

Joe Nickell

NICKELL, Joe 1944-

PERSONAL: Born December 1, 1944, in Lexington, KY; son of J. Wendell (a postmaster) and Ella Kathleen (a bookkeeper) Nickell; married Diana Gawen Harris; children: Cherrette Roycroft. **Education:**

University of Kentucky, B.A., 1967, M.A., 1982, Ph.D., 1987. *Hobbies and other interests:* "Collecting paranormal-related writing materials."

ADDRESSES: *Office*—Center for Inquiry, P.O. Box 703, Amherst, NY 14226.

CAREER: Paranormal investigator, author, and educator. Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), Washington, DC, volunteer worker in Carroll County, GA, 1967-68; professional stage magician in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 1968-73; private investigator with Toronto agency, 1973-75; Dawson City Museum, Dawson City, Yukon Territory, Canada, museologist, 1975-76; freelance investigative writer, beginning 1976; University of Kentucky, Lexington, instructor in technical writing, 1980-95; Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (now Committee for Skeptical Inquiry), Amherst, NY, senior research fellow, 1995—. Presenter at conferences; lecturer at colleges and universities, including University of Kentucky, Heidelberg University, Old Dominion University, Yale University, Colgate University, University of Ghent, University of Toronto, University of Brussels, University of California at Berkeley, and California Institute of Technology. Has appeared on numerous radio and television programs.

MEMBER: Historical Confederation of Kentucky (member of executive committee, 1988-95), Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (technical consultant, 1984-88; member of executive council, 1988-2005).

AWARDS, HONORS: Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal fellow, 1988; Distinguished Skeptic Award, Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, 2000; Isaac Asimov Award, American Humanist Association, 2004.

WRITINGS:**FOR CHILDREN**

(And illustrator) *The Magic Detectives*, Prometheus Books (Buffalo, NY), 1989.

(And illustrator) *Wonderworkers! How They Perform the Impossible*, Prometheus Books (Buffalo, NY), 1991.

FOR ADULTS

Inquest on the Shroud of Turin, Prometheus Books (Amherst, NY), 1983, reprinted, 1998.

(With John F. Fischer) *Secrets of the Supernatural*, Prometheus Books (Buffalo, NY), 1988.

Pen, Ink, and Evidence: A Study of Writing and Writing Materials for the Penman, Collector, and Document Detective, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 1990.

Ambrose Bierce Is Missing, and Other Historical Mysteries, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 1992, published as *Unsolved History: Investigating Mysteries of the Past*, 2005.

(With Robert A. Baker) *Missing Pieces: How to Investigate Ghosts, UFOs, Psychics, and Other Mysteries*, Prometheus Books (Buffalo, NY), 1992.

Looking for a Miracle: Weeping Icons, Relics, Stigmata, Visions, and Healing Cures, Prometheus Books (Buffalo, NY), 1993.

(Editor) *Psychic Sleuths: ESP and Sensational Cases*, Prometheus Books (Buffalo, NY), 1994.

Camera Clues: A Handbook for Photographic Investigation, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 1994.

Entities: Angels, Spirits, Demons, and Other Alien Beings, Prometheus Books (Amherst, NY), 1995.

Detecting Forgery: Forensic Investigation of Documents, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 1996.

(Editor, with Kendrick Frazier and Barry Karr) *The UFO Invasion: The Roswell Incident, Alien Abductions, and Government Coverups*, Prometheus Books (Amherst, NY), 1997.

(With John F. Fischer) *Crime Science: Methods of Forensic Detection*, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 1999.

Real-Life X-Files: Investigating the Paranormal, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2001, published as *Investigating the Paranormal*, Fine Communications (New York, NY), 2004.

The Kentucky Mint Julep, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2003.

The Mystery Chronicles: More Real-Life X-Files, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2004.

Secrets of the Sideshows, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2005.

(With Benjamin Radford) *Lake Monster Mysteries: Investigating the World's Most Elusive Creatures*, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2006.

Adventures in Paranormal Investigation, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2007.

Relics of the Christ, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2007.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Popular Photography*, *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, *Law Enforcement Technology*, *Indiana Folklore*, *Journal of Forensic Identification*, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, *Canada West*, *Filson Club History Quarterly*, *International Journal of Forensic Document Examiners*, *Humanist*, *Fate*, *Science et Vie*, *Skeptical Inquirer*, *American Rationalist*, *Performing Arts in Canada*, *Christian Life*, *Current Anthropology*, *Fire and Arson Investigator*, *Lincoln Herald*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Free Inquiry*, *Journal of Kentucky Studies*, *Identification News*, *Manuscripts*, and *Behavioral and Social Sciences Librarian*. Member of editorial board, *Skeptical Inquirer*.

SIDELIGHTS: Joe Nickell is a paranormal investigator, "perhaps the only full-time, salaried one in the world," as he once commented. His written work, including his ongoing investigational writing for the science magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*; is a result of that multifaceted occupation, which Nickell has described as a combination "ghost hunter, UFOlogist, cryptozoologist (one who studies unknown animals like Bigfoot), etc.," occasional photographer, and proofreader. "Even as a writer," Nickell added, "I've been something of a chameleon: children's author, poet, forensic-science writer, carnival historian, editor, advertising copywriter, columnist, newspaper stringer, historical reporter, and so on."

In his job as senior researcher for the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), Nickell travels the world investigating alleged paranormal psychic phenomena, and regularly attends séances, healing services, and other events wherein connections with otherworldly entities are claimed to occur. He also publishes a column in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, which is published by CSI. Founded in 1976 as the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

and dedicated to evaluating paranormal and pseudoscientific claims within a rational framework, CSI has a list of fellows that reads like a lofty roster of academics, scientists, philosophers, and researchers. Described by *New Yorker* writer Burkhard Bilger as "the country's most accomplished investigator of the paranormal," Nickell is included in this roster, declaring himself a skeptic in a world in which, according to Bilger, "half of all Americans believe in E.S.P., more than forty per cent believe in demonic possession and haunted houses, and about a third believe in astrology, clairvoyance, and ghosts."

Nickell's ongoing work has inspired much of his nonfiction writing, which ranges as widely as his experiences. His work in the field of document analysis prompted his books *Pen, Ink, and Evidence: A Study of Writing and Writing Materials for the Penman, Collector, and Document Detective and Detecting Forgery: Forensic Investigation of Documents*, while *Real-Life X-Files: Investigating the Paranormal and The UFO Invasion: The Roswell Incident, Alien Abductions, and Government Coverups* were inspired by his research and field work. In each of his books, as well as his writing for the *Skeptical Inquirer*, Nickell combines his abilities as a researcher with an engaging writing style that has won him both teen and adult readers.

In *Real-Life X-Files*, as well as in its sequels *The Mystery Chronicles: More Real-Life X-Files* and *Adventures in Paranormal Investigation*, Nickell collects dozens of articles he has written for the *Skeptical Inquirer* that debunk claims of paranormal activity. In addition to research, he describes on-site experiences ranging from analysis of crop circles to meetings with spiritualists and witnessing stigmata and other seemingly unearthly manifestations. Noting that Nickell approaches his subject in a serious manner, *Booklist* contributor George Eberhart noted that "skeptical teens will enjoy the debunking of these 'paranormal' phenomena. Praising Nickell's reasoned approach in studying everything from mind-reading dogs to haunted houses, *Skeptical Inquirer* reviewer Kendrick Frazier wrote that in *The Mystery Chronicles* the author/investigator "demonstrates the power of his neither too-credulous nor too-dismissive attitude" in the process of revealing far more plausible explanations for these unusual events.

