S1E2: Hank Compton's Deep Secret script

The Gulf Podcast

Introduction and Opening Scenes

<<soulful guitar music[1]>>

[Dr. David McKee]: When you look at the whole picture, it's just a tremendous story, a Texas guy, a guy that got his marine biology degree at UCC, you know, University of Corpus Christi, a guy that did some of the early work in the Gulf of Mexico, when you didn't really know what was down there, a guy that ran a pier right there by the university where so many of the professors used to go in and drink coffee and beer. He had these demons from the war, he fought society. <<music fades out>>

[Dr. Jen Brown]: Hi listeners, this is Jen. Welcome to The Gulf Podcast! Season One is made possible by the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Today's episode brings you into the secret world of Henry "Hank" Compton. In the 1960s, Hank Compton was a marine biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. He worked on a research ship out of Rockport. The researchers did some of the early scientific work in the Gulf of Mexico. They hauled out strange deep sea fish from the depths of the gulf. Compton's job was to take the fish back to the lab to catalog and photograph them. As a scientist, he led a rather unremarkable career. But Hank Compton had a secret. One that wasn't discovered until after his death.

Hank Compton's legacy was brought to light through the work of Dr. David McKee. David is a true Texan with white hair and a bushy mustache. He's also a retired marine biology professor at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. And he's the author of *Fire in the Sea: Bioluminescence and Henry Compton's Art of the Deep*. David likes to tell a story about Hank's reclusiveness. These tendencies were problematic dealing with the paperwork and bureaucracy of a state agency.

[McKee]: And the story was that very large federal grant they got, and those things can take months and months and months to write the final report, and he didn't get a paycheck one month,

[Brown]: Hank complained, and his boss said that he needed to write the report, which was due.

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[1] Doctor Turtle, "Rotisserie Graveyard," *The Double-Down Two-Step*, August 31, 2017, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Doctor_Turtle/The_Double-Down_Two-Step/Rotisserie_Graveyard. This song is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).

[McKee]: So he saw the only way he was going to get his money was to write that report. Well, the word is, he left the lab very pissed off, went to the liquor store and bought several bottles of liquor, went home, sat down, started drinking, and cranked that thing out in one weekend (laughter). Came back in Monday morning, threw the damn thing on the regional director's desk, and said, "Give me my money" (laughter). Now that's Compton.

[Brown]: Eventually, the work became too stifling. David doesn't know whether Hank Compton quit or was fired. <<ominous music slowly builds in[2]>> In the years following, Compton worked at a fishing pier, and his life slowly spiraled into tragedy.

[McKee]: In his last years of life, he lived by himself like a hermit and he had one living relative and that was his sister-in-law and she would go over to his little apartment where he stayed holed up and try to take him food and all he wanted was booze. He basically just drank himself to death. <<music fades into silence>>

Chapter One: Opening the Boxes

<<light-hearted guitar music[3]>>

[Brown]: Hank Compton's story, though, didn't end there. After his death, there was a discovery tucked away in his sister-in-law Helen's garage. Helen passed away in 2010.

[McKee]: She called me that morning, and said, "David, I just remembered, I've got some boxes that I brought from Henry's apartment after he died and the maids cleaned it out," and she said, "I have no idea what's in those. Why don't you come over this afternoon, and we'll sit down and open them up?"

[Brown]: Helen found two boxes outside of Hank's apartment. Without looking inside, she placed them in her garage. The boxes sat there unopened for over a year. Then she invited David over to take a look.

[McKee]: So I went over to Helen's house and we sat down on the floor. She'd already got them out of the garaged, opened these up, and here are probably 175 paintings, paperclipped, polaroid pictures of each one, everything organized almost to a fault. It was crazy. I looked, turned just to see what was on the top one. there was the painting and below that was a polaroid picture of that painting that he had taken over the kitchen table, and then he had all of that text written on each fish, and when I started reading that text that he had written about that fish, I just thought "oh my goodness" I'm going to have to read this three or four times I think to get

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[2] Kai Engel, "Cold War Echo," *Sustains,* December 19, 2017, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Kai_Engel/Sustains/Kai_Engel_-_Sustains_-_07_Cold_War_Echo. This song is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).

[3] Doctor Turtle, "It Looks Like The Future, But It Feels Like The Past," *Flush Your Rolex*, March 17, 2016, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Doctor_Turtle/Flush_Your_Rolex_1416/it_looks_like_the_future_but_it_feels_like_the_past. This song is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).

the true meaning of what Henry was trying to say. When I did, it was just like I've opened something here that is just absolutely splendid and it gave me an insight into what I was getting into, which was the world of Hank Compton.

