

Robert Clayton Spies(s)  
October 16, 1921—March 13, 2002

## A Bit of Autobiography

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[John Stevenson writes: Beginning in April 2000, I worked with Bob Spiess on a project that was originally intended to be a selected works and biography. I found Bob a somewhat reluctant subject for the biography. His natural modesty, combined with doubts about whether his story was interesting and a disinclination to comment on others, made for slow progress. What was produced—the following autobiographical sketch—imparts Bob's personal style and at least some of his story.]

At the request of John Stevenson, who thought that there might be some interest among haiku poets in aspects of my life, I shall set forth, with trepidation, a sort of autobiography, beginning with some information about my grandparents.

My mother's forebears were of Dutch heritage and had been in the United States for several generations. My maternal grandmother died before I was born. She had been a homemaker. My grandfather had an interior decorating business, with a store on Milwaukee's main street, Grand Avenue, later renamed Wisconsin Avenue. I recall that he drove a Whippet automobile and that at his funeral one of the musical selections was "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere."

On the paternal side my grandfather was of Germanic extraction, and my grandmother of Bohemian. As a married couple they came to the U.S. in the early or mid-1890's. They lived in the south-central Wisconsin town of Waterloo, where my father was born. Grandfather, who was a good letter writer, began to manufacture pearl buttons from the nacreous lining of freshwater mussels. This business thrived enough for him to be able to have an employee, but for most of his working life he owned a grocery store. He liked to play cards. I was well acquainted with these grandparents, as I would be at their large house in Waterloo during part of my summers. Grandmother was an excellent preparer of meals. When they retired from business and moved to Milwaukee, I frequently visited them. Grandmother lived to be nearly 101 years of age. Upon her 100th birthday anniversary she received a congratulatory letter from Pres. Lyndon Johnson.

My mother, Myrtle, was the last of seven children, and my father, Oscar, the second of six. In temperament they were surprisingly different. She was of a quiet, introverted, and somewhat aesthetic nature and played the piano, while Dad was very outgoing and gregarious. Most of his career was as a sales representative, mainly for Miller Brewing Company in Milwaukee, the city in which I was born, in a hospital, on October 16, 1921, at 2:00 a.m., an only child.

Father had a vast fund of jokes and sometimes played gentle practical jokes. One time when fried eggs were part of breakfast, and my mother had

temporarily returned to the kitchen, he quickly cut out the yolk of her egg and replaced it with one of the canned apricot halves that were in a dish on the table! After a couple moments of mother's perplexity, there was general hilarity.

He was interested in and adept at several sports and played semi-professional baseball. He enlisted in the navy during World War I and though holding the rank of yeoman his real job was as manager of the Great Lakes Naval Training Station's baseball team. He was a good bowler and excellent pool and billiards player. In an undated clipping from the Milwaukee Sentinel that I found among family photographs, it states, "Oscar Spies won the title of Milwaukee city pocket billiard champion on New Year's Day in 1917, and up to the present time has never been defeated in twenty championship games played in defense of his title." I was too young to see him play championship games, but in later years often saw him play and perform various trick shots. He also was a sharp card player. Later he took up golf which he taught me and which was my main sport for many years. I also played a bit of tennis. Afterwards I purchased a small sailboat that I had for ten years, then a canoe, and later also a kayak.

My mother and father were both high school graduates, and Dad also attended business school. I was educated in the Milwaukee public schools, where in high school I became interested in poetry due in part to a fine English teacher. I also had a wonderful Latin teacher and consequently took that subject for four years: Caesar's Gallic Wars as a sophomore, Cicero's "Orations" as a junior and Virgil's Aeneid in my senior year. I did not engage in extracurricular activities because I had a newspaper delivery route in the afternoons.

After graduation from high school I matriculated at the University of Wisconsin, in Milwaukee, in 1939. Although my father paid for my tuition I provided for my books and incidentals by driving a light delivery truck for a janitorial supply company for a couple of hours a day and on Saturdays. My university career was interrupted midway by World War II. Upon being drafted I was trained as a cryptographer (to be distinguished from a cryptanalyst, who breaks codes and ciphers). I served in what was then the Army Air Force and was posted to Christmas Island, the largest atoll in the Pacific, about 220 square miles, including the large lagoon. When I was there, its indigenous population was coconut palms and large land crabs that ate fallen coconuts. There I met Eleanor Roosevelt, who was visiting the troops on various Pacific Islands. At breakfast she happened to sit at the table where I was eating. I do not recall that there was any serious conversation that occurred, just the exchange of pleasantries. I suppose that those of us at the table were a bit overawed by the presence of the first lady. As I was on duty that day, I encrypted a top-secret message that was sent by radio (as all our messages were) to the next island she was to visit.