Nickell's long-standing interest in magic has contributed to his success as a paranormal investigator; as a *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted in a review of the

author's *Adventures in Paranormal Investigation*, Nickell "has the right skills to separate truth from confabulation." The book, which draws from over four decades of work, ranges from hauntings and sightings of religious figures in overcooked toast or unlikely places to untruthful claims regarding new drugs such as Laetrile. Religious relics are the subject of Nickell's examination in *Relics of the Christ*, which updates readers on the known and scientifically verified facts about the Shroud of Turin, the Holy Grail, and other objects reportedly connected with Jesus and his followers. Dubbed a "quirky little book" by a *Publishers Weekly* critic, *Relics of the Christ* debunks the assertions connected to these relics while also acknowledging the sincerity behind those believing in them. *The Magic Detectives* and *Secrets of the Sideshow* tap into Nickell's knowledge of the art of illusion, revealing sleight-of-hand secrets while also inspiring readers with an interest in the history and traditions of the magician's trade.

Reflecting on his multifaceted career, Nickell once remarked: "Why have I done so many things? . . . Since I began to think of myself primarily as an author (which kept me from having an identity crisis!), it made sense to try on different 'costumes,' so to speak (sometimes quite literally), in order to learn about people and the world. I have been able to view life from different windows, different perspectives, and thus to learn more about myself as well. In fact, I believe the most creative thing one can do is to shape one's own life, not merely to drift along at the mercy of circumstances. I realize I've been very fortunate to be able to follow Thoreau's advice: 'Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you've imagined.'"

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY: Nickell contributed the following autobiographical essay to *Contemporary Authors*.

In my childhood, I was constantly revising my answer to the age-old question: what did I want to be when I grew up? Every child tries on several identities, but most reach adulthood with a career or two in mind. I, however, have never quit asking the question. One writer would come to describe me as "a man with a hundred faces," another as having made "a career out of careers." I have sometimes called myself "a real-life actor," and I have approached life with the convic-



The author's parents, Wendell and Ella Nickell, 1982

tion that shaping it is the most creative thing one can do. I have followed Thoreau, who wrote in *Walden*: "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

Alas, I wasn't born in a log cabin, but I did grow up in eastern Kentucky, in Appalachian foothills still dotted with the occasional log farmhouse or outbuilding. My ancestors on my father's side were area pioneers, mostly Irish, but also French Huguenots and others, including one Hessian mercenary who—according to tradition—defected to the American cause during the Revolutionary War. One of my mother's lines apparently traced back to a first cousin of Mary Todd Lincoln, and another wended back (through Dillards, Starkes, and Wyatts) to Sir Thomas Wyatt (ca. 1503-1542), the celebrated English poet who, for alleged intrigue, was twice imprisoned in the Tower of London.

My father, J. Wendell (1914-1983), was postmaster in the little town of West Liberty (the seat of Morgan County) and had been a talented baseball pitcher in college. I'm told he had a windmill-like, all arms-and-legs delivery, and a great "slider" ball. He had also been a high-school science teacher and coach, and his hobbies included hunting and fishing, woodworking, reading detective stories, inventing, and performing magic!

My mother, born Ella Kathleen Turner (1918-2002), was a modern woman who graduated from a business college and became secretary and bookkeeper for the board of education. When First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited town in 1937 to dedicate a new school, Mom took down her speech in shorthand for the local newspaper. When my brother Bob and I were old enough, she returned to work while continuing to raise a family. She sang in a beautiful voice while doing housework. She was devotedly religious, while my father was vaguely a deist.

I was born in wartime, on December 1, 1944. I was named Joe Herman, after my father's younger brother, Herman Volney Nickell, who had recently died a hero at Normandy.

AS HIS NAMESAKE
(FOR H.V. NICKELL, KILLED IN ACTION, JUNE 17, 1944)

Wounded, then shot again,
in the war,
in the end—
& now I grow old for him—
keep his image in a book,
& keep his looks,
& keep his name like a rank.

But in this photo he's always young
(although the faded brown

& flaking's like the fallen leaves):

his hands in his pockets
like sabers in their sheaths.

Our first home was a frame house on Glenn Avenue, when the town's population was under a thousand and there was no stop light. If I recall correctly, our telephone had to be cranked and our number was 82F2. I don't remember our first dog, Ol' Bim, but he was a St. Bernard who, my parents claimed, would herd us boys away from playing in the street.

One of my earliest memories is from the age of four. My brother and I had been given little black toy pistols made of licorice. You could eat them or "shoot" them, but not in that order. Bob was chasing me around the back yard past Dad's bird-dog house. Bob was firing, "Bang! Bang!," when, suddenly, he seemed to shoot the gun from my hand! Indeed, blood spurted from my wrist! In fact, I had sliced it on the tin roof of the dog house, producing a severe cut that severed an artery. My mother responded to Bob's cries that I was "killed." She ran with me across the street where two men from Blair's Wholesale Grocery put me in a truck and sped the short distance to the clinic, she and Bob following on foot. Dr. Alec Spencer sewed that wound, years later tended to my broken left arm, and apparently once saved my life when I had blockage from a kinked bowel. He avoided emergency surgery by placing me under a fluoroscope and manipulating my intestine. He was a great Norman Rockwell doctor who made house calls even far into the countryside.

I learned about politics from my grandfather J. Current Nickell, who—having been a farmer, teacher in a one-room school, hardware salesman, and parole officer—was also a one-term state representative. He was a staunch Roosevelt supporter, and I still treasure his FDR mantle clock with its post-Prohibition mechanical figure of a bartender shaking a cocktail. He once sat with me on his porch swing and explained our two-party system: one being devoted to moneyed interests, he said, the other to helping everyone else. A big, outgoing, passionate man, he is shown in an old photo pushing down Main Street a wheelbarrow carrying a Republican friend with whom he had lost an election bet. (Another family photo shows his grandfather wearing the beard that was the result of a similar lost wager.)

My grandmother, born Emma Golden Murphy, had descended from one John Murphy (1733-1836) who, according to family legend, emigrated from Ireland at age fourteen as a stowaway on a ship. She was locally famous for her cooking and—taking advantage of her father-in-law's orchards—she turned out apple pies, dried-apple stack cakes, and a preserve she invented and called Apple Honey. She also made quilts and played the piano and dulcimer.

My grandmother Turner, daughter of attorney John B. Phipps, was a schoolteacher and librarian known affectionately as "Miss Nancy." She put on school plays and had accumulated a treasure-trove of wigs and costumes. I had a part in one of her Christmas skits, and it was no doubt to her that I owe much of my penchant for role-playing and disguise. When I became Batman, the cape crusader, she sent me to the home of a local seamstress along with a quantity of black satin, and I soon had a fitted cowl and cape. And, after I metamorphosed into Sherlock Holmes, she somehow managed to find me a child-sized deerstalker cap of gray herringbone, along with a volume of the complete stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. She also unwittingly sowed the seeds of my future skepticism by keeping me believing in Santa Claus until most of my friends had become wise. She would put soot on letters from "Santa" so they appeared to have come down the chimney!

Among my early personae was prestidigitator. In addition to performing close-up effects for friends, I appeared once with my amateur-magician father on stage at a local talent show. I also put on little exhibitions at

family gatherings where I wore a crepe-hair mustache affixed with spirit gum. I recall thinking that one day I would grow a real mustache and so become a real magician!

At age nine or so, I played fortune-teller at a Halloween carnival, garbed in turban and robe, my face darkened with "gypsy" makeup. While I had good-natured skeptics among my clientele, many others seemed surprisingly credulous. I thus learned several lessons—not only about the will to believe and the consequent need for skepticism, but also about how I could adopt a persona in order to study people and even to learn more about myself.

