

By Kris Robbins

THIS GUMSHOE NO STUMBLEBUM

*Denver's top private eye is expensive,
tricky and effective.*

Robert W. "Pete" Peterson says he's probably the best private eye in Denver. What he doesn't tell you is that he's a hard case.

You work your way past his perimeter of weapons and gizmos, past round-the-clock guards of quips and wisecracks, only to find that the man himself has vanished. Not that he lacks candor, but secrets come with the territory. The man's a very private I.

Peterson opens the door in his shirt-sleeves and a shoulder holster packed with a .38 Special. The Colt draws attention from the red wing chairs and high-gloss antiques in his waiting room. His office is more utilitarian: a desk, chairs, file cabinets. They don't teach Peterson's filing system at secretary school. The cabinets hold anti-eavesdropping and debugging equipment, remote tracking systems and other magic boxes. At one point he opens a drawer and pulls out a semi-automatic Uzi, the "most formidable weapon on the face of the Earth," he intones. "That's what you need on Colfax," he adds, indicating the neon strip outside.

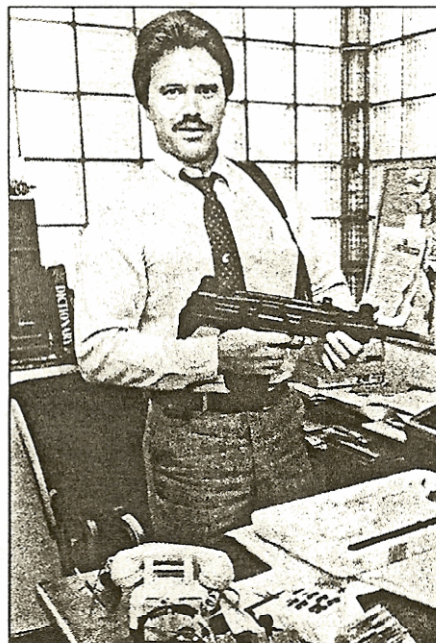
The tools of his trade include disguises, and Peterson likes to keep them simple: a hat, glasses, a jacket. Medium height, medium weight, medium brown hair, blue eyes not medium but large and clear as a child's — the 41-year-old will grow a beard to blend in while checking out a client's associate in Venezuela or don a tool belt, a name tag ("Jim, it's gotta be Jim") and a repairman's bored-stiff expression to change the film in a surveillance camera. "I'm a chameleon."

A very expensive chameleon. "If you have to ask, you can't afford it"; Peterson's clients don't ask. He describes his

No. 1 client only as a household name.

Calling domestic cases "passe," Peterson tracks down stolen oil, securities and cosmetics formulas instead of wayward spouses. He also roots out employee drug use and theft. He nailed a thief recently by implanting a transmitter in a power tool. After two false alarms the thief and tool were caught going out the back door. Electronic counter-measures, executive protection, asset searches — as the woodcut in his office says, "There is no such thing as an impossible mission." Peterson specializes in missing persons.

"You lose 'em, I'll find 'em," he says. Peterson remembers finding an industrialist's daughter who'd eluded detectives



Robert W. "Pete" Peterson

for years. "It's like catching the biggest fish in the lake," he says, "the one everyone wants to catch." A case like that becomes an obsession; the stalker half falls in love with his prey. "You feel like you know the person," he says, "like you're part of the family, but they don't know you're there." Peterson finally nabbed the woman by getting close to a friend of hers. "What a sneak," he laughs. "But it was the only way."

The pretexes, the ruses — Peterson admits that every once in a while something will bother him. But, then, most of the people he's after are pretty sneaky too.

Nonetheless, people perceive PIs as "kind of iffy." Since 1977, when the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that the law regulating private detectives was unconstitutional, Colorado's been one of a handful of states that don't license PIs. As a result, Peterson says, "eight out of 10 are bozos." He's forming the Colorado Association of Certified Investigators to separate the gumshoes from the stumblebums.

A background check on Peterson would turn up "cloak and dagger stuff" for Army Intelligence in the late 1960s and a tour as a cop until faced with the prospect of arresting friends at a time when smoking pot was a "hanging offense." Deeper digging would show that, as a kid, the Chicago native read everything he could find, including, at 14, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.

Unlike some fictional PIs, Peterson doesn't go out of his way to step on cops' toes. "Denver cops I like," he says. Small-town cops will "blow your cover, their cover, everybody's cover."

Peterson calls his profession of 13 years a "mercenary's occupation," working "both sides of the criminal justice system. You're either trying to catch people or get them acquitted."

How does a mercenary spend his free time? Why, he builds a helicopter in his back yard, and earns a black belt in karate. As for a family, he says he hasn't found the right woman — or he might have found the right woman, but she hadn't found the right man. "That makes me sound self-effacing," Peterson says, then laughs. He knows that's a false lead. □

Kris Robbins, a Denver free-lancer, writes this monthly profile for DENVER MAGAZINE.