

Prosser Gifford: Our Own Renaissance Man

By Vicky Cullen

Prosser Gifford, 1929–2020

Pross long will be remembered for his kindness, his expansive spirit, intellectual discernment, open mind, and most distinctly for his signature booming laugh that could be identified anywhere by all who met him.

—Nicholas Allard

Prosser Gifford was what might be called a “summer native” of Woods Hole, one who enhanced village life by drawing on his wide world experience to contribute to local organizations and activities both before and after retiring to a family home here. His grandparents, Bankers Trust Company chairman Seward Prosser and his wife Constance, traveled from New York to summer on Nantucket, in Quissett, and in Woods Hole before purchasing the Edgar Harding estate and its large home called “Weatherside” on Penzance Point in 1917.

After the Pacific Guano Company that had occupied Penzance Point beginning in 1867 went bankrupt in 1889, a developer had divided its land into 24 lots ranging from 1.5 to 9.43 acres. Wool merchant Edgar Harding of Cambridge was the first buyer. He purchased four large lots in 1892 and constructed Weath-



Prosser Gifford and friend at the Woods Hole Library in 2016. Photo by Anne Richards.

erside, a rambling three-story, gambrel-roofed, shingle-style home. It was soon joined on the point by other large summer homes. (The story of Penzance Point’s development appears in interesting detail in the Winter 1992 issue of *Spritsail*.)

In 1934, Seward Prosser enlarged the chauffeur’s cottage for his daughter Barbara, her husband John Archer Gifford, and their son Prosser. Following the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Prosser, Weatherside was demolished in 1948.

Eight years later, its site was chosen by Barbara and her family for the first section of the house that Prosser and his wife Deedee retired to in 2005. By then, the house had been enlarged several times. The property, where there are now three homes, including a renovated barn, is now owned by Prosser and Deedee’s three daughters, Barbara, Paula, and Heidi, and their families.

Prosser Gifford was born May 16, 1929, in New York City, where his father was a lawyer with White & Case specializing in trusts and estates. His paternal grandparents were Helen Conyngham Gifford and Charles Alling Gifford, of Newark, New Jersey, where Charles practiced architecture; his design projects included the Mount Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, and numerous armories and courthouses along the East Coast of the United States.

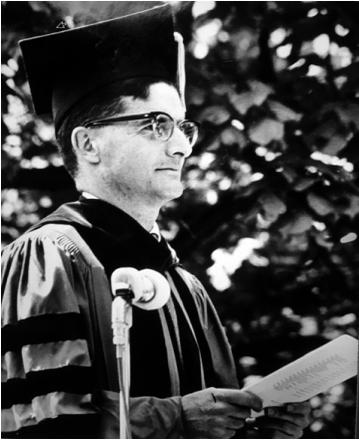
Prosser graduated from the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut in 1947 and earned an undergraduate degree from Yale University in 1951. He was named a Rhodes Scholar and read English at Merton College of Oxford University for the next two years, developing a lasting affiliation—he was a life trustee of the college and president of the Merton College Charitable Corporation from 1998 to 2006. Upon returning to the US, Prosser completed a law degree at Harvard in 1956 followed by a PhD in history at Yale in 1964. Research for his thesis, *The Framework for a Nation: An Economic and Social History of Northern Rhodesia from 1914 to 1939*, included some residence time in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), still a British colony, and by this time Pross and Deedee, who were married in 1954, had three daughters in tow, aged 3, 6, and 7. Quoting from a tribute Barbi Gifford Shimer wrote to her mother, “We drove thousands of miles over bumpy roads in a Land Rover, stopping to pick up people who needed rides, to explore ostrich farms and waterfalls, libraries, and a hospital. We tasted caterpillars and got stung by fire ants and stuck in

swamps. We stalked cheetah, were stampeded by wildebeests, and got chased by a rhino.”

Staying on at Yale as an assistant professor, Pross taught undergraduate as well as graduate courses and continued to write and edit on the subject of African history. Yale President Kingman Brewster tapped him to initiate a new kind of global education by organizing a five-year pilot program through which Yale undergraduates could live and work in underdeveloped countries for a year between their sophomore and junior years. This was in the middle of the Vietnam War, and according to Tim Weiskel, one of the first participants, it involved Pross going to “battle with our draft boards back in 1966 to argue for each of us to have the right (as fully enrolled Yale students) to devote a year to work in a third world country in a self-supporting job.” He continues, “The program was a smashing success in all respects, and it was continued for years thereafter.”