I enjoyed school—even becoming a champion speller in the sixth grade—but I was often impatient for classes to conclude so I could direct my own studies. Our house had an extra upstairs room that I appropriated and transformed, in turn, into an art studio (with easel, tables and art-box), a crime laboratory (complete with chemicals and glassware, a microscope, black light, and other accoutrements), and a museum (featuring a family spinning wheel, other antiques, and much more, including my collections of fossils, coins and currency, butterflies, and stamps). Whenever I needed paper supplies—such as card stock cut to size for labels, or large sheets of Hammermill Bond for drawings—I went to the Licking Valley Courier office where publisher Earl Kinner allowed me to watch text being composed on the Linotype machine or freshly printed sheets coming off the presses. This was a favorite place. Summer vacations took us to more exotic ones.

Attending church was part of my upbringing. My mother always went to church; my father never did. His father loved to point out the essential difference between the Baptists and the Methodists: "One dunks," he would say laughing. "The other sprinkles." Ours was the Christian Church, a Disciples of Christ congregation. The county's first such church had been organized by my great, great, great grandfather, mountain evangelist Reverend Joseph "Preacher Joe" Nickell. (A story is told of him preaching in another county and conducting a river baptism. As he dunked a particularly notorious sinner, someone yelled from the crowd, "Souse him again, Joe, for he's a dam'd dirty dog, and it'll take two dips to wash away his sins!") I was baptized when I was in the fifth grade, and I later became bible reader during church services,

delivering aloud the passage on which the minister, Rev. Joe Nevius, had based that Sunday's sermon. In that role, I learned to stand before a crowd, project my voice to the back row, and try to do justice to the rich cadences of the King James text. These skills would serve me the rest of my life, although religious belief would pass.

As I grew older, I learned to both play and work, and I understood that sometimes they were the same thing. I balanced my indoor activities with outdoor ones, pitching sandlot baseball and going hunting and fishing with my father. I also spent valuable learning time with my other grandfather, Charlie Turner, who fished with trotlines, had a rustic riverside fishing camp, and even made flat-bottomed boats for clients (utilizing his trade of carpentry, which he learned from his father, a coffin-maker.) His and Granny's little farm at the edge of town had wonderful work/play learning sites: a chicken coop, smokehouse, barn with a milk cow, a little grist mill powered by a gasoline engine, and a large garden in which I hoed myriad rows of corn, staked tomatoes, and picked beans and strawberries. I was a child turning into something of a farmhand.

Other maturing activities came from being a Boy Scout patrol leader and going on long hikes, camping trips, and excursions: collecting fossils and other specimens or building a lean-to, or the like. One of my many merit badges was for fingerprinting. I got it when I was fifteen, but for years I had studied forensics. I had compiled a couple of dozen "monographs" (as Sherlock Holmes would say) on the various forensic sciences, and I learned to record prints with the simple post-office-issue kit I borrowed from Dad. When I eventually wanted a complete professional outfit, my indulgent parents got me one for Christmas. Soon, I was dusting the house with black and white powders and lifting latents. For my merit badge, I sent the requisite five sets of rolled and plain impressions to the FBI, one set my own, and received a letter of encouragement from J. Edgar Hoover. (Who would have suspected that, in time, I would actually become "Wanted by the FBI"?)

One of my first real paying jobs had been as a chainman for a local surveyor (fancying myself in the tradition of George Washington and Daniel Boone), and by age fourteen I was running a successful business as a sign painter. Growing up in a small town as an artist (and winning an occasional blue ribbon at the county



Joe (foreground) and his brother in Wyoming, 1960

fair), I was maneuvered into that role by relatives and townfolk: an aunt needed a sign, "Jean's Beauty Shop"; my father a banner, "Kiwanis Horse Show"; and a sports-enthusiast druggist a poster, "Go Blue Devils!" I came to realize I could make an enterprise of such demand.

I picked up other personas at school and elsewhere. I was quite often umpire or referee or scoreboard operator during a lunchtime or after-school game. During my freshman year, I was concession-stand popcorn vendor, which paved the way (somehow) for me to become basketball team manager the following year, and occasionally summertime swimming pool attendant. My junior year found me as class president, president of the Chemistry Club, and delegate to the state speech festival, and during my senior year I was a member of the Thespian Club (a further intro to acting) and editor of the yearbook.

But mostly I was a signman. I worked a three-county area, so I had to be a generalist rather than a specialist, with "sign painter" also at times meaning commercial artist, advertising consultant, billboard designer, sign fabricator and erector, electric-sign salesman, calligrapher, show-card writer, silk-screen printer, gilder, and so on. Rather than tell a customer I could not do something, I would buy time to phone in an order for an instruction book and supplies, then strive to be a fast learner.

I saw no need to go to college. I would marry my fiancée, a local beauty queen, and make a respectable living with my sign business, which I would expand from a summer job to a full-time occupation. My parents were mortified that I would fail to realize my potential, and their entreaties eventually prevailed. My change of mind was partly influenced by being chosen to attend one summer week's art instruction at the University of Kentucky, and by a letter of commendation regarding my scores on the College Qualification Tests. A guidance counselor had also ordered a special test for me that ranked my visual-spatial ability as extraordinarily high. I decided to major in art.

In the fall of 1962, I attended the University of Kentucky in Lexington. I helped to pay my way through college, working as an assistant in the art department. I helped install exhibitions and performed other gallery chores, gave slide-illustrated exams for professors, and did whatever else needed doing. I continued at this during my sophomore year, while also serving as a dormitory counselor in Donovan Hall. Summers were spent running my profitable sign business from home.

My first-semester English class was an eye-opener. I had breezed through the subject in grade school, but now our teacher, Bruce Vermazen, graded our first batch of essays and brought them to class shaking his head. "We have our work cut out for us this semester," he announced woefully. There was, he conceded, one good paper, which he began to read. I had sunk down in my seat at the first announcement, and now I sank further. It was my essay. Mercifully, the teacher did not tell the other students whose it was.

I made an "A" on every paper in Mr. Vermazen's class and when, at his insistence, I enrolled in an advanced class the following semester, I aced each of those papers as well. Thus began the English Department's wooing of me. Meanwhile, I had begun to think of myself as a writer, even a poet, and by the next year I was both an editor of the literary magazine, *Stylus*, and president of the English Club. So I changed my major (an act that would require an extra year for me to graduate), although I continued taking art courses as electives. (I would end up only a couple of courses short of a full major in art as well.)

I was not the best of students after all, becoming caught up in the whole sixties revolution. I churned out poems which I began to publish, taught myself to



Joe's first sign for his own business, about 1960

play the guitar, experimented with psychedelics, campaigned door-to-door for Lyndon B. Johnson (over right-winger Barry Goldwater), helped form the Campus Committee on Human Rights (which promptly effected the desegregation of residence halls), picketed the federal building in the wake of the Selma crisis, marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. (and Peter, Paul and Mary) at the Kentucky state capital, and participated in antiwar demonstrations.

Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) was originally a requisite for freshman and sophomore males at UK, but the requirement was dropped after my first year. My opposition to the war in Vietnam easily persuaded me not to continue as a ROTC cadet, so I no longer had to spit-shine my shoes, polish my uniform brass, or clean my rifle; nor did I have to march in drills or stand for inspection or attend military class. I celebrated by growing a beard (briefly)

and soon adopted an appearance more suited to making love not war. My typical garb at this time was paint-splattered jeans, boots, a bright shirt, and a sport coat, a side pocket of which was usually stuffed with a sketchbook or perhaps a book of Kenneth Rexroth's poems or a copy of Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*.

