On Christmas Eve 1936, a 6’0 Olympic bronze medalist arrived in Denver to test the mettle of “Young Joe Louis and his puffed-up record. His name was Eddie Peirce and he was announced as the middleweight and light heavyweight champion of South Africa.

The fight would be Louis’s third in ten days and he wanted no rest. He was training almost obsessively -chopping wood to increase power and running seven or eight miles every morning on trails winding through the oak-lined hills and valleys of the Spanish Peaks. He seemed to be trying to counterbalance the secrets he kept by sheer commitment. If he kept winning, his lack of professional experience wouldn’t matter and his troubled past might be forgiven. His commitment was paying off. He won a few state and regional titles and defeated several top fighters around the old buffalo plains in a dazzling first year.

Spectators filtered through the doors of the Windsor Gym to watch his opponent train. They were impressed. Sure, Louis’s power caused George Black to stiffen up, in Reddy Gallagher’s words, “like a wooden Indian but he had such an easy time thus far in his career that questions still floated around him. Local fight fans couldn’t decide if he was the next big thing or a flash in the pan. *The Denver Pos*t asked and then answered the question “can Louis take it? Yes, he could, Gallagher predicted. All the same, he favored the white man to win their match.

If Gallagher was a betting man, he’d have done all right.

Louis had been told that New York had emissaries in the City Auditorium with lucrative offers waiting on the wings. He also knew that this Peirce was bigger, more experienced, and as worldly as he himself was a hick. Looking out from the ring at the biggest crowd he ever saw, Louis’s mouth must have gone dry. His skinny legs must have trembled just a little.

A contingent of his fans from Walsenburg was there. They told Gallagher that Louis covered up for the first couple of rounds and allowed Peirce to take over. Unlike any previous opponent, Peirce “wasn’t bothered at all by Young Joe’s unorthodox style. He simply stepped inside and countered while the younger fighter “fanned the breeze with missed shots. Louis lost the fight at close quarters, said Gallagher, and Peirce opened him up with body shots. In the third, he crashed three rights onto Louis’s chin –and Louis blinked, stood his ground, and kept right on punching. Louis tried to adapt by dancing around the ring behind a stabbing jab. It was not enough. He couldn’t keep him off. Peirce took eight of the ten rounds and handed the undefeated Coloradan his first defeat.

In the dressing room after the fight, Peirce rubbed his aching arms and shoulders and acknowledged that Louis was “a very good puncher. The question posed the day before was answered emphatically: Young Joe Louis could take it. Manager Mathews was neither surprised about his courage nor concerned about the loss. “He had to lose sometime, he remarked, “and I think it will do him a lot of good.

It didn't. It was a disillusioned and less confident fighter that continued on. By the end of 1937, he had at least fifteen more fights in five states that included two decision losses and one by knockout.

And then it all went to hell.

Since his release from prison in December 1935, Isaiah Chase had formed new attachments but failed to disconnect old ones. On Friday night, January 7th 1938, he and a friend were in Colorado Springs breaking into the Alpine Dairy on South Nevada Avenue and stealing $5 in sales tax money. Next they hit the Kelsay Lumber Company and took a pinch bar, metal shears, and $1.21 in pennies. The pair was arrested the following night and charged with "burglary with force. The Colorado boxing commission announced that if convicted, Young Joe Louis would face the loss of his titles and permanent suspension.

Four days later he was convicted. The sentence was six-to-eight years and it came with a promise printed in the *Colorado Springs Gazette*. The judge perused his lengthy prior record and warned Chase that if he ever appeared in court again on a felony charge, he would not see freedom again until arthritis set it.

Once again the iron doors of prison slammed shut behind him.

Only now did Chase state his occupation as "Pro Boxer though he also said that he was 22 years old. He was actually 23.

After processing, he was escorted to an eight-by-nine cell. The walls never changed. Neither did the sounds –the clinking shackles and clanging doors; humming chatter between the narrow glance. The smell didn't change either. His eyes would have scanned the scene for a familiar face and he soon found one in a diminutive bootblack-turned-thief by the name of Paul Bowers. Bowers was right there with him from crime to conviction. He was also part of the ring of thieves convicted of the boxcar burglaries five years earlier.

Chase had years ahead of him to stare at cinderblock. He'd lay on his cot and those pangs of regret he carried around all day would float up to the ceiling. During sleepless nights he'd keep time by the guard's footsteps in the corridor and reflect on who he was, where he wanted to go, and where he could go. Stripped of his state titles, he'd be lucky if he wasn't stripped of his boxing license as well. Then what?

