

Hough Puts His Stamp On Vineyard Letters

A newspaper can be big-time without being big-city.

By Thomas Forbes

For the past 10 years, Henry Beetle Hough has led a crusade against the development of a spit of wetland on Martha's Vineyard called Starbuck's Neck. His arguments have not always been the normal stuff of the editorial writer.

44 years since *Country Editor*, his much-celebrated, autobiographical paean to small-town journalism, was published. At the end of that book, Hough observed: "When we see what there is around us (not much from the city's standpoint—just the life of the island, old white houses, meadows, woods, hilltops and the sea) we have again and again



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"Time," Hough wrote in a book documenting the struggle, "is a dimension, not a uniform standard at all, and in fact accelerates its course from Cathay to Fleet Street to Broadway to Starbuck's Neck, as well as from Gutenberg to Mergenthaler to the laser beam, or from *Acta Diurna* to *The New York Times* to the *Vineyard Gazette*."

Hough and time are like old cronies who always seem to be squabbling, always trying to get a fix on one another. When Hough refers to time as a dimension in which the past talks to the present, it is more the parry of a poet than the thrust of a newspaperman. Deadlines, after all, are a uniform standard, just as surely as the *Vineyard Gazette* goes to press each Friday morning. But so be it, for the temerity of Hough the newspaperman has always been refined by the vision of Hough the poet. That is why his *Vineyard Gazette* has been a special newspaper.

It is Henry Beetle Hough's 88th year, and

a haunting sense that one lifetime is not enough for all this."

In the years since the end of World War II, the city has encroached on Hough's island. "Monster growth," he calls it, "things that we don't need and don't want": housing developments, proposals for an open-air theater and fast-food restaurants, boat loads of transients, a multitude of bureaucracies replacing "three selectmen who met once a week and signed some papers."

Ironically, it is not necessarily city people—the summer residents who flee skyscrapers and their trappings—who have imported the city standpoint to Martha's Vineyard. "Economics," Hough says, "is always crude"—and one doesn't have to be an off-islander to be mesmerized by mammon. So, to a man putting out a community newspaper, fighting development often means fighting the men and women who own the businesses that advertise in the paper. The *Gazette's* boosterism is different from that of most small-town newspapers. It has preached preservation, not expansion.

"There is a war going on between environmentalists and conservationists who want to keep the character of the island and those who want to develop it for the maximum of profit," Hough says. "That's an invidious way of putting it. . . . Those who are trying to make the profit would define their aims much more modestly and more softly."

And while, on occasion, the *Gazette* has faced advertiser boycotts, Hough and his vision of a newspaper's duty to its readers have prevailed. "I don't believe in a newspaper that is not at times sensational," Hough says. "I believe in the crusading function, and there's much more to be crusading about now than in the old days."

In his recent campaign to preserve Starbuck's Neck, Hough confronted two of Martha's Vineyard's leading businessmen. They had planned to build two houses and a tennis court on their property near the famed Edgartown lighthouse. Hough's battle was waged not only through the pages of the *Gazette* (and his book, *Soundings at Sea Level*) but also in the courts and the meeting rooms of various bureaucratic agencies. Just last month, Edgartown summer resident Farleigh Dickinson donated the land to the town after having swapped a residence he had owned for the property.

The two businessmen, Robert Carroll and Allan Jones, recently joined with three other men active in the island's commerce to back *The Martha's Vineyard Times*, which will start up next month (see box on page 44). Hough is not worried. "In the long run, the advertising is going to go where it gets results. And these people—the Chamber of Commerce and Board of Trade types—undoubtedly will be able to line up advertising to begin with. But it isn't going to stick unless it pays," he says. "I would feel that the odds are very heavily weighed in the favor of the editorial policy of the *Gazette*, and the tradition and the hold it has on readers. . . . Influence is very hard to have."

Hough also was at the center of the nation-

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ally celebrated campaign to keep McDonald's from opening a franchise on the island in the late '70s. Though he was no longer the publisher of the *Gazette*, its coverage was influenced by his spirit. "Not Wanted," trumpeted one of the editorials; "Big Mac Closing In," warned the ominous—some would say partisan—headline on the news story in the same edition. *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, the wire services and national TV covered the islanders' fight. Hough has referred to the Golden Arches as part of "the

folk imagery of America, a symbol not much below the Ford car, the Almighty Dollar and the American Eagle." But it was the folk imagery of New England, the Boston Tea Party, that won out.

