



## ME AND HENRY

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I was born in Portland, Maine the day before Thanksgiving, 1914 at my grandparents' house. It was a 2-story semi-detached brick structure with granite steps, built in the 1870's on the corner of a street, aptly and exotically named "India". India Street lead to the docks three blocks away, where one could see the towering spars of 4- and 5-masted schooners and smokestacks of steamers that came and went all over the world. To either side stretched a parade of piers serving every conceivable maritime purpose. The nearby Grand Trunk Railroad docks loaded Canadian wheat and lumber to Europe and off-loaded crates and bales to trains bound to Canada. Other docks served the fishing fleets, coal barges, freighters, whose business was unknown, and an occasional navy vessel. One smartly painted terminal accommodated the passenger ships that went "Down East" as far as Bangor and south to Boston. Some even went all the way to New York, and, so gossip had it, a couple of times each fall and spring, all the way to Florida. With the Great War already exploding in Europe, the seaport was bursting with activity that would grow for the next four years.

None of the foregoing excitement attracted my attention at the time, although it would later be a part of my boyhood environment and my lifelong memories. Another event of which I would later learn, was that Henry had been born 107 years before me about a half a mile away where Fore Street, a name taken from the waterfront, extended up the hill overlooking the bay, at the east end of town. I was to walk the same streets as Henry had; play on the same shores and fields; marvel at the same scenes and perhaps dream the same fantasies.

My mother was a loyal patron of the public library and a great believer in early reading to discipline and improve the juvenile mind. Almost every Saturday, by the time I was four, my six-year old brother and I would follow her to the library. We now lived near the Eastern Promenade, just off Congress Street, [but I was] totally ignorant of exciting and historic features nearby. At that time Congress Street was (and still is) Portland's principal thoroughfare and extended from the hilltop at the east through downtown, past the library to the passenger station at the west, two miles away. Our route, replete with a small boy's wonders, took us past Lincoln Park, which my grandmother loved. She liked to shop at the adjacent farmers' market and sit in the shade of the great elm trees for which our town was known as the Forest City. A kid could splash in the circular fountain at the center of the park or rattle a stick along the wrought iron palings of the park fence. Next came the elegant white marble city hall, the town's pride and joy, and Monument Square graced by the only two 10-story buildings in the state and the Soldiers and Sailors Monument where all the parades ended, and surely the grandest anywhere except Boston. All the finest stores and theatres lined the next several blocks to the library that faced another big square in the center of which was a granite pedestal bearing a big bronze seated figure of an old man. He wore an old-fashioned coat, and his face was partially hidden by thick hair and a beard that came down to his shoulders all around. He seemed to be staring at the dark brownstone early Victorian front of the library as though he watched everyone, especially the kids, who came in and out. I assumed he may have been a library official, and although he was only a statue, I tended, on leaving, to carry my books in front of me where he could see them. It never occurred to me to ask who he was. At five, my reading was limited to one and two syllable nouns under childish pictures, and even had I been able to read, the statue was too far from the sidewalk for me to decipher its inscription.

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## HAPPY 200TH BIRTHDAY, HENRY

A year older, we were allowed to go by ourselves to Saturday afternoon movies. My literacy was now enhanced by the shorter words I could pick out of the subtitles on the silent westerns. My brother and I would leave our returned books [at the library] before the movie, and pick up two more on the way home for the next week's reading. We would usually stop across the way at the Mayflower Do-Nut Shop that had a wonderful machine that made donuts automatically, but not always perfectly. When the machine had been missing a few clicks, kids could get a big bag of malformed donuts for a nickel, or an even bigger one for a dime, that would last two kids through a two-western double feature with a short comedy and a serial episode. On being towed across the square clutching my brother's hand, closer to the statue one afternoon, I made out the letters of one word "HENRY". The reflection of the lowering winter sun on the polished granite obscured the two other words, which were too long for me to have read anyway. And until my curiosity would extend further, "HENRY" was enough to know.

