METRO
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'Private Eye' Doesn't Need Odd Disguise

Practical gifts normally are not very exciting.

There was this one beautiful Christmas, though, when a practical package beneath our flickering tree turned uncontrollable excitement in my boyish heart.

Beneath the flashy wrapping was a box labeled "Be A Detective!" Inside were the following essential items: Heavyrimmed glasses without glass, fake nose and mustache, handcuffs, identification card and, best of all, a private investigator's badge.

PRACTICAL? Well, having been hooked at an early age on 'B' movies, I was going through a private detective stage, and what could be more practical than all this undercover paraphernalia?

There was considerable doubt the handcuffs would ever be used but just as much considerable satisfaction knowing they were available.

Now I was prepared to go into business for myself. With a black crayon I printed "Ace Detective Agency" across my sweatshirt. Now I was in business for myself.

They say it takes a long time for self-employed people to establish themselves and make money, yet after devoting six months of weekends to this pursuit, snooping, sniffing and trailing a few relatives, I had earned enough cents (for locating a neighbor's lost dog)

A HALF dollar was a windfall in those days, and there was no overhead, nevertheless I moved on to other pursuits.

Recollection of this yesteryear activity was spurred by a meeting with John Russell, the state's youngest licensed private investigator (he's 24), a man who is making it with his own business, Attorney's Trust Investigative Agency.

Don't look for it in the yellow pages until January. Russell has been engaged in investigations since he was 19 but his own business is new on the market.

Although he claims not to be enjoying overnight riches, he talks quietly about 15 to 20 investigations a month at about $300 to $400 per, leading me to believe I might have given up too soon on my own Ace Detective Agency.

"I'D RATHER be doing this than anything else," said Russell, and it's always interesting to encounter selfsatisfaction, regardless of the endeavor.

Of course it's the way I feel about my own job now, still most of us doodle with the contemplation of how we might've made it in some other profession.

It was a small disappointment to learn that John Russell does not lean on disguises in his work, although he can slightly alter his appearance if necessary by combing his hair from over his ears to behind the ears ("I can look like a greaser with a ducktail") and substitute contact lenses for his rimless specs.

"I know investigators in Orlando who use disguises," he said, "but I don't find it necessary. People don't remember faces. I have kind of a hippie look and people don't think of me as an investigator."

FEMALES ALSO make good, undetectable investigators, he noted. A woman with a child in her car makes for an ideal tailer.

Several weeks ago I wrote a column about my plight to get my telephone bugged. On this particular weekend I was unable to locate a detective or an electronics dealer to give me a hand.

I went to the wrong parties. Well, since the right man was not in the yellow pages it was understandable.

"Most of the people I know who have bugs don't use 'em because of Watergate," Russell related, "but a man has every right to bug his own phone. Nobody in Orlando makes 'em."

NATURALLY what you do with the bugged information is where the problems arise. "But yes," said Russell, "it is possible to bug a phone, and get paid quite well by the people who do it."

Much of John Russell's life is routine and endless legwork, but it's still an interesting enterprise and still heavy with mystery and lure for boys anticipating Christmas surprises.

A check with area department stores and toy shops reveals there are myriad junior detective supplies available yet, disguises and badges — everything you might need to trace lost, strayed or stolen dogs.

Ivey's in Winter Park even has a $4 pair of handcuffs.

Watergate investigations have had a direct impact on the Christmas market. Although unable to track down any toy bugs, I did hear about a hot Watergate Scandal card game, but Toy and Hobby in College Park reported a complete sellout in a week.