After a year or so on Christmas Island in 1943-44 I went to the Hawaiian Islands for a few months and then embarked on a troop ship—destination unknown. On the way our convoy was attacked in the Western Pacific by five suicide mini-submarines. We put on our Mae Wests (life jackets) and went topside until the battle was concluded by the couple of destroyer escorts our convoy had. We lost a few ships, including a tanker, and apparently sank three of the submarines, although the others, too, would probably have been

flooded by their two-man suicide crews.

Eventually we landed on Leyte Island in the Philippines by wading through the surf. In addition to carrying two large barracks bags and a carbine, I also was lugging a medium-size suitcase filled with books, a Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, a complete Shakespeare and complete Keats and Shelley, other books plus texts for a course in psychology I was taking by correspondence from the University of Wisconsin. During my three and a quarter years of service I earned eight credits.

Before leaving the U.S. we had received overseas training, which included use of the gas mask: taking it off and putting it on in a very dimly lit tent filled with tear gas. We also learned the odors of various poison gases, such as mustard gas, hydrogen cyanide (bitter almonds), and phosgene, the odor of which is described as that of new-mown or musty hay.

One rainy (as usual in Leyte) night I was asleep in a squad tent on my cot under a mosquito net, with my head toward the vertical lower wall of the tent. Some time in the night I awoke and for a moment did not know why. Then I realized I was breathing the almost suffocating odor of new mown hay. "This is it!" I thought. In the dark I'll never be able to get out of the mosquito net, take the gas mask slung on the side of the cot (the carbine was slung on the other side) from its canvas covering and get it on. Then I heard a breathy sound behind my head and, turning, was just able to make out, with only the mosquito net between us, the head of a cow. In order to get somewhat out of the rain, she had pushed her head and neck under the loose side of the tent and, while chewing her cud, was breathing on my face. Lucky for me I had not had presence of mind enough to shout "GAS" and wake the other eleven fellows in the tent!

During my service I managed to become a staff sergeant, and after discharge in October 1945, I returned to the University of Wisconsin—this time in Madison—in February 1946. I earned a B.S. degree in June 1947 with a major in botany and near-major in English. I continued for another year and got an M.S. with a major in vocational guidance. At graduation ceremonies for the latter degree one of the persons receiving an honorary doctorate was Duke Ellington. (I do not recall any of the others!)

After a six-month stint as a trainee for a casualty insurance company I passed the written and oral examinations for employment interviewer with the Wisconsin Civil Service. After a few years I became an employment counselor, eventually specializing in law enforcement positions, from entry level police officer, highway patrol trooper and deputy sheriff, to sergeant, lieutenant, captain, assistant police chief, chief of police, juvenile officer, detective, narcotic investigator, etc. and various positions for fire departments. I also served on oral examination boards for these positions. Some of my work also included examinations for the Department of Natural Resources for wardens, park rangers, foresters, fish and game managers, biologists, etc.

Thus employed, I saved all my yearly three weeks of vacation time for winter, would select one place and stay there for the entire time. I began by going to the Gulf Coast of Florida, then to the Keys and Key West, sometimes returning to the same place for another stay. Then I started visiting the Caribbean islands. First, pre-Castro Cuba, where I stayed on the Isle of Pines off the west coast. Hart Crane had lived there for a while, and I

met persons who had known him. I do not recall any particular details about him that were told to me, but I met an elderly lady who had known him and who kept a large snake in her attic to take care of roof rats. I did see that boy whom Crane wrote about in one of his poems, titled (I believe) "The Idiot Boy." The boy was grown by then, of course, but still went around wearing a couple of holsters with toy guns in them.

Afterwards I traveled to Puerto Rico's southeast coast a couple of times, St. Croix, Anguilla, Nevis, Grenada, St. Vincent, Tobago, Roatán, the Yucatan Peninsula—again, some places more than once. My book *Five Caribbean Haibun* resulted from these trips. Then it was the Hawaiian Islands: Oahu, Hawaii, Maui (three times) and Kauai (seven times). My only visit to Japan was in September 2000, to receive a Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Prize.

Much of my summer activity, in addition to sailing for many years, involved canoeing, and later kayaking, which was instrumental in my writing of many haiku.

My interest in haiku probably started to some extent in the late 1930s and early '40s, and after the World War II hiatus, especially in the late '40s when I began reading more of the earlier translations of Japanese haiku. In the late '40s and early '50s I acquired R.H. Blyth's four volumes of *Haiku*, which I still have, their pages brown and brittle. From then on it was one translation after the other, and I became hooked on haiku. My first haiku were published in 1949 by *American Poetry Magazine*, at the time second in terms of length of publication only to *Poetry* of Chicago, I believe, among current magazines devoted solely to poetry. My haiku then were strictly 5-7-5, with the first and last line rhyming, à la Henderson, and with titles.