Chapter Two: Hank's World: Deep Sea Discoveries and Scientific Knowledge

<<light-hearted guitar music[4]>>

[Brown]: What was the world of Hank Compton? An inner world of imagination and discovery of the deep sea.

The deep sea has been a mystery for most of human existence. What we know about it comes only from the last one hundred and fifty years. It was a foreboding place, and the depths were left unexplored.[5]

Starting in the mid-19th century that seafaring nations sponsored research expeditions.[6] The most celebrated discoveries came from the voyage of the HMS *Challenger*. The ship traveled enough nautical miles to go around the world almost three times. During the long journey, the scientists aboard catalogued over 4,000 new species. In the western Pacific, near Guam, they discovered the deepest part of the ocean in the Mariana Trench. This cavern, deeper than Mount Everest is tall, is now called the Challenger Deep in honor of its discovery.[7]

It wasn't until the next century, though, that humans themselves ventured into the deep sea. There was William Beebe and Otis Barton who, off the coast of Bermuda, climbed into what looked like a giant steel eyeball. A single cable connected it to the ship. Then they went down and down, thousands of feet below the surface.[8] As they descended, Beebe hammed it up for live radio listeners.[9] A decade later, Jacques Cousteau would pioneer scuba diving.

And then there was World War II and the Cold War. Strangely enough, these two events propelled American oceanography forward. The US Navy invested a lot of money into science. Many oceanographers studied sound to help better detect submarines.[10] When they started listening, they heard a noisy, rambunctious world under the waves.[11]

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[4] Doctor Turtle, "It Looks Like The Future, But It Feels Like The Past."

[5] For measuring shallow parts, ocean depths, see Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 5.

[6] Rozwadowski, 6–62.

[7] For the Challenger expedition, see Rachel L. Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 39–40 and Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean*, 168–209.

[8] Gary Kroll, *America's Ocean Wilderness: A Cultural History of Twentieth-Century Exploration* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 67.

[9] Kroll, *America's Ocean Wilderness*, 65–67.

[10] For more on the connections between the military and Cold War science, see Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *Oceanographers and the Cold War: Disciples of Marine Science* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005) and D. Graham Burnett, *The Sounding of the Whale: Science and Cetaceans in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), ch. 6.

[11] For ocean noises, see Carson, *The Sea Around Us*, 51–52 and Burnett, *The Sounding of the Whale*, 537–540. See also Winthrop N. Kellogg, *Porpoises and Sonar* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), ch. 3.

<<gradual fade into the popcorn and frying bacon sounds of snapping shrimp[12]>> Like snapping shrimp.

And blue whales. <<blue whale sounds, left side[13]>>

And humpback whales <<humpback whale grunts, right side[14]>>

And dolphins. <<squeaky dolphin sounds, left center[15]>>

And all sorts of things. <<all of the different noises combined together>>

With so many new sounds, oceanographic institutes started cataloging them. But at the height of the Cold War, even whale songs were sometimes classified.[16]

What we know about the depths of the ocean, then, is fairly recent. In this postwar context of discovery, Hank Compton started his scientific career. Both Hank and David McKee were drawn to the Gulf of Mexico. One was a scientist on a research vessel. The other was an aspiring biologist.

[McKee]: I loved it. You know, I did that right out of high school. I was just always kind of intrigued with the shrimping boats, and spent two summers on shrimp boats. So I was just very taken with—of course the money was pretty good, but I just thought it was the coolest thing in the world to be out catching food in the Gulf of Mexico, and then having, aside from the shrimp, having all of these other very cool things that would come up in the net, and you never knew from trawl to trawl what you would come up with. We caught one very large sawfish one time. We caught all kinds of eels. I, like Henry, preserved everything that was weird on the boat. And this was like '65, and that was about the same time, Henry was doing this, I was out in the gulf, too. My grandmother would save Gerber baby food little jars for me, and I took alcohol with me and I was the biology nerd putting fish in alcohol. Kind of doing the same thing he was. I just loved the intrigue, the mystery, being out there on the sea where it was very dangerous. All that really appealed to me, and probably in the same way it appealed to Hank.

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[12] Digifishmusic, "Hydrophone at Boatramp 1.wav," *Under Water*, December 24, 2007, https://freesound.org/people/digifishmusic/sounds/45436/. This sound is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).
[13] Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, "Blue Whale B Call @5x," April 21, 2016, https://freesound.org/people/MBARI_MARS/sounds/343682/. This sound is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).
[14] Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, "Humpback Whale," October 2, 2017, https://freesound.org/people/MBARI_MARS/sounds/403406/. This sound is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).
[15] felix.blume, "Dolphin Screaming Underwater in Caribbean Sea (Mexico)," July 24, 2012, https://freesound.org/people/felix.blume/sounds/161691/. This sound is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).
[16] Burnett, *The Sounding of the Whale*, 543.

