

Stan Waterman

poetry in motion

Text by Hillary Hauser —
Photography by Jack McKenney

Every now and then the world is touched by a human dynamo — an inspired individual who moves quickly forward in his chosen field, producing much for the enlightenment of all. Stan Waterman is such a person, rising from the anonymity of a Maine blueberry farm to the podiums of auditoriums around the world.

Stan's rise to glory is an amazing story. He graduated from Dartmouth with a B.A. in English, and did graduate work at Columbia in political science. After serving in the Navy during World War II, he settled in Maine to farm blueberries. However, during his stint in the service he had become involved in the innocent pastime of catching lobsters and scallops and looking around beneath the sea — even before the Aqua Lung® was introduced to the United States. As he himself puts it, "the hook was set." Soon, Stan decided to give up the blueberries, built a boat, and in 1954 set up a diving charter business in Nassau, Bahamas. The result was his first pictorial documentary entitled, *Water World*.

In 1959 Waterman participated in the first underwater archaeological expedition to Asia Minor, where a Bronze Age shipwreck over 3000 years old had been discovered. This resulted in his second major documentary, *3000 Years Under the Sea*. Also in 1963 he completed his third major documentary, *Man Looks to the Sea*. An excerpt from this film, entitled *Hogsty Reef*, won him three top honor awards in 1965 at the United Kingdom International Underwater Film Festival, as well as Special Honors Awards at the Santa Monica International Underwater Film Festival.

Soon after, Stan packed up his family—wife Susie and children Gordy, Gar and Susie-dell who are now young adults—and took them to Polynesia where they stayed for one year. The resulting film, *Call of the Running Tide*, eventually became a National Geographic special.

And so it goes. Stan Waterman has worked with scientific institutes and research organizations such as the National Geographic Society, Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, American Museum of Natural History, Cornell University, and the National Science Foundation. He may probably be best known for his part in the classic box-office thriller *Blue Water — White Death*, which he filmed with Peter Gimbel and Ron and Val Taylor. Just recently Stan completed a filming assignment for ABC TV's *American Sportsman*, with Peter Benchley, author of the best-selling novel, *Jaws*. The film documents the author's first underwater encounters with real sharks and stirred more reactions from *American Sportsman* viewers than any other show in its history.

Stan's humor and character are unique, as those who have heard him on stage will testify. It is a rare treat to hear him in an informal situation as we did when we interviewed him for *SKIN DIVER*. Not only did we find out that his first thrust in life was on the berry farm, but that Steel Reefs has shared the same billing with *Devil in Miss Jones* in Philadelphia, and that he has probably the world's largest collection of *Prince Valiant* comic strips. But between the jokes comes inspiration for everyone who has ever hoped to make the underwater world the arena for a career.

SDM: We've heard rumors that you jumped into the diving arena almost the minute the sport began to take root in the United States. Can you tell us what your introduction was like?

WATERMAN: I started diving in '38 when I was a schoolboy, which was really way back when. I think it was even before Doc Matthieson, Dick Prodonovich and the old pros. The whole thing started when a friend of the family brought a diving mask back from Japan. It was before masks were developed in this country. We had nothing like that, but the Japanese had them; they still have the same ones, with all the tin rings hand-crafted with two rubber bands going back around the head. I put the thing on and went into the water in front of the hotel in Palm Beach, Florida, where as a poverty-stricken family we were vacationing. I just did the big take . . . eyeballs out, the whole thing. The hook was set.

Shortly after that I was in the service in the Canal Zone. There was a company called Sea Dive that had a Frankie the Frogman Club. Their frog feet were the first fins ever made in this country — a web-shaped green fin. Sea Dive was in California, and Guy Gilpatric was the big cheese then. When their stuff came on the market I snapped it up. While I was in the Canal Zone I started diving with a couple of California guys from Long Beach who had been going after bugs. I sent away for more gear from Sea Dive and got a letter from Frank Rodecker saying, "Dear Mr. Waterman," or no, he was a Californian, "Dear Stan . . . Glad you like diving so well. We're sending your order and we are also sending other things that we thought you'd like to try and let us know what you think of them." They had some absolutely ridiculous cork-handled diver's knife, and if it slipped out of your grasp it would float to the surface. It was so informal, so fresh and ingenuitous that there was correspondence between the maker and the kooks who were ordering the stuff.

