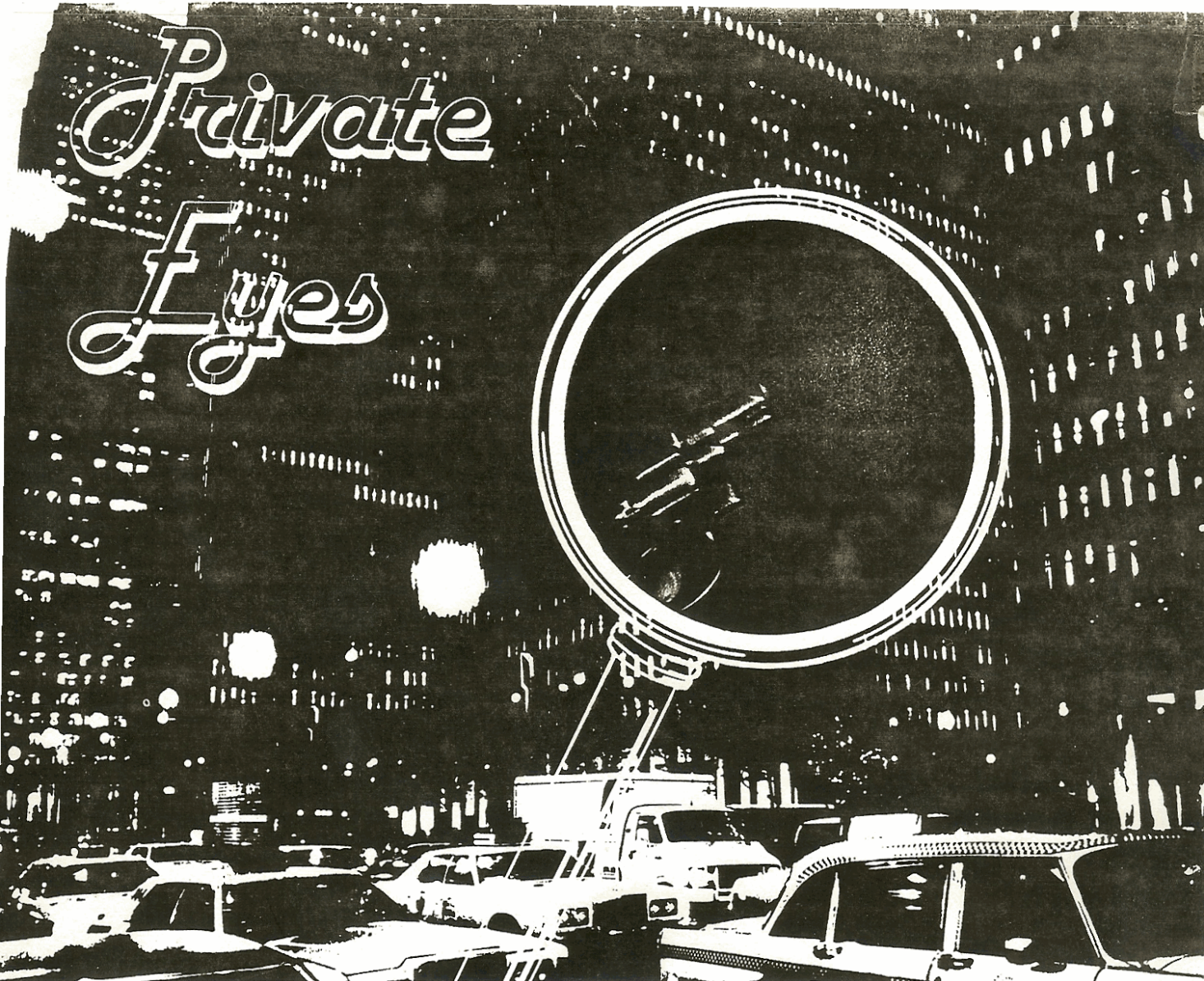


Private

Eyes



By
Marjie Lundstrom

11:36 a.m. The stocky man with a toothpick dangling from his lip slips a palm-sized Pentax camera into the pocket of his three-piece suit. A .38 special is tucked in his leather shoulder holster. On the wall of his East Colfax office is a sign, almost a dare, that reads: *There is no such thing as an impossible mission.* A tarantula peers out of a terrarium on a nearby coffee table. The man flips off the light, switches on the burglar alarm and springs down the back stairs. Putting on his shades, he strides over to his silver Corvette and slides in.