<<light-hearted guitar music[17]>>

Interlude: World War II Demons and the Sunken Plane

[Brown]: Other dangers remained solely in Hank Compton's memory.

[McKee]: I think he had a lot of demons. There's the one painting of the plane on the bottom, and even his sister-in-law Helen Compton said that, said you know, he never got over the loss of that friend Ed that crashed during World War II.

[Brown]: The painting shows a fighter jet resting in the dark water. Inside the broken cockpit is a skeleton. Outside, massive sharks swim by.

[McKee]: And I think that stayed with him, like it did with a lot of those veterans from World War II. It stayed with them for the rest of their lives, a lot of things they saw, a lot of the things they went through, as very young men, they just weren't able to cast that off in later life.

[Brown]: Compton also wrote a haunting scene.

<<dark, cloudy music[18]>>

[Hank Compton's writings, read by Justin Ives]: *We left on the night tide from Nagasaki bound brave for Palau. Off the deeps of Manila's Island, the planes came to us at dawn and we died. As I died I saw the eyes of my wife. I saw black wrap me. The light of heaven came again as delicate crabs ate my eyes and fish with flares cleaned the sockets…My bones lie deep in the ooze of ocean's bottom. I am steadied. I am chalk to write my tale of love and death. I am calcium. My bones dissolve in the weight of my tomb. They are restless.*

<<music fades out into silence>>

Chapter Three: *Fire in the Sea*: Painting and Writing about the Wonders

<<fun, choppy music[19]>>

[Brown]: Despite his demons, Hank Compton's artwork on the deep sea is full of a sense of wonder. A while back, I sat down with David McKee to look at some of Hank's paintings. For Hank, painting the deep sea meant portraying light in the dark. Deep sea creatures emit light through a chemical reaction known as bioluminescence. Hank called it fire in the sea.

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[17] Doctor Turtle, "It Looks Like The Future, But It Feels Like The Past."
[18] The Pangolins, "Beneath Dark Clouds," *When The Wick Is Gone/Beneath Dark Clouds*, September 3, 2017, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/The_Pangolins/When_The_Wick_Is_GoneBeneath_Dark_Clouds/Beneath_Dark_Couds. This song is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-sharealike license (CC-BY-SA).
[19] Lee Rosevere, "A List of Ways to Die," *The Big Loop – FML*, November 14, 2017, https://leerosevere.bandcamp.com/track/a-list-of-ways-to-die. This song is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).

[McKee]: The basis of all of them is bioluminescence. They're living down at, say a half mile or much, much deeper, and light is only available, at least to our eyes, down to a few hundred feet so the only way they can live down there, and find food, and avoid be preyed on themselves, and find a mate is to use this biolumination to their advantage.

<<fun, choppy music[20]>>

[Brown]: The ocean is full of these glowing and strange-looking creatures, with massive mouths and giant teeth, and other adaptations for a cold, dark place.

[McKee]: In fact some of the fishes have are able to keep their blood in a liquid form even though the water around them is freezing. They have proteins in their blood that allow their blood to act very much like antifreeze. So, some really crazy adaptations for living down there.

<<fun, choppy music[21]>>

[Brown]: The pressures of the deep made Hank's work challenging.

[McKee]: The paintings tend to be, I think, a little bit abstract. As flaccid as these things are, when those are brought up from great depth, when they come to the surface, they basically disintegrate. So he had to kind of reconstruct what that fish looked like. What we're amazed at, among many things we're amazed at with his work, even though they tend to be a little bit abstract, maybe a little too long, and the shape's not quite right, I think he did that on purpose. But if you look as a biologist at, say, the fins, or the scales, and you start counting the individual little rays and things like that in the fins, taxonomically, that's correct. He had the scientist side working for him there as well. And probably the same thing with the teeth, that is the correct number of teeth in the lower and upper jaw. So he was very accurate, and yet a little abstract. I like that.

<<fun, choppy music[22]>>

[McKee]: This is a really duded up viper fish. It's just got an array of all—not only down the lateral surface, but off the chin barbel is lit, then these streaming rays of, that would be the pelvic fins, are all lit up.

[Brown]: Along with the paintings, Hank Compton wrote descriptions and short stories about the fish.

