veteran out of Chicago named Nick Broglio.

He trained every day and improved quickly. By the end of June he won the Colorado State Middleweight Title. By the end of August he won the Colorado State Welterweight Title and boxing figures were raising eyebrows. Jerry the Greek Luvadis, Jack Dempseys old chief second, was training him by the time he faced sixth-ranked welterweight Jackie Burke that September. Louis sacrificed his end of the purse to satisfy Burkes financial demands and bring him to Walsenburg. Promoter Babe Shosky was confident enough to offer a money-back guarantee to any unsatisfied fan after the show.

Almost everyone in the small town came out to see the Louis-Burke bout. It didnt disappoint.

Young Joe Louis declared the World-Independent, was not only a smart boxer but surprised fans with his whirlwind attacks against Burke, driving him time and time again against the ropes. Jerry the Greek was instrumental in the corner, finding Burkes weakness without a minutes hesitation and then advising Louis how to exploit it. Burke won the first round ? and that was it. Louis became the welterweight and middleweight champion of the whole Rocky Mountain region.

Burke was crestfallen. I was really beat he said afterwards. Louis set his sights on world welterweight champion Barney Ross. Im going to keep on going until I reach the top he said, and I dont intend to stop and Im willing to take on all comers.

Young Joe Louis was Isaiah Chase, starting over.

Fighting under that soubriquet was good for marketing. Heavyweight contender Joe Louis was making headlines and breaking down a color line in place since Jack Johnsons heyday. There was just one problem Young Joe Louis was in fact three months older than Joe Louis. So Chase cooked the books. He pushed his birthday up one year later than it actually was. He had another good reason to conceal his name -if his lengthy criminal record got out his fan base would be as dry as that soil blowing all over Gods country. Sometimes he had to lie outright. After his third fight, a local reporter asked him what his Christian name was. Isaiah answered Billy Chase.

He had several fights in his hometown. It would not have been surprising to see Nancy in the audience, proudly watching her son make something of himself. By the spring of 1936, neighbors might have rushed over to her apartment with a copy of the Walsenburg newspaper. He is considered one of the finest battlers this city has ever had it read.

Soon enough, her son made his debut in the Mile-High City.

DENVER????
Patrick R. Gallagher was Denvers foremost boxing man. Called Reddy because of his red hair and his readiness to put his dukes up, he had been a professional himself at the turn of the twentieth century before writing for the Post. The old featherweight took note of the new prospect and liked what he saw. Young Joe Louis, he said, is an extraordinary boxer with a lightning left hand and an attitude to go with it; he doesnt hand pick his opponents and is ready to fight anybody at any time. He was a boxer after Reddys own heart.

Theyre going to send Young Joe Louis into the lions den tonight wrote Gallagher in December. George Black had a record of 25-10-2 and could boast of a win over future king Tony Zale. He represented a stern test and was considered by a few in-the-know as the toughest young middleweight in the game today. If the local welterweight emerged victorious, Gallagher asserted, we will have with us one of the greatest prospects in Colorado boxing history. With that, an incognito ex-con entered the ring at Denvers City Auditorium with 3,000 eyes on him. He was a 10-6 underdog.

Over the first three rounds Black was boxing easily and tying him up. Experience seemed to be

taming youth. The African American calmed his nerves and began to fight aggressively out of a crouch, bobbing and weaving and punching from every angle. Sitting at ringside, Gallagher was struck by their contrasting styles. Black was a stand-up fighter and counterpuncher who seemed stiff and rigid whereas Young Joe Louis was very unorthodox and confusing. They were more opposite than Gallagher knew. Black was a white medical student at Marquette University who would retire at the age of twenty-five. In the early forties, he would be working as a guard at Alcatraz.

In the fourth round, Chase landed a left hook to the future prison guards flank, followed by a whistling right cross to the chin. Black went down as if he was clocked by a nightstick. He got up at the count of eight and was driven around the ring by a hail of punches. He would go down five more times and was spared from a knockout loss only by the final bell. His handlers told Gallagher after the fight that Black was absolutely out of his head since those wicked shots in the fourth round. Black agreed.

Gallagher found one flaw in the victors otherwise notable performance -the ?Fancy Dan clowning in the closing minutes. Denver boxing figures all agreed that Louiss speed and unorthodox style were his strongest assets. Hes all head and shoulders when he moves in said one, its pretty hard to get a clean shot on his chin. Another noted how well the young fighter varied his style and preferred to fight in close. The sports editor of the Denver Post suggested that most colored are natural counter punchers though that soap box he stood on shook less when he recognized that Louis is a radical exception. He set a hectic pace, the editor continued, and was in fine shape at the finish.

