
The Starbuck Essays Of Henry Stommel

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Foreword

These essays appeared from time to time over a number of years in *The Enterprise*, the community newspaper of Falmouth, Massachusetts. I first encountered “Starbuck” as a youthful editor some forty years ago.

We were early in the cold war. We were in the McCarthy era. Inspired by McCarthy, persons ambitious for attention were going about the country discovering Communists. One of these Paul Reveres of the cold war came to address some gathering on Cape Cod and announced to a startled audience that there were—he knew for a fact—a thousand or more dedicated Communists living on Cape Cod.

A thrill of excitement ran through that part of the community that enjoyed alarms and nourished the idea that there were Russian spies everywhere in the land.

Kicking around the newspaper office was a Rotary Club handbook that listed the members of the several Rotary clubs on the Cape. I counted the names. They added up to a couple of hundred. So I ran an editorial saying that there seemed to be more Communists than Rotarians on Cape Cod.

It was the sort of appeal to the ridiculous that delighted Hank Stommel, and a day or so later he came to me with an appreciative note that was signed “Starbuck.” I regret the note isn’t preserved. I remember that it was amusing and to the point and that I wished that I had written it.

I had met Hank Stommel, but I did not yet know him. That was the start. Encouraged, I like to think, by my appreciation, the “Starbuck” letters began to arrive at *The Enterprise* office.

These letters, which I correctly called essays, speak wonderfully for themselves.

Reading the “Starbuck” letters will suggest the pleasure of spending a sociable evening with Hank Stommel over beer and fresh-shucked oysters. I can hear his laughter now.

Bon appétit.

John T. Hough
Publisher, The Enterprise

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Henry Stommel

Hank Stommel was born September 27, 1920, in Wilmington, Delaware. His early interest in science, particularly chemistry and astronomy, was encouraged by his maternal grandfather. From his own stories, it was clear that he was of independent mind early on. While still in high school, he “developed a taste for simple ideas interacting with a sparse number of facts.”

Hank graduated from high school in 1938 and attended Yale University, starting in chemistry and then switching to physics. He graduated in 1942, a conscientious objector with three years of war work to do out of uniform. He stayed at Yale to teach Navy V-12 students analytic geometry and celestial navigation. During this time he briefly tried out the ministry, but after one semester he found it too constricting—it was mostly about ideas, not practice. His clear sense of moral ambiguity and personal integrity was well established. Then Hank met astrophysicist Lyman Spitzer and considered further work in astrophysics. Spitzer told him about the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and suggested that it might be a good place for him.

Hank joined the Institution staff in 1944, initially developing instrumentation for use with the U.S. Navy submarine fleet and instructing officers in its use, and later doing acoustics work with Maurice Ewing. Neither of these projects really engaged Hank’s mind. He finally met Jeffries Wyman (see “On Honorifics”), who was working on cumulus convection. Hank found this work interesting, and it led to his first scientific paper in 1946. From then on, Hank was fully engaged in scientific research. He was a professor at Harvard University for three years, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor for 15 years, and then returned to Woods Hole, which was always his spiritual home.

Hank Stommel was the most prodigious oceanographer who has lived, and much has been written about his influence and the breadth and depth of his contributions. His publications include some 140 scientific papers, 12 books and 65 other articles and papers. His list of honors includes membership in the national science academies of the United States, the United Kingdom, France and the U.S.S.R., and medals, awards or prizes from the American Meteorological Society, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the American Geophysical Union, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Academy of Sciences, the Bedford Institute of Oceanography, the principality of Monaco and the German Meteorological Society. In 1982, he received the Crafoord Prize of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, and in 1989 the National Medal

Holly Pedlosky



Henry Stommel

of Science of the United States. What was equally remarkable about Hank was the breadth and intensity of his interest in human beings. His agile mind and voracious appetite for life fueled his amazingly catholic interests.

