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# The quintessential Downeast storyteller

September 3, 2003

**By John Gould**

**J**ohn Gould, who passed on early Monday in Portland, Maine, has appeared in the Monitor every week since 1942. To readers, he was a welcome and engaging friend. To fellow journalists, he was a master essayist - and a friend as well. Mr. Gould's storytelling talent, along with his remarkable memory, character, and wit, equipped him to entertain and educate readers with tales that spanned 150 years: from his grandfather's memories of the Civil War to Gould's pungent observations of life in a retirement home. Readers caught glimpses of the

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author's life in his essays. But with news of his passing came the discovery that Gould had written what he called an "exegesis" of his life. We publish it here, to honor him.

John Thomas Gould, the subject of this exegesis, was born at Brighton, Mass., on Oct. 22, 1908. His father was a Maine farm boy, born at Lisbon, Maine, on Oct. 8, 1878, to Thomas Jordan and Hannah Foster Gould. Franklin Farrar Gould, John's father, was named for a tentmate of Thomas's in Company I of the 16th Maine Volunteers, a regiment active at Gettysburg and other places. Tom and Hannah had eight children.

John's mother was Hilda Dobson Jenkins, born Dec. 14, 1886, daughter of John Henry and Catherine MacLeod Jenkins of Vernon River, Lot 50, on Prince Edward Island in Canada.

Frank quit school and left home at 15 to seek his fortune in Boston. Hilda, half Scottish, was as pretty as a field of Highland heather. She'd come to Boston to seek a husband. Frank was the lucky man. The couple lived in a three-decker apartment house on Champney Street until John was born. Then they moved to suburban Medford, first to a flat and then to a single-family home on a double lot at 28 Grant Ave. Here, Frank had land enough for a garden and a stable for hens, rabbits, and pigeons. The neighborhood was mostly immigrant Belgian, and the Belgians ate rabbits and raced homing pigeons. The hens and eggs were the assertion of a homesick Maine boy.

Two weeks' work in six days

Frank studied by mail and passed the exam for a railway postal clerk. In 1916 he was appointed such, and for the next 40-odd years "ran" on the Vanceboro & Boston Railway Post Office. His job began and ended at Portland, Maine, so he found a house in Freeport. In May 1918 the Goulds moved to Maine. John was 10 and had a sister Louise and a brother Franklin Jr. His sister Kathryn MacLeod was

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born in Freeport on Aug. 24, 1918.  
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As a railway postal clerk, Frank worked "six and eight": in six days on the train he worked the equivalent of two weeks' time. Accordingly he had eight days for "rest, study, and relaxation" after each tour. This may sound like a bed of roses, but John recalled how his father staggered home to sleep for two days and then sat up for two more days memorizing postal routes and addresses.

But he had his miniature Sabine farm with fruit trees, bees, cow, pig, and a flock of Dominique hens. Son John was custodian and nursemaid to all this when his father worked.

Young John milked and fed the livestock before and after school. He recited his conjugations aloud so he had a cow that knew as much Latin as he did. John also had the company of his Dad on the eight days he was home. He was grateful for the hours they had doing things together, from trout hunting to hiving bees, setting hens, hunting bunnies, and a million other important matters that working daddies don't always have time for.

John's father didn't finish school, so he insisted his son should, and nothing ever interfered with homework. If John didn't get his chores done in time to study, don't let that happen again!

What influenced John Gould to write? His family subscribed to two magazines, the Youth's Companion and the Rural New Yorker. Both had "kiddie pages" and encouraged contributions. John was published in both while still in grade school. Later, the family "took" the Boston Post, a daily morning paper that had the largest circulation in the country.

