Mr. Moderator honored

By Dorris Hilberg
Staff Writer

John Putnam

ACTON — In his own words, John Putnam has been consistently working for the past three decades to "improve our Democracy by having better informed citizens." Why did he take that path in life? He acknowledges that "I am my mother's child." She was a woman he not only loved but admired and respected, and his life has been a testimonial to her. She had a great influence on his life, and, following in her footsteps — she was a very dedicated person and worked with the blind during the roaring '20s — he has spent the last 15 years reading, on tape, for the blind.

He is eminently suited for that role, for John Putnam has the most marvelous, resonant voice — Yankee, but with a British accent he cannot account for, as he was born and raised in Boston. And it is that voice people here will long remember as the voice of the town moderator for 10 years from 1965-1975, and as the voice of the moderator of the Acton Water District until his retirement last Wednesday night at the close of the annual meeting. If anything marks his tenure as moderator for both town and district, it is his sense of fairness, that everyone be recognized and allowed to speak.

John and his wife Susan built their home in Acton in 1948, when the population was only 3500. "In the fifties and sixties, Acton went haywire," he said in a recent interview. "We had strip zoning on 2A, Acton was the fastest growing town in the state. A bunch of us — Bill and Nancy Kingman, Paul Lesure, Bill Sawyer, Tom Rogers — asked ourselves what was wrong with the town, what could citizens do to help bring Acton into the new world, the modern era." One thing that disturbed these citizens was the fact that the then moderator, Jim Kinsley, was a "rigid conservative who violated the first principal of Democracy by letting his bias show in recognizing people, deciding who could talk" at Town Meeting. They decided to oust the incumbent.

After failing to find a candidate to challenge the incumbent, John Punam ran for moderator and lost by about 180 votes. The second year, "my little gang decided to run me again," said John, and he won by about 200 votes. That was the same year Acton elected its first female selectman, Mary Hadley.

At about this time, a local clergyman, Justin Hartman, approached John and asked him to head a human rights group in the Nashoba Valley area. "But my highest priority was to make a change in Acton," said John, so he turned him down. But he was not to escape from this cause for long.

John's choice of career early on was preferably non-business, "not money for money's sake." He counts himself among the "worthy poor." His ventures have been varied. A Harvard graduate, he started teaching at the Middlesex School after the war, but wanted to get into politics, government. For a while he manufactured books for Houghton Mifflin's Riverside Press. There was a brief stint in the military. While working for the International Cooperative Association he was an advisor to the Philippine government on printing. And for two years he and his family lived in Austria while he was director of the Salzburg Seminar for American studies. "It was an effort to bring Central Europe a breath of fresh, democratic air."

At another point, He became "hooked on the issue of volunteer activities for retired men, when the mandatory age for retirement was 65." And so he formed the non-profit clearing house for volunteers which produced "Widening Horizons," a column listing volunteer opportunities. Although the company is defunct, the Boston Globe still publishes a volunteer column three times a week, its successor.

John became involved in the human rights movement in 1983, when he was impressed by a magazine article by Robert Holmes, a professor of philosophy at Rochester, who write, in essence, that we had reached a point in building nuclear weapons where the weapons we were acquiring were threatening our own security.

That put him "smack into the peace movement" and led to the formation of the Walden Peace and Justice Center with a grant from the Greeley Peace and Justice Foundation. It was a regional center where the exchange of ideas and equipment could be put together to enhance efforts to work for peace. It was housed in the basement of Trinity Church in Concord until it was closed a couple of years ago. "But we are still fighting the battle," said John.

Although he is retiring from public service, he is not going to rest on his laurels. He is still involved in many activities that pique his interest, establishing contacts and improving outreach.

The person who is to follow in John's footsteps must be "flexible mentally, be a catalyst, a facilitator. If I have any genius, it is my ability to talk, ceaselessly."

For his many contributions to the community and to the cause of peace and justice, *The Beacon* presents its "Bouquet" — a framed certificate — to John Putnam of Acton.

OPINION

Wanted: Someone to follow his lead

THAT'S THIRTY — With this issue of *The Beacon*, **John Putnam** is taking his leave as a regular contributor as he and his lovely wife make plans to enter a retirement community in Lexington. (See page 6.) His contributions to the community through the pages of this newspaper over many decades have been most appreciated. A man of great wisdom and depth of understanding of the human condition, he has worked tirelessly for peace and justice in the world, starting right in his own back yard.

John's "World Concerns — Reader's Choice" column, which has appeared four times a year in *The Beacon* , has been well received and is on deposit at the Acton Memorial Library. Those columns have provided food for thought for many readers and have been used in the classroom by many teachers in the local school system. John has also shared his thoughts on a wide variety of subjects over the years in numerous guest opinion pieces which have appeared on these pages. And he also gave freely of his advice, which was always much appreciated, on what we were doing right, and where we could improve the local newspaper.

One of my earliest recollections of John was when he came to the office one day to deliver his copy. He was dressed very casually, which is his style, in a sport shirt and worn beige work pants. His belt was a frayed piece of rope. I was then, as now, struck by his individuality.

John, your byline and your good advice will be missed; yours is a tough act to follow. But we hope that someone will pick up the gauntlet, as it were, and continue in your footsteps. Keep in touch, dear friend.

WINDOW ON MAIN ST

Dorris **Hilberg**

Readers' choice

WORLD CONCERNS

John **Putnam**

A quarterly review of current affairs as discussed in periodical literature

FINIS! We are moving in April to Brookhaven, a retirement colony in Lexington, and so this will have to be the last publication of World Concerns — unless one of our readers should like to take it over and keep it going. It is not a difficult job and beyond constant reading only calls for four major efforts a year. For those who have the time and inclination to read widely in current affairs publications and share the high spots, it's a pleasant job. Our regular reading has been in The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, The New Yorker, The New Republic, and the Sunday newspaper magazines of the New York Times and Boston Globe. Anyone interested in talking with us about it should call 369-2599 before April 1. Also, we have copies of most articles cited which we are ready to part with.

This concluding issue is unusually thin. Not due to lack of effort but because much recent publication has lacked wide appeal, not a trend we trust, though you never can tell.

We lead off with a piece that is worth a dozen average ones: "The Coming Anarchy" by Robert D. Kaplan in the February Atlantic. "How scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet." A long, brilliant, highly relevant article that focuses heavily on the Third World and should bring about some basic rethinking about the state of the earth.

"Zapped — The Roots of the Chiapas Revolt" by Enrique Krauze, The New Republic, 1/31/94. A Mexican writer with verbal restraint gives us some interesting information about the background of the current revolution.

And now we turn for the final two pieces to Russian affairs:

"Reagan and the Russians — The Cold War ended despite President Reagan's arms building, not because of it or so former President Gorbachev told the authors, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein in the February Atlantic. The Carter-Reagan military build up didn't defeat the Soviet Union; it prolonged the Cold War. Gorbachev's determination to reform an economy crippled in part by defense spending urged by special interests, but far more by structural rigidities, fueled his persistent search for an accommodation with the West. That persistence, not SDI, ended the Cold War."

"The Bear in the Caucasus — From Georgian Chaos, Russian Order" by Misha Glenny in the March Harper's. A vivid picture of economic and social devastation in Georgia of the old Soviet Union. The concluding sentence: "What is clear is that the destruction of Georgian society is now almost complete."

John Putnam, is the founder of the Walden Peace and Justice Center, which closed last year.