Hank used the discipline of writing to organize and anneal his thoughts. He was driven to express himself. His sense of humor was also key to the way he interacted with people—he found it was easier to capture people’s attention with humor than with a frontal attack. The issues he addresses in these letters and essays range from the sublime to the ridiculous—but often turn on his sense of personal integrity and responsibility and the restraints society imposes on it. Hank refers to his “commentarial ambition,” which, I think, underlies much of his nonscientific writing. This was already evident in an editorial he wrote in his high school newspaper exhorting his fellow students to work hard and not waste the opportunity of an education. While he was teaching the Navy students at Yale, he wrote his first book, *Science of the Seven Seas*. He later felt embarrassed by its superficiality, and though much of it *is* superficial, the book nevertheless contains the seeds for much of Hank’s later interests—lost islands (his *Lost Islands, The Story of Islands That Have Vanished from Nautical Charts* was published in 1984 by the University of British Columbia Press), as well as many of the fundamental puzzles in oceanography he later addressed.

I don’t know where the pseudonym “Starbuck” came from, but I believe Hank found it convenient for several reasons. He refers to one of these in “Dr. Hashelew’s Plan” (page 82). He felt the pseudonym gave him freer reign to lampoon the official bodies of the town, the state, etc. A deeper reason though was that it deflected attention from him personally to the content of the writing—it wasn’t Hank Stommel, world famous scientist, writing, but rather someone whom you might know personally.

James Luyten
Physical Oceanography Department
Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution



A colophon often used
by Henry Stommel

“Foolish” Traffic Light Starts Mr. Stommel’s Friend To Ponder

Editor of *The Enterprise*:

My friend Starbuck, a student of the quantitative aspect of things, and an observer of the American scene, recently wrote me the following letter, which may interest some of your readers:

Poised, as we are told we are, on the verge of a new age of Automation, I marvel at the toleration which we as a people exhibit toward the inefficiency of poorly designed machinery. Let me offer a humble example: the automatic traffic light at Quissett Corners. Normally this signal shows a green light on the main road. When cars approach the intersection from Oyster Pond Road they trip a switch in the road which stops traffic on the main road, and lets them through. The trouble with the system is that cars turning off the main road also trip the mechanism because the road is so narrow, and also stop traffic on the main road—for no good reason. This has been going on for years. The machine is an imbecile: a patrolman who behaved the same would be committed. However, everyone submits meekly, tolerantly to this ridiculous machine. Certainly it is within reach of modern technology to invent a switching device which can discriminate between cars approaching and leaving the intersection.

Perhaps you will think this a small matter indeed. But is it? Let us consider that each of us in the United States is stopped on the average twice a week for one minute each time by a similar traffic light. That makes two hours a year for each of the 150,000,000 of us, a conservative estimate. Evaluating our time at \$1.50 per hour, that represents a total waste of almost one half billion dollars each year—all on the account of poorly designed traffic signals. Were we now to try to compute the loss due to other incompetent machinery: overpowered cars, inefficient heating systems, the telephone dial system, etc., we would be appalled, but would not protest. I submit this paradox to the attention of deeper philosophers of life than I. It is said that matters of national political and economic policy are decided these days with the help of vast computing machines: General MacArthur was recalled from his command on advice of the UNIVAC. The next war may even be declared by machine...the public will remain supine. As for me, I am getting rather scared of machines and very angry at them too—especially that foolish Quissett traffic light.

Starbuck

Henry Stommel
Sippewissett

August 6, 1957

On February 7, 1958, the editorial below was printed in The Enterprise. It inspired Starbuck, whose reply appears opposite.

Wanted—A New Poet For Shivericks Pond

This would be called a lake where ponds
Like precious pearls are rare.
A necklace passing beautiful
An heirloom from the skies;
Time fails to touch it with decay,
Its beauty never dies.

This is Shivericks Pond as Mrs. Frances E. Swift, the Falmouth poet, saw it. She wrote in 1894 in her *Rhymes of Falmouth*:

How oft I longed to dip
My fevered brow in this cool pond
And of its waters sip.

If there are those so tempted today, let them be warned. Those who dip or sip of this precious pearl may not live to write about it. Alas, Mrs. Swift, though the beauty of Shivericks Pond may never die, Time has not failed to touch it with decay.

Shivericks pond still ripples blue as citizens glimpse it from Main Street on a summer day. Benches on its embankment invite visitors to enjoy the watery vista. Around it rise modest homes of citizens, store blocks, our million-dollar high school, the post office of the United States of America.