Sometime during the week of January 16th, a solemn face over a uniform appeared at his cell door. Chase sat up and peered through bars. The voice he heard was subdued: "I'm sorry to inform you that your mother has passed away. The words fell on him. His concerns about titles and licenses turned to glass and shattered at his feet.

He was truly alone now.

Gone was the defiant, cold expression of the 19-year old in 1933. A mug shot taken towards the end of this sentence shows a man ill-at-ease, his eyes almost pleading for another chance.

On May 27th 1941, he was released on parole with a state-issued five dollar bill in his pocket, a suit of clothes on his back, and a railroad ticket. He stepped outside those walls and breathed in that mountain air. Spring was in bloom. He would try again to find a glimmer of hope.

It was the Colorado Boxing Commission that gave him his first break. It turned out that they did not permanently suspend him because his boxing career soon resumed. Still campaigning as Young Joe Louis, Chase wasted no time. On June 30th, he was scheduled to face a white fellow Coloradan named Roy Gillespie at Denver. Like Chase, he lost his father early. Gillespie's father died when he was a boy, and before he turned eighteen he took out a boxing license. He had a reputed 77 bouts under his belt.

Five men were knocked out in the preliminaries that Monday night in Mammoth Gardens. The Louis-Gillespie bout was upgraded to main event status due to a cancellation and it proved to be more brutal than anyone was prepared for. The balding twenty-five year old middleweight, who had bummed a ride to see his mother the day before, was knocked down in the first round. He went him down twice more in the second round for two counts of nine. Chase heard the crowd yelling "stop the fight! after he knocked Gillespie down the second time. Gillespie might have heard it too, because for the next three rounds he fought back hard and on even terms against the faster, lighter man. What happened next was examined and re-examined by the police. "Staggered by hard blows to the chin, the *Post* reported, Gillespie "collapsed on the ropes. The referee noticed his glazed eyes and stopped the action at about one minute into the sixth round. Chase helped the stricken fighter to his corner, where Gillespie lost consciousness and fell onto his stool. Two doctors examined him and called for an ambulance.

Sports editor Jack Carberry talked to Chase the next morning. "I, over many, many years in which a reporter's job has carried me to countless scenes of tragedy, he wrote, "never met a boy whose sincere sorrow over what occurred, touched me more.

Gillespie spent Tuesday hovering near death in the Denver General Hospital. An operation was performed to remove a blood clot on his brain and his temperature climbed to 109 degrees. The winner of the match had since returned home to Walsenburg. Local police soon showed up at his door to take him into custody at the order of the investigating detective in Denver. Paroled only a month earlier, Chase was back behind bars.

The next afternoon at 12:10, only hours before Joe DiMaggio safely hit for his forty-fifth consecutive game and broke a sports record, Roy Gillespie died in a hospital bed.

Both events made front page news.

Chase was ordered transported from the Huerfano county jail back to Denver to stand before a coroner's jury. "Young Joe Louis, wrote Carberry, "-and life's breaks have been pretty much against him as of late –was in there doing his best to make a comeback –to earn a few dollars. A very few dollars I might add.

The day before the bout, Gillespie told his mother that he was promised $40 for the fight; that is, forty dollars less the manager's cut of 40%, less the licensing fee of $5, and less $2 per

second. That left his corpse with less than $20, which his mother hadn't received as of Wednesday. Chase's purse was about the same. He too had yet to receive it.

The city pathologist testified that the dead boxer had suffered a brain hemorrhage on some previous occasion, most likely in a boxing match. The victim, he said, probably suffered a temporary loss of vision and the loss of control of his arms or legs at that time but didn't grasp the danger. No one else did either and he was cleared to fight.

Chase was exonerated and set free.

Undoubtedly, he was shaken by what he had done to Roy Gillespie. This experience changed him. When he reached his peak two years later, Chase was asked whether he liked to fight. His answer? "No.

After the tragedy, he may have started pulling his punches. He went on to win a decision and then dropped one to a man he had already beaten -a man who should never have beaten him. Did he have another identity crisis? He seemed ambivalent about using the Young Joe Louis moniker again and alternated between that and a variation of his given name. As 1941, a year of tragedies, closed, Isaiah Chase bid it good riddance. By the end of January he left Colorado for the Pacific Coast and began calling himself a name that he would use for the rest of his life -Jack Chase.

California was breeding and attracting some of the most dangerous fighters in the country during the early 1940s. Chase, who the now-deceased Reddy Gallagher quipped entered "a lion's den when he fought Eddie Peirce, was headed into a war zone.

He went armed -not only with his fists, but with the determination of a man who had nothing else.

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Photograph courtesy of Colorado State Archives.

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