Meet R.W. (Pete) Peterson, one of Denver's most flamboyant and exclusive private eyes. He is handsome, he is slick, he is everything you ever imagined a private detective would be. On this crisp day, he will slip secretly and silently into the lives of several prominent people. He has been hired by the president of a stock brokerage firm,

who suspects that at least two of his employees are about to "defect" and take company secrets—and clients—with them. Later, this president will retain Peterson to investigate cocaine dealing in the firm.

11:47 a.m. His silver 'Vette streaks downtown. The CB radio crackles; he picks up the mike. "Hello? Are ya

there?" More static. "Yo, Vicki, are ya out there?" he asks again. After a few seconds, a faint voice acknowledges. "Howzit look?" the detective asks. "They'll be going to lunch soon, probably about 10 minutes," the voice responds. The woman on the radio is a plant. She has been inside the firm for three months. Watching... Reporting. She is the friendly receptionist who

Editor's note: While some dissatisfied citizens complain of too much government intervention, there is one industry Colorado state government apparently is keeping its hands off—that of the private detective. In February 1977, the Colorado Supreme Court held that the statute licensing and regulating private detectives was unconstitutionally vague and couldn't be enforced. With that decision, the regulating of private eyes went out the window and the responsibility fell into the lap of the state legislature which, three years later, still hasn't enacted a new law. Hence, private eyes have gone unwatched and unregulated, other than through standard channels such as consumer fraud. Who are these sleuths? Theoretically, they can be just about anyone. Denver Monthly has learned that even a few area teenagers have dipped into the private investigation business. In our search for private eyes, we found two who seem to illustrate the diversity among Denver's Sam Spades.

takes frequent trips to the maintenance room to use her walkie-talkie. The antenna sticks several feet outside the window of the office, which is at least 12 floors up.

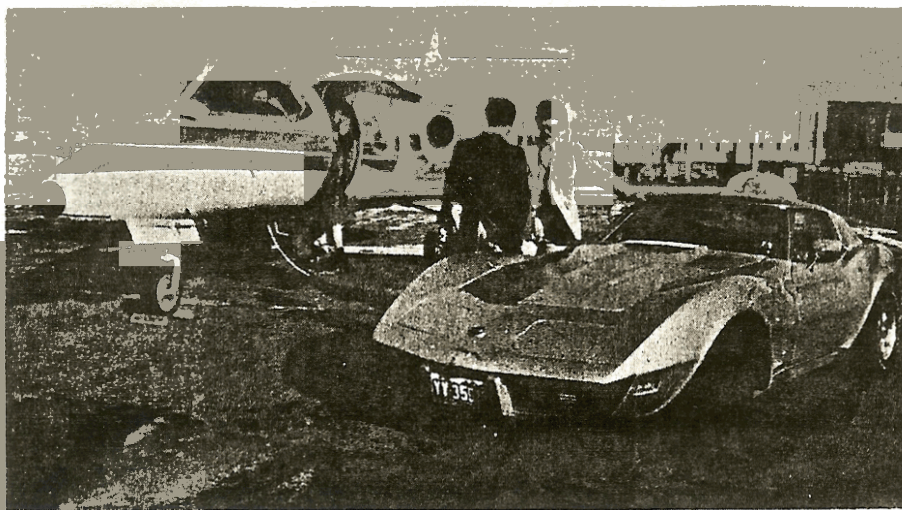
11:58 a.m. His arms folded across his chest, the detective leans against a marble wall in the corridor of the luxurious building. "They'll come out of those elevators," he mutters, squinting at a new batch spilling into the lobby. He wonders if the security guard recognizes him; he's been there before. He strolls over to the elderly man. The guard remembers.