The library was a special experience itself. The "CHILDRENS' ROOM" was identified by a large sign on its door that seem to admonish us that kids were allowed nowhere else. It was guarded by a formidable woman in a long apron and with hair wound in a coil on top of her head. She would examine every incoming book for frayed covers and creased pages; call attention to every defect however old; and lecture the cringing patron on the sacrilege of damaging books. When returning to select new books, each child silently extended his hands for inspection. Not even the tiniest smear of chocolate or frosting from Woolworth candies or deformed donuts escaped detection, and a chilling frown and an imperious gesture toward the boys' washroom might result. Outgoing books were minutely inspected and released with a warning that they return in mint condition. I dreaded that she might see my mother with me and report some act of literary vandalism of mine and order me banned from the library. What I did not know was that she and my mother had known each other since high school. I wondered if she acted as she did because she felt that Henry was watching her.

The old North School, built in the 1840's where I went to kindergarten, was only a block away from home. My class was in the "new", 1880's addition and included a lot of swarthy, colorfully dressed children who spoke little or no English, and who seemed to shy away from those who did. My grandmother who had grown up in Poland and spoke with a European accent, and knew all about such things, explained that most were Italian, some Greek, Armenian and Syrian. Their families had come to escape the War, and the gold earrings necklaces and crosses they wore were their savings that they could sell when they needed money. The lunches they brought to school consisted of thick slices of dark bread, aromatic cheese, strange looking sausage and onion. The odor of garlic and spices pervaded the schoolroom, and transferred itself at noon from lunch bags to clothing. My mother never failed to comment on the perfume that accompanied me into our house. Grandma, who believed that everyone wanted to be as American as possible as quickly as possible, assured me that they would soon speak and dress like other children. I could no longer understand my mother's exhortations to eat our unappetizing vegetables on account of starving Armenians when those I saw at school looked healthy enough. I wondered if Henry had gone to old North, and if there were lots of foreign kids there then.

As time passed by, my explorations of the city extended ever more widely. The heights of the Promenade at the eastern end of Congress Street were a favorite haunt. They overlooked the great expanse of the beautiful island studded bay and the wooded capes and gleaming inlets of the shoreline beyond. The





southern side of the hill faced the harbor and the ocean beyond. Part way down the hill toward town and facing the sea was an imposing colonial mansion with a handsome fan light over its big doorway. Although converted into apartments or rooms for poor immigrant families, paint peeled, railings broken and windows cracked, it still retained vestiges of its one-time elegance. It had to have been the home of a rich and famous sea captain whose wife watched from the rooftop lookout as her husband's great clipper ship spread its snowy sails and faded over the horizon enroute to Oriental ports, and months later, exulted to see its safe return. My Uncle Lew, at whose nearby house a stop was always good for a story about his fanciful adventures with ships, sailors, Indians and pirates, and some cookies and lemonade to get home on, told me that it was the Longfellow house. Longfellow was a man who wrote books, and maybe I should ask the lady at the library about him.

In due time, after several regular visits to the library, I summoned the courage to risk censure for not knowing who Longfellow was. The librarian's eyes lit up, and her face broke into a smile - the first seen by any kid that I knew! "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow" she exclaimed. "He wrote wonderful poems that every boy should read, and he lived right here in Portland on Congress St.!" The light in my head went on. Henry - that's who it was outside - that's why he's in front of the library - that's why places are named after him. From now on, Henry would be my imaginary friend. I took the book that the librarian held out to me, promised to read it, and wondered why I had never noticed what a nice lady she was and what a nice smile she had.

Now into my eighth year, I was reading ever more eagerly. I would labor over the books my brother read, and he would help me with unfamiliar words. I struggled through Ivanhoe, bewildered and thrilled over knights, squires, armor and mortal combat over ladies' honor. "Treasure Island" and "Kidnapped" inspired games of pirates and seamen along the beach and woody east end shore. With James Fenimore Cooper's Indians, we hunted ferocious animals and stalked and ambushed hostile tribesmen in the woods on vacant land beyond the edge of town. Boys traded and debated the adventures of the Merriwell brothers, Tom Swift and the Rover boys, and reenacted their exploits all over the neighborhood.

