

## Childhood

*“He sings to the wide world,  
she to her nest”*

# 1

An inkling of six-year-old Inez’s destiny as champion of the underdog surfaced one day as she played in Madison Square, the fashionable oasis of greenery at the lively junction of Twenty-third Street, Fifth Avenue, and Broadway where the Milhollands moved after her father’s career took off. A band of immigrant children that had roamed up from the Lower East Side gathered around Inez. Her rich playmates announced they would not play with tenement children. “All right for you,” Inez replied, as her bemused nanny looked on. “You don’t have to play with me.” Then she skipped off with her new friends.<sup>1</sup>

Inez’s mother liked to tell this story in an exasperated tone that failed to hide her pride in her daughter’s independence and kindness. Inez inherited her affinity for the underdog from her father, the biggest influence upon her life. John Elmer Milholland was a contradictory crusader who rose from his birth in a mountain shack to become an international entrepreneur. Inez heard the tale many times: Her grandfather immigrated to America in the 1840s from an emerald slice of undulating Northern Ireland townland called Tamlaghtduff. John Mulholland, born on the summer solstice in 1819, undoubtedly learned hard lessons in prejudice because his father was Protestant and his mother Catholic. John, his three brothers, and three sisters were raised as Protestants but had many Catholic relatives in the vicinity of their rented thatched-roof stone cottage.<sup>2</sup> The seven-acre farm kept the smallholders, near the bottom of Ulster’s highly stratified social pyramid, too busy to worry much about religion.<sup>3</sup> Despite their hard work, John Mulholland knew he never would own land. He could read, unlike most Ulstermen, and had left Ulster at least once, crossing to Scotland to make extra money during its harvest.<sup>4</sup> America’s natural rights rhetoric beckoned such ambitious, bright young men. More than a

third of immigrants to the United States in the 1820s were Irish, and the exodus nearly quadrupled in the 1830s, even before the great potato famine.<sup>5</sup> Twenty-two-year-old John Mulholland followed in 1841.<sup>6</sup>

The four pounds he scraped together for his fare bought him a bed along a triple tier of bunks lining the innards of a wooden sailing ship that Herman Melville, who made the trip in 1839, likened to dog kennels.<sup>7</sup> Mulholland settled in the upstate New York hamlet of Lewis on the fringe of the wild Adirondack Mountains.<sup>8</sup> He signed on as a laborer for fellow Londonderry natives Alexander and Robert Moore, who in 1828 had realized every immigrant's ambition, when for one hundred dollars they bought their own fifty-acre farm.<sup>9</sup> Mulholland married the widowed Robert's daughter, Mary Ann, and their first child, Mary, arrived in 1847, followed the next year by Emily Ann. When the couple gained title to their own hundred acres in 1854, John signed the deed "John Milholland," signaling his change of identity from Ulsterman to American.<sup>10</sup> Crops and children multiplied. The one-room red schoolhouse the children attended down the dirt road housed their parents' desire for their children to live an even better life.<sup>11</sup> Ulster's senseless religious prejudice echoing in his ears, John stood firmly with the rest of the county in the North's swelling abolitionist ranks, a link in the Underground Railroad. Abraham Lincoln swept the county in 1860, the year the couple's sixth child, John Elmer Milholland, was born.<sup>12</sup>

Their American dream seemed nearly realized when a kerosene lantern tipped over and burned down the house, a common hazard of pioneer life. A visiting neighbor scooped sleeping three-year-old John out of his bed and rushed him to safety, but seventeen-year-old Mary and her mother became trapped by the flames. The children raced to a neighbor's home where they spent the horrible night. Several days later, the toddler joined the funeral procession to the Congregational Church, whose bell tolled the ages of his mother and sister as a long line of people filed by.<sup>13</sup>

