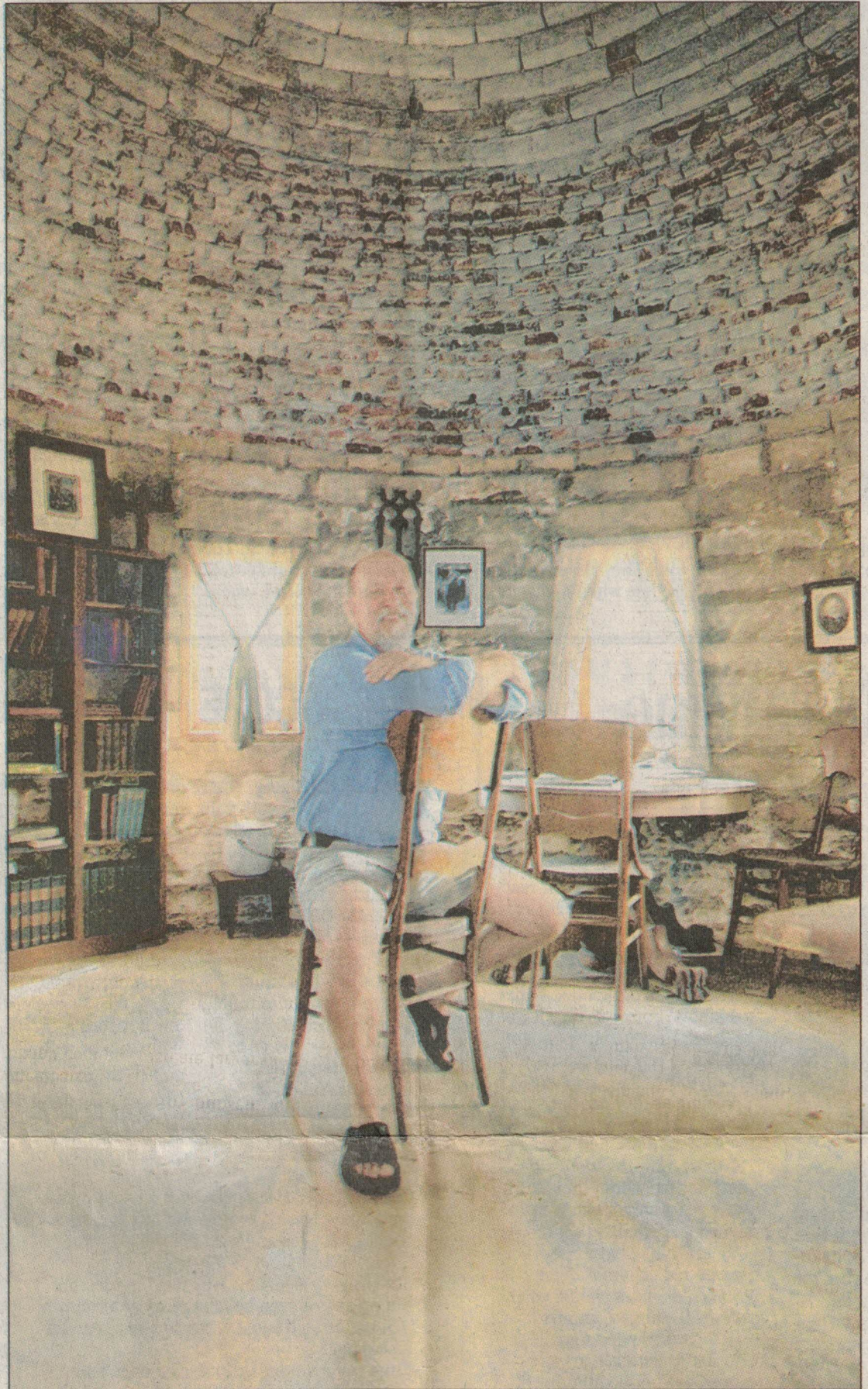


Always the dreamer, Sonny Brewer looked
at the house Henry built and discovered ...



The poet within

Story by KATHY KEMP ♦ News staff writer

Photos by BERNARD TRONCALE ♦ News staff photographer

FAIRHOPE

If a spacecraft landed on U.S. 98, it would seem only slightly more alien than the round, domed, concrete-and-brick dwelling that stands in an insurance company parking lot just off the highway.