As I say, I was not the best of students. For example, once having missed classes for days, I attempted—late—to slip into the classroom of a professorial A.K. Moore who was writing on the blackboard. He spotted me, turned, and drawled, "Well, well, the prodigal returns! I hope you don't expect a fattened calf!" After class, while I was talking in the hallway with Wendell Berry (an educator now even more celebrated as novelist, poet, and agrarian essayist), Prof. Moore came up to say, "Wendell, this is the most delinquent student I've ever had. See if you can do something with him." Wendell—a great poetry teacher and in many other ways a mentor—laughingly put his arm around me and led me away as if to do just that. But he was part of the problem: cohort Harley Beal and I would sometimes hole up for a couple of days at Wendell's Henry County farm, where we would sleep on the floor of his writing cabin, swim in the Kentucky River, and converse—about everything.

I mentioned making love. In the spring of 1966 I came upon the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Her name was Diana Gawen, and whether we first met on campus or at a poetry reading at the Nexus Coffeehouse is uncertain. I was smitten. Then, in a few short weeks, she was out of my life again, having returned to a previous boyfriend, whom she soon married. I did not get over her—friends recall me on a drinking binge for weeks—and when I would later see her on campus, pregnant, I had to turn away. Once I attended an art show on campus and she came in with her new baby girl. I slipped out the door, and finally got on with my life, never imagining that there would eventually be more to that story.

FROM THE REVEALING MIRRORS

Darling of mirrors,
you wandered

out of mine,
unseen,

drawn
into another's

by a spell.
I never knew how you were held,

captive behind glass,
your face
sadly looking
from your looking
glass.

My poetry was progressing. I had become something of a protégé of John Wieners, one of the original Beat poets. He had seen a few of my efforts in one of the little magazines—*Wild Dog* from San Francisco—and had written the editor, Drew Wagnon, to ask about me. Drew invited me to stay at his place during the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference and toured me around the city on his motorcycle. Wieners came over to see me, and during the conference introduced me to Robert Creeley (who gave me a warm double handshake and a penetrating look from his one good eye) as well as Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, and others. At an outdoor reading at the end of the conference, with everyone sitting on the grass, Wieners was called on to read but stood up and said he had shared all he cared to at his own reading. Instead, he said, he would like to introduce a young poet to read in his place and, mentioning my name and casting his gaze over to a nodding Creeley, said I should come up and perform. It was a heady experience for a boy from the Kentucky hills.

I continued to publish poems—in *Janus*, *Coraddi*, *riverrun*, *Midwest*, *Broadsides*, the *Wormwood Review*, and elsewhere—and to edit and publish in *Stylus*. I began to write in a style I call cadenced rhyming—essentially free—verse poems with orchestrated rhymes, off-rhymes, and other sound devices, like alliteration.

In 1967 I won the English department's Farquhar Award for poetry, and upon graduation I was offered a scholarship at Johns Hopkins University for a master's degree in creative writing. However, I was unable to accept because President Johnson had ended masters-level deferments while the Vietnam war continued.

Instead, I began training as a community organizer in the war-on-poverty program called Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), which sent me to Atlanta

and Athens. Subsequently, a pair of us was sent to "correct the situation" in a poor Carroll County town ironically named Villa Rica ("rich city"). The VISTA Volunteers there before us—two young women who ran afoul of local taboos by being seen with black men at night, even though they were recruiting them for Job Corps—were run out by vigilantes. We were unable to get a place to rent in town, since each time an owner learned we were VISTAs, he or she would allege someone else had a prior claim on the place.

We eventually rented a farmhouse several miles away, down a dirt road, on the landlord's condition that we never have any black visitors (not his actual term) at the place. Before we could say anything, he mentioned that he was unable to get fire insurance. I understood his meaning and assured him we were not there to cause trouble. We made similar assurances to the Villa Rica town council, which agreed to sponsor us and further erase the old animosity. Thus cautiously, we were able to help create a public library and obtained the assistance of West Georgia College for a proposed tutorial program aimed at high school dropouts. Unfortunately, because most of these students were black, officials—including the school superintendent and chairman of the board of education—refused to allow the program.

At this, my frustrated coworker asked to be transferred. On my own for the remainder of the year, I worked with other VISTAs and black leaders to register African Americans to vote. There were credible stories of blacks attempting to register but being told they had to take a test on the constitution. Our strategy to counter this depended on a young professor from West Georgia College who managed to become a deputy registrar on the grounds of recruiting students to vote. Instead, in two nights—secretly and countywide—we registered numerous new voters across the color barrier. If a person could not sign his name, his "mark" was witnessed. Not surprisingly, the registrar was promptly de-deputized, but the registrations stood: officials feared the intervention of federal marshals and civil rights commissioners.

In October 1967 I went to Washington for a poverty-program conference, but as luck would have it the massive antiwar march on the Pentagon was about the same time, so some of us were able to attend both events. On October 21, following speeches on the mall, we protestors made a trek to "confront the war mak-

ers." At one end of the grounds, a group of hippies led by Abbie Hoffman performed an exorcism of the Pentagon, singing and chanting until it was supposed to levitate and spill out its evil spirits.

The building did not budge, but meanwhile a few thousand determined marchers left a parking area for the entrance to the Pentagon. I was in this group, which pushed over a section of chain-link fence and stormed the grounds. Only a few—including author Norman Mailer, who would later write about it in *Armies of the Night*—were able to get inside the building, but they were forcefully expelled, bruised and bloodied. Most of us were driven back by tear gas. An experienced activist, I had brought a wet handkerchief in a plastic bag, so was able to cover my nose and mouth as the gas was fired. Things soon settled down and we maintained a long vigil, occupying an area of the Pentagon grounds and burning placards in trash barrels into the night. These beacons—we were sure—signaled an eventual end to an intolerable war.

I believe it was the next day that I attended the poverty conference. It was addressed by Vice President Hubert Humphrey who contrasted two groups of young people. He railed against the antiwar protesters, but commended the exemplary service of VISTA volunteers. We VISTAs sat in a single row across the auditorium, not far from the front, and we were conspicuous during applause when (as we had prearranged) we folded our arms in a silent but unmistakable protest. Humphrey was visibly shaken.

During that 1967-68 year with VISTA, I also took part in civil rights demonstrations, notably in Forsythe County, an enclave of racism. On April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis and his body was soon returned to Atlanta. Atlanta friends and I wore black armbands and stood in line for the viewing at a Spelman College chapel, often receiving and returning Black Power salutes from young men leaning out of windows, standing atop buildings, or crowding the sidewalk along the way. As I passed by Dr. King's coffin, I was struck by how small his body looked in it, in contrast to the larger-than-life stature he had in my mind.

I saw Bobby Kennedy when he and other notables attended a memorial service for King at Emory University. Then it was Bobby who was assassinated, two

months later in Los Angeles, while I was at a VISTA conference on Jekyll Island. A hurricane warning was in effect, and I stood on a hotel balcony with a friend, our hands gripping the railing in the raging wind and darkness, tears streaming down his face, mine an angry mask.

After my year in VISTA ended, I stayed on in the area, moving into a room in a house off Peachtree Street that headquartered the Atlanta Cooperative News Project, publishers of the south's notable underground newspaper, *The Great Speckled Bird*. I was now involved in further leftist activities, including the historic Poor People's March in Washington which I covered for the paper. In addition to serving as a reporter and photographer (I even had a police press pass) I was also a layout artist.