The tragedy set off a series of events that lifted John Elmer Milholland into a world of ideas and money inconceivable to his parents, a world that allowed his daughter Inez to grow up amid privilege and power. With a hardscrabble pioneer's resolve, John's father wasted no time erecting a gray clapboard house on the ashes of the first. Overnight, fifteen-year-old Emily became woman of the house and a second mother to young John. He loved the farm, especially the top of a big hill from which he could see Lake Champlain and dream of what lay beyond.<sup>14</sup> His father, however, was unable to keep his farm or family together. When he sold the farm in 1869, he left behind Fred, aged fourteen, as an apprentice printer for the *Elizabeth-town Post*, probably immensely pleased his oldest son was learning a trade.<sup>15</sup>

Emily, twenty, and Martha, seventeen, like most nineteenth-century women, faced duller prospects.<sup>16</sup> They remained in Elizabethtown, working as live-in maids for a judge. Eleven-year-old Alice's whereabouts are unrecorded. Milholland took his namesake back to Tamlaghtduff for two years. When they returned to America,<sup>17</sup> the siblings were reunited in crowded Paterson, New Jersey, where their father opened a confectioner's shop that soon expanded into a grocery store where John E. worked after school.<sup>18</sup> He proved a precocious student at Paterson High School, praised for his speaking and writing skills, and graduated with a dozen other students in 1878. The Milholland family joined the local Presbyterian church, whose Calvinist creed appealed to the ambitious but resourceless teen.<sup>19</sup> Even more critical to Milholland's future, a powerful mentor took notice of him.

Congressman William Walter Phelps was the scion of local New Jersey gentry, and his estate stretched from Hackensack to the Hudson River. He held degrees from Yale and Columbia University Law School but valued ability over pedigree. As Phelps did for other promising boys from his district, he may have helped pay for John to begin college.<sup>20</sup> After a year of boning up on the classics, John passed the entrance exam for New York University, the first Milholland to attend college. Although one of the ablest debaters on campus, he collapsed from overwork and dropped out after his second year.<sup>21</sup> He apparently worked for local newspapers for the next couple of years to pay off college debts before buying the *Ticonderoga Sentinel* and moving back to the Adirondacks. As he lacked the capital to make such a purchase, Phelps likely financed the venture.<sup>22</sup> "[A]n Essex County boy takes the helm," wrote publisher R. R. Stevenson upon turning over his Republican weekly to Milholland. "He is a young man of ability, backed up with energy which is so essential. He has the 'push' in him and has come here to stay."<sup>23</sup>

The roots of Inez Milholland's individualism can be discerned in her father's early editorials. They reveal the maverick political streak that became the hallmark of his life. The days of blind party fealty were over, he declared in his first editorial: "This is simply the result of the growth and dominance of Individualism—the outcome of our great thinking age."<sup>24</sup> The moralistic Milholland campaigned for whipping wife beaters and locking up drunks and brawlers. He also issued some of the earliest calls to preserve the Adirondack wilderness and restore crumbling Fort Ticonderoga.<sup>25</sup>

Not all of the energies of the tall, handsome newspaperman with a dashing mustache were devoted to journalism. He met a raven-haired Scottish beauty in Jersey City the previous winter. After Jean Torry's father drowned off a Boston pier, her mother remarried, and the family ended up in Jersey City. The young editor intrigued the cultured Jean enough

for her to invite him to call.<sup>26</sup> Soon after, at the end of a sermon on marriage they heard at the Broadway Tabernacle, Milholland blurted out a proposal. Two days later, March 11, 1884, the couple married. The newlyweds splurged on a carriage ride to Grand Central Station to catch the Montrealer Express, so excited they forgot to eat dinner. Barely had the newlyweds settled into Ticonderoga, however, than Milholland sold the *Sentinel* for triple what he paid for it and, a recommendation letter from Phelps in hand, landed a job as a political writer for the *New York Tribune*.<sup>27</sup> Whitelaw Reid's aggressively Republican *New York Tribune* served as the city's "Great Moral Organ" during the turbulent Gilded Age, when newspapers were synonymous with party politics. Milholland's flair for the era's high-spirited prose made him a natural as the *Tribune*'s chief editorial writer, and he jockeyed into position as Reid's right-hand man on the business end of the paper and in politics. Both were righteous Presbyterians but otherwise made an odd couple: Egalitarian Milholland expected the party of Lincoln to promote civil rights for blacks; Reid was elitist and racist. Both, however, were optimists who believed economic growth resulted in social good.<sup>28</sup> The job moved Milholland into national Republican circles, where he helped Reid choreograph candidates and campaigns.