But all this, though fun it was, I knew was unreal. Henry was different. He was real; he had lived right here. He knew what it was like in olden times - a hundred years ago. He wrote about the big trees that shaded the streets, and through them saw the water and the islands beyond, which he dreamed, as I did, were tropical atolls thousands of miles away. "*A boy's will is the wind's will*", he wrote, and I knew just what he meant. He recalled the fort (now Fort Allen Park) atop the hill above his house that guarded the harbor entrance, and where "*soldiers drilled...bugles shrilled...drums beat... and sunset gun roared*". My friends and I played at aiming and firing the park's Civil War cannons on enemy ships trying to blast through the channel, and repelling hostile troops scaling the steep cliffs below our fort, and I imagined Henry with us waving a home-made sword or firing a broom handle musket. In one assault up the cliff to retake the fort from French invaders, I slipped and slid "belly-flopper" to the bottom, tearing knicker knees and suffering bloody scrapes on knees, hands and forehead. When I tried to soften my mother's anger with an elaborately contrived explanation, I only burst into tears.

Henry told of "*the sea fight far away*" outside the channel, of which I knew as between the British sloop "Boxer" and the American sloop "Enterprise" in the War of 1812, and the sounds that... "*Went*





*through me with a thrill".* He told of seeing the two young captains dead "*as they lay in their graves*". I knew they were buried in the Eastern Cemetery near where I lived. I found them in two simple rectangular red brick tombs, English and American, side by side in the Congress St. corner of the cemetery. I had seen them many times, but never knew what they were. Inscriptions on the granite slabs on top of the tombs related the history and gallantry of the 21-year old lieutenants and mourned alike for their tragic deaths.

By age seven, we were living in a flat on Congress St. near the very top of the hill, much closer to the attractions of the Eastern Promenade and the bay shore. The public playground there was the gathering place for all neighborhood kids, and the departure point for our forays into the woods and gullies and along the rocky shoreline. In summer, we swam at the beach below the Promenade as I was sure Henry had a century earlier. When play took us to the fort at the southern end of Promenade, I could see Henry's house on the hillside, and beyond it the ships and wharves in the harbor. The Cleves and Tucker Monument, a modest obelisk surrounded by a wrought iron fence, at the end of Congress St., memorializes the town's first settlers who arrived in 1632. I imagined them coming ashore from sailing ships, like in pictures of Columbus, wearing armor and helmets, and, while awe struck Indians stared, planting staffs with British flags and claiming the land for the king of England. Actually, the two families were farmer-fishermen who had settled on one of the larger nearby islands, and moved to the mainland only after the Indians were "pacified". I wondered why Henry hadn't mentioned them, but then I realized that the monument was not erected until after he had died.

Also nearby is a low iron fence enclosing an elongated plot that a plaque identified as the grave of 21 Revolutionary War soldiers, of which army I do not remember, being marched as prisoners from or to one place or another. The factual details were unimportant to the reconnaissance, mock skirmishes and battles that we shared with these unfortunate casualties. I was sure Henry must have seen these same mementos and played the same games.

Anchored in the bay were five or six big wooden schooners. Abandoned except for a few watchmen, these big four and five-masted ships were once part of the great sailing fleet that carried the cargo and fame of New England all over the world. Now obsolete, stripped of their great sails, slowly succumbing to ravages of time and weather, they had last served as tug-towed barges during the War. One frigid winter evening, one of my pals came rushing in, breathless, to report that one of the schooners was on fire, wherewith we pulled on our warmest clothes and rushed to the Promenade. Flames were shooting up through the main deck, and as we watched, climbed the masts and rigging and crept out on booms and spars. Their brilliance, undimmed in the clear winter air, reflected gold and red from the snow covered hills on both sides of the bay and the still, dark water between. The widow's walk on the roof of Henry's house down the hill would have been the perfect place from which to watch the thrilling drama as flame-wrapped masts collapsed into the hull, and the ship slid deeper into the water, its soul departing in the dying flames. To the hundreds watching, it was a death more befitting a great ship than to rot away in the mud of a tidal inlet.

At the very top of the hill across from our house, on the highest point of land in the city, stood a lookout tower. Known as 'The Observatory', it had been built in 1809, before houses had been built on the hill. Its octagonal shingled sides tapered 80 feet to a glass enclosed lookout platform that looked like a





lighthouse without a light. With powerful telescopes, lookouts could see and identify ships far out to sea with whom they could exchange signals and information and pass them on to customs officers and port director. During the war with the British, which was to come within a few years, the Observatory was to be invaluable to avoiding surprise by hostile vessels.

