Rex Stout Is Alive and Arguing in Fine Fashion

By Phil Casey

Rex Stout, who is, not too much to his surprise, one of the most popular and financially happy writers in the entire history of wordsmanship, is alive and kicking and happy in at least two states. He can be found, though not without difficulty, in either New York or Connecticut, all depending on which part of his 58-acre estate he happens to be standing and arguing.

Stout, the lean, bearded creator of Nero Wolfe, the famous fictional detective noted for his fat and aplomb, is 82 and then some. His love for talk and debate remains strong. His birthday score will be 83 this Dec. 1, and on him old age looks good. "Yes," he said over the phone the other day, "I'm expecting you and I expect to be here. I have heard nothing from St. Peter."

What Stout means by "here" is confusing. If you were to ask, he'd probably claim that he lives in Brewster, N.Y., but the chances are he'd be wrong. High Meadow, his beautiful piece of earth (most of it woodland, caressing deer, raccoons, squirrels and other animals that are okay with Stout if they leave his flowers and fruit and vegetables alone) straddles the New York-Connecticut line.

His 14-room house, which he designed and built in 1930 and modified somewhat after a place of a Bey of Algiers, is in Fairfield County, Conn. But if Stout and his wife, Pola, a vivacious, happy and talented textile designer, go outdoors in the right directions, they'll find themselves instantly in Putnam County, N.Y., just a few miles from downtown Brewster, which is a pleasant town about 80 miles above New York City, with a main street that is barely a print.

One of the interesting things about Connecticut is that there is no state income tax and many people of note have noted this and sleep there. Stout concedes that the fact that he built his house on the right side of the state income tax line is of certain financial advantage. But he denies that this was his plot.

He built the house there, he said, because he didn't want to be represented by New York Republican Rep. Hamilton Fish. He chose Connecticut, he says, simply to escape Fish.

"So what did I get?" he growled the other day. "I got Clare Boothe Luce." All that was long ago, but Stout is still sore.

Stout, who has been writing on and off, mostly on, for 57 years, has been writing about Nero Wolfe and his assistant, Archie Goodwin, for 36 of those years. He has written so many Nero Wolfe novels and stories that neither he nor his publisher, Viking Press, seems clear about what has happened. The figures given on the numbers of books and stories seem contradictory.

It was Stout's best guess the other day that he has written 38 Nero novels and a dozen collections of shorter stories. Stout is a mathematical whiz, and he's probably right about this.

"I think that's about it," he said. "That's close as you can get ... There are supposed to be between 45 million and 60 million copies sold, in 24 languages. Have you ever seen Nero Wolfe in Singhalese? Wow, that's something."

One reason for writing about Stout at this time is because after you talk to him, there's no good reason not to. He has been practically everywhere and done just about everything. Before he was a successful writer, he was a successful businessman, "the Pied Piper of thrift," establishing and operating a school banking system that flourished in 420 cities and towns and made him wealthy, until the 1929 stock market crash. He

See STOUT, E2, Col. 1
Rex Stout Is Alive and A

The cigar is a Havana.

Stout, from E! has rescued Nero and Archie since then. Before that, he was a number of things, including yesterman and warrant officer of the British Navy. Then he was Roosevelt's official yacht, "Tuscania," flower, from 1916 to 1918.

Stout has been around a long time and he has been busy. He has been not only a sailor, banker, writer, farmer and radio commentator, but an itinerant bookkeeper, cigar salesman, public guide, hotel manager, architect, cabinet maker, boot salesman and blanket and basket salesman. He was the spelling champ of Lamoure, N.D., and was a first-rate bass fiddle player. A few years ago he co-authored and class poet in Topeka High School.

He's not the first to work, a pion, to the old "Smart Set" men, the kind that has nothing to say and says it. He has raised and trained cocks and crows and a jumping pig. He has produced, by fair means or foul, vegetables and all there is to know about them, and was noted at county fairs. He was also a child math prodigy, but didn't enjoy it.

Stout is enjoying a little surge of publicity lately. He had, of course, a new Nero novel out early this year, "Death of a Duke," and there at the study published that year by the late William S. Baring-Gould, author of "The History of Sherlock Holmes." Baring-Gould wrote "Nero Wolfe and William G. Montgomery, a truly magnificent detective story."

