

I What drove George was trying all the time to please his father.
—Patsy Stecher

Henry and George

The Steinbrenner family got into the shipbuilding business because of a disaster on the Great Lakes. The steamer involved, called the *Western Reserve*, had been built in 1888 by Peter Minch, the oldest son of shipping baron Philip Minch, who started building boats on the Great Lakes back in the 1850s.

When Philip died in 1887, Peter took over the ten-ship company, which was in the business of transporting ore, grain, and other commodities. An experienced seaman, Peter had been a ship captain since the age of twenty-one. He was fifty-one years old in August 1892 when he left Cleveland harbor on the *Western Reserve* for a run across the lakes along with his wife and two of his children, Charles and Florence. His wife's sister and her son also went along.

The *Western Reserve* was three hundred feet long, the largest in its class on the lakes. There were twenty crewmen and eleven passengers on board. On August 30, the ship cleared the Soo locks, and Captain Albert Myers pointed the ship into the teeth of a fierce storm about sixty miles beyond Whitefish Point at the entrance to Lake Superior. The vessel had weathered many similar storms without any trouble.

As the ship's bell struck nine, suddenly the vessel shuttered strangely. The captain sounded the alarm, and all hands rushed to the lifeboats. The ship's steel mast had snapped halfway up and fallen to the deck around amidships. After the two lifeboats were lowered into the water, one of them collapsed immediately, while the other stayed afloat only to run aground and capsize less than a mile from land. There was only one survivor.

The bodies of Captain Minch and his wife's sister were recovered a day later. A funeral was held at the family home on Kinsman Street in Cleveland. The flags of all his ships were flown at half mast.

Several months later the *Western Reserve's* starboard lantern floated to shore along a bleak section of the Canadian coast. It was returned to Peter Minch's son Philip, who kept it burning constantly in memory of his lost family.

The wreck of the *Western Reserve* was what brought the Steinbrenner family into the shipping business. The Minch Transit Co. limped along until 1901, when it was taken over by the husband of Sophie Minch—Philip's daughter and Peter's sister. Sophie's husband, Henry Steinbrenner, had a thriving career as a lawyer and businessman, and at first he was reluctant to get involved in the shipping business, but the vitality of the company was at stake, and in 1901 he agreed to try and save it. That year he formed the Kinsman Marine Transit Company.

Henry was assisted by his son George II, who then took over and was assisted by his son Henry, a track star at MIT and first in his class of 1927. When Henry took over the company in the 1930s, he was a wealthy, respected baron of the industry.

Henry Steinbrenner, George Steinbrenner III's father, was a control freak, a Prussian from the old school who let everyone around him know that it was his way or the highway. As Henry saw it, this was a man's world, and women were to be treated as servants. They had no business in business; their place was in the home, cooking, doing the dishes, or raising babies.

There was another thing Henry believed in: himself. No one else could do the job as well as he, so delegating authority was a no-no. As a result, if Henry wanted something done, he would either do it himself or would assign an underling with the job and stay on top of him until he got it done or screwed up, in which case the underling would suffer a terrible tongue-lashing. If he messed up badly enough, his fate was certain: he

would be fired. Since employees were interchangeable, Henry taught George, you never got close to employees, never invited them to social functions. No employee of Henry's was ever allowed to make a decision, even about a simple task. Only one person in the Kinsman Marine Transit Company made decisions, and that was the boss, Henry Steinbrenner.

Steinbrenner's family was dominated by his rules and his iron fist that enforced those rules. For his children, he would choose punishment over affection every time, sure that fear begot respect. Love would play no part. Love was for weaklings. He didn't have many friends, but Henry Steinbrenner didn't need friends. He had his shipping business, and he worked long hours almost every day, taking no holidays or vacations. He taught his children that to succeed, one needed to keep one's nose to the grindstone and a close watch on one's employees to make sure they weren't slacking off and wasting your hard-earned money. For Henry Steinbrenner, his employees were to be treated not as servants but as slaves.

The Steinbrenners—Henry, wife Rita, son George, and daughters Judy and Susan—lived in Lakewood, Ohio, a town ten miles west of Cleveland, in a large home, one of the largest in town. They spent summers in nearby Bay Village, because Henry liked the ambience of the sleepy town with the open fields so much that in 1912 he bought twelve acres of property across the road from the Lake Erie shore. After he took over Kinsman Marine from his father in 1939, he remodeled the quaint farmhouse on the land into a modern, substantial two-story home. George was eight years old when the family moved into their Bay Village home.

Henry built a sturdy white fence to surround the property, and at the front of his estate he placed the anchor of a lake freighter and a capstan. He named his home the Anchorage.

George's friends were deathly afraid of his father. George feared him, for sure, but he never could get himself to admit it. He recalled a bucolic childhood that was seemingly carefree, except that he was constantly under the thumb of a rigid, domineering father.

"Bay Village was a small place, and it was a great life," George told me. "It was a rural community and very friendly. You walked or rode ponies or bicycles. I had my own pony. Later my sisters had horses. I rode in pony races at the Cuyahoga State Fair when I was a kid.