Inez's birth on August 6, 1886, thrilled her parents. Another daughter, Vida, followed on January 17, 1888. The little girls would fly out the door to throw their arms around their father's neck on his nightly return from Manhattan to the family's modest bungalow at 179 Bainbridge Street, a commute eased by the recent completion of the Brooklyn Bridge.<sup>29</sup> But his wife and daughters' charms could not compete with the adrenalin of Manhattan politics and journalism. One Christmas Eve, John abandoned Jean and the girls to race back into Manhattan.<sup>30</sup> He moved his prospering family to more capacious quarters at bustling Madison Square in 1892, a few months before the birth of John Angus Milholland, nicknamed Jack. In a five-minute stroll from home, the Milhollands could ogle jewelry at Tiffany's, browse among bestsellers such as *Quo Vadis* at Brentano's, indulge in fantasy at F.A.O. Schwarz Toy Bazaar, or clap for the elephants at the circus at Madison Square Gardens. They shopped for dresses along Fifth Avenue at Gimbel Brothers, Siegel Cooper Co., and the twenty-six-acre R. H. Macy & Co., early temples to burgeoning twentieth-century consumerism.<sup>31</sup> The Milhollands' growing fondness for middle-class indulgences did not replace church as the center of their family life. Inez received her own child-sized Bible as soon as she could read. The children attended nearby Madison Square Presbyterian Church presided over



Childhood photograph of Inez, left, and Vida Milholland.  
*Courtesy of John Tepper Marlin.*

by Rev. Charles H. Parkhurst, president of the new Society for the Prevention of Crime. John Milholland, a church deacon, admired the crusading pastor's secular preaching against gambling, prostitution, and city officials who looked the other way, although detractors joked that Parkhurst wanted to run Manhattan like a Sunday school.<sup>32</sup>

Inez was weaned on talk about reform, as her father played an active role in the wave of reform sentiment rolling across the nation. Parkhurst

was just one reformer who visited the Milholland home, where Inez absorbed the example of his successful tirades against the powerful. Her father's political career had received a boost when Republican Benjamin Harrison moved into the White House in 1889. Publisher Reid advised his friend the president, another pious Presbyterian, to appoint Milholland chief inspector of immigration for the Port of New York.<sup>33</sup> When Harrison appointed Reid ambassador to France, Reid left Milholland in charge of tough negotiations with the New York Typographical Union Number Six, which Reid had warred with for fifteen years.<sup>34</sup> Settling the strife became imperative when Reid emerged as a contender for the 1892 vice presidential nomination.<sup>35</sup> Milholland played an instrumental role in securing Reid's nomination by producing the leaders of Big Six at the GOP convention in Minneapolis, where they dramatically announced the union had settled with the *Tribune*.<sup>36</sup> As a reward for his savvy political choreography, Milholland was named an assistant secretary of the National Republican Committee.<sup>37</sup> His political star seemed to be rising, but Milholland fared less well in city politics. Although in coming years Inez's rebellious streak perplexed her father, he had to look no farther for its seeds than his own example as an ebullient rabble-rouser.