When I married my girlfriend and fellow radical Ruth Everett on the dock of a lake in the north Georgia woods, with flower children in attendance and the wedding march played on a banjo, the newspaper featured a full page on the event: a collage of pictures with the caption, "Congratulations Joe and Ruthie!" We almost spent our honeymoon in jail. We expected to get arrested at a city hall protest over the police's questionable killing of a black man, but officials were making every effort not to exacerbate the situation.

Instead, before long, I was a federal fugitive. Along with my VISTA Service, my deferments effectively ended, and my appeals (filed as a delaying tactic) were denied. To avoid the draft, in October of 1968 Ruth and I headed for Canada, receiving landed-immigrant status. We lived in Toronto, where I got a job as an advertising copywriter with Simpsons-Sears (later Sears Canada). When time came for me to report for induction into the U.S. Army, we drank a toast to the fact that I had become a wanted man. A subsequent query from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police sent me to their headquarters where I learned that there was, indeed, an "alias warrant" in the U.S. for my arrest. After making sure of my legal status, a Mountie shook my hand and welcomed me to Canada.

My protest activities now consisted of picketing the American consulate or joining in some other demonstration, and working on the staff of the magazine *AMEX: The American Exile in Canada*. I mostly served as a political cartoonist, drawing cartoons on

war and peace, or occasionally on another topic. However, I did not always feel like laughing. In fact, as I look back now, this was one of the most unhappy periods in my life. I had lost my country, had an uninspiring job, and was watching my marriage deteriorate—in large part because I had never gotten over Diana and, it seems, would never really trust women again.

THE WAIT

This is the weight then:
the cen-

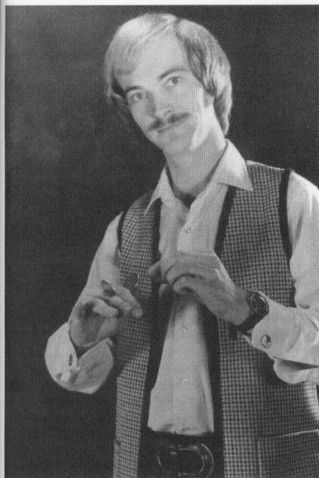
ter of the thumb's whorl,
the final
zero
I go
in search of
the worth of,

the blank
clock
that tells me when.
Let me say, then,
when
I will speak

such worth of myself,
or else

end
with what I know,
and let my life go,
my hands
be twisted roots
in the roots'
hands.

I coped by throwing myself again into conjuring. At first this was just a hobby, but I soon reflected that I now had the mustache I had envied as a child. I also had friends who teased me about my many personas. Fellow writer and exile Doug Fethering would say, "God help us if Nickell ever has an identity crisis. There'll be twenty of him running around not speaking to each other." I came to discover that—like participatory journalist George Plimpton, who did stints as a boxer, trapeze artist, stand-up comic, etc., and "The Great Impostor," Ferdinand Waldo Demara, who posed as a Trappist monk, prison warden, and



Becoming a stage magician, 1970

linguistics professor, among other identities—I had a penchant for playing different “roles.” I saw these roles as unique vantage points from which to view life from an insider’s perspective. I intended to be as honest and serious as Plimpton and as real-life and full-time-committed as Demara. I thought of Houdini, who created the myth of the man who could escape from any restraint, and decided I wanted to be the man who could become anyone—although of course I recognized that there were finite limits.

So “professional magician” seemed like a good start. One day at the Arcade Magic and Novelty shop on Yonge Street, which was run by ex-vaudevillian Harry Smith and his wife, Sophie, I met the venerable magic genius Norman Houghton. He was soon tutoring me at a bar on Saturday afternoons, bringing a piece of rope or deck of cards or whatever else for instruction. I can still hear his patient voice saying, “That’s not quite it; let me show you again.” He led me into the inner circle

of magicians, mentalists, hypnotists, ventriloquists, clowns, and other allied artists. I began my career working as a magic pitchman in the carnival of the 1969 Canadian National Exhibition (CNE). There, at a booth run by American magician Paul Diamond, I pitched (demonstrated and sold) such effects as the cups and balls, the cut-and-restored rope, and the astonishing “Svengali” deck of cards.

Always attracted to the odd and the curious, I also began to study carnivals, especially the sideshows. I recall my father once in the mid-1950s having taken me to the Kentucky State Fair where I was particularly dazzled by a fire eater, and whenever a traveling carnival came to town, I was on the midway every night. At the CNE I met El Hoppo the Living Frog Boy, whose banner depicted him as a youth with the hindquarters of a frog, although he was actually a wheelchair-bound man with spindly limbs and distended stomach. Among other attractions was Atasha the Gorilla Girl, a show that featured the transformation of a beautiful young lady—slyly acknowledged to be in “a legerdemain condition”—into a wild gorilla. Suddenly the beast lunged from its unlocked cage(!), driving frightened spectators from the tent (and thus helping to draw in the next crowd—or “tip” in carnies lingo). In addition to human oddities and illusion shows, there were sword swallows and other “working acts” as well as various grifters, fortune-tellers, and more. I studied them all, years later incorporating them into my book *Secrets of the Sideshows*.

THE FORTUNE TELLER

As if she
were you, she

held my hand
in hers,
gypsy

palmist,
caressed
the skin,
traced
the lines

that led nowhere.

She guessed,
pressed

on,
saw in
my eyes then
the lost

look,
she
looking
at me
looking

for you.

As a magician, I performed at birthday parties and convention shows (such as one for Chateau Cartier Wines), and as a freelance broadcaster coproduced the CBC radio special *Houdini in Canada*, among other programs. Work on the special introduced me to James Randi, Houdini's successor as magician, escape artist, and investigator of spiritualist mediums and psychics and a man who is still a great friend and mentor. The research also initiated my role as paranormal investigator (my best-known persona) when we commissioned a spiritualist medium to conduct a séance in a CBC studio and try to contact Houdini's spirit. When work on the program also took me to the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame in Niagara Falls, Ontario, I came away with the job of resident magician, moving there to work in the summer of 1970 and each of the next two seasons.

Niagara Falls was a carnival in its own right. I often stood among its lights, colors, and sounds and looked across the gorge to the country I could not visit. Usually I was happy to be where I was. However, the year before, my grandfather Nickell had died, and the FBI—no doubt tipped off by someone back home—thought I might show up for the funeral. That there were agents in town seeking to arrest me we learned from Sheriff Jim Phipps, who tipped off my father. That fact was long a family secret which (those involved now being deceased) I'm telling publicly for the first time.

My first summer at Houdini's was very profitable, made even more so by my creation of the museum's Houdini Magic Kit. This enabled me to travel with a girlfriend for a few months in Europe, Asia, and North Africa. In London we saw the British Magic Circle's Christmas show; in Paris a nighttime fire-breathing and chain-escape performance; in Istanbul a "dancing"



Author's sketch of snake charmer in Morocco, 1971

bear; in Tehran and Herat much cultural magic; in Barcelona a charming little old street conjurer; and, in Marrakech a variety of entertainments including snake charming.

Having summer employment taken care of, I filled in the remainder of the year by performing on the Toronto school circuit with a charity group called Inner City Angels. The idea was to provide cultural enrichment for disadvantaged children. We did not perform as a troupe; rather, schools chose which of the Angels' performers to bring in. I began as Janus the Magician but also created, for the youngest children, Mister Twister the Magic Clown, a character with zig-zag tie, crooked glasses, and bent top hat who twisted balloons into animal shapes and attempted magic tricks that always backfired. For middle-school students I became Mendell the Mentalist, performing a mind-reading act but then confessing it was all a trick, in order to teach critical thinking.