Hough, son of a newspaperman from New Bedford, Mass., acquired the *Gazette* with his wife Betty in 1920. The couple met at the Columbia School of Journalism, and Hough spent a year as a publicity man in Chicago for the Institute of American Meat Packers before forsaking the fortunes of the city for a business in which "you could go broke in your own way." Says Hough, "We enjoyed the utmost liberty." Then, after a pause and a Yankee cackle: "To starve."

A cavalier attitude toward advertising is usually a quick road to ruination, but Hough's *Gazette* never has followed trendy editorial or marketing strategies. Most papers, he'll tell you, "are merchandised, not edited." And though in the '30s he was hustler enough to beat on the doors of the New York agencies for national ads (he doesn't recall getting any), his sales strategy seems to have been casual at best. "A lot of them advertised because they thought the island should have a newspaper just like it should have churches and schools, and you had to support it."

The *Gazette*, Hough says, has been "oriented by the news," sometimes resulting in a lopsided advertising/editorial mix of 30/70. "There were times," Hough continues, "when we had to leave out advertising to get in the news that we thought was necessary." Still, the *Gazette* has always published box ads on the bottom of page one, as much for the convenience of the reader as for the client. To journalism professors and critics who would prefer a "citized" front page, Hough's defense has been that if one were to leave ads off the front page of a small country newspaper, the rest of the pages would be overburdened with them.

In 1965, Betty Hough died. Hough says that his wife "never got enough credit for setting the policy of the paper." Three years later, seeking a buyer who would honor the tradition and editorial integrity of a paper born in 1846, he sold the *Gazette* to *New York Times* columnist James Reston and his wife, Sally. Hough still contributes to the *Gazette*, mainly editorials and obituaries. The obits have always been an important component of the *Gazette's* editorial mix, and Hough, like summer resident Red Smith, has turned their composition into an art form.

"One word here or there makes all the difference in that sort of writing," says Hough. "My wife always said that an obituary should have some feeling in it to indicate to the reader that it was a human being who lived, and what sort of a human being, what difference he made to the community, and what he

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The Vineyard's Newspaper Battle Sharpens

Henry Beetle Hough says he thought the *Vineyard Gazette* had "finally reached grandeur"—at least in a mechanical sense—when he spent \$25,000 for a state-of-the-art linotype machine. "But," he says, "I lived to see it hitched by chain to a truck and towed away for junk."

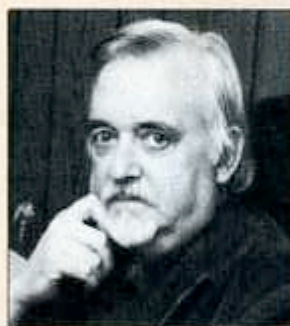
That was in 1968, right after he sold the *Gazette* to James Reston and his wife.

There have been other improvements to the *Gazette's* physical plant—a new press, a computerized newsroom and advertising department, an ongoing expansion and restoration of the 18th-century house in which it is quartered. Circulation has risen to over 16,000 during the season and to nearly 13,000 during the winter lull. It now is published semiweekly five months of the year. A shopper, with ad sales separate from the *Gazette's*, is printed for the tourist trade. But since the *Ga-*

But Reston is the first to agree with Hough that the idyllic community described in *Country Editor* is no more. "The battles are much sharper, much more frequent and much more complex."

The battles have been manifested by the appearance of *The Vineyard Grapevine* 14 years ago and the start-up of *The Martha's Vineyard Times* next month.

"The *Gazette* is not the venerated institution on the island that it's perceived to be off [the island]," says Gerald Kelly, the founding editor of the *Grapevine* who left in January to become editor and publisher of the *Times*. He charges that the *Gazette* is edited for "rich summer people"—the Jackie Onassis, the Walter Cronkites, the Kay Grahams—and not for the year-round residents whose median income is the lowest in Massachusetts. "[The *Gazette*] is anti-development in a kind of



Gerald Kelly (left) of the *Times*; Marlene Rubin of the *Grapevine*; Dick Reston of the *Gazette*.

zette has been in the Restons' hands, the family has done its utmost to leave its editorial grandeur untouched.

In fact, when the paper shifted to offset printing, it hired a designer not to modernize its look but to "retain the look and feel and tone of the old hot-metal *Gazette*—with the old typefaces, with column rules, holding on to the old vertical makeup and the wedding of headlines and photography so that one doesn't overwhelm the other," says Dick Reston, the absentee publishers' son and the paper's executive editor/general manager.

