

Senior seminar *Bald Press 10-20-91*

So-called hermit made Montrose his home, the world his temple

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Art at Point

er from across the nation iott's Grand Hotel for the ors, fine craftsmen and e public to see and to buy. usic, continues Sunday ound 4:30. were featured Saturday, /lock, Leta Bowen, Steve Dee Fitzhugh. aid sculpting has always niversity of Texas)," she n. "Some pieces are very

By JEAN RICHMOND
Press Register Reporter
MONTROSE, Ala. — He was known as "The Hermit of Montrose," although written accounts would dispute that name. But one thing is certain, his unique, beehive-shaped house still stands as testimony to his ingenuity.

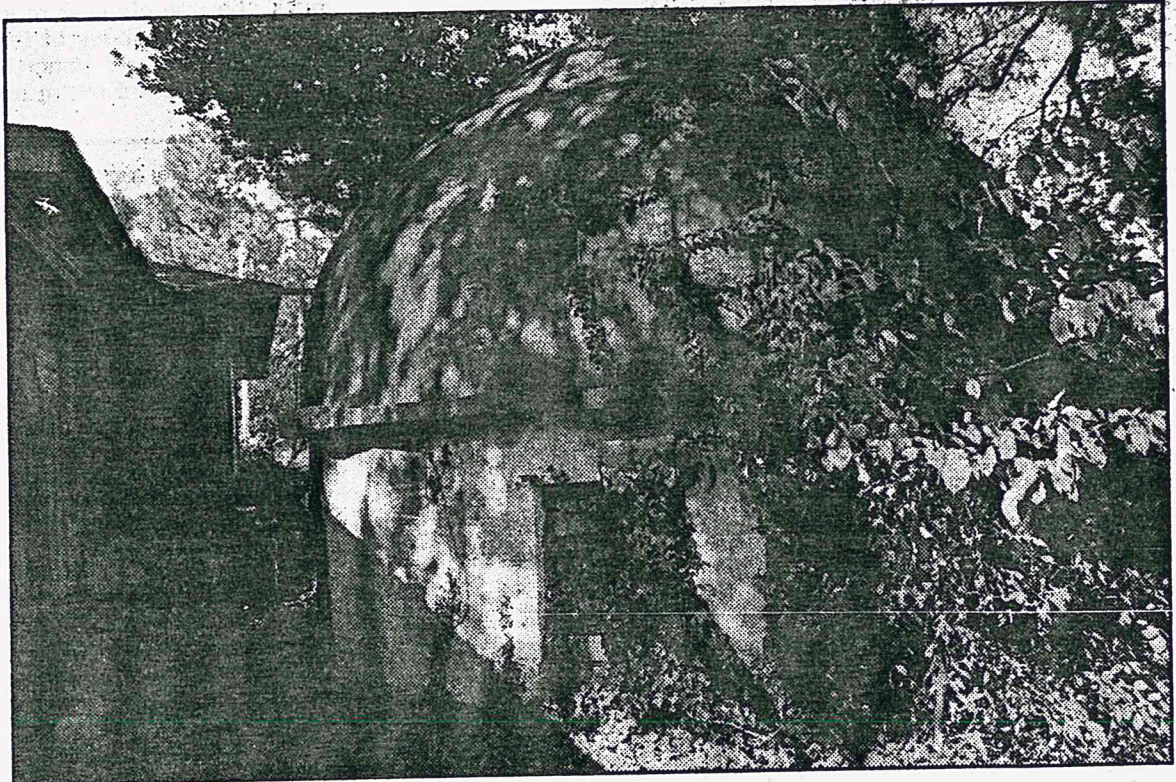
Nestled in the courtyard of the office complex beside Highway 98 and Parker Road, sits this unusual home built in 1924 by Henry James Stuart.

Today, the "hermit" tag seems more appropriate. Camouflaged by relentless growing vines that cover most of its sides and roof, the round house is hidden from the busy traffic flow unless one ventures into

Please see Page 2



This photograph of Henry James Stuart, known as "The Hermit of Montrose," hangs in the reading room of Fairhope Public Library.



Press Register photos by Jean Richmond

This house built in 1924 by Henry James Stuart, known as "The Hermit of Montrose," sits in the courtyard of the office complex beside Highway 98 and Parker Road in Montrose. Stuart felt the round design would withstand any local hurricanes.

of humor helps when working with public

after she moved back to her father's hometown from Maryland

Get to know...

transactions from the office," she said.

essential factor for the Probate workers, Karpanty said.

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Hermit

Continued from Page 1

the office complex parking lot.

"There's no doubt he was ahead of his time," says local businessman Carlton Niemeyer. "The way he has got the bricks counter-levered to make the roof — they really don't have anything supporting them in the middle — they support themselves."

When the office complex was built in the late 1970s, Niemeyer and other business associates built it in such a way the old house would be preserved. It is known as "the conversation piece," of the complex.

It is well documented that Stuart arrived in Fairhope in October 1923. Grace Harrell Flagg in a March 1929 article for The American Riviera Review, quotes Stuart as saying, "I remember well my feelings as the boat came down the Bay with the stretches of pine and red sand hills in sight, that this was home."

Stuart was born in England in 1858 and emigrated to Ohio with his family. During his adult life, Stuart and his wife and family lived in a number of places but it was in Idaho when his doctor advised him to move to Southern California for his health.

But Stuart never made it out West. Instead, through correspondence with a Prescott A. Parker of Montrose, Stuart purchased 10 wooded acres in Montrose for \$150, according to Flagg's article.

When asked why he purchased wooded acres instead of cleared ground, Stuart had said, "It was just the kind of place I wanted, where I could fix everything to suit myself." No written accounts mention that Stuart's wife and family accompanied him to Montrose.

He was a strict vegetarian, and after building a temporary cottage, he set about building his garden. The garden beds were raised three feet to alleviate bending and he could weed and pick the produce with no effort. He also experimented with water hyacinths he got from the bay for fertilizer.

If the hermit's garden seems innovative, it was the house he built that astounded the local residents. In Florence Scott's book "Montrose," she said, "He would accept no help in the building of his house and when it was finished, he said it was the 'wonder of the natives for miles around.'"

Stuart wanted a home that would withstand any local hurricanes and came up with the idea of building a round house after building a circular water tank out of concrete.

He is quoted as saying, "I began to make blocks of the cement, taking all the time I needed. All this time I was living in my cabin, working at my garden part of the day, whenever necessary, and sleeping out in the pavilion. My health was improving right along, and I was enjoying life as I never had before."