"In a word," said Clifton, "it's a superior work."

Stout has appeared in the New York Times, the Virginia Quarterly Review, the Nation, the Saturday Review of Literature, and many other magazines and newspapers. He has said: "I didn't want an architect, I didn't want it done for me, it wouldn't have been any fun.

Stout is a man of many parts, many interests, many enthusiasms. "I don't think I've ever done anything that wasn't fun," he said. He's a good many things: (think of the word), an excellent cook, a dedicated trout fisherman, president of the Author's League, a lover of literature, art, opera, symphonies, the ballet and baseball.

Stout notes movies, and a few times he has told them before that he got to be taken seriously.

"It was just before a movie in 1921, Frederick March asked me to go out with him to the theater. He thought I'd do a good job to it. I don't think he knew I had a body, so I showed him I was there for half an hour. I couldn't stand it.

Stout left his movies and get away with it in his soul, but he has a problem with television. He says, "If you people ever have heard a show filled with moral turpitude it's experienced on the marlino, but his love for baseball is so great that he's playing that game. But now he ties heavily on TV for the night stand. He says, "I think of the job he has to do so lightly and on a bigger stage." "If not for baseball," he said in that growl that he has now, "I wouldn't be in this fix.""
Stout was a resounding success, and his first Nero Wolfe story was published in 1934, written under the pen name of John D. MacGowan.

Mr. Stout returned from a trip to Vermont and joined her husband on the patio. He left for a moment, and his wife, married to him since 1932, smiled. "Isn't Rex Stout a wonderful man? With the years, I see more and more of him.

Rex was almost certain, and she was willing to take him out for a walk.

It's not clear why he said this. A self-penned 'man of the world,' he must have thought that the sea was placid, and he might fight you on that.

He got a big kick years ago raising giant peaches, strawberries and pumpkins by whatever means he could, and his peaches are still enormous. His major feat, in the gardening line, was a pumpkin that he force-fed on evaporated milk. It weighed 210 pounds and was incredible. But it won no prize at the county fair. He didn't do that anymore, he said righteously the other day. The important thing is whether all those things are good to eat, and that's what he handles best.

But even Stout gets beaten. A deer, or several, are now eating his tulips once. He still raises tulips, but he watches out for the deer.

Stout is a widely and well read man, and enjoys re-reading the things that to him are significant. He told me that he knows great swatches of Shakespeare and Milton by heart and can recite, he said, every one of Shakespeare's sonnets. He thinks Yeats is the only truly great poet in English in this century, and Joseph Conrad, the "great" novelist.

He thinks Philip Roth is a good writer, but believes that "Portnoy's Complaint" should be re-titled "Penrod Revisited."

"My great luck," Stout said, "is a sense of guilt. What is it? What is It like? I tell my literary friends that they act as if I'm crazy. If you feel guilty about something, then you should look, I've been too late to fix it, then what's the use of feeling guilty? It's a waste of time.

I thoroughly approve of life. Not reverence for life, I approve of life itself. I have more and more of that.

"People are always saying something is unnatural. How can it be unnatural, if it happens? If a man makes love to 14 women in one night, it may be astounding, it may be debilitating, it may be stimulating, but it's not unnatural."

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Stout returned and sat. "If you would ask me what, looking back, I would like to have changed about my life, I'd say: that I would like to have learned to play the piano well and play Chopin. And I wish that every morning of my life between the ages of 18 and 80, I had got out of bed to see the summer dawn. What a beautiful thing to see and be with," he said, and began quoting Shakespeare.

Stout has a wide range of readers—cab drivers, school teachers, judges, national figures, and many of them admire him. His mail took a jump a few years ago when he wrote a Nero Wolfe novel that picked on the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover. This mail was a burden, because Stout tries to answer it all.

But he has some regular correspondents, many of them of note, and one is a Jesuit priest.

"Last time I wrote him," said Stout, "I signed myself S.J., too. My S.J., I told him, was for 'still jaunty.'"
A Visit at Home With Rex Stout

Above, the author relaxes in the workshop of his 14-room home, which he built. Below, he ponders over an idea.

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