A hand holding a deck of cards against a dark background with glowing lights and symbols. The background is dark and textured, possibly wood or stone, with several glowing circular lights in shades of yellow and orange. One light in the upper center has a black symbol resembling a right-angle bracket. A string of small red lights is visible on the left side. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

PIs put psychics  
to the test --  
and sometimes in jail

BY MARTIN YANT



# Florida PI puts psychics to the test -- and sometimes in jail



Private Investigator Bob Nygaard didn't see it coming. But neither did the psychics who, if you believe their claims about foretelling the future, should have. Some of them ended up in prison as a result.

Nygaard, who was a New York police officer until he retired and moved to Boca Raton, Florida, to enjoy the sun and the bars along the beaches, soon decided he needed more in his life.

"I got bored, so I decided to get a PI license to stay active," Nygaard said. "At first, I did the routine type of things PIs do, and then I met these two women, one a doctor and the other a nurse, in a bar."

That meeting, in 2008, changed Nygaard's life and gave him what he now calls his "calling" – investigating psychic frauds.

At the bar that night, Nygaard regaled the women with his favorite stories, including one about how, as a New York cop, he broke up a traveling home-improvement scam. He told them the case gave him an ongoing interest in "bun-co" (fraud) investigations. When Nygaard and the women decided to leave, he gave each his card, and was ready to call it a day.

Then his phone rang. It was the doctor he had just met, who asked if he could meet her at a nearby gas station. When he arrived, the doctor told him she thought he might be able to help her with a big problem she had with a celebrity Miami psychic named Gina Marie Marks.

Marks had told the doctor her life was unraveling because a co-worker had put a curse on her. The only way to get rid of it was through expensive cleansing rituals involving magic which Marks could perform. By the time the doctor realized she was being

scammed, she was out more than \$12,000, but was too embarrassed to talk about it until she met Nygaard.

When she finished her sad, embarrassing story, Nygaard offered to help her pro bono. Nygaard soon discovered four more of Gina Marie Marks' victim. They all told the same story of Marks claiming that someone had put a curse on them. Marks asked each for large amounts of money to conduct elaborate rituals to get rid of their curses.

After developing his evidence, Nygaard went to the Broward County Sheriff's Office and convinced a reluctant detective to look into the case. Later, the detective called Nygaard and told him that he had persuaded Marks to reimburse the five victims.

"What about the arrest?" Nygaard asked.

"There won't be an arrest," the detective said. "The case is too weak because the victims were stupid enough to fall for the scam and then participate in it."



Unsatisfied, Nygaard went to the prosecutor's office, where he was told again that there was no crime to prosecute because all of the victims had cooperated with Marks. Nygaard didn't want to take no for an answer, so he pushed harder. At that point, the prosecutor said, "Who the hell are you to tell us what to do or who to prosecute?"

Nygaard still wasn't finished, though. Instead, he gave the goods to a local reporter, who wrote a detailed expose of Marks. That finally got law enforcement's attention. Marks was convicted of a misdemeanor and the victims got their money back. That opened a floodgate of complaints. Marks later pled guilty to a felony, paid the other ripped off clients a total of \$503,000 and went to jail.