Stuart put his building skills to the test. Bricks found near Rock Creek, which had been the site of several brickyards many years before, were carried a few bricks at a time in a sack slung over his shoulder. Down at the beach a half mile away "was material of all sorts which could be used in building, free for the taking away," he said to Flagg.

Within one year and 16 days his unique house was complete. Made of cement blocks, the one circular room inside measures about 14 feet in diameter. It has a concrete floor and is topped by an un-

supported dome also made of concrete. There are six windows around the circular structure and the dome roof has two ventilation holes.

Stuart had a small box stove for heating and cooking and a narrow ladder led up to a bunk where he slept. He apparently was an avid reader and writer, and books, magazines and other belongings were arranged around the circular wall. He was also a weaver of rugs and a loom stood in the center of the room.

He always rose before 4 a.m., and told Flagg, "In a half hour, I am ready for my breakfast of mush, made of corn and wheat ground in a small hand mill, a little toast and tea."

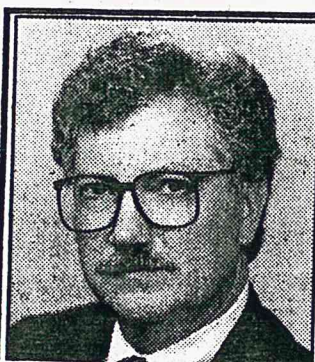
Perhaps the "hermit" tag came from Stuart's appearance. He always wore overalls and went without shoes year around. But Mrs. Scott said, "He walked the world with dignity in spite of his overalls, his unshod feet and a sack over his shoulder in which he carried whatever he needed to transport, be it brick, bread or small sticks for wood for his fire."

There is no doubt Stuart loved his unusual lifestyle. In Flagg's 1929 article, he was no longer the sickly man who had come to the area in failing health. "These five years have been the happiest of my life," Stuart told her.

As well as believing in self-sufficiency, Stuart appears to have been somewhat of an intellectual. It is said he held a bachelor of divinity degree from Mount Union College in Missouri and had correspondents all over the country, as well as some in Europe. He was a lover of Tolstoy, and because of his expert knowledge, he then became "The Hermit-Sage" of Tolstoy Park.

Stuart's creed appears as simple as his lifestyle. He said, "For orthodox churches I have little use; I worship God in His own temples; I see Him in every bush and every shrub when I walk through the woods."

Well into his 80s, Stuart's health began to fail and his family persuaded him to join them in Oregon. He gave his loom to the Marietta Johnson Organic School and moved. He died two years later in 1946 at the age of 88 years.



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The Hermit of Montrose

Stuart 'igloo' could get designation

► Mysterious attraction may gain historical status, visits from tourists

By LESLEY FARREY PACEY
Staff Reporter

MONTROSE — The wiry, barefoot man lived in the one-room beehive house in the woods for 22 years, growing his own food, weaving rugs on his loom and sleeping in a hammock strung high in the air.

Not far from the buzz and bustle of U.S. 98 near Parker Road still stands the igloo-like home built by Henry James Stuart in the 1920s.

Stuart, known as "The Hermit of Montrose," enjoyed a dwelling as simple as his lifestyle with a philosophy akin to Thoreau's. Stuart once said, "For orthodox churches I have little use; I worship God in His own temples. I see Him in every bush and every shrub when I walk through the woods."

But the modern world has moved in during the 70-something years since Stuart broke ground on his place in the woods. Office buildings now surround his home. Irvine Co. Real Estate uses the hermit's home to store signs.

Jack Thomas said Monday he would ask the Baldwin County Historical Development Commission to stake a marker to unlock the history of the hermit to Eastern Shore visitors.

"I think it needs it," said Thomas, who is the immediate past chairman of the county historical board.

He also would like to unlock the door of the home to the public.

So would its current owner, Ken Niemeyer.

"That would be wonderful," said Niemeyer, who built office buildings around the home so as to preserve the local history

"For orthodox churches I have little use; I worship God in his own temples. I see him in every bush and every shrub when I walk through the woods."

— Henry James Stuart,
"Hermit of Montrose"



LESLEY FARREY PACEY /Register



At top, the one-room beehive house — built in the 1920s by "The Hermit of Montrose," Henry James Stuart — still stands in the parking area behind Irvine Co. Real Estate at U.S. 98 and Parker Road in Montrose. At right is an interior view of the ceiling of the domed dwelling, while, above, Stuart poses in front of the structure.



Stuart

► Continued from Page 1

that he had heard about for so many years.

"I'm from Fairhope and I had always known about the hermit," said Niemeyer. "... He was one of the many characters in and around Fairhope who grew their own food and made their own clothes. They were naturalists."

Niemeyer got the hermit's home when he bought the property it sits on about 20 years ago, later developing much of the acreage into office buildings.

Over the years, Niemeyer said he has uncovered historic treasures related to the hermit.

Landscapers recently discovered that a cement stepping stone decorated with leaf imprints was actually a grave marker for Stuart's dogs.

On the other side of the stone, now leaning against a nearby dogwood tree, is carved: "Jigs, Little Bit and Dinny."

The brick-and-concrete house already generates a lot of curiosity, said Starke Irvine, owner of Irvine Co. Real Estate.

"Most of the time they don't have a clue," said Irvine of the people who ask about the home. "They often ask, 'What in the world is that thing?'"

Irvine's employees invite inquiring customers to read a framed Mobile Register article about the home.

A sage and philosopher, Stuart may have appeared to have been an eccentric drifter to those who didn't know him.

He never wore shoes. His shaggy white beard grew long, and a gunnysack filled with his daily needs always was slung over the suspenders of his homespun trousers.

Stuart was born in England in 1858 and emigrated to Ohio with his family.

During his adult life, Stuart, his wife and their children lived in a number of places up North. The family was in Idaho when Stuart's doctor reportedly advised him to move to Southern California for health reasons.

But Stuart never made it out West. Instead, through correspondence with Prescott A. Parker of Montrose, he purchased 10 acres in the Montrose woods for \$150 and he arrived in Fairhope in October 1923, according to a 1929 article in the American Riviera Review.

There is no further mention of Stuart's wife, and she may have died before he made the move. His children would have been adults by this time, since Stuart was 65.

A strict vegetarian, Stuart planted a garden of vegetables and herbs, which he grew in concrete boxes built about waist high to eliminate bending.

Stuart had told friends he wanted to build a house that would withstand hurricanes and he also felt a round house "is the way a house ought to be built. No corners to collect rubbish."

"The Hermitage," as it is sometimes called, is set down three brick steps behind a wooden door.

From the round cement floor that's almost 14 feet in diameter, a brick wall covered with cement rises smoothly upward about seven feet.