Two columns on the Post's editorial page every day were All Sorts, by Newton Newkirk, and The Observant Citizen, by several unidentified writers. Both were written rather much by readers. An early contribution to All Sorts by John Gould was a limerick that used abbreviations:

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*There was a young fellow from Maine*  
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*Who went out with a beautiful Je.*

*But he found with dismay*

*Later on in the day,*

*That she'd lifted his watch and his che.*

The Observant Citizen column liked short pieces about odd New England matters, and John's first item was about a cat in Pownal that jumped to the porch railing and rang the doorbell when it wanted to come in. John was happy to learn that the Post paid 50 cents for each "obs cit" item, and he managed to find a good many of them as time ran along.

A tender age for a cub reporter

In 1924, when John was a sophomore in high school, he wrote the editor of the Brunswick Record to offer his help, and editor Rob Toby replied to start sending news. John wrote gainfully for the Record until 1940. Since then he contributed an occasional essay to the daily Times-Record for memory's sake.

John also moonlighted as stringer for other papers, and this led to his becoming a featured writer for the Boston Sunday Post. In 1942 he began a weekly column for The Christian Science Monitor, which is perhaps the longest-running dispatch of its kind. In that same year, his first of 30 books was published. He was published in all major magazines in the United States and nearly all the newspapers. His weekly Monitor column was syndicated. For five years he did a daily radio show for WLAM in Lewiston, Maine. He also did a remote weekly show for WBZ in Boston. For many years he was "most frequent contributor," by tape, to an evening show on the Trans-Canada English network of CBC.

John lectured at colleges across the country. For two years he taught journalism at Goddard College in Vermont. He was editor of the Lisbon (Maine) Enterprise, a weekly. He was a featured writer for The New York Times Magazine. For many years he had the spot in the Baltimore Evening Sun once filled by H.L. Mencken.

He was a member of the Maine Press Association, and among the first group of inductees to their Hall of Fame. He was graduated by Bowdoin College in 1931 with a BA degree, and received honorary doctorates from Bowdoin (1968) and the University of Maine (1976). He served as president and trustee of the Boston Veteran Journalists Association. In 1953, the US State Department asked him to survey the newspaper situation in occupied West Germany. Gould conferred with more than 400 West German newspaper publishers.

On his birthday in 1932, John and Dorothy Florence Wells of Arlington, Mass., were married in Arlington and honeymooned on Prince Edward Island. They returned to make their home in Brunswick, where John resumed writing for the Record. Dorothy became the Record's household editor.

Rescuing the Gould family farmstead

It wasn't until 1946 that they could build a house on the Gould family farm at Lisbon, which John had bought at the estate auction after his grandfather's death in 1929. The farmhouse built by his great-grandfather in the late 1700s had burned, but with money from his books John replaced it. Their two children thus grew up on a farm. They are John Jr. (born June 6, 1938, in Brunswick, died Oct. 4, 2002, in Rangeley, Maine) and Kathryn MacLeod 2nd (born Jan. 4, 1943 in Brunswick). John Jr. married Ellen Dornbusch of Rye, N.Y., and had two boys; Kathryn became Mrs. Terence Christy and has three girls. There are five great-grandchildren.

John Gould held two political offices. In the 1930s he was a Brunswick fence viewer, and for more than 30 years he was moderator of Lisbon Town Meetings. Besides his journalistic affiliations, he was a Granger and an honorary member of United Lodge No. 8, Free and Accepted Masons, of Brunswick. For many years he was a registered Maine guide. He was also a justice of the peace. He held a commission as admiral in the Navy of the Great State of Nebraska, and was a fellow of the Guild of Former Pipe Organ Pumpers, having pumped in the First Parish Congregational Church at Freeport. In 2001, John was nominated for the Pulitzer

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The public is invited to a memorial service for Mr. Gould at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Sept. 6, at United Lodge No. 8, 65 Baribeau Dr., Brunswick, Maine. Letters to Gould's widow, Dorothy, and daughter, Kathryn, may be sent care of The Home Forum, The Christian Science Monitor, Mailstop P02-20, One Norway St., Boston, MA 02115. E-mail: The Home Forum

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