SDM: You were obviously eager to use anything available to get underwater. What was your reaction to the Aqua Lung®?

WATERMAN: When I came back after the war, the first Aqua Lungs® began to appear, first in *National Geographic* articles in about '48 or '49. It is hard for anybody to understand today what the advent of a piece of equipment like that meant to someone already turned on by the sea, someone who had already dived, breath holding and pushing to stay as long as possible. The idea that you could breathe underwater was so way out — it was the equivalent of having a space capsule in your back yard that you could take off to the moon with.

SDM: At this point did you turn your attention to scuba diving?

WATERMAN: I got the first Aqua Lung® that came to New England. In fact, I brought the first one up to Maine. I ordered it from Paul Arnold and Rene Bussoz, who then comprised U. S. Divers, and I also got the 25th Cornelius compressor that was ever sold — number 25. Cornelius was the first company that ever came out with a compressor that you could fill these things with.

SMD: You were filling your own tanks?

WATERMAN: Yes, there was no other way. You couldn't take it to the gas station of course. I also bought one of Bill Barada's Bel-Aqua suits. They were supposed to be dry suits, which of course was a euphemism because they filled with water. If you trapped the water in them you felt pretty good, but they used to give terrible crotch squeezes that were just painful.

I was a blueberry farmer in Maine then, what my lawyer always called huckleberry raising, and I started a business on the side, advertising in the Bangor Daily News for the repairing of fishing weirs also the recovery of scallop drags, outboards and bodies. Of course it was complete monopoly. Nobody else had this Martian gear and in quick order I went into the business and saturated the market by selling ten complete units — dry suit, Aqua Lung, fins, the whole thing.

SDM: Did you actually open up your own version of a dive shop?

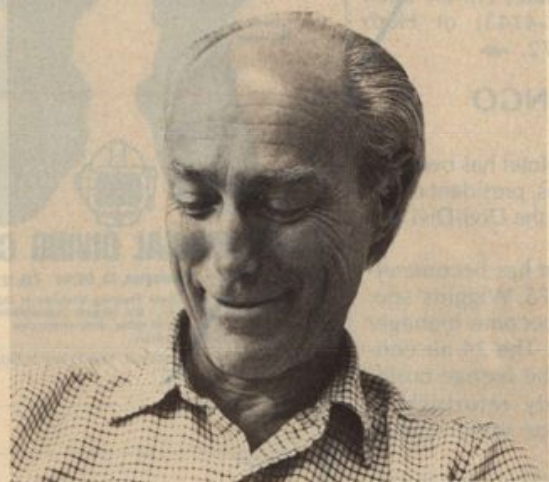
WATERMAN: No. I started in the guest room of the house. I had all those boxes piled up there. This was in about 50 — '51.

SDM: How did people learn to use this equipment?

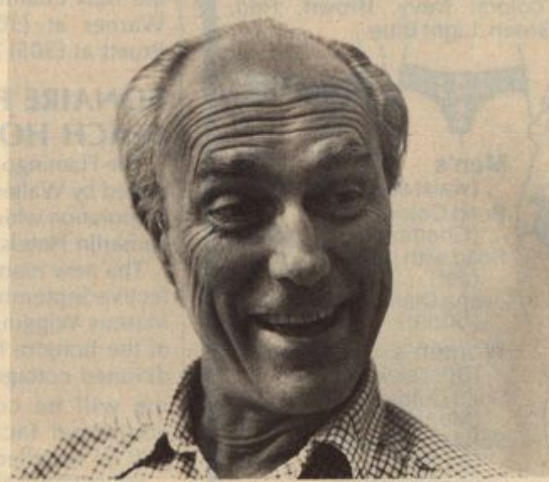
WATERMAN: At that time you received your Aqua Lung® with a little instruction pamphlet that said not to hold your breath when you came up. It also said that there was no way you could possibly get in trouble with a single tank because the air would not last long enough to occasion the need for decompression. So, you held this pamphlet in one hand and walked into the water. It really was wild.

SDM: What do you think was the real motivator that pushed you into the diving thing all the way, that induced you to give up blueberries?