There may be some in town who know this pond in our village center was named for Samuel Shiverick who was town minister in 1701. Many more know the pond was rechristened some years ago by our Chairman of Selectmen. He called it Falmouth's "public cesspool."

Whew! The literature of Shivericks Pond has changed. Today it is being written by sanitary engineers and bacteriologists, not by poets. We prefer the poets. The state Department of Public Health is more up-to-date. Here is what the department said when it closed Shivericks to ice-taking in 1932:

"Recent analyses show increasing pollution of Shivericks pond, especially so far as the total number of bacterium including those characteristic of sewage."

Years later in 1946, the director of Division of Sanitary Engineering wrote:

"Samples of Shivericks Pond in the general vicinity of the post office showed that the water contained 1,000,000 bacteria characteristic of sewage per 100 cubic centimeters of water examined which indicates that the water in the pond at that time contained nearly one percent of domestic sewage."

Last October the deputy state Commissioner of Health wrote the most recent apostrophe to our lake:

"Shivericks Pond continues to be polluted with sewage."

Alas that Frances Swift is gone, and after her our Katharine Lee Bates. These bacteriologists are prosy fellows.

Falmouth needs a poet like Oliver Wendell Holmes to save our pond for us as he saved *Old Ironsides* for the nation.

Have we no modern Julia Ward Howe to write for this month's town meeting, The Battle Hymn of Shivericks Pond?

Falmouth Is A Friendly Place

Editor of *The Enterprise*:

Last weekend, while on a business trip to Avernus, I happened to meet, on the night-boat crossing the River Styx, a microscopic Falmouth resident who was much concerned over the attention which *The Enterprise* has focussed upon Shivericks Pond. He seemed most apprehensive of some action on the part of the Town which might prejudice his interests in Falmouth, and asked me to forward to you this piece of verse, which, he said, expressed his sincere appreciation of the provisions which the Town has in the past made for him and his business.

Yours faithfully,
Starbuck

I am a jolly Spirochaete
Who lives in Shivericks Pond,
And finds there all the dainty things
Of which he is so fond.

And fragrant medieval towns
Return in memories dear
As we inhale the scented air
Of our new home right here.

My relatives are also here,
The Coli and Bacillus,
And comfortably proliferate
With nothing bad to kill us.

In other towns a germ like me
Finds things much less secure;
His very life is threatened by
A nasty, costly sewer.

We are a friendly, social set;
And soon as we are able,
We'd like to visit at your house,
And share the dinner table.

But Falmouth is a friendly place
To keep so nice a pool,
Right in the middle of the Town;
Convenient to the School.

The Old World charm of Old Cape Cod
—despite some recent changes—
Reminds us of our former homes:
In India and the Ganges;

Canal Electric's Plume Of Smoke

Wednesday, a week ago, Junius and I drove to Boston. The wind was from the south, and when we turned at the Bourne traffic circle to follow the road along the south bank of the canal, we saw ahead of us, on the horizon, a great plume of dark red-brown smoke. Upon reaching the Sagamore Bridge, we could see that it issued from the chimney of the new Sagamore electric factory. As we drove northward along Route 3, the sky was filled with dark billows for a distance of at least nine miles. This ugly pall seemed to overhang the whole of the Miles Standish Forest. By comparison the little cloud from the town dump near Plymouth seemed innocent and harmless.

Late that night, bringing our Russian visitor down from the airport, and extolling the charms of the Cape, we were startled when Dr. Schmoksky exclaimed: "I am surprised by how close we are to the Gulf Stream—the cumulus clouds ahead suggest that it must approach the shore of the Cape quite closely." Sure enough—up ahead, towering above the bridges, the bright moonlight was transfiguring the same electric factory effluvium into a line of immense silvery white clouds, marching across the sky.

"I don't know what others may think" said Junius, "but in my mind a Massachusetts Air Purity agency that acquiesces to such gross disfigurement of the sky by an electric factory, and at the same time bedevils the householder over his homely bonfire of autumn leaves is a monster of bureaucratic obtuseness. Were I an earnest student, bent upon exposing an irrational establishment, I think that instead of demonstrating for a reduction of the drinking age to 16 years, I would solemnly commit the heinous crime of burning a modest pile of leaves in front of the electric factory's door."

