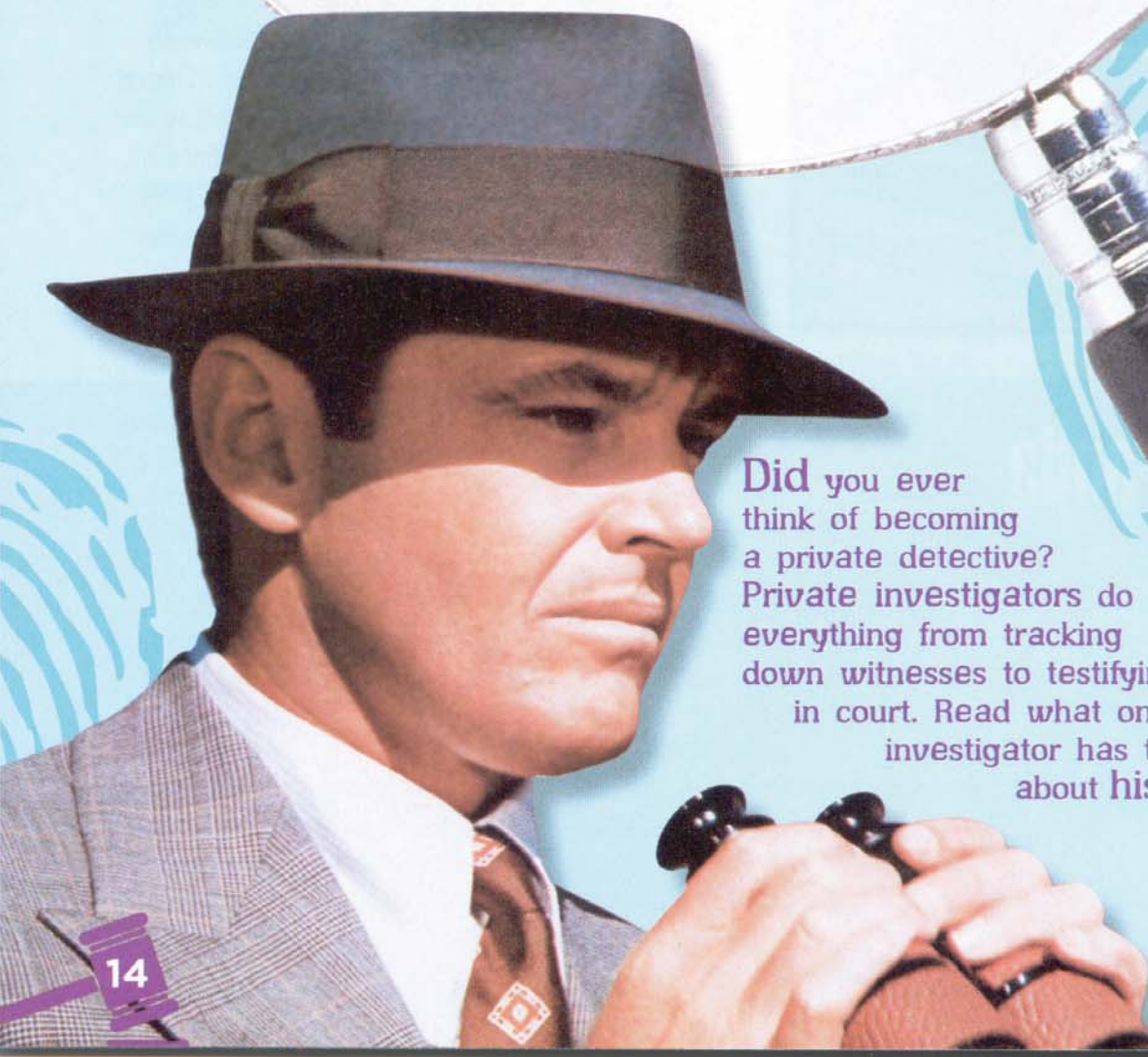


# SEARCHING OUT THE TRUTH



Did you ever think of becoming a private detective? Private investigators do everything from tracking down witnesses to testifying in court. Read what one investigator has to say about his work.



**RICK JOHNSON** is a private investigator in Denver, Colorado, and also operates his own investigative firm. Rick has been a private investigator for about eighteen years. Before that, he served for ten years in the Denver District Attorney's office. Rick (RJ) kindly took time out from his busy schedule to answer the questions of this reporter (JC).

**JC:** When did you start looking at law enforcement as a possible career?

**RJ:** My interest in police work probably started when I was in junior high or high school. I started out as a court bailiff at the age of nineteen, working for the City of Lakewood, Colorado. I got more and more interested in the criminal justice system. I was pretty focused on what I wanted to do—how I got there didn't much matter to me.