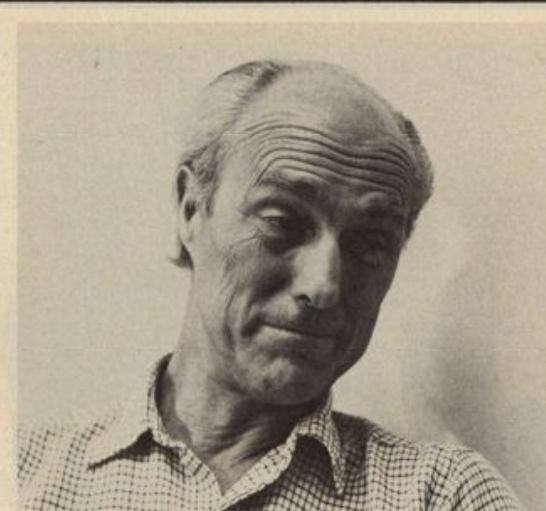
WATERMAN: Since the market was saturated with the ten full get-ups, I was poaching scallops and lobsters on the side with some diving buddies. About that time Cousteau was just beginning to appear in *National Geographic*. Hans Hass came out with *Diving to Adventure*, which was even before *Silent World*. That was the adrenaline producer. It is still good reading, a super classic. I was on fire, breathing heavily every time I smelled salt. At the end of about three years of blueberry



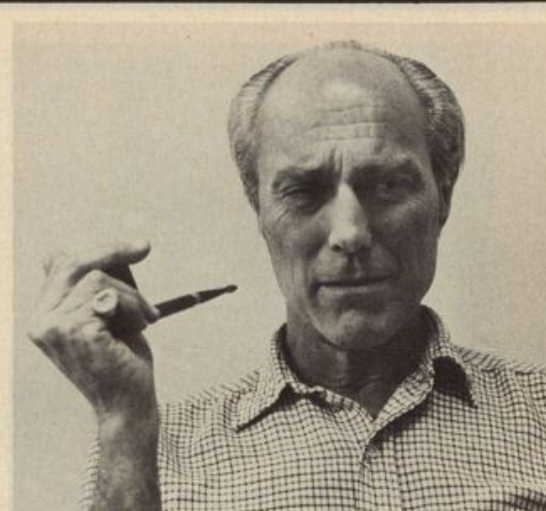
"I put the thing (mask) on and went into the water in front of the hotel in Palm Beach, Florida, where as a poverty-stricken family we were vacationing. I just did the big take . . . eyeballs out, the whole thing. The hook was set."



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farming — I can remember really as thought it were yesterday — Susie and I were sitting by the fire one evening and I had just finished a Cousteau article. The wheels started turning, and I thought, "Who is this man who does this kind of thing? Who are these characters who go off and have these experiences? What is it that's required?" That was the first germ of thought — that maybe I could do it, you could do it, if only I got up and took the chance. That was the beginning of it.

SDM: How did you transpose this ambition into reality?

WATERMAN: I looked into the business of having a boat built. A friend of mine designed it, and I helped to build it. It was a Maine coast lobster boat with Aqua Lung® racks in the stern, glass panels in the bottom, and a flying bridge for working in the tropics. We spent everything we had, mortgaged again, and put the whole works into it. I went down at Christmas time to Nassau and made friends, looked around. I took another holiday to look at the Caribbean — Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, and other places — to see what looked like the most likely place to generate business. Nassau was it. So, in the fall of '54 we closed up the whole shooting match in Maine, hopped on the boat and went south. I'd already been down and rented a house and found that I could quarter at the yacht harbor and work through the hotels. That's the way things got started.

SDM: Did you introduce diving to that area?

WATERMAN: No. There were two other fellows. But I was the first one who had a boat that could go out to the outer islands for a week at a time.

SDM: Were people then coming to Nassau to dive?

WATERMAN: No, they weren't coming to dive, but they were coming to the hotels and then looking for things to do. I advertised in *SKIN DIVER*, way back then, and gradually by the second year people were writing and there were dates ahead of time.

SDM: So, the charterboat business was successful; what was the impetus for giving that up?

WATERMAN: After three years it became apparent that as long as I owned my own boat I was confined to that area, and also that we weren't going to get ahead because it cost so damned much to operate. Somewhere there had to be a better leverage for earning which the charterboat business just didn't have. Also, it's a way of life like ski or tennis instructing. It can become a terrible drag if you are forced to it every day of your

life. It takes a certain quality. I didn't have it, whatever it is.

SDM: What was the next step?

