

It's hard to say
whether collectors
prize the clocks
made by Elmer O.
Stennes because of
their craftsmanship
— or because of his
lurid life and
shocking death.

by Jeanne Schinto

Stennes, Peter O.

Murder on Tick Tock Lane





NOT LONG AGO, A CAPE Cod auction house sold a truckload of items drawn from the estate of an American cabinetmaker named Elmer O. Stennes. The exhibition before the

sale was in most ways a typical scene, except for one thing: The customers were discussing not only dovetails but bullet holes.

For 30 years, between the 1940s and the 1970s, Stennes (rhymes with “tennis”) was famous for being the only large-scale reproducer of classic American clock cases in the country. But his former friends and associates remember him for another reason, too — because he killed his wife and later was himself killed. In fact, it’s hard to say whether the clocks and other items made by Stennes

them where we live, say, ‘Oh! The Elmer Stennes house! Aren’t you spooked? Aren’t there ghosts?’ I had a girlfriend who wouldn’t come into the house until I had it blessed.” (A Catholic priest did come and sprinkle it with holy water.)

But Judy and her husband, Norman, who bought the house in 1989 knowing the Stennes story full well, were at the Cape Cod auction, too, buying pieces to add to their already large Stennes collection. They bought three flying mallard decoys, carved, painted, and signed by Stennes (\$660); two candle stands (\$506 each); and a Queen Anne-style curly maple highboy (\$2,475). They already owned several of his clocks, a hutch, another highboy, two silver chests, a wood-and-pewter chandelier that hangs above their dining-room table, and a desk he made at age 21. And they would have bought

Elmer took out his • 357 magnu

are so collectible today because of their quality or because of his notoriety.

He lived at 45 Church Street in East Weymouth, Massachusetts, in a house he built himself in 1938. He used a design by Royal Barry Wills, the 20th-century American designer of reproduction Colonial-era dwellings. (So the house, like his clocks, is a facsimile.) It is a classic two-story cedar-shingle Cape, and the present owner, Judy McCulloch, who grew up nearby, used to walk past it on her way to school and think to herself that she wanted to live in such a picture-perfect place someday. Now she admits, “A lot of people, when we tell

a single bullet

more if they hadn’t been beaten out by absentees and phone bidders from around the country, who picked up the majority of the lots, many of them sight unseen. “I bought the first clock he ever made!” phone bidder Douglas Joseph of Trumbull, Connecticut, boasted to me the following day. “Tell me, what does it look like?”

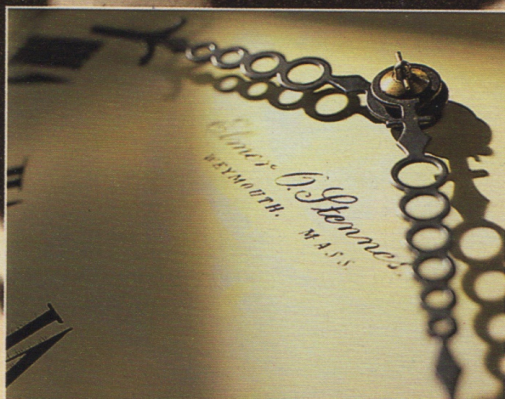
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ELMER OSBORNE STENNES was born in Somerville, Massachusetts, in 1911, the son of a Norwegian sea captain, or so he told a local newspaper

*Eva and Elmer Stennes
two months before the
murder. Afterward,
in addition to signing
the faces of his clocks
(below, right), he
added the letters MCIP
(below, left), which
may have stood for
"Made Case in Prison."*

derringer and shot

into his wife Eva's head.



reporter the year he earned a spot in Brooks Palmer's widely respected reference volume, *A Treasury of American Clocks*. There he is, alongside 19th-century masters Lemuel Curtis, Silas Hoadley, and members of the Willard family, whose timepieces were so well replicated by Stennes that Palmer used photographs of a couple of them as illustrations. That was in 1967, when Stennes was 56 and, reputedly, the only living craftsman to be so honored. The distinction caused a few good-natured jokes, his wife, Eva, told another reporter. A few years later, those jokes would seem portentous.

A lanky man, nearly six feet tall, with slicked-back hair and a long, angular face, Stennes didn't start out as a clock maker, though he liked to say he began making furniture at age 13. He also claimed to be a graduate of Boston's

pine, native birch, and maple. He didn't make the movements — he bought antique ones, rebuilt them, and installed them in his reproduction cases. The finishing touch was his own name painted across the dial. Not only a craftsman, Stennes was also a crafty marketer, and his clocks were sold nationwide through contacts he made as a member of the National Association of Clock and Watch Collectors.