Then the dome begins in narrow layering of brick, curving upward for about five feet. The upper dome, which is completely self-supporting, continues in a gentler curve where he layered wide brick.

The top part is completed in wood with two air and light vents. Outside, the dome is completely rounded in concrete.

Six windows with hook latches are situated around the lower wall to provide cross-ventilation from the Bay breezes.

Around the circular walls, Stuart kept a library of books he enjoyed. He slept in a hammock strung across his home.

Though Stuart was known as a hermit, he was no recluse. Those who knew him told of his cheerfulness, his delight in talking about his philosophy of life, the joy of nature, plants and animals.

As well as being part of Fairhope's intellectual scene, he held a bachelor of divinity degree from Mount Union College in Missouri and had correspondents all over the country, as well as some in Europe.

He would weave rugs and other items he needed on his loom, which sat in the middle of his round home. The children at the Marietta Johnson Organic School, which he often visited, knew him as The Weaver.

Stuart's health began to fail in his 80s and his family persuaded him to join them in Oregon. Stuart left his beloved Eastern Shore home and returned north in 1944. Two years later he died at the age of 88 years.

The real poet of Tolstoy Park, Henry James Stuart, built his little round house about three miles north of Fairhope. It was his home from the middle 1920s to the middle 1940s, and is open today for your visit. Henry likes folks to drop in. Maybe you've read my book, **THE POET OF TOLSTOY PARK**, or maybe you've just heard tell of Henry's odd round hut. Please go by. Sit and imagine his quiet life in the home he built all by himself. Sign Henry's guest book. Tell your friends. Come again anytime.

...Sonny Brewer

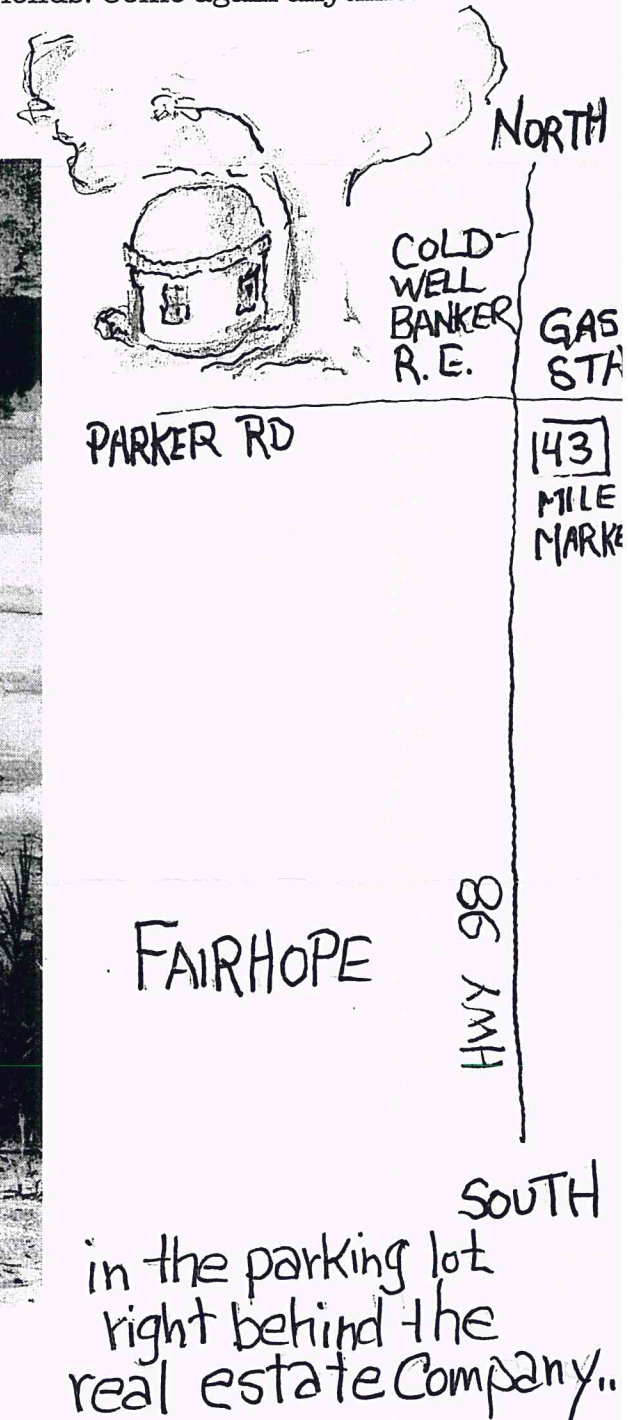
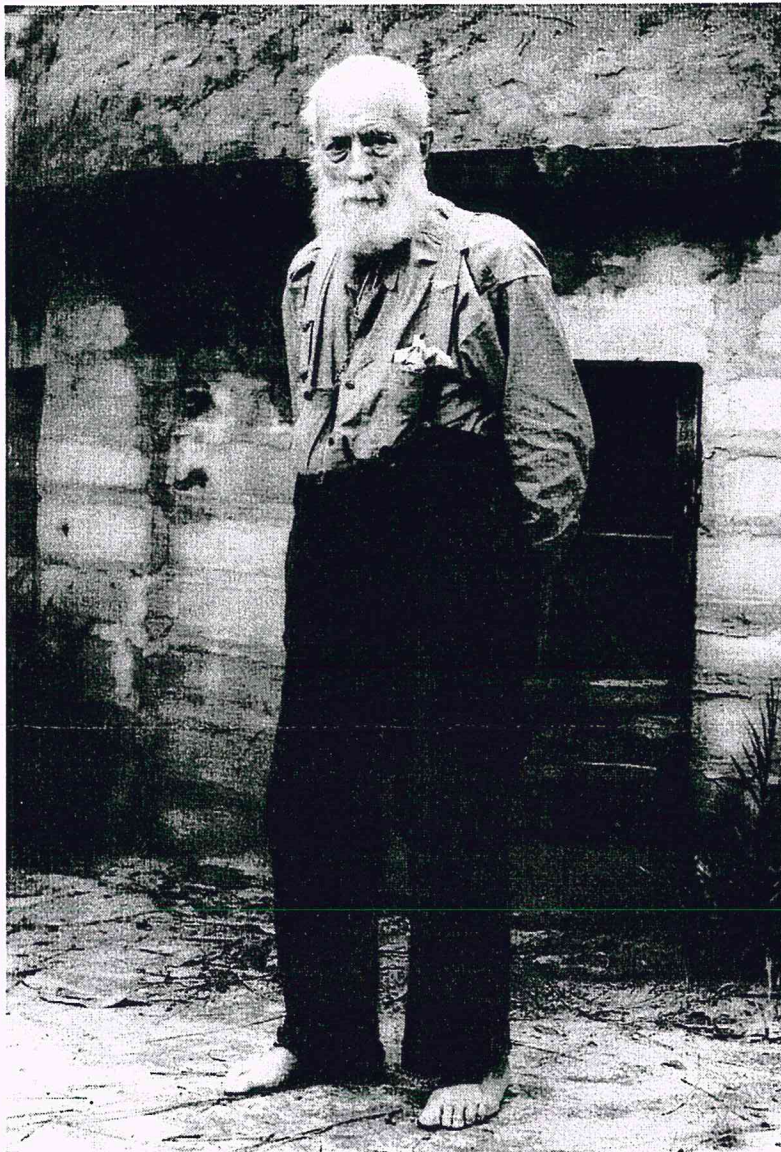