The building evokes not "Star Trek" but "The Lord of the Rings," with its little door and windows. You have to walk down several steps into the ground and then duck your head to enter, but inside, the room — just 14 feet in diameter — seems magically vast, like a circus under the big top.

From 1926 to 1944, a white-bearded and forever barefoot old man named Henry Stuart lived in this house, at the time the sole dwelling on 10 acres of forested land just north of Fairhope. Stuart built the place by himself, toting bricks by wheelbarrow from an old Civil War foundry and mixing cement to create larger blocks. He began construction when he settled here in 1923, after a doctor in Idaho told him he would soon die of advanced tuberculosis.

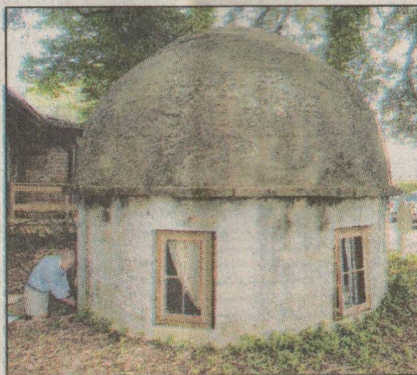
"Even in a place full of eccentrics — there was a woman here at the time who would paddle naked in Mobile Bay — Henry stood out," says Sonny Brewer as he unlocks the padlock he recently attached to Stuart's hut, which, after the old man's departure, fell into extreme disrepair.

Brewer, 55, who runs

the Over the Transom book store in downtown Fairhope, is himself an eccentric, known by all and loved by almost as many. A tireless talker, Brewer takes half a day to recite his own biography of a backwoods Alabama boy who grew up to become a folk singer, an electrician, a construction worker, a specialty car salesman, a tug boat crewman, a high school teacher, a magazine publisher, a real estate salesman and an independent book seller, in, roughly, that order.

But Brewer's original dream, from a childhood spent reading E.B. White and Jack London in his

great-grandmother's house in Lamar County, was to be a writer. Now, after years of helping authors find publishers for their first books, Brewer has found one to publish his.



► See Sonny, Page 7E

The Birmingham News

FESTYLE

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Kemp

**Always the dreamer, Sonny Brewer looked
at the house Henry built and discovered ...**



Smoking in Arnold's tent: Stogies help governor cope

By STEVEN BARRIE-ANTHONY
Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — There he is
Juan Vargas, the state assemblyman

SONNY: Fairhope author's time has come

► From Page 1E

In March, Ballantine Books, a subsidiary of Random House, will release Brewer's "The Poet of Tolstoy Park," a novel informed and inspired by the life of Henry Stuart, another free spirit finally getting his due.

Random House made a six-figure advance to Brewer, who, the very next day, was to file bankruptcy papers on his book store. "I was in dire straights, and then, overnight, I was able to pay all the bills," he says.

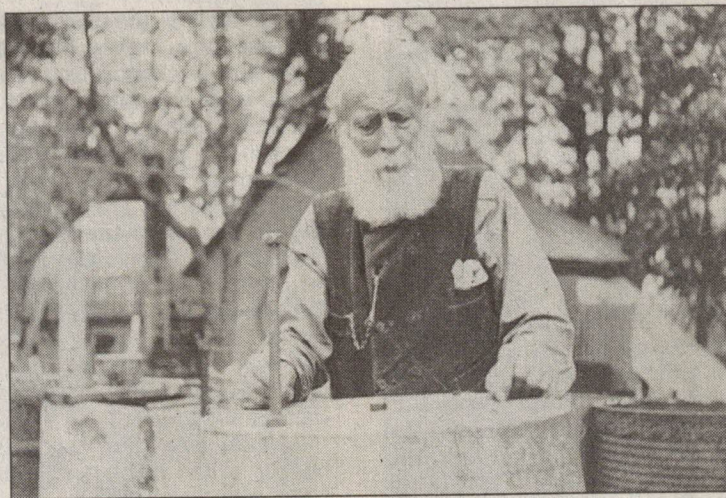
Brewer, whose soulful eyes and gray goatee suggest a poet lurking within, tears up at the recollection. He himself is a restless soul, a wanderer, a man constantly yearning for what lies around the bend. Between his various jobs, he has always fallen back on construction to make ends meet.