"My family was not flamboyant and did not live extravagantly. My dad had a lot of money. I know my grandfather was very well-to-do.

He left a lot to the grandchildren. In fact, the grandchildren got a good portion of his money.

“Most of the people who came from the West Side of Cleveland were very conservative. I’m not that way. I can’t tell you where that comes from. Not from my father. Not from my mother, who was five foot one and quiet. She was the strength of the family. She held it all together. My mother, Rita, is a lovely, lovely woman.

“My father was the disciplinarian, but my mother provided the love that was necessary in a strong disciplinarian system. You have to have somebody like my mother in there—there has to be a human strain through it too.

“I had rules—written and unwritten—that I had to live under at home. Rules about when you could listen to the radio and when you had to do your studies and when you had to have your work and chores done. We were never allowed to feel that anything my dad was fortunate enough to have could be used by us. We had to work. He was a pusher. He led, and we followed. You could run three races in one day and get two firsts and a second, and the only thing he wanted to talk about was, How did you get beat? What did you do wrong? One lesson he taught me that stayed with me more than anything is that you can learn more from your mistakes than you can from your successes.”

The other lesson he learned from that was that winning was all that mattered. “I was mad at him all the time. I was mad a lot. But I found myself working that much harder to prove to him I could do it, or prove to him something, whatever it was, and sometimes that’s a good psychology, and sometimes it isn’t. You have to know how to handle it, to get your athlete or the person working for you to say, ‘I’ll show that son of a bitch.’ You have to go by a fine line, or it can be difficult and destructive.

“My sisters and I had to live with that pressure every day, but I don’t regret it now. It means more to me as I look back on it than it did while I was going through it. In a sense, I thank God he did what he did for me, because he taught me an awful lot. And you had to respect the man.

“He never crushed my spirit. Some people think I’m a case for an institution maybe. But it never crushed my spirit at all.

“My dad was very well respected and liked. He was elected councilman. He got the highest votes of anyone who ran. In those days politics was not the fishbowl it is today. Your private life was your own. My father in a lot of ways was a very, very private guy.

“My dad liked teaching his kids and educating us. From the time I was a kid, I worked. We all knew how to keep books and a ledger from the time we were nine years old. I had chickens to raise. We never got an allowance. We were given chickens, and we sold eggs, and that’s the way we made our money. We had a little cart and ponies to pull the cart, and I used to sell eggs all through Bay Village. Then when I went away to school in the ninth grade, Dad had me sell my egg company to my two sisters. The George Company became the S&J Company. I sold the company to them for fifty dollars, and it took them two years to pay me, but I got my money. I made sure of it.

“I’d have to get up every morning before I went to school, clean the chicken roost, collect the eggs, get the chickens fed, and I can remember a couple of times forgetting to take the eggs out of my pockets in school, and egg stuff would be dripping. I went to Bay Village Elementary School, and I was the only one who had to wear a coat and tie.

“My father always was interested in having his kids in sports. My dad is six foot three, and he knows his sports. In 1928, he had everyone beaten in the high hurdles for the Olympics. He was one of the three best hurdlers in the world at that time. And he would have made the U.S. Olympic team, but he didn’t try, because he and my mother decided to get married instead.”

I asked George if he had seen the movie *Chariots of Fire*, about an English runner who leaves his girl behind so he can try out for the Olympics.

“A great movie,” George said. “Isn’t that a great movie? My dad did just the opposite. And they are still together,” he said proudly. “He’s a very competitive man, and he had all three of his children doing sports at a very young age, my sisters as well, both of them.”

Ike Ganyard, who was a year older than George, was a close childhood friend of George’s. He recalled what it was like growing up in rural Bay Village in the years before and after the war.

“George’s white, big old farmhouse was on the south side of Lake Road,” he said. “I thought it was the biggest house in Bay Village. It was huge, three stories with a gabled roof. It was a modern, beautiful home; because the rest of us lived in little, tiny houses and we were very impressionable. We all knew Mr. Steinbrenner owned a shipping company. We were aware.

“George and I were friends since we were kids. We lived about a quarter of a mile to a half a mile away. We would ride bikes and meet. We would leave home at eight in the morning in the summertime, and our parents never saw us until dark. We went swimming. God, people went swimming morning, noon, and night in the summertime.

“We used to play baseball and football in the backyard of what we called the Little Red Schoolhouse. Playing sports was all a kid had to do back then.

“George was big for his age. I can remember in the fifth and sixth grade we played hardball, and George pitched because he was tall and he could throw the ball faster than the rest of us.

“We also played football. It wasn’t organized like they do today. We didn’t have uniforms or teams. When we had six guys, we played three-on-three, but we played tackle with no equipment. As in everything, we had good players and bad players. Anybody who showed up could play.