Illustration by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Money Changes Everything

Anxiety about economic differences can strain the bonds of friendship.

By JENNIE YABROFF

GRETA GILBERTSON was caught off guard recently when her 9-year-old daughter, who attends a private school on the Upper West Side, requested a cellphone. "I sort of snapped at her," recalled Ms. Gilbertson, an assistant professor at Fordham University in the Bronx. "I said, 'Don't think that you're one of the rich kids, because you're not.'" Though her daughter rarely expresses envy of her more affluent friends, Ms. Gilbertson said, it was an "unedited moment" revealing her anxiety over being in a world where other parents have more money than she does.

Carol Paik, a former lawyer who is married to a partner at a prominent New York law firm, found herself on the other side of that money equation. When she returned to school in 2002 to get her M.F.A. in creative writing at Columbia, her diamond engagement ring attracted particular attention from her new group of friends. "When I was working," she said, "I never thought about the ring, it seemed unremarkable."

But at school, she said, "People said things like, 'That's a really big diamond,' and not necessarily in a complimentary way." So she began taking off the ring before class.

If, as Samuel Butler said, friendships are like money, easier made than kept, economic differences can add yet another obstacle to maintaining them. More friends and acquaintances are now finding themselves at different points on the financial spectrum, scholars and sociologists say, thanks to broad social changes like meritocracy-based higher education, diversity in the workplace and a disparity of incomes among professions.

As people with various-sized bank accounts brush up against each other, there is ample cause for social awkwardness, which can strain relationships, sometimes to a breaking point. Many find themselves wrestling with complicated feelings about money and self-worth and improvising coping strategies.

"The real issue is not money itself, but the power money gives you," said Dalton Conley, a professor of sociology and the

Continued on Page 6

A Hermit's Refuge Is Now a Writer's Muse

By WARREN ST. JOHN

EVER since its founding in 1894 by a group of 28 utopian dreamers from Iowa, this quaint waterside town on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay has been a refuge for what Southerners politely call "characters."

There was Craig Sheldon, a sculptor known for making fantastical creatures, like a wacky insect he called "head holding high hopper," and Winifred Duncan, a spinster who lived by the water with four bloodhounds and was regularly arrested



Bill Starling for The New York Times

SWEET CONCRETE HOME, ALABAMA The hut Henry Stuart built in the 1920's.

A hut originally built as a place to die draws, and inspires, visitors today.

for canoeing at night in the bay, naked.

Strangest of all, perhaps, was an Idaho man named Henry Stuart, who moved to Fairhope in the 1920's, after being told by his doctor — incorrectly, it turned out — that he had only a year to live.

Mr. Stuart, who wore a long white beard and became known locally as the Hermit of Montrose, after a neighborhood in Fairhope, built himself a small round hurricane-proof hut out of concrete and lived in it for 18 years, apparently certain he might die at any moment. Mr. Stuart eventually died at 88 in 1946, somewhere in Oregon.

Today, Mr. Stuart's hut in Fairhope has become an odd sort of tourist attraction, a kind of temple to eccentricity and individualism, thanks largely to another Fairhope eccentric, a goateed man often seen in a seersucker suit riding around town on a Harley-Davidson: the novelist Sonny Brewer.

Since the publication last year of Mr. Brewer's first novel, "The Poet of Tolstoy Park" (Ballantine), which is based on Mr. Stuart's life and the construction of

Continued on Page 2

Underwater, and Over the Top in 1972

By THOMAS VINCIGUERRA

FOR junk-film buffs, the 1970's were the golden age of disaster. Years before "Titanic" and "The Day After Tomorrow" thundered their way onto the big screen, there was "Airport," "The Towering Inferno," "Earthquake" and "The Swarm."

And, of course, "The Poseidon Adventure."

Alone among the all-star blow-'em-ups re-

leased during the Watergate era, "The Poseidon Adventure" has achieved cult status. This Friday, the \$160 million remake, titled simply "Poseidon," will open nationwide, and last fall, NBC broadcast a made-for-TV version. But for many, nothing can supplant the original 1972 epic about a luxury liner capsized by a monster wave.

We're talking serious "Rocky Horror Picture Show"-type devotion here. Die-hard "Poseidon" fans have dissected the movie frame by frame, committed it to memory,

satirized it in home videos, built action figures of the cast, even designed homes with "Poseidon" motifs.

No detail is too trivial. Poseidoneers know the cabin number of Mike and Linda Rogo, played by Ernest Borgnine and Stella Stevens (M-45). They delight in telling you about the actress who played the character they call India Lady (she's Freida Rentie, sister of Marla Gibbs, who played Florence the maid on "The Jeffersons"). They speculate at length about the gravitational qualities of Gene Hackman's comb-over.

And, like true devotees, they convene. This weekend, the Poseidon Adventure Fan Club is holding its seventh annual reunion at

the Warner Grand Theater in San Pedro, Calif. Joe Shea of Babylon, N.Y., was flying to the West Coast to attend. As an 8-year-old, he saw "Poseidon" seven times during its initial theatrical release.

"The excitement of the boat flipping was spectacular," he recalled last week. "Instead of playing cowboys and Indians, my brother and I played 'Poseidon Adventure.' We'd hang upside down by our knees from trees."

Kevin Sandoval of Wailea, Hawaii, was 9 when "Poseidon" came out. He has since watched it at least 400 times.

"I was fascinated with these beautiful people in this beautiful ship in the middle of

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Everett Collection

BOTTOM'S UP From left, Carol Lynley, Stella Stevens, Ernest Borgnine, Shelley Winters, Red Buttons, Gene Hackman and Jack Albertson in "The Poseidon Adventure."