WATERMAN: By the third year I had the first film together, *Water World*. I had borrowed a movie camera and had bought a Rebikoff system to do it. In the summer I went back to Maine for the blueberry season and showed the film wherever they were willing to see it. I'd arrive at a church supper in a station wagon loaded with rebreathers, tanks, compressors, books and this and that. It would take two hours to set up a display of this stuff. I would show my film, and I also had a couple of Cousteau films, black and white. I was turned on just talking about it. Then one season I got hold of a catalogue of prep schools and boarding schools. I sent out mailers to about 200 of them and to my surprise I landed 16 dates at \$85 a shot. After that first season with *Water World* an agent got wind of it. She was a real remora who lived in Hollywood. What a shark; she so buttered me up over the phone that she made me think I was talking to Sol Hurok. She said that she would book my dates, give me a dazzling lecture fee and that she would take only 33-1/3% of the gross. I was to pay all of my expenses. I finally broke away from her, started booking my own dates, and had a couple more agents before I found a really good one. And so, it evolved.

SDM: In looking back over the evolution of your career are you able to sum up any sort of formula, so to speak?

WATERMAN: Young people love the idea that you're doing something that's exciting and doing what Robert Frost called "making your vocation your avocation, as your two eyes make one in sight." Kids say, "How do you get into this business? What do you study in school, and how do we go?" Of course, the answer is that there is no immediate course to take, that you must try many things on for size. Everyone I know, any of the top ones who are fine filmmakers and makers of still pictures, started on the side as an adjunct to something they were doing. Some weren't even in the diving business but were fine photographers who did it as a hobby. I am reminded of Daving Doubilet, who just kept hanging around film festivals. The next thing we knew his slides were winning prizes, and then he landed his first assignment. There was Jack McKenney, who worked as a draftsman in Windsor, Ontario, and started out with a quarry diving film, an example I talk about often. Al Giddings was a telephone lineman.

SDM: So, *Water World* was done strictly as a hobby that

launched you on a filming-lecture circuit. What do you think was the big turning point in this area of your career?

WATERMAN: *Blue Water - White Death* was really the first big breakthrough, wherein the "do-it-for-myself" gave way to a production team. *Blue Water - White Death* was a wonderful stroke of luck because it could have happened to any reasonably competent photographer. Any of us would have given our left arm to go out and do it, but I knew Peter Gimbel and we were friends. I was in on it from the beginning and so I got to do it. Everybody who took part in it, from Jim Lipscomb on the surface to those underwater, is still experiencing spin-offs from that marvelous film.

SDM: Was that your first big entry into the world of sharks and snapping jaws?

WATERMAN: Oh yes. The first and the greatest. The Benchley shoot was a grabber, but I don't think I will ever come near that experience off Durban in *Blue Water*, that opening thing with pelagic sharks all around us, with us pushing them off with cameras, kicking them, and everything. That was a spaced-out bit of madness that I don't think any of us would arrange to do again. The margin for error and safety was so thin that it was a very dangerous experience. Ron and Val Taylor and Peter felt the same way. Anyway, that was the single most exciting experience that I've had underwater. In the Benchley film we had fine experiences, but the tiger shark was containable. People who know sharks will feel that when they see it, and the whites were seen from inside a cage and that's a different ball game. But those big white tips off Durban, all around us in the open water, I still look at that when I show it and I wonder. It was Peter Gimbel who pushed that, who was the catalyst. Neither Ron nor Val nor I were prone to step out of the cages. Peter opened the door and stepped out and in so doing drew all of us with him because it was unthinkable that he should be out there all by himself. So, we all went together.

SDM: The incident where Peter Lake's cage became entangled with a thrashing shark — that wasn't too calm either.

WATERMAN: That was an actually happy thing for the film — the kind of thing you couldn't plan and wouldn't want to plan. But it was a natural piece of action that came out happily and grew to sort of a climax.

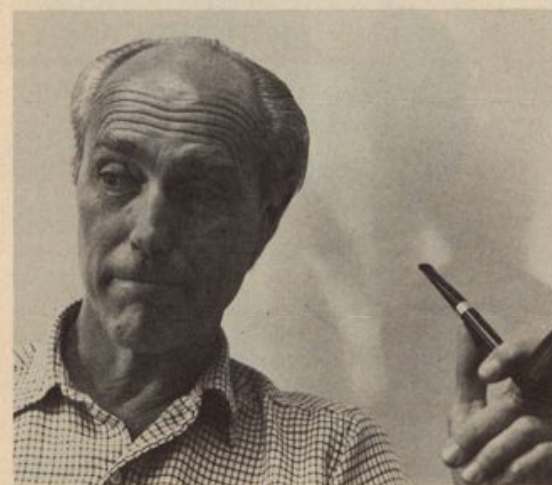
SDM: What actually happened?