While Pross was working on publishing a book version of his thesis, one rainy day he received an unexpected visit from Calvin Plimpton, then president of Amherst College, who convinced him to become the first Dean of the Faculty at the Massachusetts institution. With some trepidation, Pross and Deedee decided to make the move to Amherst, where Pross began his new position in 1967.

Successfully navigating this difficult time of campus protests regarding civil rights, the war in Vietnam, college governance, and other issues, he continued as Amherst dean until 1979, championing equal rights, free speech,



Prosser Gifford in scholarly attire speaking at an Amherst College graduation. Courtesy Gifford family.

and coeducation, and also teaching at least one class every semester. These were the early days of Black studies, and within his first year, he was one of 12 faculty members and students appointed by President Plimpton to the Black and White Action Committee to consider the problem of the "disadvantaged in our society," especially "blacks victimized by history and racism." He also chaired the Black studies committee for the Five College Consortium in western Massachusetts. Amherst music faculty member Lew Spratlan later wrote, "He forced preachy members of powerful committees at Amherst to get to the point and left order in his wake."

In 1969, Amherst College called a two-day suspension of classes to conduct a college-wide discussion of campus and national issues. Prosser wrote and read to a large assembly a letter addressed to US President Richard Nixon urging him to address poverty, urban riots, racial discrimination, and inequities in the draft system. "The pervasive and insistent disquiet on many campuses throughout the nation," the letter said, "indicates that

unrest results not from a conspiracy by a few, but from a shared sense that the nation has no adequate plans for meeting the crises of society." Signed by Amherst president Plimpton, the letter was reprinted in full in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. This was also a time of emerging women's issues. Pross later wrote that his proudest achievement at the college included leading the commission that resulted in the Amherst trustees voting in 1974 to admit women (the first coed class arrived in fall 1976) and increasing the number of women faculty members from one upon his arrival to 26 when he departed. In a 2011 interview for an Amherst archival project, he said, it is "a singular disadvantage to men to bring them up as undergraduates when they never encounter brighter women . . . they're going to be in law firms and doctors' offices and engineering, businesses . . . where women are going to be their bosses! And they better get used to the fact that [women are] equally as bright, quicker, and have different emotional reactions."

In 1979, having rejected possibilities for college presidencies, Pross took a new direction, becoming deputy director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, which consistently ranks among the top think tanks in the US and internationally. His responsibilities during eight years there included convening meetings in the US and abroad that involved hundreds of scholars from around the world to collaborate on research, writing, and discussion of national and world issues. Not surprisingly, the *Wilson Quarterly* once described him as an "exemplar of the strenuous life."



Prosser Gifford engaging with a student during an Amherst College freshman class picnic in 1967. Photo by Jim Gerard, Amherst College photographer.

In 1990, Prosser began a 15-year tenure as Director of Scholarly Programs at the Library of Congress, a position created for him. His responsibilities included directing the library's Poetry Office, which conducted a Poetry at Noon program, and helping to select the US Poet Laureate. For a taste of his days there, you could go to the Library's website, click on an audio, and hear him introduce a program such as "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry Robert Pinsky reading his poems" from May 7, 1998. Or, from 2001, you could watch "Islam in America, 18th–21st Century" with Prosser as a contributor. He was the first director of the Library's John W. Kluge Center, founded in 2000 to better understand and address the challenges facing democracies in the twenty-first century by bridging the gap between scholarship and the policymaking community. The center brought together some of the world's eminent thinkers and supervised the selection of the \$1 million Kluge Prize for life-

time achievement in the humanities and social sciences. In 1995, he curated a major international exhibition, *Treasures from the Bibliothèque nationale de France*, and was an editor of a book by the same name. This must have been the perfect job for Pross to cap his scholarly career; his daughter Barbi observed, "he loved to gather people together to share and test out ideas."

At home, the Giffords lived a full life. When Deedee died in 2010, Pross wrote the following: "Deedee taught nursery school in our first house in New Haven; we had three graduate students who lived on the third floor, and they were part of the family; we had a succession of au pairs from Denmark, Holland, and France who were part of the family; in the summer we had the daughters of Deedee's French friends who lived with us and spoke French with her; we held birthday parties and neighborhood parties; in Amherst we had gatherings of many kinds—women's groups, garden groups, student seminars, work groups, discussion groups, faculty parties; we entertained a lot; we entertained distinguished guests of the College, we entertained undistinguished guests of the College. The house was always full of people, but not just people. Our golden retriever had 22 puppies in two different litters; we had a succession of at least six cats; we had gerbils, salamanders, and guinea pigs. There was life underfoot as well as above board."