**JC:** What are some essential skills that legal investigators need to develop?

**RJ:** Having good interviewing skills and people skills is essential. Intuition, or having a feel for things, certainly helps—being able to follow leads. An investigator also needs to be prepared to testify in court. Lawyers are looking for a person who won't be intimidated or afraid to walk into a courtroom and give a deposition, or sworn statement.

**JC:** So I suppose it's crucial to get every detail right when you're writing reports and conducting interviews, since you might be called to testify on cases you haven't worked on in many months?

**RJ:** That's exactly right. One of the problems for investigators is when they don't ask clear, concise questions in an interview, or when they don't know how to ask follow-up questions. An investigator needs to listen carefully and examine what's said to him or her.

**JC:** Do you work for both prosecutors and defense attorneys?

**RJ:** Generally, prosecutors do not hire private investigators. Defense attorneys usually hire investigators, and sometimes a defendant charged with a crime does.

**JC:** What's something that distinguishes your investigative firm from others?



**RJ:** One of the things our firm does is public corruption investigation. That's when an elected official, or someone working on behalf of the government, is suspected of having done something dishonest that's gotten him or her suspended. For instance, the Denver City Council might suspend a police chief for some alleged criminal action. My firm would conduct in-depth interviews to determine whether the allegations are true. Our final report might be hundreds of pages long. The report helps people determine whether the person being investigated should be fired.

We're also involved with many things that are more common to legal investigation firms. We conduct interviews and locate witnesses and missing persons. Our firm also deals with workplace violence, and we do surveillance work, too. So we're pretty well-rounded and able to accommodate most people who call us.

**JC:** What approach do you take when you're confronted with someone who seems to be evading, or avoiding, your interview questions?

**RJ:** This is something every investigator runs into from time to time. You can be persistent, but you have to keep in mind that witnesses can stop an interview at any time, so it's important not to annoy them. But if you're continually getting irresponsible answers, you may want to remind the witness that the tape of the interview could be used in a courtroom down the line.

**JC:** What are some methods you use to make interview subjects comfortable?

**RJ:** You want to use neutral language and try to put the person you're interviewing at ease. When I interview someone, I'll spend the first ten minutes just shooting the breeze, letting the person relax, and reminding him or her that, even though I'm an investigator, I'm also just a regular guy. It's a way of softening them up a little before you get into the formal part of the interview.

**JC:** What kinds of details do you give to defense attorneys?

**RJ:** Investigators gather all the information they can obtain, and then present all the details

to attorneys. Attorneys then build cases with the details and try to convince juries, who will determine guilt or innocence in a criminal case. So it's not the investigator's place to determine which details are important and which aren't.

**JC:** Do your cases often take unexpected twists?

**RJ:** Things have a tendency to change rather quickly, so adapting to sudden changes is crucial and very important. For instance, you could be conducting an interview with a witness who suddenly threatens violence, or even reaches for a weapon.

**JC:** Have you ever experienced anything like that?



**RJ:** Absolutely—most investigators have—so you need to be prepared when a situation takes a turn for the worse. With experience, you learn how to keep a cool head and how to defuse those dangerous situations before they turn ugly.

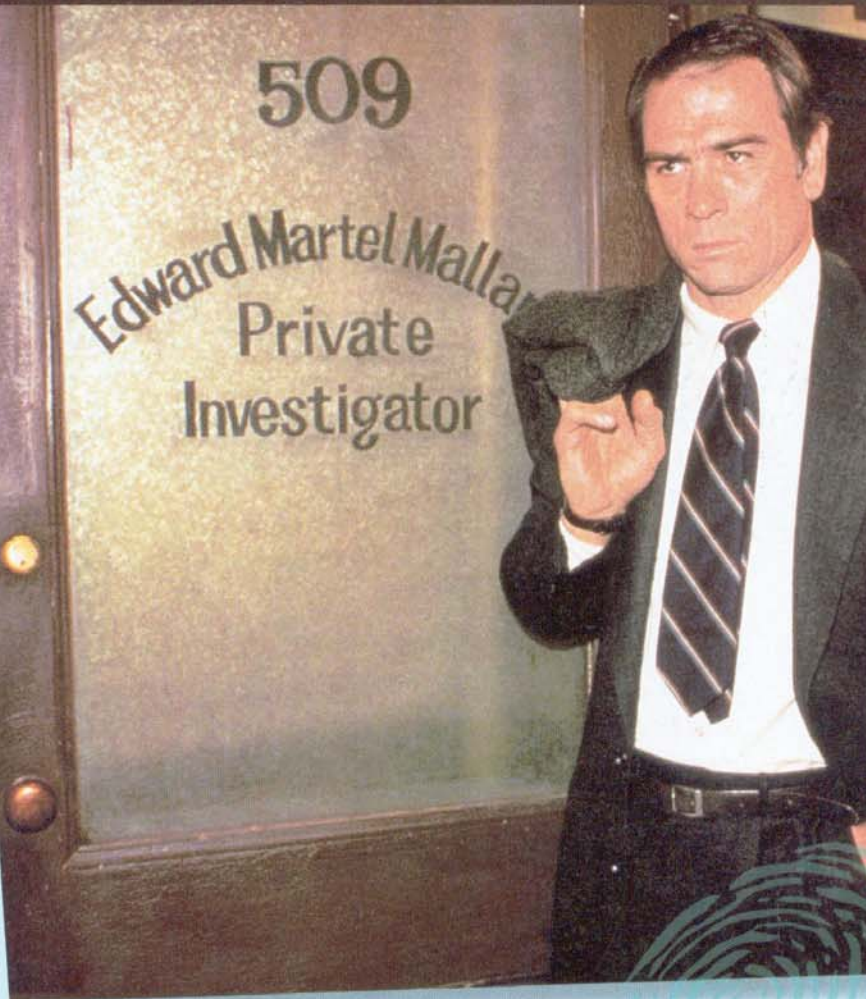
**JC:** TV shows, books, and movies often feature private investigators. Are these characters realistic, and, if not, what are some misconceptions that you'd love to clear up?