In addition to being a magician, I also became a co-publisher and art director of an alternative newspaper that debuted in mid-1971; whimsically named *Tabloid*, it was said by a Toronto *Globe & Mail* columnist to be possibly the best-written newspaper in Canada, which may explain why it lasted only a few issues. I was also coproprietor of a coffeehouse, Soft Cell, another short-lived venture, and there and elsewhere occasionally did a set as a poet, or folk singer, or both. I became a songwriter (although my early output was meager), a sometimes media-interviewee, and a columnist for the Society of Canadian Magicians' publication the *Levigator*. I also read about, researched, and otherwise prepared for some potential future roles.

Mostly all went well, except my restless lifestyle seemed to lead me too often into excess. I was a shameful womanizer, excessive drinker, occasional barroom brawler. One night two fellows were insulting women friends at my table and generally looking for trouble, so I obliged them. At one's dare, I smashed him in the face and, holding his head against the table, was hitting him repeatedly as the other guy tried to get at me. Friends of mine took care of him, and soon the waiters broke up the fight, ousted the troublemakers, then turned to me. They stapled my torn shirt, replaced my drink, and brought an ice pack for my injured fist.

As luck would have it, my hand was broken, but the fortune was not all bad. True, I had won the battle but lost the war, so to speak; however, there was a plus to the situation. During that time I had been teaching magic workshops at Sunny View, a school for the handicapped, attempting, with Norm Houghton's brilliant suggestions, to teach magic to children who lacked arms or had other disabilities. The irony was perfect: now, however briefly, I, a prestidigitating artiste, was one of them, struggling to do magical effects with a single hand, and my left one at that. I quickly decided that the improved rapport there was worth the price.

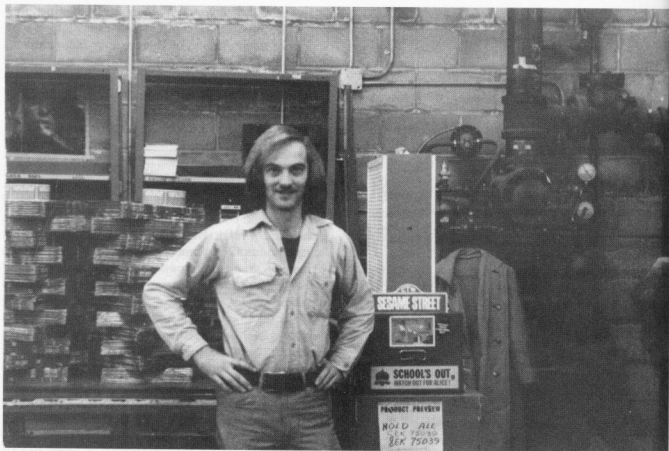
After toying with the idea of more fully developing another magical persona—an escape artist—I decided instead to become a private investigator. To that end, over a year, I completed a correspondence course from the Institute of Applied Science, then a major trainer of fingerprint experts. I completed, says my diploma, "the full Course of Instruction in Scientific Crime Detection, Embracing Exhaustive Studies in Finger

Prints, Police Photography, Firearms Identification, Principles of Criminal and Civil Investigation, Modus Operandi, Identification of Handwriting and Identification of Typewriting." Determined to start at the top, I applied to a world-famous detective agency in mid-1973. (I'm not supposed to use their name for publicity purposes, so I'll take cue from Dashiell Hammett stories and call it the Continental Detective Agency.)

I was put through the agency's own training course and soon was conducting background investigations, fixed and moving surveillances, interrogations, and other assignments such as bodyguarding a political candidate. Mostly, I did undercover work, which allowed me to play a number of additional roles: forklift driver (a grand-theft case), mail clerk (a routine check), stock clerk (ditto), warehouseman (arson), steelworker (a safety issue involving drugs)—even lens polisher (at an optics lab supposedly missing gold) and tavern waiter (where there was a personnel issue). Several times I was on the inside of criminal operations, and once was actually a member of a theft ring involving a local warehouse.

In this case I worked undercover in the warehouse shipping department. A certain store would send in modest but frequent orders and the order-filler would endeavor to be the one to get his hands on those papers. He would hugely overfill the orders, then bring them to shipping where—and this was the tricky part—he had to make sure that his partner there (me) got the order. I would check and okay the goods, then box them and send them out. From time to time the order filler would visit the store to get his cut (in stolen goods or cash), which cut he shared with me. I quickly discovered the truth of the adage about honor among thieves: By tracking the amount of overage, I learned that I was being cheated out of my fair share. It hardly mattered, since one day, when I was to go to the store too, I managed to tip off Continental, whereupon we were apprehended by burly detectives. The next day at headquarters my supervisor said he was recommending me for an Academy award for my effective role playing.

While in the middle of this operation—considering I was at once thief/detective/fugitive—I realized that even if I sometimes had to live beyond the law, I must never lose sight of my principles. I soaked up everything I could learn about detective work and relished long nighttime stakeouts with a seasoned



Undercover warehouseman and "thief," 1974

Continental Op. who shared his exploits and insights. I was twice promoted, reaching the agency's second-highest investigative ranking in only two years.

I next turned up in Dawson City, Yukon Territory, where I played several additional roles from mid-1975 to the fall of 1976. Hired by Diamond Tooth Gertie's casino, located in an old dance hall, I became alternately a blackjack dealer, crown-and-anchor (wheel of fortune) croupier, occasional back-parlor bingo caller, alternate Texas Hold'em poker dealer, and part-time master of ceremonies. During the winter, with temperatures down to minus-sixty degrees, I took a correspondence course in museology from the Canadian Museum Association while working as exhibit designer at the gold-rush museum.

The following summer I continued to work evenings at the casino and mornings painting signs, but also now I was general manager of Yukon River Tours, a venture owned by Capt. Dick Stevenson. During afternoons I helped in the various enterprises of operating a tourist

boat, maintaining an outdoorsman's camp, and tending to Stevenson's smoked-salmon business. At times we also panned for gold and hunted spruce hens. In addition, I was a newspaper stringer for the weekly *Yukon News*, pecking out stories from Dawson and sending them by plane some 300 miles south to Whitehorse.

SOURDOUGH

The dance-hall girl strays.
A hornet's-nest piñata sways

over the head
of one dead,

rotting to the bone in a box.
They should've boxed

him in his sluice:
He died of too much juice,

old,



Blackjack dealer, Diamond Tooth Gertie's, 1975

and not enough love,
never enough gold.

In 1977 I was able to return to the States. A couple of years earlier, President Gerald Ford had offered a clemency program for war resisters, but it required accepting punishment, and most resisters—thousands in Canada—boycotted it. But now President Jimmy Carter had given us a full and unconditional pardon. A Kentucky television crew accompanied me as I was arguably the first to clearly return under the amnesty.

For the next year I attended Paul Stader's Hollywood stunt school, held in a gym in Santa Monica, where we practiced fight scenes, tumbles, high falls, fencing, and other basics. Several active stuntmen and stuntwomen dropped by on occasion: real pros like Julius Le Flore, who doubled Bill Cosby for a twelve-storey-

high fall in *A Piece of the Action*, and Rita Egleston, who did stunts for Lindsay Wagner in the *Bionic Woman* television series. A highlight of this time was tracking down my mother's first cousin, Don Turner, who had been a famous Hollywood stuntman. He doubled the likes of Erroll Flynn and was actually mentioned by Flynn in his autobiography, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*. Don regaled me with behind-the-scenes accounts of horse falls, sword fights, and other adventures. Stuntman was not my most successful role, but I did take part in a stunt show at the Santa Monica Main Street Fair and I also worked as an extra in a couple of movies.