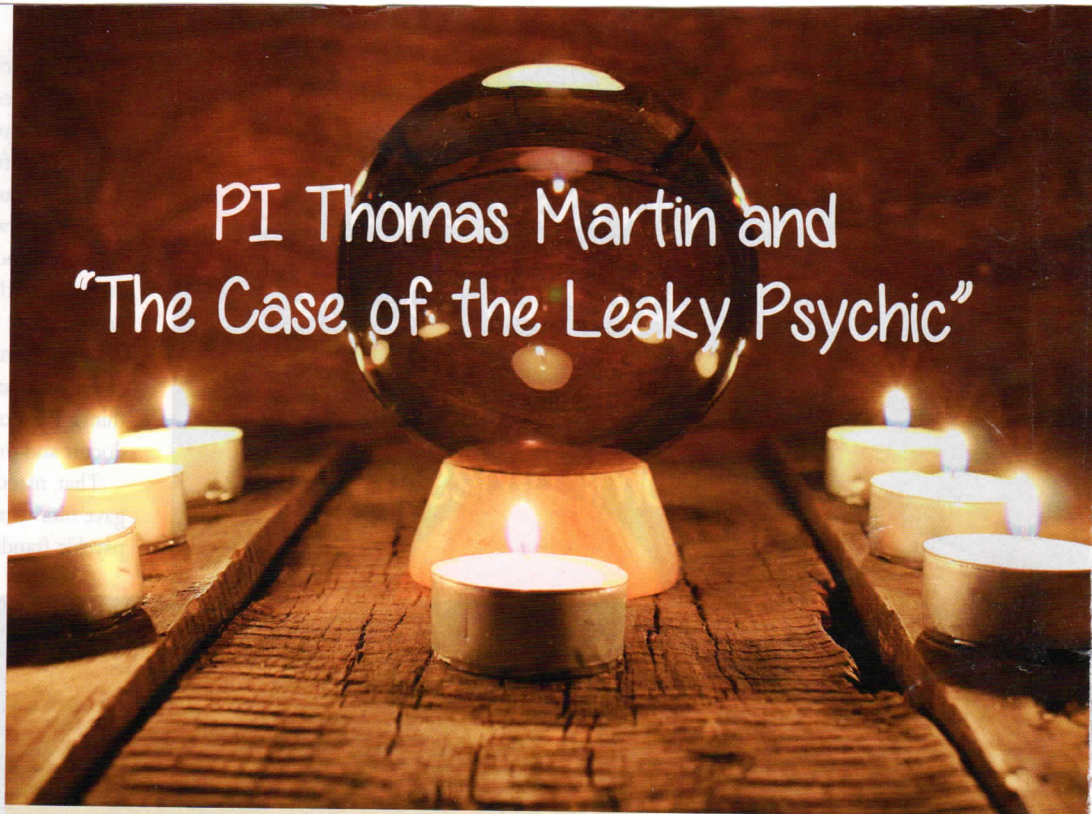
"That was the start of it," Nygaard said. "Since then, I've been fighting the same kinds of battles all across the country. Sometimes I get a cooperative detective who understands what's going on, but I still find many who don't. In those cases, I get stories in the media about local law enforcement's reluctance to prosecute psychic frauds, and then their attitude changes.

"The emotional abuse and financial devastation these self-proclaimed psychics cause for these vulnerable people is unbelievable. Some people become suicidal, and I've had some clients who actually attempted suicide. There is a very sinister side to this fortune-telling game. Psychics are often part of what they call 'non-traditional organized crime.' When people go into what seems to be a mom-and-pop shop, they think they are dealing with an individual fortune teller when they are actually part of a larger criminal group that does all kinds of fraud. Yet I've never seen victims of organized crime so maligned as these victims are."

So far, Nygaard said, he has investigated 28 psychics for 40 victims and recovered \$3.2 million. He said he's now working on about 30 cases across the country.

"It doesn't take a lot of time to figure out if someone is being defrauded by a psychic," he said. "All you have to do is ask the victim what happened, and the victim tells a story that usually follows a pattern, often based on a curse that must be eliminated by increasingly expensive techniques."

## PI Thomas Martin and "The Case of the Leaky Psychic"



**T**homas Martin, president of Martin Investigative Services in California, has the same feelings about psychics. The former federal agent said that in his 40 years as a private investigator, he's come across a number of psychics hired by his clients, and he has never had one of them give him anything concrete.

Martin said he now tells his clients with a psychic to keep them away from him.

"I tell them that if having a psychic makes you feel warm and fuzzy, deal with them on your own time and don't try to drag me into it. I'm not going to lend credence to it. In LA, there's a psychic on every corner, and they're nothing but bad magicians. They may be able to pull a rabbit out of the hat, but at the end of the day they never produce factual evidence."

Sometimes psychics can even be a mole. As an example, Martin talks about what he calls "The Case of the Leaky Psychic."

When Martin was retained by an international business mogul to find out how he was being blindsided in divorce court every day by the attorneys representing his wife, a well-known TV star, Martin and his agents quickly eliminated wire taps, computer hacks and listening devices as the source of the leaks.

At that point, Martin took his client through every step of his day, but that didn't help, either. Finally, the frustrated client complained to Martin that he couldn't understand how neither he nor his psychic could figure out who was leaking case strategy to his wife's legal team.

"Psychic?" Martin asked. "When do you talk to your psychic?"

"I talk to her pretty regular, especially at night to go over the day's activities so I know what is going to happen the next day."

Martin couldn't believe how such a wealthy client could be so naive, so he came up with a strategy to smoke the psychic out.