"Junius," I replied, "such irrationality does not become you, there must be a reason for so much smoke—a good sound economic reason."

"Undoubtedly," he said in a long-suffering tone, "the darker they can make the sky, the more people have to turn on their lights—even in the daytime."

And so we drove home, sadly, through the hauntingly beautiful night—haunted by visions of other industrial parks in the Ruhr Valley, and Hoboken, New Jersey, and near Magnitogorsk, and of factories sprouting up everywhere on the Cape. We think that our views are in tune with the times. We display a bumper sticker that says BAN CREMATORIA!...And we think we know the answer to the poet's haunting question: "Where are the leaves of yesteryear?"—in a huge festering pile at the town dump.

Don't Write Decade Off— It Has Another Year To Go

It was over a glass of malmsey that I happened to mention to my friend Junius that the Decade of the Seventies was about to expire. I had heard someone on the radio say it, and usually half my chatter is a reply of what I hear and read. Junius looked pained. "Of course you won't be writing sevens on your checks and letters, but surely you know that the Eighth Decade of the Twentieth Century is made up of the years 1971-1980 inclusive, and ends following Dec. 31, 1980. The Tenth Decade ends simultaneously with the century itself, following Dec. 31, 2000."

Of course, I had to admit that I felt a little helpless, so far as the calendar is concerned, and that I really never even felt comfortable referring to the 1900's as the twentieth century anyway (except of course for the year 1900 itself which really is in the nineteenth century), and that this naturally increased my respect for experts in calendrical matters like Julius Caesar and Pope Gregory. Just to be sure, however, I rather furtively looked at the microfilm *New York Times* in the Falmouth library, for January 1, 1901—and there, just as Junius would have assured me, was a two-column account of the Celebrations for the Turn of the Century at City Hall, complete with fireworks.

As Junius subsequently told me: "It is a little humiliating, at your age, to recognize that you still don't quite know how to count. The calendar seems to bring this out in people. At the turn of the last century the issue was a hot one, and at least one head of state insisted that the century ended on Dec. 31, 1899; but then Kaiser Wilhelm II was a loser. I don't see why it seems so difficult to understand. It illustrates the simplicity of the decimal system, after all, and isn't that why we are all rushing toward metrification?"

It doesn't profit me to argue with Junius. When I began to wonder whether the calendar could really be regarded as Decimal, when there never was a year Zero (for, I believe, Divine reasons), I decided to let the matter pass, and to meekly accept whatever I was told.

On January 1, 1980, The Enterprise offered the following:

An Answer For Starbuck

For those who have been fretting over Starbuck's disquisition in the Friday *Enterprise* about the decade having one more year to go, the question has also roused dispute elsewhere.

This is the way it was explained in *The New York Times* on Sunday:

Any 10 years make a decade. The 10 years beginning with 1970 conveniently make a decade called the 1970's. It ends tomorrow. However (because Jesus was born in the Year 1, there being no Year 0), the 198th decade of the Christian calendar ends Dec. 31, 1980. So it's 20 years to the twenty-first century. Or 21.

Twenty Years To Go

(Our correspondent, Starbuck, who created a rather one-sided controversy a year ago with his insistence that the decade would not end until Dec. 31, 1980, continues to be interested in the subject. A short time ago we received a brief note from him. "Dec. 31, 1980, will bring us to within 20 years of the end of the twentieth century: Dec. 31, 2000. Two more decades to go." This was followed by the following longer dissertation.)

The coming New Year will mark that point in time when there still remain but twenty more years in our monstrously cruel, yet peculiarly idealistic Twentieth Century. The new century begins on Jan. 1, 2001 (not 2000, as implied in these columns during the New Year's euphoria last year).

The New York Times of Jan. 1, 1901, marked the birth of the new century with four columns describing the previous night's celebrations. The official ceremony was in front of City Hall. It began at 10:45 with an overture by Sousa's Band and an address by the President of the City Council in which he expressed the wish "that the crowning glory of the coming century shall be the lifting up of the burdens of the poor, the annihilation of all misery and wrong, and that the peace and goodwill which the angels proclaimed shall rest on contending nations as the snowflakes upon the land," sentiments which, in those innocent days before the advent of the loudspeaker, did not reach the ears of most of the tumultuous crowd. The song which followed, by 500 picked voices of the United German Singing Societies, was more easily heard. The crowd joined in singing "America" and "Ring Out Wild Bells," and cheered and tooted horns.