INSIDE

PULSE

Shirts with a message for Barry, Jason and Sammy.
 By John Eligon.

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A NIGHT OUT

Jeremy Piven works the Tribeca Film Festival.
 By Joyce Wadler.

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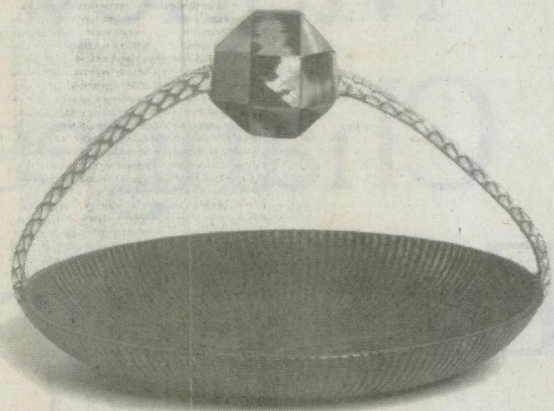
MODERN LOVE

I hate the way he never gets lost and I always do.
 By Michele Herman.

PAGE 10



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A Hermit's Refuge Is Now a Writer's Muse

Continued From Page 1

his concrete hut, readers, along with various searchers, spiritualists and philosophical types, have been turning up at the hut to commune with Mr. Stuart. Two thousand people have signed a guest book Mr. Brewer left in the hut last year, and some have brought sleeping bags and spent the night inside.

"It's a special place," said Jimbo Meador, 64, a kayak designer who lives in nearby Point Clear and who meditates regularly in the hut. "The acoustics in there are pretty unusual. Like you say, 'Om,' and it really resonates."

Mr. Brewer, who is 57, is quick to cop to the charge of being an oddball, even by Fairhope standards. He has been a carpenter, a bookstore owner, a real estate agent, an editor and a rock musician, and he once sold vintage cars for a living, though he lost money at it.

Mr. Brewer has also been through a boat phase, an R.V. phase, a convertible phase, and several motorcycle phases. As for religions, he's tried a bunch of those, too: He was raised a Baptist, became a Methodist, a Presbyterian, a Quaker, and converted to Catholicism for a while. Mr. Brewer said he's an Episcopalian — for now.

"I sometimes have a feeling I'm from another planet," Mr. Brewer said in a soft southern Alabama drawl. "Even my own behavior looks alien and ridiculous to me."

Mr. Brewer discovered Henry Stuart's hut in the 1980's during one of those career changes. He had quit his job as a carpenter, and was on his way to a seminar on selling real estate when he pulled into a parking lot about a mile from town. Though originally built on 10 acres of wilderness, the hut in the intervening years had been encroached upon as Fairhope grew. Office buildings have been built to within six feet of the dwelling. It now sits just off the parking lot of a local Coldwell Banker office, which used the hut for years to store its "for sale" signs.

"I thought, 'What is this crazy little house doing in a parking lot?'" Mr. Brewer recalled. "It was like finding a very strange bird nest in the forest. You want to know, 'What kind of bird built this?'"

Inside the real estate office, Mr. Brewer came across a framed copy of a newspaper article about Mr. Stuart and his hut. Mr. Stuart, the article said, left behind two grown sons in Idaho when he came South to die. He admired Tolstoy, naming the acreage around the hut Tolstoy Park, and with his white beard even resembled him.

Mr. Stuart was described as quick to lend a dollar, and unconcerned about repayment. And though described as a hermit, he accepted visitors regularly; 1,200 people signed a guest book he kept in his hut, according to one article, including the lawyer Clarence Darrow.

Mr. Stuart, who was in his late 60's at the time, built his hut over the course of a year and 16 days in 1925 and 1926, and refused all help with the construction, the newspaper reported. Mr. Stuart's bed was a hammock that hung 10 feet off the ground; he could get in only by



Bill Starling for The New York Times

THE AUTHOR Sonny Brewer in the hut that inspired his first novel, "The Poet of Tolstoy Park."

climbing a ladder. He kept a loom on the floor that he used to weave rugs, which he sold for a living.

"I was completely mesmerized," Mr. Brewer said.

He managed to find two other newspaper articles about Mr. Stuart, and six photographs. Mr. Stuart was barefoot in all of them, even one taken with a woman in a winter coat.

The more Mr. Brewer learned about the man, he said, the more obsessed he became.

"I identified with Henry; he did what he wanted to do, and so did I," Mr. Brewer said.

He decided to try to write about Henry Stuart. He considered a non-fiction account of Mr. Stuart's life, but settled on fiction, "because I lie," he said. He wrote a couple of short stories about Mr. Stuart, and the first 20 pages of a novel, but put it aside in favor of an autobiographical novel about his own life, which he sent to a literary agent in San Francisco.

By now, Mr. Brewer had quit real estate to open an independent bookstore called Over the Transom, in Fairhope. It was losing money — a lot of money. Mr. Brewer's only hope was that his novel would sell, but his agent was not optimistic and asked him if he had anything else. Mr. Brewer mentioned the Stuart novel, which begins with Mr. Stuart taking off his shoes after hearing the news

Wandering from job to job until an odd-looking dome and the lore behind it lead to a first novel.

that he will die. Based on the first 20 pages and a six-page outline, the agent sold the novel to Ballantine for \$100,000.

Mr. Brewer said he got the news hours before an appointment with a bankruptcy lawyer.

"I broke down and cried," he said.

Mr. Brewer's next move was to persuade a local banker who owns the hut and the land around it to rent the building to him for \$9 a month. He



Overthetransom.com

THE HERMIT Henry Stuart, barefoot as usual, in the 1940's.

wrote a draft of "The Poet of Tolstoy Park" in four fevered months, and then immediately set about restoring the hut, ridding it of "snakes and lizards and fast-food wrappers," he said, replacing windows and removing a wooden floor. When he was finished, he moved in to revise his novel — while barefoot.

"Where did Henry Stuart stop and Sonny Brewer start?" Mr. Brewer asked. "That line was not clear. Some ladies from the real estate office told me they thought I had gone crazy."

A local architect who studied the hut noticed that the diameter of the floor, 14 feet, perfectly matched the distance between the floor and the top of the hut's domed roof. The hut was also dug 16 inches into the ground, which at that depth is a constant 57 degrees, making the floor cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

When he was finished with his book, Mr. Brewer left a copy of the manuscript in the hut, and then left the door unlocked. Shortly after publication last year, he began to hear from people who had visited.

One of those people was Wilson McDuff, 35, a schoolteacher from

Fairhope who spent a night in the hut last year with his father and son. "It was kind of weird to me," Mr. McDuff said. "I started imagining what it would be like to be Henry Stuart, living in a little bitty house like that. I was inspired."

