

GREAT IMPOSTERS OF HISTORY

Quest paper prepared and presented by Nancy Carlson Dodd on Dec. 13

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(I will begin this paper by having George whisper something in the President's ear. Then he will announce that Nancy can't be here today, but has sent a substitute in her place. She is good friends with the famous Doris Day, so she will be here instead of Nancy. I will then burst thru the door singing, "Que Sera" wearing a blonde wig. Someone will shout, "You're an impostor!!!" And that's the way I'll begin.)

History is jammed full of people who practiced deception under an assumed name or character. There seems to be no one exact reason why someone becomes an impostor. Some do it for excitement and thrills that come from exhibiting oneself in another's identity. Others do it for the recognition and fame they're able to achieve. For others, money is the sole motive. But all impostors have one thing in common: They live by their wits. There is no limit to their cleverness, ingenuity, and boldness. They are a special breed of people.

In the early 17th century, Russia saw no less than three 'False Dimitri's, all claiming to be the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible. The first of them even made it to the throne, but all three met violent ends. Today I am going to limit my talk to 5 famous impostors of history; otherwise we'd be here til Christmas.

The first impostor, Wilhelm Voigt, born in 1849, had spent much of his life in prison for theft. In 1906, dressed in the uniform of a German Army captain, a uniform which he had assembled from various second-hand purchases, he played on the unquestioning obedience expected of German soldiers. He gathered a few of them, and occupied the town hall in Kopenick, near Berlin. Claiming that town officials were suspect of fraud, he got the soldiers to guard the building while he "confiscated" just over 4,000 Marks, (German money). Ordering the troops to wait half an hour before leaving, he left, changed back into his civvies, and

disappeared. He was later apprehended and served some of a four year sentence before being pardoned by Kaiser Wilhelm II. He was now an international celebrity because of the way he had highlighted the absurdity of German militarism. He then made lucrative personal appearances and retired in financial comfort. Several films and TV dramas have since been produced about him.

And to further prove that being a believable impostor does bring one fame, let's just consider the life of probably the most well known impostor of all, Frank Abagnale, who was played by Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2002 movie, "Catch Me if you Can." Frank pulled his first job at age 15, bilking his own father out of \$3,400 by buying tires on his dad's gas station credit card, and then returning them for cash. Frank had a rather unhappy childhood, which seems to be a similar strain in the young lives of many impostors. His father was wealthy, the divorce from mother brought many disruptions, then his father lost his business and money, and Frank ran away from home at age 16. On the train, running away from home, he conned another boy to take him home with him, saying his parents had died. He stayed with them for awhile, and realized he could earn more money if he was older and since he looked older, he altered the birthday date on this driver's license, adding 10 years to his age. He started writing bad checks and that was the beginning of his career.

One day, while he was in New York, fleeing police for check fraud, he saw his first flight crew, a Pan American crew. He felt if he were a pilot, he could cash a check anywhere. One of the fascinating things about studying impostors is the canny way they get the necessary documents. Abagnale looked in the yellow pages, dialed Pan Am's number, and said he was a pilot, Robert Black, based in Los Angeles. Said someone had stolen his uniform. The woman gave him the address

of the Uniform company and said she would call ahead and tell them he was coming. He was welcomed, they fitted him with a uniform, wouldn't accept cash or check, but they put it on the Pan Am account with a phony employee number Frank made up. Next, he knew he needed Pan Am wings for his jacket and an emblem for his hat, so he dialed the Pan Am number again and was referred to the Stores Dept and told it was in Hangar number 14 at Kennedy Airport. Wearing the uniform he had just acquired, he walked right past the guard in the shack, told the clerk his two year old had taken the pin off his uniform, and the clerk gave him wings and a Pan Am badge for his hat. He hung continually around airports, talking to pilots, garnering knowledge, and noticed all stewardesses and pilots had plastic-enclosed cards pinned to their jacket.