To pay the bills while attending Stader's classes, I got a job that would dovetail with the class schedule. After firearms training and qualification at the U.S. School of Law Enforcement, I became a hired gun for a security firm and soon was catching shoplifters,



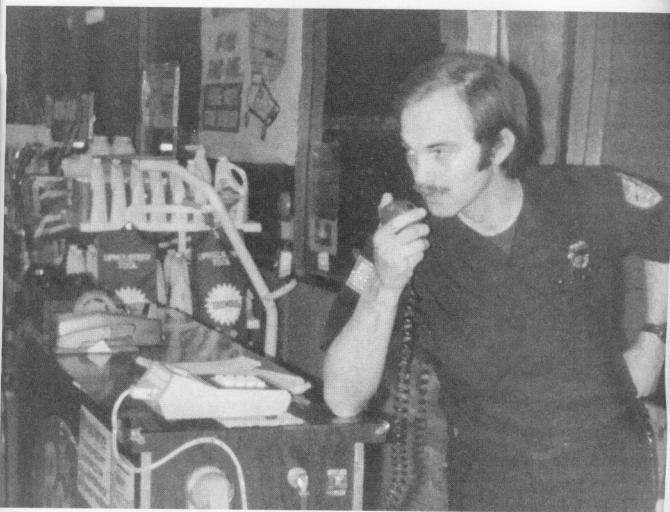
Riverboat manager, Dawson City, Yukon 1976

thwarting robbers, identifying a pickpocket, handcuffing a violent drunk . . . and always breathing a sigh of relief when I was back at my apartment unbuckling my gun belt.

I devoted my free time to new personas. I became an inventor, acting as my own draftsman and attorney and receiving patents for "Survival Kit Container," Pat. No. 4, 075, 078 in 1978, and "Magic Drinking Straw," Pat. No. 4, 211, 024 in 1980. I began more seriously to work as a paranormal investigator (more on this presently), and I continued as a freelance writer, turning out an occasional article for magazines such as the *Humanist*, *Canada West*, and *Popular Photography*. Yet I was unable to get anyone to look seriously at a book manuscript by an unknown author. I traveled awhile, but in Florida, where I tried to land a job as a

park ranger, for the first time I began to see that my resumé—with its too-diverse and too-frequent postings—was becoming a liability. It was time to reinvent myself.

Therefore, in 1979 I returned to the University of Kentucky where I worked as a teaching assistant while pursuing a master's in English (received in 1982) and then a doctorate (1987), afterward staying on to teach until mid-1995. I spent summers in West Liberty, mostly being an historical researcher and publishing articles in journals such as the *Filson Club History Quarterly* and the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, as well as in my hometown paper. I became a cemetery records compiler, helping to record and publish five volumes of tombstone inscriptions from over 600 graveyards countywide, and I was a cocre-



Armed guard, Santa Monica, California, 1977

ator of the historical Old Mill Park. I also became a board-certified Genealogical Records Specialist (CGRS), helping solve the occasional puzzle regarding a client's roots, and a notary public available to clients of my mother's little retirement business, Nickell Secretarial Service.

During my several years as a graduate student (and teacher of courses in composition, Appalachian studies, technical writing, business writing, survey of English literature, and editing), I became a literary detective. Whenever possible, I would do investigative work rather than critical studies. Among literary mysteries to which I proposed solutions were the disappearance of writer Ambrose Bierce; Bierce's biographer Roy Morris, Jr. (*Ambrose Bierce: Alone in Bad Company*, 1995) found my conclusion "hard to resist." I also identified Nathaniel Hawthorne's probable real-life source for the Veiled Lady in his *The*

Blithedale Romance (1852). And I discovered the famously "lost" second edition of Ebenezer Cook's *Sot-weed Factor* (published under a different title in 1730, and so having been on the shelf in full view all the time). My doctoral dissertation (under the direction of noted scholar John Shawcross) featured these and more, and I continue to investigate literary mysteries today.

Also during my graduate years, I became a collector of antique writing materials, and that, together with my training in handwriting comparison and my historical research experience, led to one of my most significant roles: historical document consultant. In further preparation, I imitated old writings, learned to cut quill pens and concoct ink, practiced deciphering antiquated scribbles, used ultraviolet light to read faded texts, and scanned documents with a stereomicroscope to reveal hidden traces. I researched water-



Document expert (examining the Bondwoman's Narrative), 2001

marks, collected ink recipes, and began to authenticate (or otherwise) questioned documents, like Lincoln's supposed reading copy of the Gettysburg Address or the infamous Jack the Ripper diary, both of which proved to be fakes. (This work would eventually prompt my books *Pen, Ink, and Evidence* and *Detecting Forgery*, while similar research into photographs would result in *Camera Clues: A Handbook for Photographic Investigation*.)

During these years at the University of Kentucky I worked on a number of additional roles (see www.joenickell.com). These included archaeological worker, forensic anthropology assistant, graphic artist, lecturer, Mensa member, and photographer, to name a few.

Two of my now best-known personas also developed considerably at this time: paranormal investigator and author. They actually came together in my first book by a significant publisher, *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin*, in 1983. A subsequent book, *Secrets of the*

Supernatural, followed in 1988; then came another, and another, and another. I was a guest on television programs like *Larry King Live* (on crop circles), *Sally Jesse Raphael* (on ghosts), *Oprah* (on miracles), and many others. I appeared twice on the *Jerry Springer Show* (on angels and psychics) and lived to tell about it.

In 1988 I was named a fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP)—now the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI). In mid-1995, Chairman Paul Kurtz named me senior research fellow, and Executive Director Barry Karr brought me to committee headquarters at the Center for Inquiry, a think-tank complex in Amherst, New York. I became, apparently, the world's only full-time, salaried paranormal investigator—surely the only one to have been professionally trained as a magician, detective, and academic.

In this role I travel around the world investigating strange mysteries at the very fringes of science, and I



Paranormal Investigator (checking for "miraculous heartbeats," 1994)

publish reports in our magazine, *Skeptical Inquirer*. I have investigated crop circles (England), the Oak Island mystery (Canada), the fabled Yowie (Australia), a weeping icon (Russia), an "alien hybrid" (Germany), miraculous relics (Italy), Chupacabra attacks (Argentina), "ancient astronauts" (Peru), medical quackery (Mexico), werewolves (Austria), the Holy Blood of Christ (Belgium), a Marian visionary (the Netherlands), a saint's legend (Spain), and many, many other mysteries in these and other countries. In contrast to paranormal proponents who are often little more than mystery mongers, or to some skeptics who call themselves "debunkers," I hold that mysteries should neither be fostered nor dismissed but, instead, should be carefully investigated with the intent of solving them.

And so I have examined a statue's "miraculous heartbeats" with a stethoscope, used simple sticks and string to recreate the giant Nasca ground drawings of Perú (once for National Geographic Television), and

studied lake-monster reports, matching some to river otters that sometimes swim in a line to create the serpentine effect. I have gone undercover—and occasionally in disguise (necessitated by my media appearances)—to explore bogus fortune-tellers and mediums. (Once, as "Jim Collins," I received loving messages, seemingly from my dead mother, until I recalled that my mother was then still living and wasn't named Mrs. Collins!) And I have at one time or another eaten fire, walked on hot coals, and even used a knife to inflict "stigmata" on myself. (A badly broken leg in Spain was another matter.)

With all my investigations—paranormal, historical, forensic, literary, or whatever—I have striven to take a hands-on approach, and to let the evidence lead to a solution, rather than the other way around. That is, I take a rational, scientific approach, following the evidence objectively and adhering to basic principles: that the burden of proof is on the claimant, that extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof, and that the simplest tenable explanation (the one requiring the fewest assumptions) is most likely correct (the rule of "Occam's razor"). My several investigative books are based on these principles, and I have become increasingly convinced that we live in a real and a natural world.