Mr. McDuff's father died later that year in a cycling accident. Unable to sleep the night he heard the news, Mr. McDuff said he was drawn back to the hut. "I didn't feel like I was alone anymore," he said. "It was comforting to think about Henry Stuart and to know that just because you're not here doesn't mean you're forgotten."

Somewhere along the way, Mr. Brewer said, people began leaving coins and dollar bills in an iron skillet in the hut, money that seems to be lent and borrowed according to Mr. Stuart's principles.

"Sometimes I come in here and it's \$65, sometimes it's \$5," Mr. Brewer said with a shrug. "The pile just comes and goes."

Mr. Brewer said that so far he has remained on good terms with the banker who owns the hut. But one thought keeps him up at night.

"My fear is that sooner or later the proverbial offer that can't be refused might come along," he added. "I could see a Blockbuster Video standing where Henry's house is."

That thought has inspired Mr. Brewer's latest crusade: getting the hut placed on the National Register of Historic Places, a move that could help preserve it in perpetuity. So far it hasn't gone so well. Though the State of Alabama designated the hut a landmark, the United States Department of the Interior said that his application needed more work.

"They said it was too weird," Mr. Brewer said.

Correction

An article last Sunday about Dylan and Cole Sprouse, the 13-year-old twin stars of "The Suite Life of Zack and Cody" on the Disney Channel, and their effort to be as successful commercially as the actors Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, misstated the amount of money that boys and girls spent on clothes over the last year. It was \$12.5 billion for boys and \$21 billion for girls, not millions.

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LIKE NO OTHER STORE IN THE WORLD

Photo may have been enlarged/enhanced to show details.

Mr. Prescott A. Parker, died in Mobile on May 29, 1946, at the home of his daughter, Mrs. Matt Rutherford, and he is buried in Magnolia Cemetery. After his death, Mrs. Parker made her home with her daughter and, just ten years later, on May 30, 1956, she passed away and lies beside her husband in Magnolia Cemetery.

Another dweller on Parker Road was Mr. H. S. Stuart. A picture of him taken at Nampa, Idaho, at the age of sixty-five, showed him as a handsome and scholarly gentleman.

Mr. Stuart was born in Hampshire, near Winchester, England, on January 13, 1858. According to Mr. Converse Harwell, who corresponded with him and who Mr. Harwell later got to know quite well, Mr. Stuart held a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Mount Union College, Missouri. While living in Nampa, Idaho, he became greatly interested in the weaving of rugs and called himself "Ye Olde Weaver."

Through correspondence with Mr. P. A. Parker, he decided to come here in the middle nineteen twenties. He built a frame house at first but came to the conclusion that one built in a round shape, similar to a bee-hive, would be better able to withstand hurricanes. So he put his theory into practice and brought a few bricks at a time, carrying them in a sack over his shoulder, from the mouth of Rock Creek, which had been the site of several brickyards over a hundred years ago. He would accept no help in the building of his house and when it was finished, he said it was the "wonder of the natives for miles around." He installed his loom for rug weaving and was quite happy living a frugal and simple life.

He had a series of raised vegetable beds, or gardens, similar to window boxes, that were also an innovation in this area. He was most cordial to his many visitors and would show them around, explaining his unusual devices. When, in his eighties, his health began to fail, he gave his loom to the Organic School and finally went back to the west.

While here, Mr. Stuart always walked wherever he went and I might say "he walked the world with dignity" in spite of his overalls, his unshod feet and a sack over his shoulder in which he carried whatever he needed to transport, be it brick, bread or small sticks of wood for his fire.

One of the things about him that seemed to impress Mr. Harwell most, was Mr. Stuart's creed, which was quoted with great reverence: "For orthodox Churches I have little use; I worship God in His own temples; I see Him in every bush and every shrub when I walk through the woods."

May 7, 2006

A Hermit's Refuge Is Now a Writer's Muse

By WARREN ST. JOHN

FAIRHOPE, Ala.

EVER since its founding in 1894 by a group of 28 utopian dreamers from Iowa, this quaint waterside town on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay has been a refuge for what Southerners politely call "characters."

There was Craig Sheldon, a sculptor known for making fantastical creatures, like a wacky insect he called "head holding high hopper," and Winifred Duncan, a spinster who lived by the water with four bloodhounds and was regularly arrested for canoeing at night in the bay, naked.

Strangest of all, perhaps, was an Idaho man named Henry Stuart, who moved to Fairhope in the 1920's, after being told by his doctor — incorrectly, it turned out — that he had only a year to live.

Mr. Stuart, who wore a long white beard and became known locally as the Hermit of Montrose, after a neighborhood in Fairhope, built himself a small round hurricane-proof hut out of concrete and lived in it for 18 years, apparently certain he might die at any moment. Mr. Stuart eventually died at 88 in 1946, somewhere in Oregon.

Today, Mr. Stuart's hut in Fairhope has become an odd sort of tourist attraction, a kind of temple to eccentricity and individualism, thanks largely to another Fairhope eccentric, a goateed man often seen in a seersucker suit riding around town on a Harley-Davidson: the novelist Sonny Brewer.

Since the publication last year of Mr. Brewer's first novel, "The Poet of Tolstoy Park" (Ballantine), which is based on Mr. Stuart's life and the construction of his concrete hut, readers, along with various searchers, spiritualists and philosophical types, have been turning up at the hut to commune with Mr. Stuart. Two thousand people have signed a guest book Mr. Brewer left in the hut last year, and some have brought sleeping bags and spent the night inside.

"It's a special place," said Jimbo Meador, 64, a kayak designer who lives in nearby Point Clear and who meditates regularly in the hut. "The acoustics in there are pretty unusual. Like you say, 'Om,' and it really resonates."

Mr. Brewer, who is 57, is quick to cop to the charge of being an oddball, even by Fairhope standards. He has been a carpenter, a bookstore owner, a real estate agent, an editor and a rock musician, and he once sold vintage cars for a living, though he lost money at it.

Mr. Brewer has also been through a boat phase, an R.V. phase, a convertible phase, and several motorcycle phases. As for religions, he's tried a bunch of those, too: He was raised a Baptist, became a Methodist, a Presbyterian, a Quaker, and converted to Catholicism for a while. Mr. Brewer said he's an Episcopalian — for now.

"I sometimes have a feeling I'm from another planet," Mr. Brewer said in a soft southern Alabama drawl. "Even my own behavior looks alien and ridiculous to me."