At midnight church bells tolled twenty times, prayers and addresses were offered, despite the noise in the streets. At City Hall, just as the big hands of the clock approached the midnight hour, all the lights were turned off, and then the entire front of the building burst into light—2000 electric light bulbs in all—red, white and blue—and an immense electric sign lettered "WELCOME 20TH CENTURY." Simultaneously forty lyddite bombs were discharged in the park and a "gorgeous" pyrotechnic display of exploding bombshells, colored balls, glittering arrowheads and sprays of gold, silver spikes, electric fountains welcomed 1901. The display was

Continued overleaf

not limited to the official one—from the skyscrapers Roman candles and falling bombs cascaded for more than an hour.

Labor greeted the new century with a dinner and series of speeches in Arlington Hall on Eighth St. Bishops, politicians and leaders of thought were there. There was even a literary man, Edwin Markham, author of "The Man with the Hoe," who delivered an original poem, "The Century Poem." The dinner served cost 50 cents a plate, there was an orchestra, and the surroundings were said to be much the same as those at the more elaborate feasts of people of wealth. Bishop Potter voiced his support for the strike of the Hebrew bakers against their sixteen-hour day; workers were exhorted to make use of night school, and a Mrs. Fred Nathan protested that the list of speakers was made up of fifteen representatives of the unfair sex, and not a single member of the fair sex.

Eighty years gone by, twenty more to come—so much changes, so much stays the same.

The Wanton Jangling Of A Disneyland Bell

In 1803 Prince Gifford Jr. built the old yellow homestead on what is now Old Palmer Avenue for his wife Chloe (Hoxie) and two little daughters Charity and Mercy. About 1815 “beautiful” Charity married a sea captain, Samuel Moore, but died in childbirth. Captain Moore went back to sea, leaving his tiny son in the care of his grandparents and his spinster sister-in-law Mercy.

Aunt “Massie,” as she was called, lived in the downstairs parlor. In her old age (she lived until 1887) she used to wash the family silver each night and secrete it in her room. She was troubled by ghostly noises. Even now, on a cold winter night, with a westerly gale blowing past the eaves, you can hear them.

One wonders what she makes of the bell on the fake “Plymouth Rock Trolley Co.” bus that passes the house twice each hour this summer. I think that it disturbs her peace.

Times have changed. Tourists must be transported. But do they need to be entertained by the wanton jangling of a Disneyland bell?

“Giant’s Ashtray” Was Part Of A Water System

Feeling somewhat depressed by that article in last month’s *Sunday Times* warning of the dangers of real estate overdevelopment on the Cape, I happened to encounter a New York couple looking for a hilltop building lot here in Sippewissett. They were enthralled to find a large parabolic stone dish at the summit and had consulted our local archeologist, Dr. Hashelew, who pronounced it to be a prehistoric space telescope left by early visitors from off-Cape. Local children know it as the Giant’s Ashtray. But it is really a monument to an old man’s folly, the handiwork of Samuel Moore (1844–1935), Sippewissett-born inventor and entrepreneur.

It was Uncle Sam, who as a boy, planted the huge old maples on our corner, who during the Civil War learned the mechanical arts first-hand in the locomotive shops of Taunton, who invented a machine for manufacturing those little chains of brass balls to be found in every pull-chain lighting fixture today, and founded a prosperous metal findings concern in Providence.

At the age of 65 he decided to convert his grandfather’s barn into the house now owned by Douglas and Shirley Webb. In those days there were no water meters—rates were set by the nature of the plumbing facilities. Uncle Sam was so enraged to discover that his rates would be doubled because of a projected upstairs toilet that he decided to build his own water system, both for the house and for irrigation of his apple orchard.

A well was dug at the bottom of a pothole near the railroad tracks, and a Stirling hot-air engine installed. A windmill was built on the hill and the great dish as a reservoir. In laying out his water system Uncle Sam was a very confident engineer. He depended upon his eye instead of on a level. Upon completion of his private waterworks he discovered that there was insufficient pressure to fill the upstairs toilet tank.