In 1948 Stennes left the shipyard and started working full-time on his business. By then, Eva had borne him a daughter, Esther, in 1942. By his first wife, who had died a presumably natural death, he also had two sons, Elmer Jr. and Eric. In 1951 Eva had another son, Elliot. When Elliot was very small, he started working alongside his dad, the only one of Elmer's four children to be apprenticed to him. At age 11, Elliot

"People say, 'Oh! The Elmer

Wentworth Institute of Technology, but the school has no record of him. It is

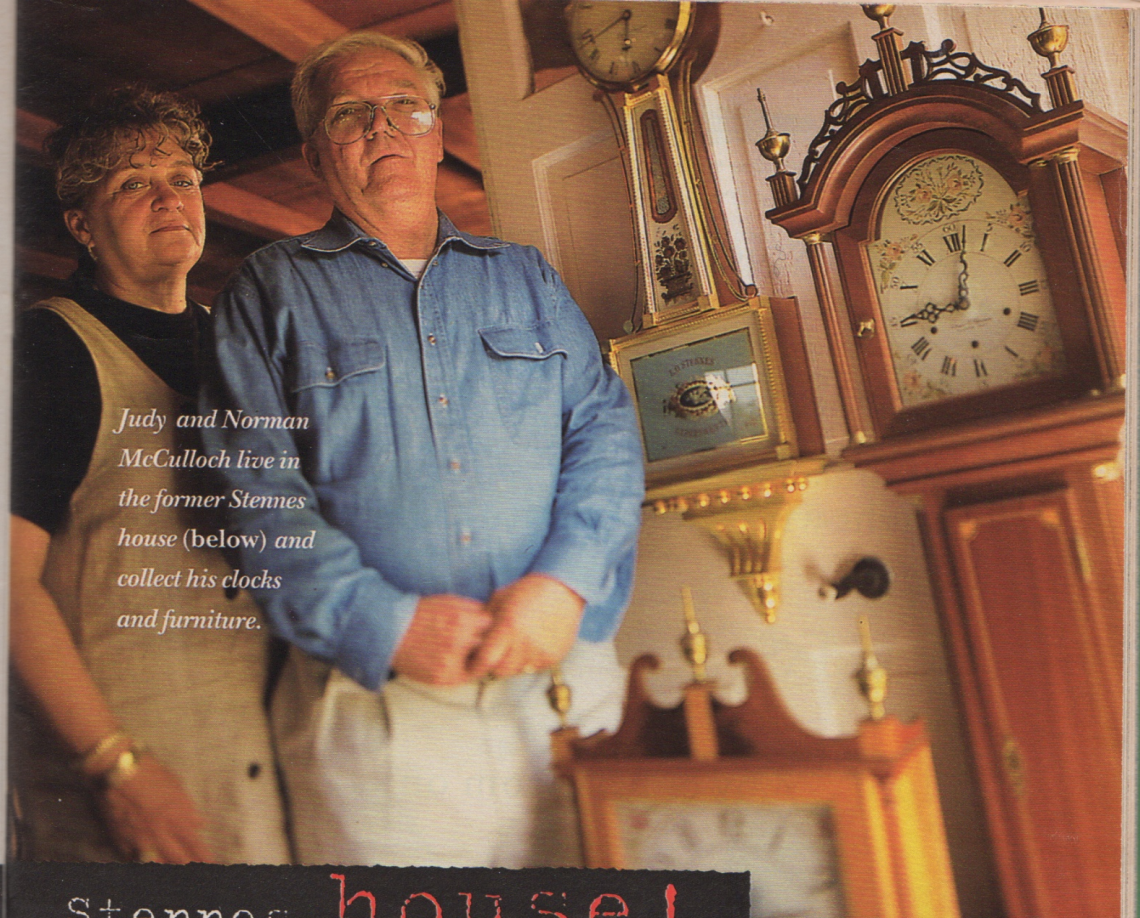
known that he worked as a carpenter throughout the 1930s and that during World War II he was employed at a Boston shipyard, building prototypes. Somewhere along the way, he kindled an interest in horology.

Stennes made banjo clocks, shelf clocks, and girandoles; he made tall-case clocks, too — grandfathers, grandmothers, and one in between, which he designed and dubbed the Wessagusset, the Native American name for the Weymouth shore. He worked in mahogany, inlaid and hand-rubbed; native

Aren't you spooke

was said to have been capable of operating most of the machinery in the workshop. Originally Stennes worked out of a room in the house; but in 1959 he erected a separate building on the 16-acre lot. He nicknamed it 1 Tick Tock Lane.