[Hank Compton's writings, read by Justin Ives]: *[The whalefish is] A fish the red clay color of old sewer tile and the floors of Santa Fe, the sunset buttes of Montana and the brooding portal*

[20] Lee Rosevere, "A List of Ways to Die."
[21] Lee Rosevere, "A List of Ways to Die."
[22] Lee Rosevere, "A List of Ways to Die."

tombs of Petra where time is frozen in the cliffs. A strange tint for a deep-sea Atlantic fish to wear. A unique one among all the fishes of the world, salt or fresh.

[McKee]: Some of those passages you read are just, it's like, "Gosh, what a way to explain something, how appropriate what he said about that fish," or the story he's telling, and then at other times, it's like, "Okay, Hank, where you going with this?"

<<fun, choppy music[23]>>

[Brown]: Looking at Hank's artwork, I wondered about some of the strange creatures. Like the pinecone fish, which literally looks like someone put eyes and fins on a pinecone, then dipped it in glow-in-the-dark paint.

[Hank Compton's writings, read by Justin Ives]: *[The pineconefish is the] Only fish in the world with a five-spine dorsal fin like part of a drunken picket fence. Slanting one left—next right—next left…For no known reason. But fish don't share man's search for Why. Their oddities are not odd to them. More easily explained are the [fish's] two great spines of his pelvic fins erecting sideways making him a painful object to swallow. As further protection he is enclosed in a helmeted head and closely interlocked plates with short sharp spines. An effective coat of mail.*

[Brown]: These descriptions and the paintings help us discover something so different from what we already know. I like to imagine the strangeness of the dark and the creatures that use light. Some deep sea squids squirt out glowing fluid instead of ink. Some fish are entirely lined with glowing dots called photophores. Hank described these dots as "like fireflies in loose and continual contact." And anglerfishes have these odd lights dangling from the tops of their heads.

[McKee]: Oh, this is one of my favorites. This is one of the anglerfishes, too, and pretty much all the anglerfish are squatty, short, you know a fish like this was probably three inches long, but all of them have some kind of ornamentation around the head and around the mouth that would bring in prey to that area.

<<fun, choppy music comes in and plays under the text below[24]>>

[McKee]: We grew up with Jules Verne and all these types of things, and when we see them, we think these things are as big as a train or something when in fact they're very small.

[Hank Compton's writings, read by Justin Ives]: *The whipnose angler. As with all the anglers, the lure was light…Her lure burned a great cavity of visibility in the black water…To hunt she lurked holding position at rim of dark below. Life entering influence of the flare glowed faint, burst to brilliant focus of identity in form and color, passed again into shadow and was gone.*

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[23] Lee Rosevere, "A List of Ways to Die."
[24] Lee Rosevere, "A List of Ways to Die."

<<music fades out>>

Conclusion

[Brown]: We'll never truly know why Hank Compton painted deep sea fish or why he kept it a secret. But then again, what we know about the deep sea itself is still rather limited. As deep sea diver and conservationist Sylvia Earle reminds us, 95 percent of the deep ocean has never been seen, and more humans have walked on the moon than have ventured down into the depths of the Challenger Deep.[25] So the secrets of the deep remain, left to be explored through our imaginations. It is here that Hank Compton's deep secret has become his lasting legacy. His artwork and writings help us discover this unknown world.

Credits

<<guitar music comes in and ducks under the text below[26]>>

[Brown]: The Gulf Podcast is sponsored by the Harte Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. You can learn more at https://www.harteresearch.org/. You can find the full oral history interview with Dr. David McKee as well as read the episode script on our digital archives. Just search online for The Gulf Podcast. You might also be interested in the second Hank Compton book called *Fishes of the Rainbow* that features his artwork and writings on coral reefs. Special thanks to Justin Ives for reading Hank's writings. Music in this episode came from Lee Rosevere, Kai Engel, The Pangolins, and Doctor Turtle. Thanks to digifishmusic, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and felix.blume for the ocean noises. And thank you all for listening. <<music fades out>>

<<humpback whale grunts>>

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[25] Sylvia Earle, Foreword to *Fathoming the Ocean*, p. x: "It hasn't been—and still is not—easy to get answers. Even now, less than 5 percent of the ocean below a hundred feet or so has been seen, let alone explored. A dozen astronauts have walked on the moon and hundreds have felt the weightlessness of space travel, but only two people have ventured and safely returned from the deepest crack in the ocean, the Challenger Deep at the bottom of the Mariana Trench."

[26] Doctor Turtle, "Rotisserie Graveyard."

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