WATERMAN: The shark took a big bait that was hanging on Peter Lake's cage. It engulfed the bait but the heavy nylon line

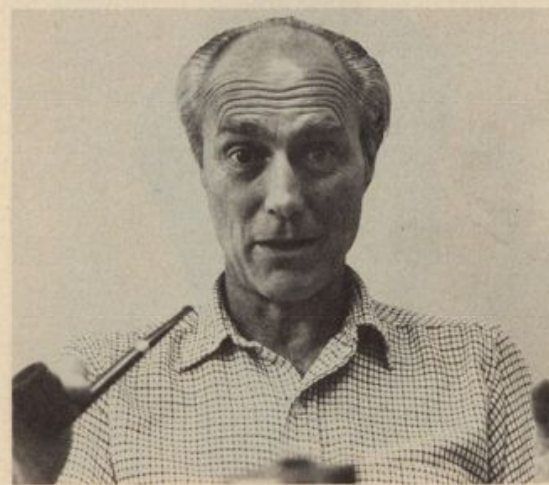
had secured him to the cage. The shark started to move away and when it felt the resistance it started really turning on the steam. This was about a 3000 pound animal, 16 feet long, and when it started shaking, the whole cage started to shake around like a dice box with Lake in it. I was in the next cage and started shooting. I kept looking out from around the optical viewer to see if it were really happening. I had the presence of mind to at least get my friend's last mortal struggle so he could be remembered posthumously. Lake, who was a very cool cucumber indeed, pulled that ever-present diver's knife strapped to the leg — the knife that has been subject of so much derision by divers. This time it was there when it was needed, and it was razor sharp, unlike most of them, because we had had them honed. With this he cut the nylon line and released the shark. Otherwise I think the cage would have been pulled loose, off its tether, and the shark would have carried him away in the cage. It doesn't mean that the shark would have eaten him up or anything, but it could have been very hairy. Nobody knows what will happen in that kind of circumstance. Lake played it very coolly.

SDM: You have just finished the *American Sportsman* shoot with Peter Benchley and you said a few things in the film that were interesting. One point you made was that as often as you have been in the water with sharks you have never felt easy around them.

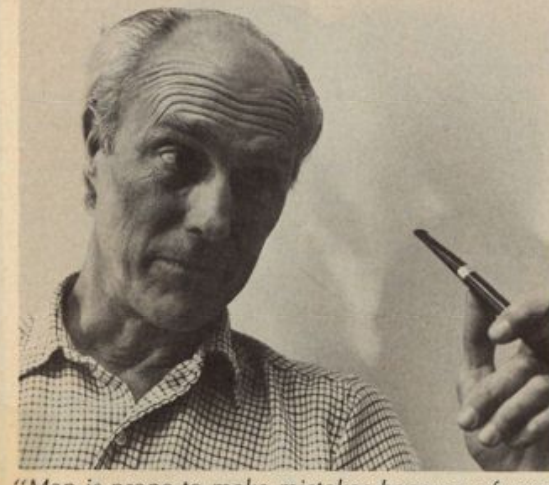
WATERMAN: No. I must say that I never feel easy with sharks. Years ago, when I was chartering in the Bahamas, I met sharks often and I was still young and pretty green, really. I began taking them for granted. I felt that I had it all over the sharks by just being cool. Then I was attacked by a tiger shark who came in very quickly and started at my leg. I just managed to ward him off with the butt of a speargun. It really shook me and I began to realize that I'd become casual about sharks and that it could be fatal, just as it is fatal for divers who become casual about their time in deep water. Man is prone to make mistakes because of overconfidence. Natural forces like the pressure of the sea or the inexorable force of a shark, always alert and ready, can catch up with a human being eventually. Because those animals and most forces are inexorable and man is fallible, I decided that as little as possible I would become fallible again. When I work with sharks now, I try to work with people whom I respect and whom I know are cool in the water with me — people who will use whatever instinct that has come from