Following his death in 1935 the elaborate system fell into disrepair. A hurricane toppled the windmill. One dark night the Stirling engine was spirited down the railroad tracks towards Woods Hole. All that is left is a cracked parabolic dish in a tangle of poison ivy.

If you are looking for evidence of visitors from off-Cape, you won’t find it in the Giant’s Ashtray, but in the numerous fresh-dug cellar holes along any back road in town.

Early Tourists

Labor Day is past. The tide of visitors ebbs. Cape Codders look forward to the halcyon months of fall. Our thoughts revert to the veteran tourist clergyman-president of Yale, Timothy Dwight. For many years he traveled through New England during the September recess, when the students were released for harvest work at home.

In 1800 he rode through Barnstable to Provincetown by the north road. The closest he got to Falmouth was a visit to the praying Indians at "Marshpee." Generally impressed by the industry and piety of Cape Cod farmers and fishermen, Dwight thought less of some of the innkeepers whose hospitality he was forced to endure. At Well's Tavern in Truro the proprietor, "a detestable Frenchman, presented an enormous bill, nearly double to what we had customarily been charged before" and swore and cursed when Dwight protested.

At Atwood's in Wellfleet he suffered "a grumbling old Democrat, who together with about half a dozen of his uncouth, unmannerly and impertinent neighbors regaled us with more profaneness and questions about ourselves and our business than I imagined could be found in any one house in New England."

But he was grateful to the old fellow's wife for "Good Beds."

He found the high moral tone of Provincetown most pleasing, and their 140 houses, 140 cows, ten yoke of oxen and two horses. He found much of the Cape bare, bleak and desolate, "the inhabitants having invariably cut down their forests." He commented upon the sparse water supply and the precautions that farmers took to protect their orchards against the winds.

He noted the state law that required the inhabitants to plant beach grass to impede the sea, which threatened to sever Provincetown from Truro.

Writing of what he regarded as the inferior quality of the houses beyond Barnstable he may have coined the phrase of what "may be called with propriety Cape Cod houses." He determined that the chief vice was intemperance, particularly in the western districts. And he predicted that the future industry of the Cape would be salt-works.

Dwight may have been the first tourist. In his own words, he and his party "were the first who had ever traveled over that peninsula from motives of curiosity." He could not foresee how many of his descendants would follow his trail, how we would so foul our urban nests that we seek refuge here on our "disagreeable sand hills" at the margin of the sea.

Recalling Henry Parker

When our boys were small there was nothing like the night before the opening of the trout season and almost no sleep. Excited whispers, restless movements of an overnight friend unaccustomed to a sleeping bag on the floor and flickering flashlights to inspect the slowly moving hands of the alarm clock kept everyone awake.

Then, about 3 A.M. the sounds of furtive footsteps, three pairs of pants being donned, the clunk of rubber boots and of doors opening and closing, and they were off on the great adventure of the hike to Goodwill Park through the mysterious heavy darkness, the dripping boughs and the slippery descent down cold damp banks to the pond. There reigned the strict discipline of self-imposed silence, stern commands to "douse the glim" in boyish tones, or perhaps the stifled cry of some small unfortunate whose hip boots unexpectedly filled up with cold lake water.

With the first light of dawn the dim outlines of the trees and pond-side boulders began to show faintly, and one could discern an earnest tiny fisherman perched on each one, for all the world like sleepy little springtime toads. These were treasured hours free of parents and teachers, on their own in the great outdoors. Some brought home their catch with pride, a pickerel or two, to bestow upon a hesitating mother.

The counselor, friend and hero of these little boys was Henry Parker. From his counter in the rear of Eastman's he outfitted them all: a five-cent hook here, a two-bit lure there. And more than this, too, for he introduced them to the magic world of field and stream. With the utmost patience he helped them wind their reels with line, and more than once he took them out back to Shivericks Pond to demonstrate how to cast a lure. On one such demonstration he even caught a fish on the first cast.

When the snow thaws and spring comes to this town, the peepers raise their voices from our ponds, and the light is still dim in the sky, there must be many men now nearing middle age who for a few moments recall Henry's kindness in their hearts, and the first clear feeling stir within in them that, though boys, they now were men. These living memories of the gift he gave are a kind of immortality that few of us have earned.

