

Behind the Scenes at The Stovebolt Page

REFLECTIONS

by Tom Brownell, Editor-at-Large



John Milliman, standing left, and Peggy Milliman, far left, visited with friends in Carlisle, Massachusetts, on their way to deliver a Chevrolet to Nova Scotia, Canada. This is an example of the voluntary services available through The Stovebolt Page. The 1956 Chevrolet 3100 in the background belongs to Larry Bearfield, second from right, and Robin Emerson, far right.

If you're an owner or admirer of vintage Chevrolet trucks, chances are you've discovered The Stovebolt Page (www.stovebolt.com), a website that provides limitless technical information, humorous stories, and fun features, such as the annual "It Ran When I Parked It" photo contest. The site hosts an extraordinary gallery of photos of viewers' trucks (and the tales that go with them), discussion forums, hobby news, and more.

Here's the story behind what you see in this vast and superbly managed and maintained resource. Those familiar with The Stovebolt Page know that the leading forces are John and Peggy Milliman of Mechanicsville, Maryland. John is a former Marine and currently a public affairs officer at the Patuxent River Naval Air Station, a test site for all Navy aircraft. One of John's programs is the new helicopter fleet for the president of the United States. It's not unusual to see his articles in publications such as *Time* or *Newsweek*, although generally not under

his byline. Peggy is a mother and homemaker. Together they work a 17-acre Christmas tree farm and often assist their Mennonite farmer neighbors. Theirs is a picture-postcard bucolic setting. So how did they become involved with an immensely popular online site for Chevrolet truck admirers that attracts as many as five million hits a month?

Peggy, who serves as co-editor (John also edits, but mainly serves as designer, writer, and publisher), said that more ten years ago, John had been assigned to produce a website for the United States Marine Corps at Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, where they were stationed. To do so, he had to learn HTML, a website language. Rather than simply pace through the assignment, John wanted to make this a practical exercise.

Inspired by a vintage 1939 Chevrolet one-ton that he had left in storage at his former duty station at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, Indiana, John decided to create The Stovebolt Page.

Peggy wanted to learn the basics of website design, too, to sharpen her computer skills and help John with the administrative tasks. John did a thorough job with his original site format, and the basics of it remain. One of the earliest series was "Two Guys in Search of a Truck," displaying John's humor.

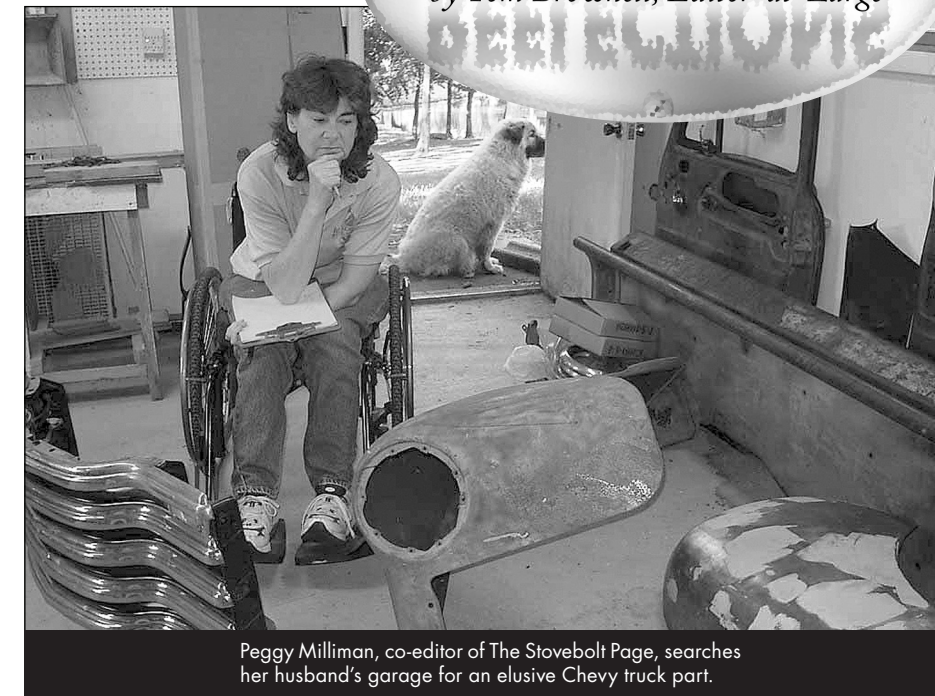
"It was a nice writing reprieve for John, who spent most of his official workday writing for the Marine Corps base newspaper—not room for too much humor there," Peggy recalled. Those original stories brought fun responses in return and were naturally incorporated into future "Two Guys" stories. As stories kept coming in, a "saga section" evolved. The "Gallery" entries took on greater depth with wonderful heartfelt stories. Back then, the big news each month was "eight new gallery entries." Now, Peggy reported, "I'm doing ten a week, and I'm still behind. But the stories are still excellent."

The site is a huge information source. My son Anthony said he goes there first with technical questions about his 1968 Chevrolet C-50 dump truck (The Stovebolt Page is not exclusively pickups) and never lacks for guidance. "People interacting with people is the site's main draw, getting information firsthand," Peggy said. "Sometimes I wonder if we burn people out, there are so many 'can you help me with ...' types of questions. We've had people who volunteer to look at trucks for prospective buyers. Recently, John and I delivered a 1951 Chevy half-ton truck to a friend and new owner in Nova Scotia, Canada. Of course, along the way, we stopped to see another long-time "Bolter" (the website is commonly called The Bolt and readers are called Bolters) who lives just off I-95 in Massachusetts."

