

Ward McLanahan — first Olympian in County history

By Michael V. Emery

Winning an Olympic medal in 1904 didn't bring about the instant notoriety that it does today.

Which is too bad for the late Ward McLanahan.

McLanahan took a fourth-place medal for pole vaulting in the 1904 St. Louis Olympics, the only Blair County athlete to ever win an Olympic medal, but back then it didn't get much play, according to his grandson, Mike McLanahan.

"In those days the Olympics wasn't that big a thing," McLanahan said. "It was a very amateur event and it didn't get nearly the media attention or the promotional effort it does nowadays."

"My grandfather was one who kept everything. He kept all his articles and memorabilia, and he had some articles on his performance in the Olympics. But it wasn't much. There wasn't much mention of it. Just a paragraph or so saying he won a medal."

The story behind the story was that McLanahan even lost the medal. He gave the medal to his oldest grandchild when she was a teenager and it was misplaced.

"He was in correspondence with the U.S. Olympic committee prior to his death, trying to get the medal replaced," Mike McLanahan said. "He wanted to give the replacement to his granddaughter again."

McLanahan became a premier pole vaulter at a young age, finishing second in the Pan American Games in Buffalo in 1901 while he was a senior at Hollidaysburg High School.

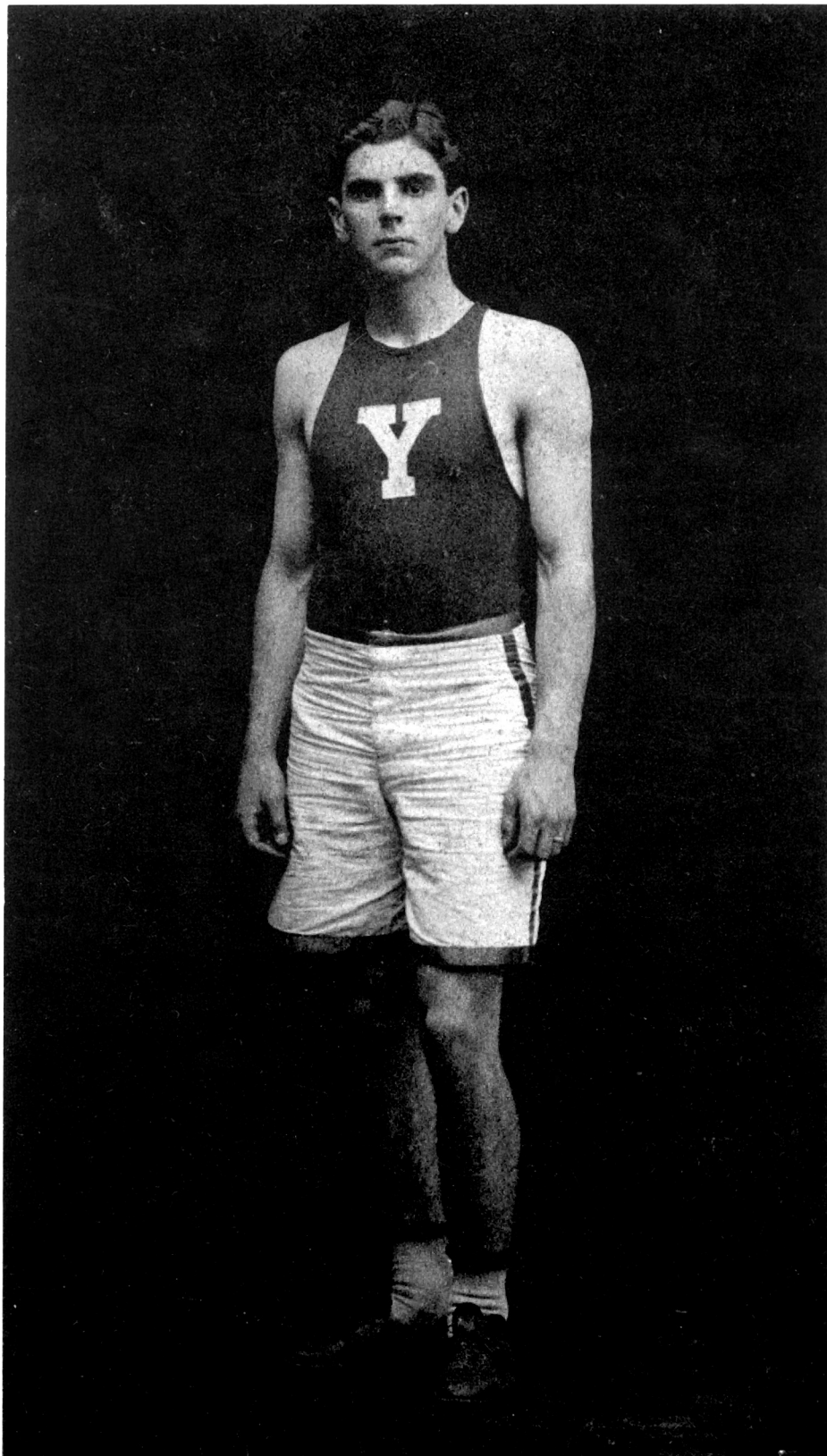
"He learned how to pole vault by using his mother's clothes pole and vaulting over the clothes line in their backyard at Gaysport," Mike McLanahan said.