Joseph Martines of Chagrin Falls, Ohio, a longtime collector of Stennes timepieces who has written and lectured on the man (and who laments that he didn't find out in time about the recent auction), describes Stennes as "a seat-of-the-pants (continued on page 116)

A photograph of an elderly couple, Judy and Norman McCulloch, standing in a room filled with antique clocks. Norman is wearing a blue denim shirt and glasses, and Judy is wearing a black top and a light-colored vest. They are both looking towards the camera. In the background, several large, ornate wooden grandfather clocks are visible, along with other smaller timepieces on the wall.

*Judy and Norman
McCulloch live in
the former Stennes
house (below) and
collect his clocks
and furniture.*

Stennes house!

d? Aren't there ghosts? , ,



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kind of guy," one who "lived by his wits." Others characterize him as "a wheeler-dealer," "a tough trader" who cruised the flea markets, a "classic Yankee" who "turned things." Robert Webber, an antiques dealer and auctioneer based in Hampton, New Hampshire, says he used to get an abrupt, standard greeting from Stennes on the phone: "Are you buying or selling?" Unfortunately Stennes is also described as a hard drinker whose disposition, never sunny, could quickly become as ugly as his clocks are beautiful. In a letter to the court, begging leniency for her father, Esther Stennes would admit that her parents had often argued bitterly. But the marital strain wasn't widely apparent in August 1968, when the couple hosted the annual picnic of the clock-collector association's New England chapter at Tick Tock Lane. After a few drinks, Stennes often did become abrasive at meetings, members recall; but he was still politic enough to be elected their chapter president. At the group's October gathering that same year, Elmer and Eva sat with Brooks Palmer, and someone snapped their picture. It shows the 50-year-old Eva wearing dark-framed glasses in the style of the day, smoking a cigarette,

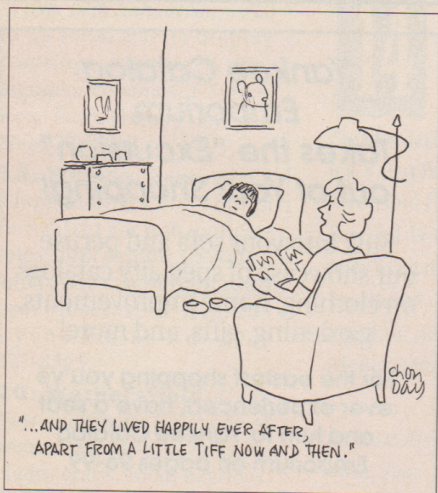
and smiling. By the time the photo ran in the association's *Bulletin*, however, Eva was dead.

It happened shortly after Thanksgiving, on December 2, 1968, in the kitchen of 45 Church Street. Robert Webber was there that afternoon and remembers Elmer and Eva "having words." As he tells it: "Elmer was seeing somebody else, and Eva found out about it." After Webber went home, Elmer and Eva continued to argue. According to court documents, teenage Elliot was there, too, but fled for his life when Elmer took out his .357 magnum deringer, which he was licensed to carry, and shot one bullet into Eva's head. She staggered from the kitchen and died on the bathroom floor.

Boston attorney Albert L. Hutton Jr., the lawyer who defended him, says Stennes called the Weymouth police himself. "I know what I've done," the police reports say Stennes told them. "I'll give you no trouble. The gun is here in my back pocket." Attorney Hutton also says that when Stennes was released on a bond of \$25,000, there was "consternation among the neighbors and chagrin in the police department." Elmer Stennes could even get away with murder, it appeared to those who saw him drive downtown each day to buy his habitual bottle. It was also business as usual at Tick Tock Lane, with one exception. Stennes now added a flourish to his clocks, branding them with the initials, "O.O.B.," to signify his new status — "out on bond."

"The craftsmen of Tick Tock Lane" — a phrase from a Stennes clock catalog — were back at work, too. In truth, he had only one full-time employee, Foster S. Campos. As reserved a man as Stennes was flamboyant, Campos started working for Stennes in 1952 and continued for 22 years, so he knew him perhaps as well as anybody did. Of the O.O.B. insignia, the taciturn Campos, who now runs his own reproduction-clock business in Pembroke, Massachusetts, has only this to say: "He had a quirky sense of humor. Plus he knew he was going to be famous."

Stennes pleaded not guilty to murder,



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(continued)

but admitted guilt to manslaughter and was sentenced to eight to ten years. "He accepted his fate. He handled it well. He was Elmer Stennes," says Robert L. Steadman. Retired Chief Justice of the Superior Court of Massachusetts, Judge Steadman was Stennes's personal friend and counsel before the crime; he is also the owner of a Stennes cherry-wood grandmother clock as well as a one-of-a-kind, custom-made Stennes item that seems to prefigure a chapter in Stennes's life: a gavel.

