

1972

# Thompson Document 05: Henrietta Thompson's Notes On Interviewing Jack Belden

Henrietta Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/henrietta\\_thompson\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/henrietta_thompson_papers)

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Thompson, Henrietta, "Thompson Document 05: Henrietta Thompson's Notes On Interviewing Jack Belden" (1972). *Henrietta Thompson Papers*. 8.  
[https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/henrietta\\_thompson\\_papers/8](https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/henrietta_thompson_papers/8)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Henrietta Thompson Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact [um.library.technical.services@maine.edu](mailto:um.library.technical.services@maine.edu).



Belden ✓

24  
Not disillusioned, but a little weary and tired and after being ill last year suddenly felt old. A ✓

Keats a spirit in revolt; that kind of spirit is very rare.

It is very necessary to see the other side; I think one of the greatest things a writer can have is empathy, put himself into the other person's place. This of course leads to indecision, seeing both sides of the problem. The symbolism of Hamlet.

#### Essence of Belden:

empathy indecision revolt against authority a spirit in revolt but unable to pursue his revolt; his identity crisis that failed is more interesting than Dorn's which succeeded.

See Belknap with an identity crisis which succeeded also but so much more interesting than Dorn's.

Belden

Chesley: "He was lucky to have peaked at all; evaluate this in the light of what Belden was searching for all his life and never has found."

#### HWT notes on Belden after interview

The restless energy of a caged lion with a sore paw, frustrated, truculent and bitter, very much on the defensive, threatened. Tired, jaded. Describes himself as a man born ahead of his time. Born to resist authority; anti-establishment long before that became a popular phrase. Irreverent is his word for himself.

Born in Brooklyn year of Haley's comet, (1910) and Mark Twain's death figures he can last until the next coming of the comet 1986. Still likes to affect the Bklyn accent almost to put on the air of a tough NY taxi-driver. Early on his parents were divorced, he never knew his own father she remarried and they moved to a conservative middle-class little town in NJ. There conflicts, he disliked his step father and when he got out of Colgate in 1934 heart of the depression, he took off. He wanted to "get out of this life." Deeply impressed by the poverty of the country at this time, the breadlines, the unemployed, the sadness of the little people. He found himself identifying with them, anti the powers that be, that had let this happen, resentful of all the sordidness of those around him and the bitterness of his own home life. Went round the world on a frghter, then took some lousy jobs then to sea again and jumped ship in HK, lonely, broke and scared, but with a sense that here at last he could lose himself in the misery of millions where his own little miseries would be as nothing.

For a long time he was on the bum; he cadged food, begged on the streets became seedier and seedier and dirtier and made the rounds of the missions and flop-houses. Finally got a job as a proof-reader for an Eng; language newspaper, began to learn some Chinese and eventually ended up as a string correspondent for 2 Brit. papers. At last his college education began to pay off and he slowly pulled himself back together.

When the Japanese invaded China in 1937 he began to follow the various Chinese armies to get his story. He had taught himself to read Ch. but now he was forced to speak it and he soon could converse with the troops. For 3 or 4 years he wandered all over the interior of China wherever the fighting was and ever retreating as the Japanese gradually annexed more and more. Got to Chungking which by now has become the capital of Nat. China and he was there at the time of Pearl Harbor. ✓



Jack Belden Cont.

25

When Stilwell arrived on his way to take command of Chinese troops in Burma, Belden wanted to be with him; he had known him in China and at last the Americans were doing something in this war. Belden got himself an American connection with Life and Time and followed the General to Burma.

HWT:1972

What do I know about Jack Belden now?

He was hard to find, defensive, reluctant, prickly, sensitive, hostile, expecting me to pick his soul, maybe what I wanted him to say he remembered was just what he didn't want to tell me.

He was living in a small cheap hotel in Paris because the owners are kind to him. They were so happy that I had come to visit him.

He is big with plenty of gray hair, a moustache, talks with Bklyn accent a non-stop talker. Had been ill; is very articulate. Has the shakes, is a chain smoker and paced continuously in tiny room or sat on window sill with traffic noises over-riding the tape recorder.

I gave him a small bottle of whiskey but he said he didn't drink any more though many people thought he was an alcoholic. He didn't drink with me though I drank some of it and he said leave it, he would give it to his friends.

He is self-analytical, bitter, impoverished, lonely, has terrible teeth but can't afford to get them fixed, can't eat anything he has to chew. He spoke tenderly of his mother, he did go back to see her in Summit, NJ two-three years ago when she was ill. Summit is the seat of the John Birch Society. Rich middle-class. Speaks Fr. and Chinese, is 3 yrs older than me.

He did soften and become expansive when he came to see that I was not political (about deserting the nurses) or picking his soul. He was expansive then and pleasant and receptive and said a few nice things to me; he has built a callous over his unhappiness, this tough exterior.

His poem about Perdita is really about himself.

Summary: broken home, bitterness mother's re-marriage, not against her but against father-in-law. ~~step father~~

The depression; his protest

Running away to sea, jumping ship, 9 yrs. in China.

Likes colorful adventure of the walkout.

Looks back with nostalgia.

He is lonely, and bitter and sedentary.

Feels tired and old, though not disillusioned.

He has a "friend" who has a restaurant but it is not open on Mondays so I took him to dinner at a super place.

Hust us there; delicious steak and strawberries with cream. He had liver because he could chew it. Cost \$16.00 which horrified him, he could live on that a week.