12:23 p.m. Peterson slides his shades down his nose and focuses on a sharply dressed man and woman leaving the lobby. "That's one 'a the guys," he says, "but we aren't gonna watch him." The couple is swallowed in the noon rush. Minutes pass. A middle-aged man in a brown suit strolls out of the elevator. "Get ready, that's him." Peterson pauses, looks around, then sprints out the double doors and onto the busy sidewalk. He stays a quarter-block behind the man, but the target is moving fast. The detective picks up his pace; he is almost running. The man ducks into a cafeteria and sits down at a table. He is joined by the couple who left earlier. Peterson's curiosity is aroused.

12:36 p.m. Peterson sits across the room from his subjects and, still wearing his sunglasses, munches a chef's salad. He has taken two bites when the attractive woman rises to leave. "Hmmm, this is interesting. I wonder if Mr. Big knows about her," he mutters, scooting back from the table and reaching for his miniature camera. He falls in behind her on crowded 17th Street. He holds his camera at arm's length and snaps a picture of this woman in an expensive gray coat and matching boots. No one notices. He snaps again. And again. At the stoplight, he ducks behind a column and waits. She enters The Denver, and Peterson follows. He needs a shot of her face. He grabs the reporter's hand. "Well, dear, what did you want to shop for today?" he asks casually, now only a few steps behind. The woman in gray stops abruptly at the perfume counter. Peterson does, too. He picks up a perfume bottle, leans over the counter and shoots her straight on. "That'll do it. Let's go."

1:03 p.m. He hops in his 'Vette and heads home.

This slice of real-life detective drama wasn't *exactly* like the movies. Those



Staff photo by Janis Kincaid

Pete Peterson meets jet-set client

folks cranking out the scripts would have us believe every assignment is filled with diamonds and daggers; that daily shootouts are "just part of the job, ma'am"; that even now, little holes are being drilled in motel room walls.

Listen, these guys in Denver don't even wear trench coats. Their cases could rarely unfold in an hour. But that doesn't mean their lives are any less intriguing. Theirs is a world where suspicion, jealousy, curiosity and crime are meal tickets. Given enough time and enough bucks, they can find out everything there is to know about you—where you live and work; who you eat, drink and sleep with; how much money you have or used to have . . .

They know just how public your private life really is.

Now if you're adamant about finding a Dan Tanna or Jim Rockford, then look up Peterson, the man who starred in the downtown Denver tailing scene. He's as close as they come. The 5-10, 175-pound detective talks like Humphrey Bogart, has disguises that'd fool Baretta and keeps a semi-automatic rifle and a tarantula in the corner of his office. At 35, this private eye fits every stereotype you've ever heard, right down to being handsome. He has a house near Idaho Springs, owns half a \$90,000 condo in Vail, keeps a secret apartment in Denver, has a branch office in Aspen and drives a Corvette. His exploits have taken him to New York, Chicago and Las Vegas.

Peterson laughs at the notion that his life might be glamorous but concedes that he does have his share of prominent clients. (He calls them Mr. Big, Mr. Big-Big and Mr. Big-Big-Big, depending on their notoriety and wealth.) Peterson once was hired to escort a gentleman to New York City. He isn't sure why—unless it had something to do with the fellow's briefcase filled with \$100 bills. He guards one Mr. Big's Learjet with a semi-automatic rifle, he claims, and is the bodyguard for an Arab oil shiek. He also has been hired to watch over a famous singer whose life

had been threatened. On these assignments Peterson says he tries to "be as inconspicuous as I can and look as threatening as possible." One of his juiciest assignments was in the oil fields of Wyoming, where he tracked down thousands of dollars that were mysteriously disappearing in oil and overbilling.