Martin instructed his client to give his psychic a lot of false information that night, and the wife's case began to unravel the next day. The wife eventually settled for pennies on the dollar to avoid being exposed for bribing his psychic.

"Psychics," Martin said, "are a cottage industry for ripping off people---and the richer the better."





# 'Ghostbuster girl' paved the way for today's PIs

Modern-day psychic-fraud investigators have some big shoes to fill—and they probably are high heels. Rose Mackenberg's name might not ring a bell now, but it certainly did in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That was especially true of psychics and spiritualists, many of whom kept a photo of Mackenberg handy so they could identify her if she sought out their services.

Mackenberg first made a name for herself after she started working for famed escape artist and magician Harry Houdini. Houdini earned publicity by exposing what he called “ghost racketeers” in every town on his tour.

When Mackenberg went to him for advice on a psychic-fraud case the young private investigator was working, Houdini was so impressed he hired her as one of his undercover investigators who investigated psychics and mediums in towns where he was scheduled to appear. After Houdini taught her the tricks of the psychics' game, Mackenberg did such a good job exposing them that he made her his chief investigator. Mackenberg was a thorough investigator and acquired so many sham spiritualist diplomas and titles that the other investigators called her “The Rev.”

Mackenberg also started appearing on stage with Houdini, which increased her fame. Houdini asked her to testify before Congress in May 1926 in support of a bill he was advocating that would outlaw fortune tellers in the nation's capital. Before she did, however, Mackenberg went undercover to investigate the two D.C. psychics scheduled to testify against the bill. When she testified, Mackenberg said one of

the psychics told her that she had performed palm readings for several senators and that séances were conducted in the White House for President Coolidge and his family.

That testimony created an uproar. According to *The New York Times*, the session “came near winding up in a free-for-all fist fight. Cries of ‘liar!’ ‘Fake!’ and ‘Traducer!’ were exchanged by Houdini and his assistants, and the din reached such a point that members of the committee demanded that the police be called.”

In the aftermath, the bill failed to pass. But Mackenberg received considerable publicity for her accusations. When Houdini died a few months after the hearing, she set out on her own to investigate claims for defrauded individuals, businesses, attorneys and newspapers. She was also invited to write a series of nationally syndicated newspaper articles about the “ghost racket” and longer articles for national magazines.

As her star continued to rise, Mackenberg received threats from psychics and their true believers. At that point, she expanded her use of elaborate costumes – including one with a non-working hearing aid – so she wouldn't be found out.

“If she were placed in a group of 10 women, and you were asked to pick out the investigator, she would be No. 10 on your list,” a *Chicago Tribune* reporter wrote.

In the twilight of her career, Mackenberg appeared on several television shows, including “The Tonight Show Starring Steve Allen.” Allen, a longtime skeptic of psychics and spiritualists, let Mackenberg talk about her work at length.

By the time Mackenberg retired in the mid-1950s, she claimed that she had investigated more than 1,000 psychics and mediums and every one of them proved to be frauds “or a victim of psychosis.” She also humorously noted that the mediums she had investigated had claimed to have made contact with more than 36 of her deceased husbands and as many sons, even though Mackenberg had never been married nor had a child.

Mackenberg said her favorite deceased husband was Walter. “I've received so many messages from Walter that I'm really getting fond of him, except that I consider him an awful dope because he's always telling me to give part of his insurance money to the medium,” she told the reporter.

Despite her many successes, however, Mackenberg lamented that “no number of exposures . . . seem to shake the faith of believers.”

That holds true today. A Gallup poll in 2005 found that 41 percent of those polled believed in extrasensory perception, 26 percent believed in clairvoyance and 31 percent believed in psychic communication.

Mackenberg died in 1968, but the psychic-fraud industry lives on. Although actual numbers are hard to come by, the industry is said to have an estimated worth of over two billion dollars, thanks greatly to the growth of psychic hotlines and web sites. **PI**



Martin Yant was an award-winning journalist before he became a private investigator in 1991 following publication of *Presumed Guilty*, his book on wrongful convictions. Yant's investigations have helped to free 20 wrongly convicted inmates since then. He owns *Ace Investigations* in Columbus, Ohio, with branch offices throughout the state. He can be contacted at [martinyant@aol.com](mailto:martinyant@aol.com) or (614) 481-1941.

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