He found an "Identification" firm in the yellow pages, went there and told the salesman he represented a Puerto Rican airline that was expanding into the U.S. and needed quality ID cards for over 200 employees. The man was enthralled with making a big sale so he showed him what most airlines use, and Frank asked if the salesman could give him a sample, saying, "Tell you what. Why don't we make one up, using me as the example." The salesman led him to an ID camera that produced mug shots within minutes, filled in his phony information, sealed it in plastic, and handed it to him

Now all Frank needed was a license, as a Captain whom he had interviewed, posing as a student, had told him that was the most important thing. He had no idea what he was looking for. He went to book stores again, and studied (there's a clue) flying publications. There was a small ad in the back of one of the magazines that a firm was offering to duplicate any pilot's license engraved in silver and mounted on a plaque for only \$35.00 The company used the standard, precut

license die used by the FAA. All the pilot had to do was supply the pertinent info, including his FAA license number. He called the firm, ordered one, gave him fake info and somehow he had found out that a pilot's license number is always the same as his social security number. The plaque arrived within a week, and the replica even had the signature of the head of the FAA. He took it to a hole-in-the wall print shop, told them he needed to get his license reduced down to carry in his wallet. He offered to send for his actual certificate which was home in L.A., but the shop owner said, "Nah, I can do this." And right then and there, he used a special camera, reduced it, printed it on heavy card stock and within 5 minutes, Abagnale had his FAA license. He was now ready for flight duty, as long as someone else flew the plane. In his autobiography, he noted, "During the next five years the uniform was my alter ego. I used it in the same manner a junkie shoots up on heroin." He was only 17! He deadheaded all around the world, cashed thousands of dollars worth of checks. He used the name Frank Williams, and eventually a tower official suspected, and he left town, moved to Atlanta.

In Atlanta, he met and made good friends with a Pediatrician and spent hours in the Atlanta Library, reading books for and about pediatricians. Claimed to be a pediatrician, got called to fill in time for a pediatrician, thankfully nothing serious happened on his watch. After several false careers, moving when anyone got suspicious, he moved to Eureka, California and began cashing bad checks again, once more posing in the uniform of a pilot. By now, he had money stashed everywhere.

Soon, he thought it would be more impressive if he had a flight crew around him, so he contacted a small college placement director and pretended to be recruiting stewardesses. So as he went around with these hopeful women, he had an entourage for several check cashing

benders. He forged passports, spent months traveling, and at age 20 went to France and presented himself as a successful Author. There, he was finally caught and arrested. He was sentenced to one year in prison, and spent the time in a dank, dark cell, no light, no bed, no wash basin, bread and water and just a bucket for a toilet. Prisons were really “punishment” then in France. When that sentence was done, he was sent to Sweden because he was also wanted there. He was malnourished, spent a month in a Swedish hospital, and was then sentenced to only 6 months. After serving that sentence, 12 countries requested him to be extradited to them!

He was about to be sent to Italy, when a judge saw his potential, knew Italian prisons were hell, so this judge called a friend at the American Embassy, got Frank’s U.S. passport revoked, so he had to deport him to America! He was sent on nonstop flight to New York, went into the bathroom and locked the door, took out the toilet, and when the plane landed, he got thru the hole and escaped in the dark! He was then going to fly to Brazil because they had no extradition treaty with the U.S. However, he was arrested in a Montreal Airport and sent back to the U.S. He pretended to be sick, was sent to a hospital, and escaped from there. Eventually, two New York detectives found and arrested him.

He was sentenced to 12 years in Federal prison, served 4, was paroled to Houston, Texas. He worked many paltry jobs, but when people found out he was a convict, he was usually let go. He finally approached his new and kinder Parole Officer and told him he had an idea, to work with bank employees to help them prevent fraud. He began with one bank, lecturing employees on what to watch out for. One appearance as a “white-collar crime specialist led to another and for more than 30 years he worked with the FBI’s Financial Crimes Unit. He founded a secure-documents corporation in Washington D.C. and now, only 71 years old

Frank lives in the Midwest with his wife and three sons. In 1980, his memoir “Catch me If you Can” was a number one best seller, and in 2002 the film adaptation would earn two Oscar nominations and more than \$350 million worldwide. Although he became infamous for lying, he found real success by telling the truth.