“I was aware that George sold eggs to the neighbors and people he knew, because I remember the chicken coop. He didn’t have that many eggs, but he could keep people supplied, a dozen for the next-door neighbor, that type of thing. We didn’t know whether it was George’s hobby because he was interested in it or because of his father wanting him to do it. I remember George wearing a shirt and tie to school in grammar school. Most of us wore open shirts and knickers.”

Joe Bennett, who knew George when they were children, remembered Henry Steinbrenner most vividly. To Bennett, George’s father was someone to fear.

“The old man was a tough son of a bitch, difficult to all the people who knew George,” said Bennett. “He was a tough cookie, a good old boy, and you were either on his side, or there was no side.

“Henry was an autocrat. He was overbearing to his wife. I would say he ruled the roost with an iron hand. His wife was timid. She swallowed it. She had to. She was scared of him. I’m sure George was scared of him. As we all were. We all laughed about his old man. We called him ‘the son of a bitch.’

“George’s father never asked George to do anything. He told him. I don’t care what George says, I think George was scared of his dad. I was petrified of him. Scared to death. I was so scared of him, when he came into the house, I ran out.

“I never saw his father hug or kiss George. Definitely not, nor joke with him. Henry was a very straitlaced person. Henry had no sense of humor, for Christ’s sake. He was tough on George.”

Frank Treadway, another of George’s childhood friends, recalled that though he rarely was around George’s father, Henry loomed as the dominant factor in his son’s life.

“Henry didn’t have anything to do with any of George’s young friends. My father was the same way. My mother used to say, ‘Rusty loves his own children, but he doesn’t really care for anybody else’s kids.’ To me, my father was polite to my friends when I brought them home, but as far as taking them on picnics, he didn’t care for that. And Henry was the same way.”

Treadway couldn’t help notice that despite his wealth, Henry Steinbrenner lived modestly, sometimes even cheaply. “Henry Steinbrenner had a little dinky white Ford with standard shift and no air-conditioning,” he said. “My father was driving one of these big four-door Lincolns, and we’d tool down Lake Avenue on the way to work in the morning, and we’d come by this beat-up old car with the roof crushed in. Something had fallen on Henry’s car, and it took him a year to fix it. And here was old Henry driving along. He wasn’t going to ride the bus, but he sure didn’t need anything fancy.”

What Treadway recalled more than anything were the stories George told about his father. The most famous was his “Egg Story.” As George saw it, the story is about Henry’s temper. But Treadway viewed it as more about George’s never taking responsibility for his actions and using his father to fight his battles.

“George used to tell some wonderful stories about himself,” said Treadway. “George is a wonderful storyteller. He’d get wound up at a party—it was never liquor-induced. When I knew him he wasn’t much of a drinker. There was nothing he loved more than to tell stories about himself.

“He would tell the story about his getting a C on his report card, showing it to his father at night, and saying, ‘My teacher doesn’t like me.’ And the next day George goes to school with eggs in his pocket, and his father comes to talk to the principal about George getting a C in a course, and he starts to shake George, and he breaks all the eggs in his pocket. Now, George is not being shaken as a disciplinary

measure. His father was going to school to stick up for George against this teacher who is picking on him.

“I just think his father is steaming under his collar, and he’s shaking George because he can’t shake the principal or shake himself. George is this eighth-grade kid. He’s the only kid in the school who has to wear a coat and tie to school and where else is he going to carry the eggs but his coat pocket? Again, we got this story from George. George could very well have embellished it. Henry came to talk to the principal, and his father is all pissed off. ‘How can you give him a grade like that?’ And he ends up shaking George and breaking the eggs. George would tell that story, and we’d laugh so hard the tears would come down our eyes.

“George also used to tell another story of how Mrs. Steinbrenner lived in fear of her husband at times. Henry didn’t like the sound of water at night past eight o’clock. George came home from a date one night, went downstairs, and there was the sound of splashing water coming from the basement. George said, ‘Mother, is that you?’ Poor Rita was giving herself a sponge bath in the laundry tub because Henry didn’t want to hear the water running. It was only eight-thirty.

“Then there was the story Rita told my mother—how she and Henry had been married about a week, and they came home after the honeymoon, and Rita made a casserole, thinking that was a legitimate form of food, and Henry didn’t, and he threw it at her. A tough old German, Henry didn’t like food that was cooked twice.

“The world is full of things like this behind closed doors. You meet him in public, and he is a gentleman, but this is behind closed doors.

“George didn’t really have any adversity in his life like so many people. He went to summer camp, and he lived in a nice home, and there was always good food on the table, so he had no adversity. If you’re rich when you grow up, and you’re still rich when you’re fifty, it’s ‘Let’s make it out that I had to climb a few mountains when I was a kid, make all the stories sound so much better.’”

Patsy Stecher, who lived in Bay Village and was close to the Steinbrenners, also saw the tyrannical nature of Henry Steinbrenner. “He fixed the rules, and you did it his way,” she said. “When you have a father like George had, either you end up being nothing, or, like George, you become competitive. My theory was that what drove George was trying all the time to please his father.”