"I've turned down lots of stuff and remained arrogant," he said, eas-

ing back in his comfy office chair. "The serious people of the world don't want someone serving paper and repossessing cars . . . You'd be surprised at how seldom I deal with sleazy people. Sleazy people don't help you. They aren't in contact with people who have the money to hire you. If I want a contact, I want it to be someone who lives on Polo Club Drive. Those are the people I want to know."

Life hasn't always been plush for this private eye. After a brief stint in 1966 with an Illinois police department, he packed up and headed for Colorado. He spent the next six years "hibernating" in the mountains, working odd jobs in construction, mining, auto repairs and gasoline service. He then studied Criminal Justice at Community College of Denver for two years but eventually decided his time had come. He became a private detective.

Getting a stable of "Mr. Bigs" was no overnight job, Peterson admits. But he held out, waiting for the big names and big bucks. Gradually, the word got out, he said.

Sam Spade had hit the streets of Denver.

Today, Peterson says he refuses to take most domestic and custody cases, unless it's a "favor." He'll leave that for the other guys. But he does recall one rather hairy domestic-type case near Nederland, where he was spying on a house he believed his client's runaway daughter had holed up in.

"Suddenly, I hear this whining noise, ya know? So I dive under this rent-a-car, not knowing whether I'm being shot at or what," he said. (He was.) "It turns out that just before that, the D.A. had made a big drug bust and people were pretty uptight. I figure they thought I was some kinda narc or somethin'."

That's the closest Peterson has come to a good, old-fashioned shootout—and he's crossing his fingers. He gets a few threatening phone calls now and then, he says, but he's not walking around in a bullet-proof vest. Just to be on the safe

side, though, he's enrolled in a karate class at the American Judo College. (He has a purple belt, but don't let that fool you. At any other school, he insists, he'd have his black belt by now.)

Also for his protection (and probably to add a little razzle-dazzle), Peterson stocks a unique assortment of disguises. A scrapbook sitting next to his tarantula shows him traipsing about as a "freak," priest, doctor and mailman. "If you're out at, say, Stapleton Airport and you think your cover is being burned, you just cut into the washroom and put on a simple little disguise," he said. "Besides, it cuts down on overhead. You don't have to call in someone else to take over."

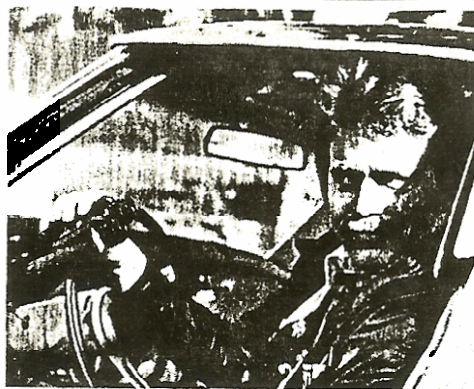
But when it comes right down to it, Peterson really sees himself as a modern-day Sherlock Holmes—a man who uses wit, reason and logic, not fancy doodads to get the job done. "The best equipment is a quick wit when it's needed," he said with confidence. "I would be able to present myself at the White House in a three-piece suit and make anyone think I have an appointment."

Not all Peterson's cases have been ready for prime time. Once, he got called in on a cat-napping. Then there was the time he followed the wrong person around Vail for three days. And he's not exactly wild about his many surveillance cases which involve long hours of sitting and staring—often at nothing.

He's not really complaining, though.

'I'd like to see myself in a Learjet, making the fees Banacek made, flying over Hawaii a lot and having a 55-foot yacht.'

—PETE PETERSON



He likes to consider himself a "mercenary who guards both sides of the criminal justice system." And being a mercenary usually means bucks. Peterson isn't sure how much he makes because his cases are sporadic, but he admitted that "there were two or three months there when I thought I would make \$100,000 a year."

But what Peterson would *really* like is to hobnob with the likes of his clients. "I'd like to see myself in a Learjet, making the fees Banacek made, flying over Hawaii a lot and having a 55-foot yacht," he said. "I wouldn't quit working, but I got into this with the intention of making a lotta money. And I plan on doing it."