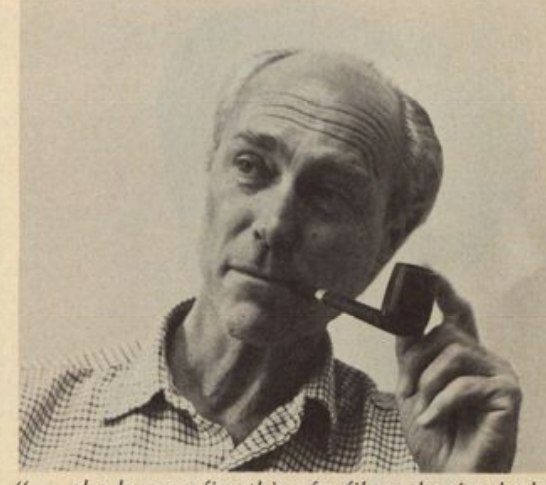
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almost a quarter of a century of diving with the animals, who are able to intelligently guess what these animals are going to do by their motions and movements. They do follow patterns that are by no means absolute, but there are familiar patterns and to some extent you can play on those patterns and know how far you can go. But there is always the odd one. I think all of us who work with sharks do so because sharks are a fine thing for films, they're the big box office. But all of us wonder when we're going to get zapped, something like an electrician fooling around with high voltage. You hope it will be a nice little nip that can be taken care of with a Band-Aid.

SDM: Your films haven't all revolved around snapping jaws and dangerous situations . . . at one point didn't you take a year off with your family and go to Tahiti?

WATERMAN: I had a sense of the family growing up very quickly, the children growing so fast that they would be gone tomorrow if we didn't do something with them today. I wanted us to experience an adventure together while the time was still there. And less altruistic and homey than that, there was the thought that something really fine could come from spending a whole year on location, working quietly and patiently and getting into the woodwork. Those were the two major factors. One other factor that I hadn't really considered, which became important later, was that few areas of entertainment are more effective than a family doing things together. *Call of the Running Tide* turned out to be the best film I've ever done from an entertainment standpoint, because America loves to see a family they can believe in or relate to, a family that will get out and do something like this. Most of America, most of the western world, is tightly caught up in the mills of their own confinement and vicariously dream of doing such a thing. I remember when I premiered that film years ago with the Boston Sea Rovers. It was the loveliest time ever, one of those rare things. It was the first time it was to be shown and right up to the starting time I was still thinking of my lines. I narrated it live. At the end I thought everyone was getting up to leave and there was this great standing ovation. It was a real tearjerker kind of thing. Going out into the lobby after the show, I heard a number of wives arguing with their husbands, berating them about why they didn't go out and do those things. In a way, I think that was a measure of what the film means and did mean.

SDM: What kind of an effect did this have on your children? Have they continued in their father's footsteps?

WATERMAN: If I have a summer project, a summer produc-

tion, I take one of them to work with me as a summer job — camera loader, tank hoister, diving buddy, the whole thing. My daughter, Susie-dell, was in the film called *The Sinai Reef*, which we did with Eugenie Clark. Susie is in Tahiti now. She's been sailing around the world on a 47-foot sloop for a year and a half.

SDM: Obviously she inherited her father's itch. Do you think that the year in Tahiti promoted a tightness and closeness within your family that might not have occurred otherwise?

WATERMAN: Affirmative in every way. It's almost corny to say so, because it sounds a bit like a psychological primer to do such a thing with your family and have it come out that way, but inevitably in our year of working together, — sharing, and living very, very simply — an esprit de corps developed. The children loved what we were doing and they love what I am doing that earns their education and keep. There is a rapport that isn't so often felt in many families. The children highly respect and love what is happening with the adult part of the family and understand by helping with it. They know what is paying their way. There is also that warm feeling of friendship and love within the family unit that often comes to people in expeditions, people who have scaled mountains together or have faced travails together, as we did in *Blue Water - White Death*. All of us who were in that film are now close friends and have remained in touch. Well, it happens similarly in a family, with the family members making up the expedition team. If nothing had come out of *Call of the Running Tide*, it would have been worth every penny that went into it — for what it did in the family growing and strengthening.

SDM: There's always a risk involved in freelancing, but probably the greatest need for courage is at the moment the decision is made to stand on your own two feet.