Dick Reston and his wife Jody, the paper's business manager, joined the *Gazette* in 1975 after Reston scurried away from the "revolving door" of big-city journalism. (He had been Moscow and London bureau chief for the *Los Angeles Times* and was their man in the State Department during the Kissinger days.)

Reston says that "there may be a difference in emphasis, but no difference in belief. . . between what Hough believes are the principles of good journalism and what my family believes in."

blanket way," says Kelly.

"Our backers realized that the *Gazette* is not progressing up with the times," says *Times* general manager Richard Scott. "They have a certain appeal for certain people, but they have angered the business community."

Kelly and Scott won't say how much money their backers are committing to the "alternative voice." But, as Scott says, "I don't think the investors are in this to make money."

Kelly left the tabloid *Grapevine* because he felt its current owner, off-island Stoneham (Mass.) Publishing Inc., wasn't committing enough money for it to compete with the *Gazette*.

The *Grapevine's* general manager, Marlene Rubin, has assumed the editor's role since Kelly's departure. The paper's peak circulation, she says, is near 5,000.

"We are the voice of the group who have been born [on] or have adopted the island—those who know what it is to make a living here," says Rubin. "We feel it's a healthy community that has two voices."

And now there are three. —T.F.

SACRAMENTO is now America's 34th largest market!

In just a year, Sacramento has moved up three places to the 34th largest MSA* in households. And we've jumped seven spots to 32nd in Effective Buying Income. To keep up with this rapid growth, you need The Sacramento Bee. Fifty-four percent of all adult Sacramentans read The Bee yesterday and every morning we catch the eye of almost a half-million readers.**

The Bee attracts discerning, better educated, more affluent readers and we reach them at home, where the real buying decisions are made.

Source: *1983 Sales & Marketing Management's Survey of Buying Power
**January 1982



The Sacramento Bee

Represented nationally by Crosner, Woodward, O'Mara & Ormsbee, Inc.

When you buy The Bee, you've bought Sacramento.

there's more to texas
than dallas/fort worth and houston,
MUCH MORE...

2.3
million
Texans

\$2.7
billion
food sales

780,000
homes

The Austin Group

Austin American Statesman, Austin, Texas
Waco Tribune Herald, Waco, Texas
Port Arthur News, Port Arthur, Texas
Longview News Journal, Longview, Texas
Lubbock News, Lubbock, Texas
Cox Newspapers

512-445-3745

\$20
billion
buying
income

\$11.6
billion retail
sales

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left behind."

He also writes "short sketches" for other publications, and he has just finished one for *Country Journal*. In May, *Martha's Vineyard: Remembrance and Light*, a collection of his writing with photographs by *Gazette* production manager Alison Shaw, will be published by Harvard Commons Press.

Reflecting back over 61 years, Hough finds it difficult to point to any one "big" story that the *Gazette* has covered.

"The obvious thing, which we hear from people time and time again, is: 'I suppose the biggest story you had was Ted Kennedy and the bridge.' And I say, 'No, it was not. Ted Kennedy was not a Vineyarder; he was just a celebrated visitor.' The bigness of the story didn't have to do with Kennedy. It was

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the arrival of these hundreds of reporters and correspondents and sound trucks. They put a grandstand across School Street so they could photograph the court house. It was this invasion which was the story."

Hough views his legacy as a mosaic of small stories forming a pattern over time. His prose is a meandering journey of sure, tiny steps rather than the rapid strides that big-city journalists—"and their imitators"—take. "I think that a lot of newspaper writing is suffering from an overdose of professionalism," says Hough. "The reporters and writers are trying so hard to be professional that they forget to be natural. Of course, there isn't the space for most reporters to express themselves in any other way than in the prescribed, limited style."

In writing about the islanders he knows so well, Hough prefers the adjective "insular" to "parochial." The distinction has not been lost on the *Gazette's* readers, who, spread across 50 states and 26 foreign countries, are neither. But the *Gazette's* coverage and perspective, Hough maintains, have always been "strictly island."

With that perspective, Hough finally admits that the hurricane of 1938—which was presented to *Gazette* readers with the insular headline "Mainland Cut Off From Island"—is "the biggest story I can remember in terms of its effect on the island and its lasting influence."

If lasting influence on a community is indeed the measurement of big news, Henry Beetle Hough himself might well be Martha's Vineyard's story of the century. It is certainly a story worth the attention of editors—be they countrified or citified—in 50 states and at least 26 foreign countries. □