Mr. Brewer discovered Henry Stuart's hut in the 1980's during one of those career changes. He had quit his job as a carpenter, and was on his way to a seminar on selling real estate when he pulled into a parking lot about a mile from town. Though originally built on 10 acres of wilderness, the hut in the intervening years had been encroached upon as Fairhope grew. Office buildings have been built to within six feet of the dwelling. It now sits just off the parking lot of a local Coldwell Banker office, which used the hut for years to store its "for sale" signs.

"I thought, 'What is this crazy little house doing in a parking lot?' " Mr. Brewer recalled. "It was like finding a very strange bird nest in the forest. You want to know, 'What kind of bird built this?' "

Inside the real estate office, Mr. Brewer came across a framed copy of a newspaper article about Mr. Stuart and his hut. Mr. Stuart, the article said, left behind two grown sons in Idaho when he came South to die. He admired Tolstoy, naming the acreage around the hut Tolstoy Park, and with his white beard even resembled him.

Mr. Stuart was described as quick to lend a dollar, and unconcerned about repayment. And though described as a hermit, he accepted visitors regularly; 1,200 people signed a guest book he kept in his hut, according to one article, including the lawyer Clarence Darrow.

Mr. Stuart, who was in his late 60's at the time, built his hut over the course of a year and 16 days in 1925 and 1926, and refused all help with the construction, the newspaper reported. Mr. Stuart's bed was a hammock that hung 10 feet off the ground; he could get in only by climbing a ladder. He kept a loom on the floor that he used to weave rugs, which he sold for a living.

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The more Mr. Brewer learned about the man, he said, the more obsessed he became.

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He decided to try to write about Henry Stuart. He considered a nonfiction account of Mr. Stuart's life, but settled on fiction, "because I lie," he said. He wrote a couple of short stories about Mr. Stuart, and the first 20 pages of a novel, but put it

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By now, Mr. Brewer had quit real estate to open an independent bookstore called Over the Transom, in Fairhope. It was losing money — a lot of money. Mr. Brewer's only hope was that his novel would sell, but his agent was not optimistic and asked him if he had anything else. Mr. Brewer mentioned the Stuart novel, which begins with Mr. Stuart taking off his shoes after hearing the news that he will die. Based on the first 20 pages and a six-page outline, the agent sold the novel to Ballantine for \$100,000.

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"I broke down and cried," he said.

Mr. Brewer's next move was to persuade a local banker who owns the hut and the land around it to rent the building to him for \$9 a month. He wrote a draft of "The Poet of Tolstoy Park" in four fevered months, and then immediately set about restoring the hut, ridding it of "snakes and lizards and fast-food wrappers," he said, replacing windows and removing a wooden floor. When he was finished, he moved in to revise his novel — while barefoot.

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When he was finished with his book, Mr. Brewer left a copy of the manuscript in the hut, and then left the door unlocked. Shortly after publication last year, he began to hear from people who had visited.

One of those people was Wilson McDuff, 35, a schoolteacher from Fairhope who spent a night in the hut last year with his father and son. "It was kind of weird to me," Mr. McDuff said. "I started imagining what it would be like to be Henry Stuart, living in a little bitty house like that. I was inspired."

Mr. McDuff's father died later that year in a cycling accident. Unable to sleep the night he heard the news, Mr. McDuff said he was drawn back to the hut. "I didn't feel like I was alone anymore," he said. "It was comforting to think about Henry Stuart and to know that just because you're not here doesn't mean you're forgotten."

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A hut originally built as a place to die draws, and inspires, visitors today.

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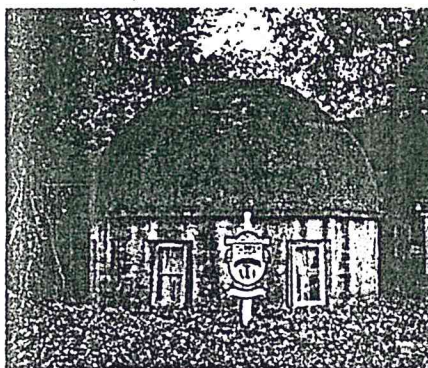
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Continued on Page 2



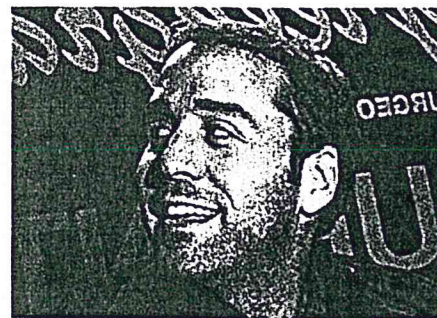
Bill Starling for The New York Times

SWEET CONCRETE HOME, ALABAMA The hut Henry Stuart built in the 1920's.

A NIGHT OUT

Jeremy Piven works the
Tribeca Film Festival.
By Joyce Wadler.

PAGE 4



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Continued From Page 1

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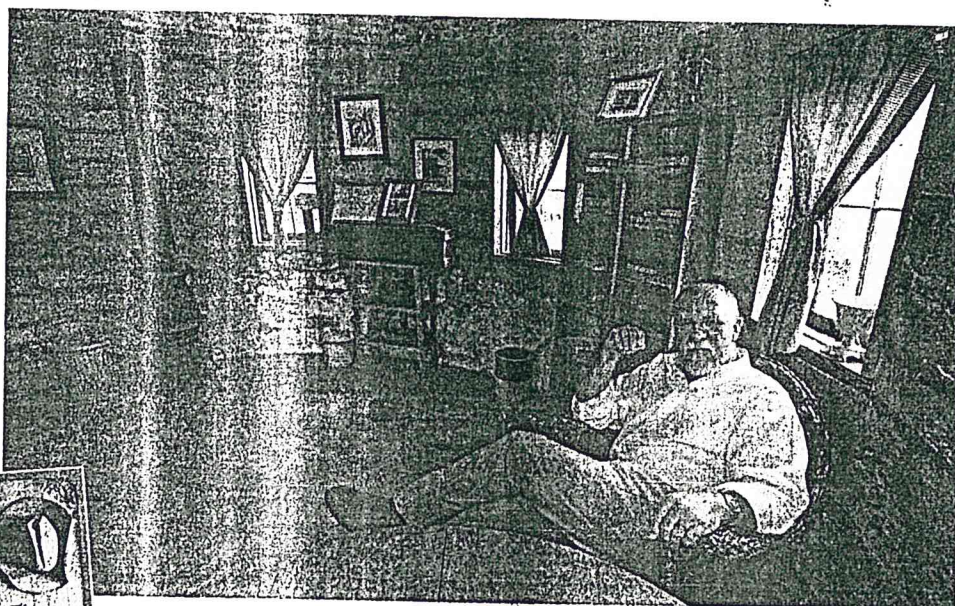
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THE AUTHOR Sonny Brewer in the hut that inspired his first novel, "The Poet of Tolstoy Park." Bill Starling for The New York Times



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Wandering from job to job until an odd-looking dome and the lore behind it lead to a first novel.