**** Oh, I’m sure you all know the difference between an Impostor and an Impersonator. (Here Tom Cain will stand up, dressed as Abe Lincoln and recite beginning of the Gettysburg address.) In case you didn’t know, that was an Impersonator.

The next famous impostor I would like to speak of is Christian Karl Gerhartsreiter, who was the subject of the book, “The Man in the Rockefeller Suit”. Christian was born in Germany and came to America as a student in 1978 at age 17. He adapted a British accent, stayed in various homes in Connecticut, moved to California, and spent much time in libraries!!! Studying how to become someone else!

For awhile he passed himself off as a nephew of Lord Mountbatten named Christopher Chichester, and wherever he went, he always joined a church known for its wealthy members, ingratiated himself with them, attended fancy private club events, and hobnobbed with the wealthy. In 1982, he got a room with an alcoholic woman, Didi Sohus. She lived in the guest house of her deceased parents’ home, and her son and wife lived in the main house. The young couple mysteriously disappeared, and Didi explained they had gone traveling and no one paid attention to the missing couple. Frank had manipulated Didi into leaving him her estate. His main obstacle would have been her son John and his wife. Chichester disappeared about 5 months later, driving John and Linda Sohus’s 1985 pickup truck. He showed up in New York, joined St. Thomas Church, introduced himself as Clark Rockefeller. He told people his parents had been killed in a car accident. He met and married

a woman who was the senior partner of the world's premier management consulting firm. She had gone to Harvard Business School, and he surely pulled the wool over her eyes. He claimed his wealth was encumbered by a lawsuit. They moved to Vermont, bought a \$750,000 home, and had a baby girl whom he called Snooks. In 2006, wife filed for divorce and he got \$800,000 settlement and visitation rights 3 times a year. On one visit, he knocked out the social worker and was going to escape with his daughter, but the police caught him and he was sentenced for kidnapping. While in prison, police opened the case of the missing John Sohus, whose body had by then been found buried on the property where Christian had lived.

During his murder trial, Christian fired his legal team and represented himself in court. People who have studied his case have called him a pathological liar with a narcissistic personality and delusional disorder. The jury found him guilty, and he is now serving time in a California prison. He is only 58 now. His mantra was always, "The bigger the lie, the more people believe you." One of his wealthy friends said about him, "He was a very competent bullshitter."

The next impostor, Enric Marco, as far as I could find out, is still alive at age 99. For three decades, Enric Marco, a Catalan mechanic, was a prominent public face of Spanish survivors of the Holocaust. He claimed he had been imprisoned at Flossenburg concentration camp in Bavaria, became president of the Spanish Survivors' Association, received many awards and distinctions for the speeches he gave. He spoke at Parliament and visited schools well into his 80's, to tearfully recall his time at the concentration camp, the torture and killing he witnessed, and his eight months' solitary confinement. In 2005, his story as revealed as a hoax. He had been in Germany during the war, but he was on a voluntary work program established by Franco and

Hitler. Why did Marco lie? It brought him dignity and fame. His early childhood was painful. He was born in a mental hospital for women, where his schizophrenic mother was being held. She was forced to hand over the baby to her husband, a man who had abused her, whom she fled, and Marco was raised in a household with alcoholism and violence. At age 94, he remained unrepentant about his deception, arguing his aim was to keep the memory of Hitler's Spanish victims alive. He was quoted as saying, "Who would have listened to me if I hadn't created that persona?"

The next impostor, Waldo Demara, is the best example of the ingenuity impostors use to get the necessary documents. Waldo was a high school dropout who, in the 1940's, assumed several professional roles before settling down as an ordained minister. Born in Massachusetts, when he was 12 his father lost his money in his business and they moved from a huge home to a poor neighborhood. See that pattern again?