WATERMAN: It can be done in steps. If it's U/W photography that you want to get into, and if you can afford it, I think a course at Brooks Institute would be a first step. It's the only formal education I know of in underwater photography that is fairly comprehensive and good. It doesn't lead to a job necessarily, but at least there is the training. Then I would go about whatever way there is to make a living, whatever job I could find, and pursue the photography vigorously as a hobby, on weekends and holidays. Instead of buying new cars, the bucks can be spent on new Nikons with lenses. It depends on how much singleness of purpose one has. It starts as a hobby, and soon the pictures begin showing up — at film festivals, and

then in articles here and there. Then if you start making bucks, gradually you may find that you're at the point where you can cast loose your moorings from a job that's a little bit pedestrian and take a crack at trying it full time. Ron Taylor did it that way.

SDM: What was your educational background? Did it have any influence on your present position?

WATERMAN: It did, really. I was an English major at Dartmouth with a B.A. in that discipline. I was a graduate student at Columbia but I didn't finish. I underwent what I call a Thoreau syndrome — getting away after too much academia and swinging a scythe on an open field in the sun — the kind of thing kids do now by joining communes or becoming lumberjacks. But I don't regret my time spent at college at all. I think that to be able to communicate and speak well is absolutely essential. Communications, if you are going to write, speak, or stand on your feet and present what you have done, is basic. I think I am glad to have had the English rather than a marine biology major. Marine biology has picked up since then, and anybody can learn well when they are stimulated to learn, as all of us have been. We learn more and more about marine behavior by watching it. No regrets about the English major. I learned enough about politics to know that I never wanted any part of it. All the rest I learned from Richard Nixon.

SDM: What are your future plans?

WATERMAN: Far ranging plans first: I think more writing. I've just really begun to pick up a little steam in that department. I've neglected it too long, really. I see a time maybe ten years hence, when I will be 63, and perhaps I won't feel so much like zonking sharks and ballooning around in the water. In fact, there are times when the flesh is weak even these days. I'd like to develop the writing because this is something I can do in later years. For the immediate future I have put aside more time for production work. I want to spend more time in the field, underwater with the camera. I've narrowed the lecturing down to about a month and a half each year and have opened the rest to what may come. There are some immediate plans to return to Israel with David Doubilet and Eugenie Clark to film off Sharm el Sheik, at the bottom of the Sinai Peninsula. Genie generates wonderful storylines by picking out interesting factors in animal behavior and concentrating on them, observing certain behavior phenomenon. It's also possible that I will return to the Johnson Straits next summer to resume the shooting of killer whales. The production group who organized that last summer are interested in another poke at it.

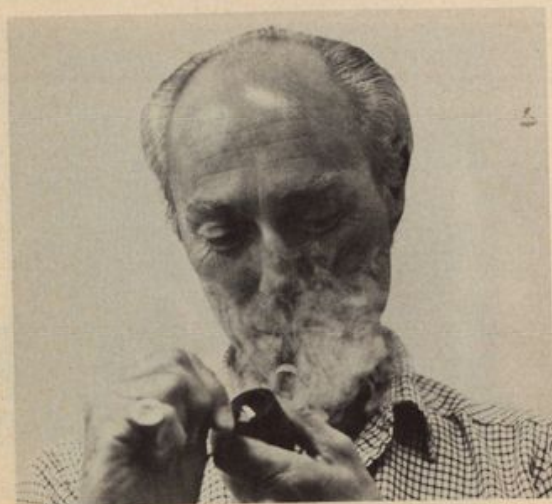
SDM: What was the killer whale project about?

WATERMAN: It was a Hollywood film called *Living with Killers*, about two young Canadian boys who establish rapport with killer whale sounds. They come closer and closer to them in kayaks and canoes, until the whales seem most definitely to know them, understand them, perhaps even to like them. There's a marvelous new book out called *Mind in the Waters*. The section on orcas is by Paul Spong, who's been living with them up in the Johnson Straits now for two years. It tells of the feelings that are felt between humans and these animals and there's something there. They're reaching out across a communications barrier, there's no question about it. There's even a mystic factor to it which I don't even like to talk about because it sounds too much like Atlantis and Bermuda Triangles, but there is, I think, another dimension.