The family always spent summers in Woods Hole, with Pross commuting to Amherst or Washington. Daughter Barbi reports that they enjoyed the sea, family ties, the lively

intellectual community, the peace and quiet, the fresh air, the town's walkability. She reflected, "My Dad loved being able to mingle with so many interesting scholars and practitioners in different fields; the peaceful atmosphere in which he could reflect and create; and having a homestead for his growing family, where everyone gathered, especially on holidays and in the beautiful summers." Affection for Woods Hole continues, and village influence is evident in the career choices of the six grandchildren: one is a doctor, one a health-care consultant, two are in computer science, and two are working in environmental affairs.



that became known as the "annual stress test" for its unpredictable weather and mechanical mishaps.

After the move to Woods Hole, Prosser continued to write and pursue knowledge—he read three to four books a week and over his lifetime assembled a home library of more than 9,000 volumes that he organized with his own Gifford decimal system. Having served as a trustee for many schools, colleges, and poetry, academic, and nonprofit research organizations (he was chair of the MBL Board of Trustees from 1977 through 1990), he lent his enthusiasm and expertise locally to the Falmouth Chorale, Falmouth Academy, Highfield Hall and Gardens, and the Church of the Messiah. The Reverend Deborah Warner remembers Pross as deeply committed to the congregation. He frequently served as an

Prosser Gifford, his wife Deedee, and (left to right) and daughters Paula, Heidi, and Barbie on a sailing vacation in the Caribbean. Courtesy Gifford family.

When Pross turned 75 in 2005, he and Deedee retired to Penzance Point and the waters where they met in a sailing race when he was 11 and she was 9. They had long been members of the Ensign fleet in Quissett. Pross crewed for the Bermuda Race half a dozen times and raced trans-Atlantic twice, once in a hurricane-filled trial from New York to Spain. He captained his own boat, *Windhover*, 28 times between Woods Hole and Solomons Island, Maryland, a trip



Prosser Gifford at the helm of the family's Ensign class boat. Courtesy Gifford family.

usher (outside in the coldest weather clad in parka and gloves handing out the program for the day) and encouraged the church to welcome all comers. Ever the teacher, he was also a frequent reader for church services, often prefacing the reading with historical context he had researched. During the renovation of the Parish and Community Center next to the church, he contributed funds for the large (100 capacity) meeting room, aptly called the Woods Hole Room, to foster a continuing connection and commitment between the church and the community. He served as chair of the Falmouth Forum, drawing on his scholarly expertise and contacts to bring engaging world-renowned speakers to Woods Hole (including one poet per year).

Continuing his enthusiasm for libraries, and bringing a generous long-term perspective for village life, Pross became a trustee of the Woods Hole Public Library in 2007, served briefly as secretary and then as president from 2009 to 2017. During his tenure, he took the occasion of the Library's 100th anniversary as a fundraising opportunity, with activities that included personal visits to potential donors and a Simon Sinfonietta benefit concert held at Highfield Hall. Replacement of the large Library windows and the slate roof were undertaken while he was president. With fellow board member Bill Mackey, Pross initiated the Library Director's Endowment fund. He took great interest in the Woods Hole Historical Museum, a division of the Library, supporting investigations regarding potential improvements to the archives and Bradley House in

general that included facilitating designs submitted by a class at the Rhode Island School of Design. He opened his home for a variety of library events that included a concert by pianist Robert Wyatt, a talk on hydrangeas, and a gathering that featured Chequessett chocolates. He enthusiastically supported concerts and especially poetry readings at the Library.

Now, it's easy to imagine Prosser, with his signature laugh echoing widely, assembling white-robed angels for poetry sessions in heaven.

About the author: Vicky Cullen's swan song in 2005 after 32 years in communications at WHOI was a book on the institution's 75-year history. She next wrote a short history of the Woods Hole Public Library, published in 2008, when she was drafted to join the Library's board of trustees, which she currently serves as president.

Sources:

Prosser Gifford, Interviewed by Robert C. Townsend, June 8, 2011, videorecording and transcript, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, <https://www.amherst.edu/library/archives/holdings/friends-of-the-library-oral-histories/prosser-gifford>.

"Plimpton Appoints Twelve Members to Committee on Race" by Terry Andrews, May 2, 1968, *The Amherst Student*.

Email communications and interview with Barbara Gifford Shimer in September 2020.

Various obituaries, including one written by the three Gifford daughters and most notably the one posted on the Rhodes Scholar website written by Nick Allard, <https://www.americanrhodes.org/news-obituaries-1183.html>.

Yale Alumni Memory by Tim Weikel on the "5-yr BA program" dated July 29, 2020.