Within weeks after moving into Manhattan, he brashly tried to take over the Eleventh Assembly District from conservative GOP stalwarts. Although Milholland enjoyed a loyal local following, he had provoked powerful enemies.<sup>38</sup> He not only failed but also was forced to resign his immigration post.<sup>39</sup> His hubris and inability to compromise proved a fatal political flaw. He further sabotaged his political future when he created a renegade city Republican committee, reigning for a short, shining season in 1894 as the "young Napoleon of ward politics."<sup>40</sup> "Fellow rebels, traitors, revolters, dissensionists," a beaming Milholland addressed fourteen hundred "Milhollandites" who squeezed into Cooper Union for an organizing rally. Jean looked on supportively from a section near the podium from which she and a dozen other women watched the proceedings, her presence in this male enclave an indication of her willingness to test the limits of woman's place.<sup>41</sup> Milholland's organization, however, disbanded within months after state GOP boss Thomas Platt backed the old guard.<sup>42</sup> Although Platt mingled among guests the next month when Rev. Parkhurst christened Inez, Vida, and Jack at home on the Milhollands' tenth wedding anniversary, Milholland's political career was over.<sup>43</sup> The hole in anti-machine politics remained gaping until an equally brash Theodore Roosevelt returned to the city the next year.<sup>44</sup> While Police Commissioner Roosevelt's exploits filled the headlines, Milholland suffered a final political setback when William McKinley's managers named a conservative to

the Republican National Executive Committee in 1896 instead of Milholland, even though he had organized the first club supporting McKinley's presidential candidacy. Milholland forever resented the twist in the political fortunes between himself and Roosevelt, the assassinated McKinley's successor to the White House. "My hold was firmer; my following larger," he said of Roosevelt when he looked back at the 1890s from middle age, memory inflating his political importance. "My prospects far brighter."<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to John's politicking, Jean's vocation was her children, and she directed her considerable energy to the domestic sphere. "He sings to the wide world, she to her nest," says the poet" she once wrote, "and as one who has enjoyed the latter privilege, I fully believe it is the better part."<sup>46</sup> For all her domesticity, however, Jean showed signs she had broken with the asphyxiating Victorian creed that trapped middle-class women in their homes. Jean was ambitious for her daughters. Inez and Vida enrolled in the private Comstock School, and Jean expected them to have some sort of career, still suspect for girls.<sup>47</sup> Notwithstanding Queen Victoria, completing her half-century of rule over the British Empire the year Inez was born, women held precious little power or freedom in the late nineteenth century. Just weeks after Inez's birth, in fact, suffragists protested the dedication of the nearby Statue of Liberty as mocking women's lack of civil rights.<sup>48</sup> Jean quietly supported votes for women; she probably had been too preoccupied with five-month-old Inez, however, to pay much attention when woman suffrage first came up for a vote in the U.S. Senate in 1887. It lost 16 to 34, harbinger of the long road ahead.

Such serious matters did not yet preoccupy Inez. Always tall for her age, "Nan," as her family called her, was a natural leader, with plump Vida, nicknamed "Tub," usually trailing a few steps behind her. Her mother believed in the novel notion that fresh air and freedom benefited girls as well as boys, so Inez and Vida roamed the Lake Champlain beach where they summered barefoot in plain frocks and shaggy tam o'shanter.<sup>49</sup> Their mother ignored the stares they drew, more evidence that this content housewife was no slave to convention and was quietly nurturing her daughters' independence.

John Milholland refocused on business pursuits he began before his bitter political defeat. He headed a pneumatic mail tubes business, encouraged by one of Milholland's influential friends from the Harrison administration, former postmaster general John Wanamaker. Pneumatic mail tubes were the e-mail of the turn of the century. *Harper's Weekly* predicted tubes would make a greater impact on the twentieth century



John and Jean Milholland at a resort in Lakewood, N.J., 1909.  
*Courtesy of Ticonderoga Historical Society.*

than trolley cars; others said the underground tubes' "instantaneous" delivery made them as revolutionary as the telephone.<sup>50</sup> The technology used vacuums to propel metal canisters eight inches in diameter and two feet long along tubes installed between post office branches beneath city streets increasingly clogged by cars.<sup>51</sup> Wanamaker department store clerks sent money to cash rooms through twenty miles of tubes connecting 250 stations.<sup>52</sup> As postmaster general, Wanamaker had authorized installation of the first American mail tubes in Philadelphia, sure they would revolutionize communication.<sup>53</sup>