"It's like the Indigo Girls sing, 'You got to get out of bed, get a hammer and a nail,'" Brewer says. In the next breath, talking about the years he spent in search of meaningful employment, he quotes Albert Einstein, who slept only a few hours each night, so eager was he to get back to his work.

Brewer's friends are thrilled that he's finally accomplished what he's always wanted, but they wonder: Will it be enough?

"It will be interesting to see if he'll be content," says Brewer's longtime friend Martin Lanaux, who runs a rare book dealership out of Over the Transom. "Will he still be looking for the next big thing? Will there even be another step?"

Perhaps a movie deal?



SPECIAL

Both the real man and fictional character named Henry Stuart were devoted to the work of philosopher Leo Tolstoy. The real man moved to Fairhope after being told he would die soon from tuberculosis. But he didn't.

THE DETAILS

- **What:** Southern Writers Reading, an annual book and author event sponsored by Sonny Brewer and Over the Transom bookstore.
- **When:** Nov. 18-21.
Where: At various locations in Fairhope.
- **Admission:** \$29 fee covers all events. To purchase, call 251-990-7980 or visit www.overthetransom.com.
- **FYI:** Featured writers include Daniel Wallace ("Big Fish"); Cassandra King ("Making Waves in Zion"); Inman Majors ("Wonderdog"); Robert Morgan ("Gap Creek"); and many others.

Brewer's literary friends have weighed in with jacket "blurbs" that more seasoned authors can only dream about:

► "This book wraps its arms around you, rubs its face against yours with a stubbled cheek, and refuses to let you go." **Rick Bragg**, author of "All Over but the Shoutin'."

► Brewer's novel is "one of those unique and wonderful books that sings a hymn of praise to the philosophical and spiritual part of daily life." **Pat Conroy**, "Prince of Tides."

► "You will not want to put it down." **Robert Morgan**, "Gap Creek."

► "Brewer is destined to become a major voice in American literature." **Bev Marshall**, "Walking Through Shadows."

When he realizes he'll likely live for many years more, the old man — called Henry Stuart in the novel — sets out to renew his

Stuart had sent \$150 to buy 10 acres from P.A. Parker, whose family still lives in the Fairhope area. A creature of habit, Stuart

out of Over the Transom. "Will he still be looking for the next big thing? Will there even be another step?"

Perhaps a movie deal?

'Time has come'

Brewer is mum on that topic. But his fictionalized account of Stuart's life, and the colorful character of the author himself, has Ballantine editors atwitter.

"Everybody here fell in love with the book, and then we fell in love with Sonny," Ballantine editor in chief Nancy Miller says from her office in New York.

The publishing house plans to advertise the book in The New York Times Book Review and to send Brewer on a six-week publicity tour, things usually unheard of for first-time authors. "Sonny's time has come," Miller says. "His book is going to do well."

"The Poet of Tolstoy Park" is an inspirational story of an old man who, upon learning he's dying, heads for a sunny place in Alabama to live out his final days. He's drawn to Fairhope, perhaps, for its focus on individualism and for its proximity to what was believed to be healing springs.

When he realizes he'll likely live for many years more, the old man — called Henry Stuart in the novel — sets out to renew his body and soul by the singular act of building a house. The fictional Stuart, as in real life a devotee of philosopher Leo Tolstoy, names his home Tolstoy Park.

In researching his subject, Brewer found old pictures of Stuart — typically in baggy overalls — and a Birmingham News article about him, dated 1929.

The News reporter, actually a retired U.S. Congressman from Alabama named Milford Howard, told of having first met Stuart when the latter worked at a Washington, D.C., hotel in the late 1800s. It was by coincidence that Howard, traveling through Fairhope, heard of Stuart's presence and stopped by to visit.

Howard described Stuart as a "modern-day Thoreau," and "a living example of what the simple life and a sane philosophy will do for a man physically, mentally and spiritually."

In another old newspaper story, published years after Stuart's sons lured him back west in 1944, Kay Nuzum reported that

Stuart had sent \$150 to buy 10 acres from P.A. Parker, whose family still lives in the Fairhope area. A creature of habit, Stuart ate mush every morning and, for lunch and supper, vegetables he grew in his vast gardens. He spent his days weaving rugs on a loom in his house.

'A little truth'

Brewer's book mixes known details from Stuart's life with Brewer's own ideas of what motivated the man and of how he thought and lived. Brewer didn't set out to write historical fiction. "My friend (the novelist) Tommy Franklin says, 'If you're going to write a novel, a little truth goes a long way,'" Brewer says. "Most of

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what's in this book is a figment of my imagination."