Judge Steadman, Bobby Webber, and others regularly visited Stennes in his new home, the Massachusetts Correctional Institute at Plymouth. Campos came, too, but not to chat. Supposedly Stennes was teaching carpentry classes in the prison wood shop; actually, he was carrying on his business, using prison equipment and inmates, with Campos bringing in wood and other supplies and taking cases back to Tick Tock Lane for finishing and sale. The prison clocks, as they are called, have their own idiosyncratic mark branded into the cases: "M.C.I.P.," the abbreviation for Stennes's temporary address, or alternately "Made Case in Prison" — a coincidence that surely amused the peculiar Stennes.

In January 1972, Stennes was paroled, after having served only two years and four months, and business resumed at Tick Tock Lane. So did Stennes's social life. On December 15, 1973, he married for the third time. The bride was 50-year-old Phyllis Means, the attractive widow of a local businessman. For their first anniversary Elmer made her a grandmother clock out of a holly tree from the yard, and on the dial he painted the inscription "Warranted for Phyllis," who couldn't have imagined that she was going to be widowed again so soon.

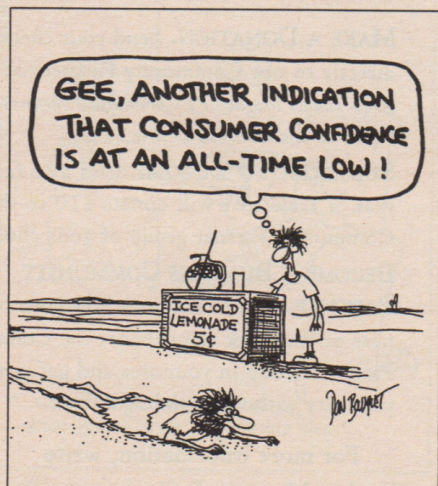
Nonetheless, around midnight on October 4, 1975, as she and Elmer lay sleeping in their upstairs bedroom, two men burst in and started shooting. Stennes was shot four times in the mouth and once in the side of the head; Phyllis was hit seven times in the face, neck, and chest. The police arrived to find her covered in blood and screaming that Elmer was dead.

From her hospital room Phyllis recounted how she had rolled under the bed and played dead to foil her intruders; she also accused 24-year-old Elliot Stennes of being one of them. She had seen his face, recognized his clothes, and heard his voice say, "Dad," claimed Phyllis. But after five witnesses testified that at the time of the shooting Elliot had been with them at a bar in Franconia, New Hampshire, the charges were dropped.

Bobby Webber and Foster Campos believe Stennes met his killers in prison. "He was the kind of guy who would promise you anything to get you to do something," says Webber. "'You do this for me now, and I'll take care of you when you get out.' So the guy got out and Stennes hadn't kept his promise, and . . ."

* * *

THE LURID TALE DETRACTED FROM THE value of Stennes's clocks for a time. Campos says some people even asked him to remove the notorious name from the dial. Later, when the prices started rising, a few had him put the name back on. Indeed, for the last 20 years, while other clock prices have remained stable, Stennes prices have climbed. As for Campos, his



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(continued)

sales brochure alludes to his "extensive apprenticeship under a highly renowned master clock maker," but doesn't mention his mentor's name.

The McCullochs, on the other hand, don't seem shy about advertising their house's history. They have posted a sign by their front door: *Elmer O. Stennes House, ca. 1938.*

Unfortunately, some unscrupulous people have put the Stennes name where it doesn't belong: Stennes fakes have been cropping up at auctions and elsewhere.

Buyers at the Cape Cod sale could be fairly confident that their items were real, since they were consigned by Phyllis Stennes herself. A petite blonde in her early seventies, she is still an attractive woman, who was sitting in the front row on the night of the sale, flanked by family members and looking entirely unscathed by her ordeal of now more than 20 years ago. What prompted her to sell now is anybody's guess. The auction house says she kept only one clock for herself. It wasn't, however, the clock Elmer made her for their anniversary. Douglas Joseph bought that, based on its description only, for \$2,200. He considers the clocks and other items an investment for his children's future.

Joseph Martines, who owns 19 Stennes clocks, believes the story "absolutely enhances" the value of the Stennes pieces. "Everybody wants to own the bed that George and Martha slept in, right?" he asks. Meanwhile, attorney Hutton says he once received a phone call from "a nut in Cincinnati" who wanted help in locating the gun that Elmer Stennes used to kill his wife. No clock connoisseur he, but a collector of weapons used in famous crimes.

The private road that used to cut into the Stennes property has become a public way, the acreage having been sold off and developed, and East Weymouth has officially designated it Tick Tock Lane. □□