McLanahan entered Phillips Andover Academy in Massachusetts, where he graduated in 1902, before starting his stellar career at Yale.

In 1904 McLanahan set the world pole vaulting record in a meet with Princeton at 12½, marking the first time a pole vaulter cleared 12 feet. A plaque honoring his world record still hangs in the Yale gymnasium.

Among McLanahan's prized intercollegiate victories were several at the Penn Relays and the New York Athletic Club.

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Ward became the first pole vaulter in the world to clear 12 feet when he vaulted 12½ feet in 1904.

Ward was somewhat disappointed by his fourth place finish in the Olympics, however.

"He always felt he had done poorly in the Olympics," McLanahan said. "He felt he should have done better. Part of the reason, he said, was that he was courting my grandmother at the time. He said he spent more effort on that than on pole vaulting."

Ward married Genevieve Hesser in 1906, a year after a knee injury ended his track career.

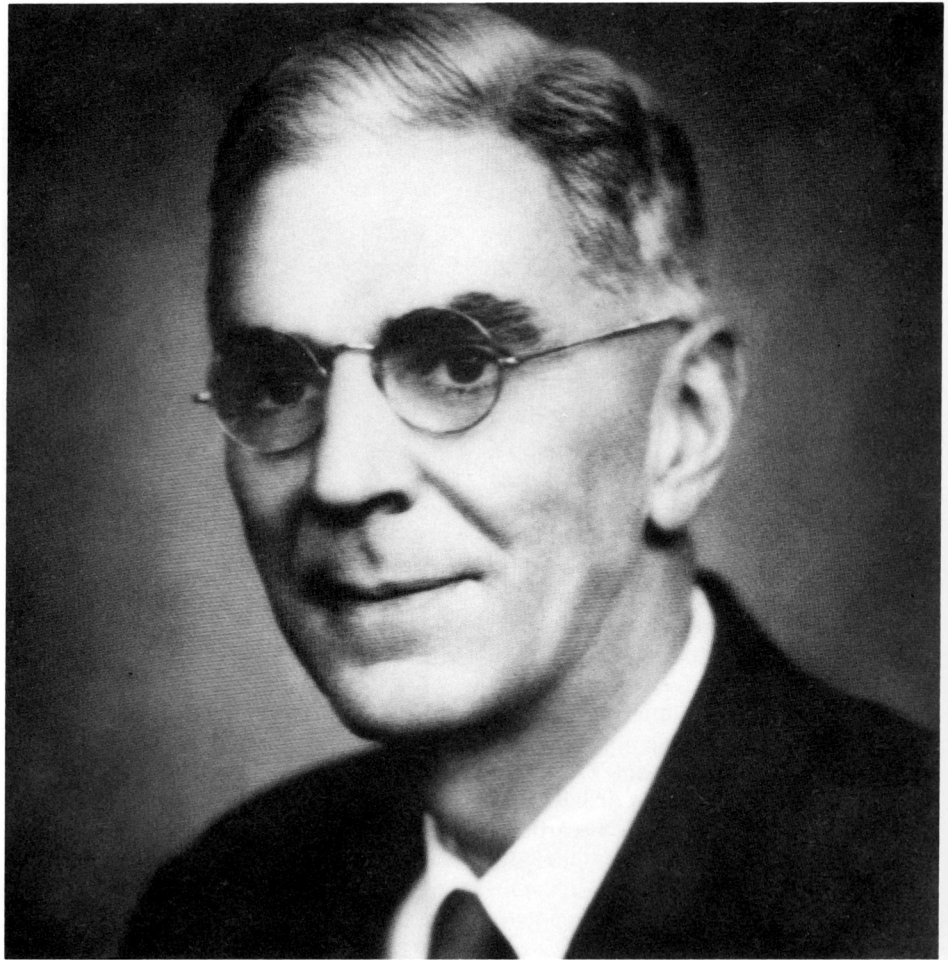
In later years Ward was also afflicted with hip and back arthritis, which he attributed to pole vaulting.

"Back then the only cushion the vaulters had was wet sawdust." McLanahan said. "That wasn't much of a cushion at all. You had to withstand a pretty hard fall."

McLanahan remained a part of pole vaulting even after his competitive days were over. In 1905, Ward McLanahan and his father helped revolutionize the sport by helping reduce the old-fashioned and heavy hickory poles with much lighter and flexible bamboo poles.

"The bamboo poles were very experimental at that time and he felt they were very advantageous for the Yale team," Mike McLanahan said. "He always remained close to the Yale team. He thought the bamboo poles would help the team and for a few years it did give Yale an edge. Eventually everybody went to the bamboo poles.

McLanahan and his wife lived in Missouri and West Virginia before returning to Hollidaysburg, where he operated the McLanahan Stone Corporation until his death in 1974 at the age of 92.



Ward served as president of the McLanahan Corp. until 1974.

"I was fortunate enough to have known him for a number of years," Mike McLanahan said. "He had a lot of memories about his achievements, but he never made much of it."

Ward McLanahan will be among the fourth class inducted into the Blair

County Sports Hall of Fame. Ward's son, Charles, 78, of Richmond, Ky., will accept the award on his father's behalf.

"Our family is very proud about the induction," Mike McLanahan said. "To be selected and recognized by the people of his home area is a great tribute."