He left home by selling his bicycle and buying a train ticket to Rhode Island. He lived for several years in a monastery. He then floated around, teaching, using a fictitious name until he was discovered, then he would move on. In 1950, Waldo drifted to a town in Maine and was offered a job teaching at a Christian Institution. He made a friend with a Canadian Doctor Cyr, and one day Dr, Cyr asked Waldo to help him get a license in the U.S. So, Waldo asked for his records and credentials! He helped him get his license, but kept a copy of the doctor's documents. The following year, when his job teaching at the college went awry, he remembered those documents! Using them, he was able to join the Royal Canadian Navy as a doctor! It was during the Korean War and they needed him! He was named Surgeon General at a Navy base in Nova Scotia. He was placed on sick call, and usually just dealt with minor illnesses for which he always prescribed penicillin! When he

was faced with a serious illness, he would get opinions from other doctors and follow their advice. He was then assigned to a navy vessel. First emergency was the captain had a swollen jaw. The captain had several infected teeth, Demara got his medical gear, injected Novocain, pulled several teeth, and the Captain later told him, “Nicest job of tooth pulling I’ve ever had.” He had a feeling, though, that the real test was yet to come. A Korean junk boat had been ambushed, pulled alongside them, and there were 19 wounded soldiers aboard! Demara cleaned and stitched wounds, but three were seriously wounded. He gave them anesthetic and removed bullets, even one near the heart!

Their ship then went back to Japan, and they called Waldo the “miracle doctor” and someone released a story back in Canada, using the name Dr. Cyr. People called to congratulate the real Dr. Cyr and he recognized the photo of Waldo. The truth got out, and they realized he was an impostor, but they were too embarrassed to press charges so in 1951 they simply discharged him. After that, he moved from town to town, posing mostly as an educator. At each stop, however, they discovered who he really was. Several times he was put on trial, found guilty, but set free. Why did Demara do this? Perhaps he went thru life trying to reclaim the status he had lost when his father lost his money.

And in closing, if you think being an impostor is outdated, consider Anna Sorokin who recently made news in July of this year. She was described in the paper as “a con artist who once posed as a German heiress. She passed herself off as a wealthy heiress known as Anna Delvey, convincing banks and celebrities that she had a fortune of \$67 million overseas that could cover her jet-setting lifestyle. She had signed a contract last year for her now-infamous life story, but the New York Attorney General’s office prevented that by challenging the contract she had signed, invoking the state law that bans criminals from

profiting from their own notoriety. She is currently serving a prison sentence of four to 12 years.

Please keep that in mind if any of you are thinking about becoming an impostor.

OTHER IMPOSTORS OF HISTORY YOU MIGHT WANT TO READ ABOUT:

Princess Caraboo: In 1817, claimed she was a princess from the East Indies and had been kidnapped by pirates and escaped by jumping overboard in the Bristol Channel. When she was exposed as a cobbler's daughter from Devon, she traveled to America where her fame enabled her to make a modest living exhibiting herself.

Cassie Chadwick: An accomplished impersonator who claimed to be the illegitimate daughter of Andrew Carnegie the fabulously wealthy steel magnate. She claimed he had given her a number of promissory notes worth millions of dollars, so banks were willing to loan her very large sums. Over 8 years she borrowed between 10 and 20 million dollars and lived in great luxury. When she was finally found out, Carnegie attended her trial. She was permitted to take many of her jewels to her jail cell, where she died on her 50th birthday.

Grey Owl: In reality was Archibald Belaney who was abandoned by his parents as a child, raised by a snobbish aunt whom he hated, and his unhappy life led him to live in a fantasy world. He worked as a guide and fur trapper in Canada, and took on the identity of Grey Owl, claiming he was the child of an Apache mother. He became a famous conservationist and gave lectures all around, pretending to be Indian.

Anna Anderson, following the Russian Revolution, came forward claiming she was a member of the Russian Royal family. In the early 1920's, after spending time in a Berlin mental hospital following a suicide attempt, she claimed she was Tsar Nicholas II's youngest daughter, Grand Duchess Anastasia.

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