The tubes may not have revolutionized the mail, but they profoundly changed Inez's life. Her father's firm broke ground for New York's first pneumatic mail tubes line at the corner of Park Row and Beekman Street on August 2, 1897.<sup>54</sup> The company built the lines and ran the machinery, making money by renting use of the system to its sole customer, the United States Post Office. The inaugural run in October featured the Milholland family Bible wrapped in an American flag that zipped into the Produce Exchange forty seconds after John sent it from the central post—versus the seventeen minutes it took a messenger boy to make the trip.<sup>55</sup> Over the next few years, Inez, Vida, and Jack watched wide-eyed at official openings of new spurs as their father sent kittens, puppies, and even a bowl of six goldfish whooshing along the tubes.<sup>56</sup> Eventually, fifty-four miles of mail tubes in New York City handled more than five million letters daily, about a quarter of the total load.<sup>57</sup> Milholland expanded operations to Boston, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Chicago, and Europe. By the turn of the century, Milholland was worth a half million dollars—a pittance to a Rockefeller but, in the days before graduated income taxes, still making Inez and her siblings richer than 99 percent of all Americans.<sup>58</sup>

Her father made two decisions on how to spend his new wealth that symbolized the basic contradiction in his nature: his need to do good versus his desire to live well. Inez inherited both traits. In 1898 he bought back the family farm, gradually accumulating four thousand Adirondack acres around Mt. Discovery that he called Meadowmount.<sup>59</sup> His dream was to someday use the property to help the poor. Over the next decade, he replaced the gray house his father built with a green cottage and added six more, plus stables, barns, and offices. Ducks quacked and geese honked on the two-acre trout pond; horses, a donkey, cattle, and sheep grazed in the meadow; chickens scratched in the barnyard; and a couple of drooling St. Bernards chased off strangers. Inez loved all of the animals. Her father even snaked some five miles of eight-foot-high fencing around Mt. Discovery and filled it with deer, elk, and a moose.<sup>60</sup> Eventually, he built

the thirty-six room, green-and-white “Big House” on a bluff that backed up to the base of the mountain. Milholland likened his sojourns to Meadowmount to Christ’s pilgrimages in the wilderness. “The mountains mean so much to me in things spiritual,” he mused atop his favorite boyhood hill, which he named Mt. Jacob.<sup>61</sup> He often spent the night alone at the summit, praying until the sun rose before the stone altar he erected. “I could stay and meditate week in and week out,” he wrote. “No place just like it—nowhere I go.”<sup>62</sup>

But go he did. John seemed incapable of staying still, another inherited trait that cursed as well as blessed Inez. No sooner did her father buy Meadowmount than the Milhollands moved to London. His growing pneumatic tube business enabled restless John and Jean to fulfill their dream of living in Europe, where he hoped to expand operations.<sup>63</sup> They wanted to expose their children to culture and tolerance they found lacking in the United States.<sup>64</sup> The Spanish-American War appalled them, as did the racially chauvinist call for manifest destiny.

The fin de siècle preoccupation with the potential for rebirth in the new century also stoked the Milhollands’ desire to begin a new life overseas. Besides revealing their Victorian reverence for history, their desire said something about the value the Milhollands placed on culture that they moved to England while the rest of the country focused on the Wild West. London represented a life of the mind, an opportunity to bathe their senses in great art, literature, and history less revered in increasingly materialistic America. The Milhollands wanted to impress upon their children that intellectual and cultural pursuits, not the acquisition of money, were worthy goals in life. Inez had just turned thirteen when the family sailed aboard the *Lucania* on August 12, 1899, launching a lifelong pattern of motion. Before settling into London life, the family undertook the obligatory grand tour of Europe, following in the footsteps of Henry James’s “Daisy Miller.” They touched down in Edinburgh, Paris, Berlin, Budapest, Antwerp, and Vienna before settling into a four-story townhouse within hailing distance of Kensington Palace just as the new century snapped open like an English Christmas cracker.<sup>65</sup>



Inez's father built this 34-room mansion, "The Big House," at Meadowmount, the family's 1,600-acre estate, on the site of the farm where he was born in Lewis, N.Y. *Courtesy of Meadowmount School of Music.*