**RJ:** I think there's a misconception that the occupation is completely glamorous—it isn't. There's also a tendency to portray things as though private investigators are constantly threatened with danger. In reality, you're usually not too concerned that someone's going to swing at your legs with a baseball bat. Finally, the job isn't as easy as television portrays it to be. Successful investigation involves long hours, a tremendous amount of work, and can be very tedious, or dull. Private investigators have to be very careful in how they obtain information and how they use it because they could end up in jail, or they could be sued if they're not careful. On the other hand, this business pays well if you work hard and stay sharp by honing your skills.

**JC:** Do you conduct interviews with a team, or do they tend to be one-on-one interviews?


**RJ:** Generally, interviews are one-on-one. It's difficult enough for people to come into an office and discuss sensitive matters with one person. Bringing along a third party can really complicate things.

**JC:** Talk a little bit about how your firm conducts surveillance—how much effort and time does it take?



**RJ:** Let's say we're conducting surveillance on a person, or "target," who is coming into Denver International Airport. I cover the entire airport pretty well using four employees. With four people, there's a lot of scrambling around—it's a very large airport—but we've never lost any of our targets.





Conducting surveillance takes a tremendous amount of scouting work. You need lead time to get a team together, and you need to remain one step ahead of your target at all times. Surveillance work can be extremely challenging, but it's also a hoot—you don't know what your target's going to do from one minute to the next. Surveillance work can also be exhausting—you could start at 3 a.m. one day, and not wrap up until 9 p.m. the next night. It can take you from one end of the state to the other.

Sometimes our firm will do surveillance work for corporations. Say a corporation tells us that it has an executive vice president coming to Denver. The corporation has reason to believe that he or she may be sharing private information with people from another corporation, during a meeting at a downtown hotel. They'd hire us to conduct surveillance and find out what's going on.

**JC:** What's your approach when you're locating witnesses or missing persons?

**RJ:** Investigators usually have strong databases to get them started. We had a recent case where an insurance company wanted us to find a woman with a relatively common name. It took my employee about two hours to find her. But we don't just locate anybody: If someone hires me to reconnect with his long-lost girlfriend, I will find her. But for her safety, I'm not going to tell my client where she's living. Instead, I'd give the girl my client's name and phone number, and let her decide whether to contact the client.

**JC:** Which of your cases have given you the most satisfaction?

**RJ:** Probably cases involving children, perhaps when they're runaways and have been brought home. Also, in the past, we've located long-lost parents or siblings. It's very rewarding to help connect people in those circumstances.

**JC:** What are the most demanding duties for you?

**RJ:** High-profile cases, where you're going to be in court the next day, and you have to quickly locate important rebuttal witnesses, who may challenge the information given and change the events in the courtroom. It's tremendous pressure just to locate these witnesses, and then you have to get them to talk, and then convince them to come to the courtroom. None of that is easy to do—and just because you get through one step doesn't mean you're going to be successful with the next.

**JC:** If a reader is interested in pursuing a career as a legal investigator, what kind of training would you recommend?

**RJ:** I'd recommend some type of law enforcement background, whether that's working in a district attorney's office or becoming a police detective. Also, people who are investigative reporters and who understand the legal process make strong investigators. ♦