More and more of the readers are getting a chance to meet face-to-face and

often ask about the site organizing a big get-together. "We think it's great they are meeting, but the idea of trying to pull off an old truck version of Woodstock is mind-boggling," Peggy said. "We encourage them to piggyback with existing shows, such as the Midwest All Truck Nationals in Kansas City, Missouri, and meet there. Hence, someone else does the hard work—ahem, not us!—we support the local group, AND you meet some of the guys from the site. Win, win, win!"

The Millimans derive no income from The Stovebolt Page—although a few very thankful readers send in donations. From the outset, they wanted to make it a free and open resource (no-cost registration is required to participate in forums, not to read them). But about five years ago, a



Peggy Milliman, co-editor of The Stovebolt Page, searches her husband's garage for an elusive Chevy truck part.

PEGGY MILLIMAN'S PHILOSOPHY FOR LIVING WITH A HANDICAP

Nothing John Milliman had said prior to my visit alerted me that his wife Peggy lived with a handicap. She gardens from her wheelchair, politely dismisses herself early at night with the simple statement: "It takes me a little longer to get ready in the morning," and makes other concessions to living with a handicap, but it doesn't define her.

I neither asked for nor needed an explanation, and I didn't get one. I thought Peggy might suffer from multiple sclerosis, like my friend, Frank; instead she's a victim of domestic violence—shot five times by her ex-husband, one bullet hitting her spine. She now speaks powerfully to forewarn others at women's groups countrywide.

Seeing how fully Peggy lives her life and being recently diagnosed myself with potentially debilitating Parkinson's Disease, I wanted to learn her philosophy and share it with others for whom it may be helpful. Here are her points of view:

When I long to do more or something physically impossible for myself, I quietly resign myself to "this may take me all day, but so what ... I have all day!" I can savor it rather than attempt to zoom through it (hurry is not a word we use around me).

Life isn't the way it used to be, but it still has a lot to offer. Before I was injured, I learned to "celebrate one another's joy," and I think that has helped me to have a good time, even if I'm not the one actively involved.

When I feel worn out, I know I'll be better in a few days. Most things can wait, and if they couldn't, they're gone!

If I start to feel down in the dumps, I just get busy. "Pour yourself into someone else's problem" is something our Pastor used to say.

I bear no resentment. There are a lot of things I cannot change, but I can change my mind and the way I think.

My main outlook—let go and let God.

financial crisis arose as the site gained popularity. “We stopped counting our transfer data when we reached 6,000 hits a month,” said Peggy. “We were happy with that. It was manageable.”

Then a hosting bill came in the mail that shook the Stovebolt Virtual Garage. Peggy said she “made several calls, and Paul Schmehl, our Stovebolt geek and life-saving resource for all things computer-

(ACTP). He wondered what had happened and asked if they were all right. (Prior to this, John and Peggy’s house had been hit by lightning, which had caused a little stir in the Bolt community.) After Peggy explained the dilemma, which was something she said she still didn’t quite grasp, American Classic offered to host the site on its server, where it still is to this day, purring along nicely, thanks to Paul.

“It was too good to be true,” Peggy said. “ACTP is located in Texas and our Stovebolt geek works at the University of Texas in Dallas, so he was able to maintain the server for us.” Besides being the techno-brains of the outfit, Paul visits John and Peggy once a year, and part of his routine (besides truck-talk with John) is to update their computer at the house.

Early last year, The Stovebolt Page added the 1,000th truck entry into its


“Gallery,” which now has more than 1,600 trucks. Dale Holt and his “rat-rod” crew happened to be number 1,000, and it was a great entry to showcase.

Youngsters Chris, Josh, and Zac Holt had seen an old car that was built by adults for little money at a show. They thought it looked unsafe and poorly built and commented to Dale that they could build one better. Dale took the challenge, and The Stovebolt Page addressed the theme of “motivating the next generation” with T-shirts for the “Lil’ Rascals Rod Shop” and a stirring feature story. “The response from the regulars on the site was great

inspiration for the kids and Dale,” Peggy said. “Many of the Bolters donated needed parts and help. It was a real feel-good experience for everyone.”

The Bolt not only is about the trucks themselves, but it is also a backdrop for people to connect. “We have a ‘Greasy Spoon,’ which is like a lounge for the Bolters to carry on off-topic discussions—everything from birth announcements and travel plans to support for those who are undergoing some hard times. When Hurricane Katrina hit, one Bolter made it his personal crusade to try to contact Bolters who we knew were from Louisiana,” said Peggy. “We see all kinds of evidence of people coming together over what’s really important in their lives.

“People come to our site with all sorts of issues—divorce, cancer, kids. We don’t allow discussion of politics or religion, but somehow they sort it out. I know God has a hand in what we’re doing,” Peggy said. “Every time we think we just can’t do it any more, He sends someone along to make it work.” People of a quiet faith, John and Peggy Milliman have both the right medium and the message. They have a great crew of volunteers who share their passion for helping out, thoughtfulness toward people, and love of old trucks.

Even though the term “stovebolt” generally implies six cylinders, the site welcomes trucks with any pre-1973—a date Peggy said I once recommended to John, although I don’t remember it now—Chevy or GMC 6-cylinder or V-8 engine. “We’ve got some interesting new terms generated from the members: resto-rod, restified, rod-o-fied,” Peggy said. “We have a fun commentary called ‘Restore or Rod’ that we continue to add to. I think we pretty well cover the spectrum.” 

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related, joked, ‘What do you expect for two million hits a month?’

“We couldn’t believe the numbers, and we didn’t know what do,” Peggy said. “So my famous knee-jerk reaction was to shut the site down for a weekend to figure something out.” At that time, John and Peggy were managing a housing development and running a boarding stable, so they had plenty to keep them busy. They never even turned the computer on.

On Sunday morning on the way out to the barn, Peggy got a phone call from a friend at American Classic Truck Parts