In 1963 I saw in a Madison bookstore the premier issue of *American Haiku*, the first magazine to be devoted solely to English-language haiku, edited and published by James Bull of the University of Wisconsin, Platteville. I sent some of my haiku, and two were published in the second issue and five in the third. By then I had eliminated titles (*American Haiku* did not have them) and although I still wrote in 5-7-5 not all of the haiku had rhyme. With Volume II, Number 2, my essays and book reviews began appearing.

Clement Hoyt was editor and publisher of *American Haiku* for one year (Volume II) out of Houston, Texas. I met Clem twice when he came from Texas to Madison to have treatment at the University Hospitals for minor skin cancer. In late 1964 or early 1965 I went to Platteville and met Jim Bull, a professor of English at the University there. He was not exactly a typical English professor, perhaps a bit looser in his demeanor and attitudes. I had evening dinner with him, his wife, Gayle, three growing children, and two basset hounds (that did not dine at the table!). At this meeting he asked me if I would become editor in charge of poetry for the magazine, while he remained editor for the prose as well as the publisher. My tenure began with Volume III, Number 1. Most of our work was done by letter or telephone calls, with occasional visits in person in Platteville or a few times in Madison. In 1967 I designed O.M.B. Southard's *Marsh-grasses*, published by *American Haiku*, which had also published my first book of haiku, *The Heron's Legs*, in 1966. In 1968 Jim ceased publication of AH because of other commitments. The following year Kay Titus Mormino founded *Modern Haiku* in Los Angeles. In the first issue several of my haiku and a book review (of John Wills's *Weathervanes*) appeared. I had ten haiku in the second issue, and beginning

with Volume II, Number 3, I became an associate editor assisting Kay mainly in the selection of the poems for the issues. In Volume VIII, Number 3 (1977), the first of the series of my "Speculations on Haiku" appeared. Kay began having severe physical problems, and she requested me to assume the publishing and editing of *Modern Haiku* out of Madison, and with Volume IX, Number 1 (1978) this came to pass.

Although I no longer canoe and kayak (it gets me in the small of the back) I walk and swim at an excellent athletic club. I live on the shore of a creek (muddier than it was many years ago) at the point where it flows into a large lake, Lake Mendota.

Most of my hours during the day, and not infrequently into the evening, are devoted to the many scores of various activities that would read rather like a shopping list were I to write them out. Since I retired from my civil service position in January 1984, the amount of work over the years in connection with *Modern Haiku* has burgeoned.

In my spare time I sometimes write haiku or senryu, occasionally visit friends or have them over for an evening. I enjoy classical music, do some exercises, or swim at the health club nearby. I like to think I have a fairly good sense of humor, liking jokes and funny stories. In reading newspapers, I turn first to the comics.

Aside from composing poetry, my fondest activity is reading: translations of Japanese and Chinese poetry, science, easy philosophy, religion, and a bit of psychology, and once in a while a highly recommended novel. I subscribe to such magazines as *Scientific American*, *The Eastern Buddhist* from Otani University, Kyoto (founded by Daisetz T. Suzuki), *Mother Jones*, *The Progressive*, and several nature and conservation magazines. At the time of writing this (summer 2001) I have started reading H.H. the Dalai Lama's *Ethics for the New Millennium*.

Perhaps apropos the above: I have "adopted" and help support a Tibetan family in Dharamsala, India. The family's three children attend one of the Tibetan children's village schools founded by H.H. the Dalai Lama. Pema, the father, is a superb artist, especially in painting the intricate and detailed traditional Tibetan-style thankas. I own one of these along with two of his other paintings. Pema uses mineral pigments that he grinds himself, including a rather good quantity of nearly pure gold (I do not know if he grinds this himself). I met him once, when he came to the United States under the sponsorship of a person who had met him in Dharamsala.

I do not recall any special aspects of my meetings with various haiku personages, and also I generally prefer not to comment publicly on my assessment of persons. I recall the psychological insight that, to bring it up to the present, says, "Robert's idea of Elmer tells us more about Robert than it does about Elmer."

[John Stevenson concludes: From my final contacts with Bob, and from those of some others subsequently reported to me, it seems clear that he hoped I would carry this biography project to its conclusion. In order to do this, I will need your help. Please send your memories, impressions, comments and thoughts about Bob Spiess to me at PO Box 122, Nassau, NY 12123.]

## Books by Robert Spiess

*The Heron's Legs*. Platteville, Wis.: American Haiku, 1966.

*The Turtle's Ears*. Madison, Wis.: Wells Printing Co., 1971.

*Five Caribbean Haibun*. Madison, Wis.: Wells Printing Co., 1972.

*The Shape of Water*. Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1982.

*The Bold Silverfish and Tall River Junction*. Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1986.

*New and Selected Speculations on Haiku*. Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1988.

*The Cottage of Wild Plum*. Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1991.

*A Year's Speculation on Haiku*. Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1995.

*Noddy*. Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1997.

*Noddy & the Halfwit* [with Lee Gurga]. Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1999.

*Some Sticks and Pebbles*. Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 2001.