Evidently, Chase had given up smoking and drinking -at least temporarily. He probably had no time for it. Five days later he was in New Mexico fighting Eddie Murdock. Murdock, like Black, was leading after the first three rounds when suddenly Louis came out for the fourth with a changed style. He led with his right and proceeded to punch Murdock silly before knocking him out in the seventh round.

The Associated Press reported that this was his sixty-sixth consecutive victory.

MYSTERY FIGHTS

Joining the Associated Press in reporting that astounding 66-0 record was the Denver Post and The Ring magazine. It has been assumed since then that Louis/Chase had many professional bouts before 1936. Indeed, an article in Walsenburgs World-Independent dated March 24th 1936 first mentions his having won 34 of his last 36 bouts by knockout. This information seemed to have come from Bill Mathews, a local fight manager handling him. In December 1936, that same newspaper states that Louis started his victory march in Walsenburg some two years ago. This simply isnt so. Furthermore, it provides the first clue to the truth. Simply put, Isaiah Chase wasnt marching anywhere two years earlier except to the chow hall. He was in prison.

Isaiah himself offers the best evidence against the claims. Not only did he give his accurate age on intake records only before he was campaigning as Young Joe Louis, he also stated that his occupation was dry cleaner in 1932. In 1933, his occupation is recorded as stationary engineer. Before 1936, he did not indicate that he was a boxer. In fact, from 1930 until 1936, Isaiah Chase

was locked up about 82% of the time. If he entered the professional ranks at the age of 16, that would have left him no more than fourteen scattered months of freedom to train, find and maintain a relationship with a manager, and fight approximately thirty-two times in a state that was no hotbed of boxing activity.

Scouring the World-Independent during the time that he was not locked up in 1932-1933 reveals a lively local boxing scene headed by Babe Shosky. There is no mention of Young Joe Louis or any variation of Isaiah Chases known aliases. He is first mentioned in the sports section of his hometown newspaper on January 29th 1936 ?about a month and a half after he was released from prison. Young Joe Louis the article announces, a Walsenburg negro, newcomer, will take on Bill Pryor of Pueblo. Theres nothing ambiguous about the word ?newcomer. It is also significant that he fought a four-rounder. New prizefighters typically begin their careers in scheduled four round fights.

The evidence grows and looks agreeable until a question peaks out like a mole in a garden: How on earth could a tenderfoot defeat established boxers like Jackie Burke and George Black?

The answer takes us further along to the truth.

The best theory about the mystery fights is this: they took place behind concrete walls. They were not professional bouts. It was not uncommon during this era for the press to publicize a fighter as unbeaten notwithstanding the fact that most of the said victories were at the amateur level. In fact, the Colorado State Reformatory and the Canon City Penitentiary had boxing programs. Many of the bouts held at the reformatory were open to the public. At Canon City, boxing was very popular and regular contests were held in the prison auditorium. According to the Wardens biennial report, the success of these contests is due to the many admirers inside and outside the institution.

Chase almost certainly learned the Sweet Science as an inmate and compiled many wins before turning professional early in 1936. Manager Mathews may have scouted the prison boxing program and recruited him. This would give Chase a head start, which would explain why he had his first bout so soon after his release. Once his charge proved to be a prospect, Mathews would want to protect his investment, so he told the press that Young Joe Louis had been campaigning and winning during those years that he was actually incarcerated. It wasnt quite a lie. Chase could have easily engaged in thirty-odd boxing matches in a ring and before a crowd in 1934-1935. Reporters may have been tied in enough with Mathews to go along with the story because nowhere in the World-Independent or the Denver Post is a specific claim made that the undocumented wins were professional wins.

Thus it is. Chase learned how to box while incarcerated and gained experience fighting other inmates in supervised matches. His professional career, however, began with a four round fight at a high school auditorium in Walsenburg, Colorado on January 30th 1936. Anything else is unlikely.

Anything else would be less remarkable.

By Christmas Eve 1936, Young Joe Louis had advanced from preliminaries to main events and was demonstrating the passion of a great fighter. He was trumpeted as the top welterweight and middleweight of the Rocky Mountain region -and a sports idol of the same state that once convicted him.
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Photograph courtesy of the Denver Public Librarys Western History and Genealogy Department.

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