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After graduating from Albion in 1905, Bretz taught biology for a brief period in Flint, Michigan. In 1907, he and his wife, Fanny, moved to Seattle, Washington, where he taught science at three different high schools over the next several years. During the long summer breaks, he explored the local glacial geology. His mapping of Pleistocene surficial deposits eventually covered the entire Puget Sound region from Centralia and Chehalis to the Canadian border. Bretz used these extensive field studies as the basis of a Ph.D. dissertation in geology from the University of Chicago in 1913.

The “J Harlen” name arose during this period. Bretz’s biographer John Soennichsen quotes Bretz’s daughter, Rhoda: “He invented the Harlen thing, just as he had invented the J in front of his name—made the whole thing up. Harley Bretz was his given name, but it just didn’t ring a bell for him; maybe he didn’t think it sounded professional enough.” In reviewing the submitted Ph.D. dissertation, Rollin D. Salisbury (1858–1922), Bretz’s Ph.D. supervisor at Chicago, asked him to spell out the first name on the author line. When Bretz responded that “J” was his entire first name, Salisbury admonished, “Then never put or allow a typist or printer to use a period after that J.”

Upon receiving his Ph.D., Bretz spent a year as an assistant professor of geology at the University of Washington, but in 1914 Salisbury recruited him to return to the University of Chicago, first as instructor in geology (1914–1915), then as assistant professor (1915–1921). His responsibilities at Chicago emphasized teaching in the field. Perhaps influenced by his own largely self-taught path to geological understanding, and reinforced by his Chicago mentors, Bretz became a lifelong advocate of geological education in the field. He wrote in his unpublished memoirs, “My ideal was to teach geology from the field as much as possible.” He instinctively rejected, “...text book and lecture methods without field work.”

At Chicago, Bretz became renowned as a teacher. Starting in 1915, he was responsible for the field course held each summer in the Devil’s Lake region near Baraboo, Wisconsin. Over the next thirty years or so, “Doc” Bretz served as mentor to hundreds of budding geologists, emerging from their tents near the lake each day, generally during the month of September, just before the start of classes. His teaching method was Socratic. It was the students who made all the discoveries, but they were ultimately guided in their geological hypothesizing by Doc’s questioning. As Bretz wrote in his unpublished memoirs, “I never would tell. I always made them work out their own salvation.”

In 1916, Bretz initiated an advanced field course during the early summer, in which he took small numbers of University of Chicago students to the northwestern U.S. In the summer of 1922, this advanced course moved to the Columbia Plateau region of eastern Washington. Thomas Large, a teacher at Lewis and Clark High School in Spokane, Washington (and one of the founders of the Northwest Scientific Society), aided with local logistical arrangements. In the course of work during the summers of 1922 and 1923, Bretz and his students documented an amazing
assemblage of landforms that included coulees, immense dry cata-
racts, rock basins, anastomosing channel ways, and gravel bars.  
Field relations among these features, most notably the multiple 
levels of divide crossings, led Bretz to propose that an immense 
cataclysmic flood had swept across the Columbia Plateau in late 
Pleistocene time, creating the great plexus of channel ways that he 
named the “Channeled Scabland.”

In a 1923 paper, Bretz concluded, “It was a debacle which swept 
the Columbia Plateau.” He named this debacle the “Spokane 
Flood,” thereby initiating the famous controversy. As he well 

How was it that this outrageous hypothesis got published? In 
today’s culture of “publish or perish,” outrageous hypotheses tend 

to get soundly squelched within the secret rituals of peer review. 
today’s younger scientists, wary of their h-index rankings, can be 

FURTHER READING
Baker, V.R., 2008, The Spokane Flood debates: Historical background and 
philosophical perspective, in Grapes, R., Oldroyd, D., and Grigelis, A., eds., 
History of Geomorphology and Quaternary Geology: Geological Society, 
Soennichsen, J., 2008, Bretz’s flood: The remarkable story of a rebel geologist 