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THE HERMIT Henry Stuart, barefoot as usual, in the 1940's. Overthetransom.com

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Correction

An article last Sunday about Dylan and Cole Sprouse, the 13-year-old twin stars of "The Suite Life of Zack and Cody" on the Disney Channel, and their effort to be as successful commercially as the actors Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, misstated the amount of money that boys and girls spent on clothes over the last year. It was \$12.5 billion for boys and \$21 billion for girls, not millions.

MARCH, 1929

DEC 1 1975 VF-Fairhope, Alabama-Boyle

FAIRHOPE, ALABAMA

"THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH"

By GRACE HARRELL FLAGG
Grace Harrell Flagg was born in Ohio, and spent her childhood near Salem, Kentucky. Left motherless at thirteen, the oldest of five children, she assumed the responsibilities of mother. For a time, she was a telephone operator. Later, taking up direct selling, she travelled over a number of states. She has always been interested in people and their experiences, and is a lover of nature. She is now living at Fairhope, growing up with her three children.

Ponce de Leon in his famous quest for the "Fountain of Youth" perhaps had his mind concentrated on springs, and bubbling waters. History does not so state, but it is possible he may have passed by Fairhope, on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, without realizing the possibilities of its climate, atmosphere, and pure water in the restoration of youth and health. However, a latter day explorer, bound on equally as ardent a search has discovered health, youth, and happiness in the magic city of Fairhope, Alabama. May we call your attention to the experiences of this present day adventurer, whose exploits are not yet written into histories' pages?

A few miles out from Fairhope, in a little round cement block house, lives H. J. Stuart, a truly happy man. A few years ago, Mr. Stuart was advised by his physicians to leave his home in Idaho, and arrange to spend his remaining days in Southern California, where he might hope to regain a slight measure of health. As it was impossible to leave Idaho at once, he began to plan, and arrange his affairs for a move to San Diego, and it was while these arrangements were in progress that he received booklets and papers from a friend in Ohio, setting forth the advantages of southern Alabama.

The description of this country, together with the illustrations, so appealed to Mr. Stuart that he immediately wrote to Mr. Parker of Montrose, Alabama, author of one of the papers. "Mr. Parker's friendly and encouraging letters filled me with hope," said Mr. Stuart, "and when he sent the description of a piece of pine land near him—ten acres for \$150.00—I sent the money and had him buy it for me. I arrived in October, 1923, and remember well my feelings, as the boat came down the bay, with the stretches of pine and red sand hills in sight, that this was home."

"I was well pleased with the land, though some have wondered why I chose pine woods, instead of improved ground, where I could have started right in to plant. It was just the kind of place I wanted, where I could fix everything to suit myself."

"With Mr. Parker's help, a temporary home was erected in 13 days; then began the enjoyable work of clearing a garden spot. Down at the beach a half mile away was material of all sorts which could be used in building, free for the taking away."

It was only a short time before the man who had arrived in broken health was carrying this up the bank, a little at a time, then hauling it on his wheelbarrow up through the woods to his new found place of happiness.

He learned how to make cement out of some of this material, then made blocks of it, and built beds in which to raise berries and vegetables. These beds stand about 3 feet high, about the same in width, and stretch away like long counters in a shop. There is no back-breaking weeding in this garden, as he simply walks along, or stands as at a table, while cultivating.

Mr. Stuart is experimenting with the water hyacinth for fertilizer, hauling it up from the beach and making a compact heap; he hopes to find something as good or better than animal fertilizer.

A round water tank was made of cement also, and it was while working on this tank that the idea of the round dwelling came to mind. "I began to make blocks of the cement, taking all the time I needed," said Mr. Stuart, "all this time, I was living in my cabin, working at my garden part of the day, whenever necessary, and sleeping out in the pavilion." My health was improving right along, and I was enjoying life as I never had before.

"I might mention here, that I sleep as well, that I am ready to arise between 3 and 4 o'clock, never later than 4. In a half hour, I am ready for my breakfast of mush, made of corn and wheat ground in a small hand mill, a little toast and tea."

"I always rest during the hottest part of the day in summer, which is easy to do as I get so much done early in the day. Working this way, I en-

joyed every minute, and my house was ready to move into in one year and 16 days."

This unusual house is made of cement blocks, roof and all, is 14 feet in diameter and has cement floor. Six windows and a ventilator at the top of the dome-like roof, give abundant light and ventilation. A small box stove serves for both heating and cooking. Books, magazines, and the various belongings of the occupant are arranged around the circular wall within easy reach; a loom stands near the center of the room—for this busy man is also a weaver of rugs—and opposite the door, a narrow ladder leads up to the bunk where he sleeps.

When one considers the fact that this man was completely broken down, an invalid; that he found strength and encouragements sufficient to enable him to begin work, and not only to begin, but steadily improve while continuing to do harder work and more of it, it speaks well for this section of the American Riviera. "These five years have been the happiest of my life," said Mr. Stuart.

Born in England, he came with his parents to America when too young to remember his old home, and lived until manhood in Damascus, Ohio. In November, 1879, he entered Mt. Union College, and in 1882 took up telegraphy at Oberlin. His father, however, needed an assistant, and offered to pay more than a beginner could hope to command at that time, with the result that the son remained at home until some time after the establishment of his own household.

He then went to Washington and later, with his wife and two little boys, moved to Denver, Colorado. After five years in that city, he went to Idaho, where he lived twenty years. A strict vegetarian, he has found the one-dish meal most satisfactory, that is, one cooked vegetable, with toast, tea, and fruit.

"Each one must decide for himself what is best," said Mr. Stuart, "but this diet has satisfied me. I am well and strong, haven't an ache or pain anywhere, and I can work like a horse. I have thoroughly enjoyed going barefoot, too, this year, have not had shoes on since last May."

A careful reader of the best books and magazines, he is able to converse on any subject, and has correspondents all over this country, as well as some in Europe. A lover of Tolstoy, he is familiar with all his writings.

Over eleven hundred visitors have

found their way to his year.

Simply dressed, erect, a boy, Mr. Stuart seems life and energy; a fit picture of the benefits derived from life in the woods of southern Alabama.



H. J. STUART
FAIRHOPE, ALA.