But his book deal isn't. His contract with Ballantine calls for a second novel from Brewer, to be delivered to the publisher next May. Brewer has already finished that book, "Like Light Around a Bend in the River," about a teenager who joins a tugboat crew to get away from an alcoholic father.

That book, Brewer says, is more about his own life than anybody else's. Born in Lamar County to a military man and his saintly wife, Brewer as a child went to a dozen schools and rarely spent more than a year in one place.

He left home to attend the University of Alabama on the GI dependents program and then quit college just shy of a journalism degree to join the Navy. Back in Alabama in the 1970s, Brewer made a name for himself in Birmingham singing and playing guitar with a band called Natchez Trace at the now long-gone Ireland's restaurant.

After settling with his first wife in Mobile, Brewer finished a creative writing degree at the University of South Alabama and then couldn't find a job. For two decades, he went from hard labor to promising career back to hard labor to promising career, never quite finding his niche. Even after opening the bookstore in 1996, Brewer's paycheck was often tenuous.

Yet he has tirelessly promoted the writers, many of them first-time authors, whose books he sells in the store. If a writer couldn't find a publisher, Brewer sometimes published their works on his own Over the Transom label.

'Purity of heart'

One such writer, south Alabama lawyer Frank Turner Hollon, so impressed Brewer that he not only published Hollon's "The Pains of April," but got on the phone trying to drum up national interest.

"Sonny kept calling and bugging us about this book, and we finally read it and said, 'Wow,'" recalls David Poindexter of the

San Francisco-based publisher MacAdam/Cage, which rereleased Hollon's novel, now considered a minor classic. When Poindexter flew to Fairhope to meet Hollon, his visit coincided with Brewer's annual writers' festival known as Southern Writer's Reading.

When Brewer, on a whim, invited that year's participants to submit short stories to commemorate the event, Poindexter told Brewer that if he'd edit the submissions, MacAdam/Cage would publish the collection. Thus began the popular "Blue Moon Cafe" anthology series, an annual top-seller for MacAdam/Cage.

Brewer brought Poindexter more first-time novelists - among them Suzanne Hudson, a Fairhope Middle School counselor and author of "In a Temple of Trees"; Fairhope writer Joe Formichella's "The Wreck of the Twilight Limited"; Mobile writer Michelle Richmond's "Dream of the Blue Room"; and Louisiana writer Dayne Sherman's "Welcome to the Fallen Paradise."

"Sonny is this tremendous guy doing tremendous things for writers in the South," Poindexter says. "He's not doing it to get rich, but out of purity of heart. What he recommends, we seriously consider."

At home with his wife, Diana, and their sons Dylan, 8, and John Luke, 10, Brewer was himself quietly writing about Henry Stuart. He wasn't confident

enough to submit anything for publication. But facing the possible bankruptcy of his bookstore, he decided to try and sell his own work.

His friend Jill Conner Browne, author of "The Sweet Potato Queen" series, got him an agent. Brewer nearly fainted when she called to report the deal. (Excerpts from the book are at www.overthetransom.com).

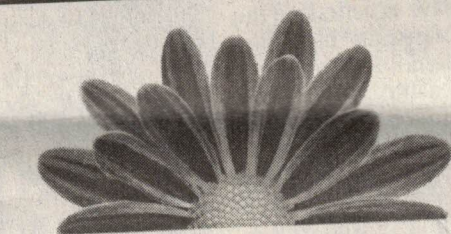
Henry Stuart's old house, which has been swallowed up by developmental sprawl, sits in a parking lot between two low-slung office buildings off Parker Road. The developer chose not to destroy the dwelling, occasionally using it for storage and finally boarding it shut.

This year, Brewer persuaded the owner to rent him Stuart's home for \$9 a month for nine years (nine is Brewer's lucky number.)

The author got out his hammer and nails and installed new windows and generally cleaned up the place. Then, with the winter sun warming him through the windows, Brewer sat at a table in Stuart's house and began final revisions on "The Poet of Tolstoy Park."

He hopes the book will encourage town leaders to reclaim the dwelling and perhaps create a park around it.

"Wouldn't that be great?" asks Brewer. In his eyes is a faraway look. He's no doubt pondering the next big thing.



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