Long since made obsolete by radio and telegraph, the Observatory, unused and locked up, was preserved as a historic building. On infrequent occasions when the doors were unlocked while workmen made repairs or maintenance work, the boys would scramble up the winding stairs and wheedle the workmen in allowing them to go to the top. The view was breathtaking! With battered old brass binoculars bought for a dollar at someone's yard sale, over the housetops, the bay and the islands beyond, we could see far out to sea. We watched ships headed for port and others far offshore on a course up or down the coast bypassing the port. Until the workmen chased us out, we pretended to raise alarms at the approach of hostile warships, and speculated on the treasure with which privateers had loaded the incoming sloops which were actually the Grand Banks fleet, with holds full of codfish and haddock. I was sure that Henry must have visited the tower often, and I imagined I was with him in his boyhood days of sail and muzzle-loading cannon, taking turns at the telescope, running messages down to the port and signaling to the two stone forts on islands out in the bay. I looked through his books, I now had three, to see what he may have recorded about it, but found nothing.

By age 9 or 10, my waterfront explorations were extending much beyond the east end and Fort Allen Park, down to the forbidden areas of the port near where I was born and to the working docks beyond. On Fridays, we would stop at the fishermen's wharf to see what the Grand Banks sloops and trawlers brought in. We gazed in awe at the occasional 15-foot shark or horse mackerel hoisted to its full length and swung out to the pier. If additional hands were needed, we would toss fish into boxes and barrels on the dock for which we got a few haddock and flounder, always welcomed at home despite the stench that came with them on clothes and hands. Since Friday was bath night anyway, getting rid of the stench was little extra trouble.

Big steamers with unpronounceable names, sometimes in unreadable letters, on their bows and sterns, towered over the docks. Cranes loaded and unloaded cargo to and from trucks and shuttling rail cars. Big, fair-haired seamen and small, dark-skinned Orientals in strange looking clothes swung on cargo nets or stood on decks and docks, waving their arms and shouting in strange tongues. Whistles and horns, jetting steam and clanging steel were ecstatically exciting beyond belief, and stirred a boy's fantasies of daring and adventure.

My Uncle Joe operated a store a few blocks from the waterfront. The store fascinated us. It was filled with musical instruments, guns, binoculars, watches and jewelry. These treasures were brought in and sold, or would be purchased and taken away *"by Spanish sailors with bearded lips"* and other exotic wanderers who were creatures of *"the beauty and mystery of the ships and the magic of the sea"* that had so entranced the young Henry. I did not understand until much later that Uncle Joe was a pawnbroker, and that these weathered and salty sons of the sea with whom he bargained in foreign tongues and broken English, borrowed to fund a shore stay, and recovered their treasures to take back to sea. Some cousins thrice removed who were in the chandlery and marine hardware business also were located close to the waterfront. It was exciting for the boys to see the signal gear, telescopes, compasses, great coils of rope and other gear



with which their warehouse was stacked. We gaped in awe at the weathered, tough looking captains and mates in brass buttoned, blue jackets and peaked caps, who came there to fill the needs of their ships. Henry would have been as enthralled as I!

I was now past ten years old, and I was growing more into the reality of the modern world. I was spending less time talking and exploring with my imaginary friend Henry, and more on western novels, baseball and other boys' games, and my newspaper and magazine routes. Like every other small boy's imaginary friend, Henry was fading into the dimmer shadows of memory. Whenever I passed his statue near the library, I realized this bearded old man was more than a hundred years older than me and long since gone. But I would smile and sense a bond with him as I recalled all he had taught me of *"the beautiful town that is seated by the sea"* where I was growing up.

Even now, more than 75 years later, when, on infrequent trips Downeast [I pass Portland] on the Interstate, I see the old Observatory pointing into the sky above the eastern heights of the city and the ships in the harbor beyond. I feel a small smile on my lips and a touch of moisture in the corners of my eyes as I recall boyhood adventures and fantasies shared with my imaginary friend, HENRY.

Edward L. Waterman  
Circa 1999