My work has been featured in many other venues. In March of 2006 I was profiled on NBC's *Today* show, and by the *New Yorker*, which described me as "a sharp-tongued and amiably pompous old gumshoe with thinning gray hair and shopworn tweeds." My Hollywood career was brief: Hilary Swank's role as a miracle investigator in the 2007 movie *The Reaping* was based in part on my work. A script writer interviewed me, Hilary read my book *Looking for a Miracle*, and I was invited onto the Warner Brothers set in St. Francisville, Louisiana, where I met the engaging actress. I even appear briefly on the DVD, but the movie bombed at the box office—no fault, I think, of mine, since my work ceased to be relevant after the first few minutes.

Meanwhile, in 2003, my life was transformed in a most unexpected way. I was contacted by my long-ago love, Diana, who was now Diana Harris. Her brief letter said she was looking up old friends, a statement that hurt my feelings: Was that all I had been to her? But I sent a reply, along with the *New Yorker* profile and a photo, and I asked her to tell me about her life.

She did, sending a group portrait of her children and grandchildren, and as soon as I saw it I knew that one daughter, a pretty thirty-six-year-old woman named Cherie, was also my daughter! She had the Nickell eyes more profoundly even than I. Periodically, I would think I might be imagining things, but then I would peek at the photo again and be convinced all over.

Wondering what Diana knew or intended, I wrote back with a statement that “family life has largely eluded me,” which prompted her to phone me. She said that that appeared not to be the case and explained that Cherie had, based on what she termed “intuition,” questioned who was her father. I was thrilled to learn, through subsequent DNA testing, the answer. We three then met in Lexington, Kentucky where, awkwardly and wonderfully, I embraced the stranger who looked like me.

At this time I had not written poetry for a quarter of a century or so, a fact I attribute to developing my rational faculty at the expense of my artistic one. When I had returned to the university and an old professor, Dr. Michael Adelstein, had learned I was no longer writing poems, he chided me, saying I had “a gift.” I told him I appreciated the sentiment but that (as it seemed), “Whatever I had, I no longer have.” He shook his head sadly. But now, needing to speak to my daughter more profoundly than I could do in a letter, I reached once again for my poetic voice and it was there after all. I am still somewhat bewildered by this, but I am writing poems (and songs!) once again.

FROM THE DISCOVERED DAUGHTER
(FOR CHERIE)

I would've searched
for you, reached

back in time
in some
temple or tomb

and clutched

the Golden Princess
with sapphire
eyes, treasure
of lost love.

What Cherie called intuition appeared, upon investigation, to be just that, but not the “sixth sense” that many imagine. Rather, it seems that she had clues—eyes that

matched neither her father's nor her mother's, a sister whom she did not resemble, and other information—which she had processed unconsciously. It gave me a new appreciation of intuition (discussed in my 2007 book *Adventures in Paranormal Investigation*) by which I gained a daughter, as well as two grandsons, Chase and Tyner.

I also reclaimed my lost love. Diana and I began to meet at “romantic rendezvous” in different places and became engaged on a Ferris wheel in Springfield, Illinois. We married in the same “haunted” mansion where we had met with my daughter, the historic George Clarke House in Lexington, Kentucky. Since Diana is a member of the Baha'i faith and I am a secular humanist, we had two ceremonies. (James Randi would later dub us “a Baha'i and a Below.”) This took place in 2006, fittingly, we thought, on April Fool's day—almost exactly forty years late.

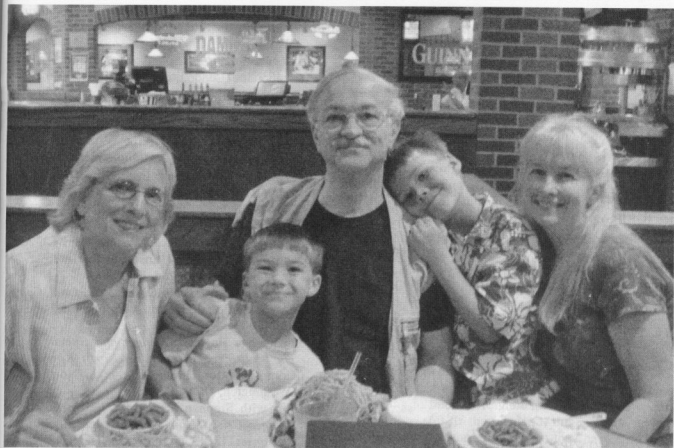
In addition to family man, recent personas have ranged from antique dealer to caricaturist, herb gardener, Toastmaster, virtual-museum curator, and now, of course, autobiographer. New roles are in progress or on the horizon (although I have kept my day job).

Contrary to anticipations (humorous or not), I never really had an identity crisis. Perhaps that is because, as my great friend, the late psychologist Robert A. Baker, joked, I am “a true multiple personality!” (Actually Bob once told me privately that I was the sanest person he knew.) I have kept all my identities rounded up and stored, so to speak (rather like disguises in my grandmother's old trunk), in a single place—called me. That sense of self, with my core values, has been with me since childhood, although of course I have grown (and become somewhat gnarly). Certain major personas, notably author and investigator, pretty much subsume the rest: I investigate things and I write what I have learned. By living many lives in one, I like to think, I have cheated death. So far, so good. I am a lot of happy people.

BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL SOURCES:

PERIODICALS

Booklist, October 15, 2001, George Eberhart, review of *Real-Life X-Files: Investigating the Paranormal*, p. 357; March 15, 2004, George Eberhart, review of *The Mystery Chronicles: More Real-Life X-Files*, p. 1245.



Family man, with wife Diana, daughter Cherie, and grandsons Tyner and Chase, 2007

Choice, January, 2006, R. Sugarman, review of *Secrets of the Sideshows*, p. 865.

Criminal Justice Review, spring, 2000, Jeffrey D. Lane, review of *Crime Science: Methods of Forensic Detection*, p. 143.

Entertainment Weekly, August 19, 2005, Gilbert Cruz, review of *Secrets of the Sideshows*, p. 149.

Library Journal, February 15, 1999, Michael Sawyer, review of *Crime Science*, p. 168.

Library Quarterly, July, 2001, Clay Stalls, review of *Pen, Ink, and Evidence: A Study of Writing and Writing Materials for the Penman, Collector, and Document Detective*, p. 421.

New Yorker, December 23-30, 2002, Burkhard Bilger, "Waiting for Ghosts: The Many Careers of Joe Nickell, Paranormal Investigator," pp. 86-88, 93-100.

Publishers Weekly, November, 9, 1998, review of *Crime Science*, p. 65; January 29, 2007, review of *Relics of the Christ*, p. 62; September 10, 2007, review of *Adventures in Paranormal Investigation*, p. 53.

Skeptical Inquirer, May-June, 1995, Robert A. Baker, review of *Psychic Sleuths: ESP and Sensational Cases*, p. 44; July-August, 2002, Robert A. Baker, "Truth Really Is Stranger Than Fiction—and More Entertaining," review of *Real-Life X-Files*, p. 55; July-August, 2004, Kendrick Frazier, review of *The Mystery Chronicles*, p. 58.

USA Today, May, 1999, Gerald F. Kreyche, review of *Crime Science*, p. 80.

ONLINE

Joe Nickell Home Page, <http://www.joenickell.com> (February 25, 2008).

* * *

NOLAND, Marcus 1959-

PERSONAL: Born March 29, 1959, in Greensboro, NC. *Education*: Swarthmore College, B.A., 1981; Johns Hopkins University, Ph.D., 1985.