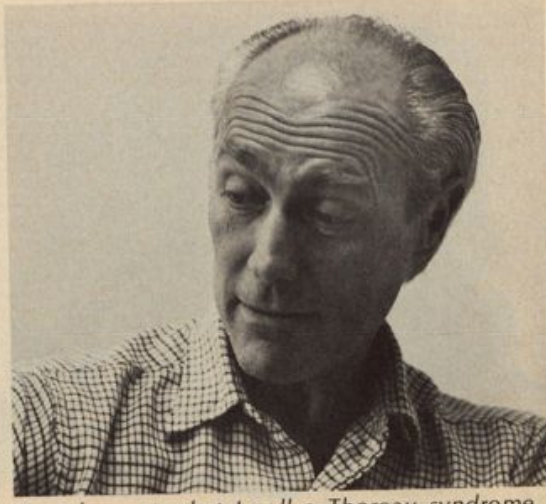
SDM: Stan, you have given innumerable diving and non-diving audiences great amounts of pleasure, adventure, sub-sea entertainment, and you are also well-known for your wit and humor. On your side of the podium, what is the funniest thing that has ever happened to you in your travels?

WATERMAN: The funniest thing I can think of involves a lecture tour. Some of the really funny things have happened to me when I was hustling around in the Bible Belt, which is Iowa and Nebraska, where it is dry. One time I was in a small town in Nebraska. In order to endure the monotony of my lectures night after night, I took to carrying a flask of my own martinis in order to have a cocktail before dinner, which I have always felt was a civilized custom. In this small, dry, rural town I asked for a glass of ice, which was the tip off, and of course when the ice arrived at the table everybody was staring at me with great hostility. So, without trying to be covert about it at all, I opened my briefcase, took out my flask and in plain view of everyone, poured a great big hooker, rattled the ice, leaned back, and took a big swig. But just then the ice shifted in the glass and the entire thing went down my shirt front and all over my suit. Families were turning their children away from this disgusting sight.

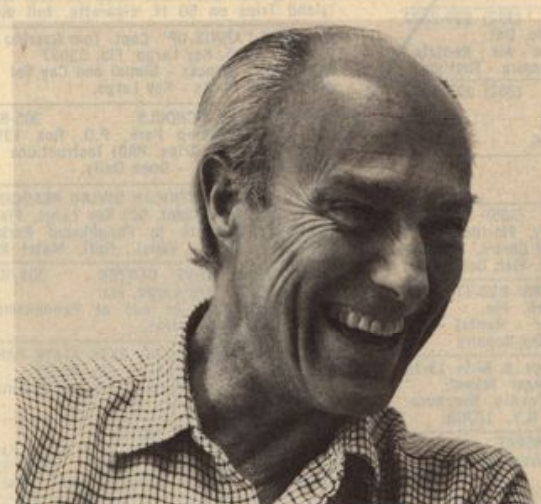
There were many other funny experiences gum-shoeing across the wastelands of America, but at the same time people were awakening to the sea. Whether any of them were ever induced to dive, I don't know, but for many it was the first sight they had of the underwater worlds. They saw that the sea wasn't a hostile area for only the derring-do, but a beautiful experience which can be had by any one of us.



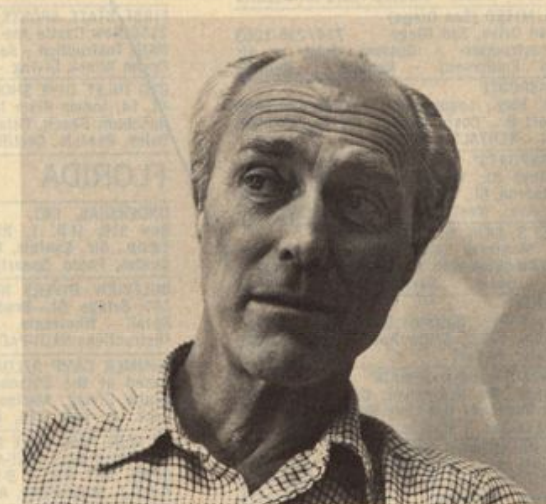
"The children loved what we were doing and they love what I am doing that earns their education and keep. There is a rapport that isn't so often felt in many families."



"I underwent what I call a Thoreau syndrome — getting away after too much academia and swinging a scythe on an open field in the sun — the kind of thing kids do now by joining communes or becoming lumberjacks."



"I learned enough about politics to know that I never wanted any part of it. The rest I learned from Richard Nixon."



"... but at the same time people were awakening to the sea . . . They saw that the sea wasn't a hostile area for the derring-do, but a beautiful experience which can be had by any one of us."