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A&M mystery writer alive and well
Professor 'murders' with typewriter

By JAMES HAMILTON
 Battalion Reporter

An English professor at Texas A&M University has murdered more than 50 people during the last 20 years. The murder scene: his fifth-floor office in the Harrington Education Center. The murder weapon: his typewriter.

James Franklin Peirce, or J. F. Peirce as he is known by his readers, proudly confesses to the murders that have filled his mystery short stories and helped earn him the status of being Texas' foremost adult mystery short story writer.

"I've probably murdered more people than anyone else in Texas," he said during a recent interview. "All on paper, of course."

Peirce, 60, has taught at Texas A&M for 33 years, using his free time to write mystery stories. For the last 18 years, he has taught creative writing.

Peirce has had more than 40 stories published in Ellery Queen and Mike Shayne mystery magazines. The Bicentennial Collection of Texas Short Stories and other

publications.

Peirce was born in Edwardsville, Ill. While a young boy, his interest in writing was aroused by a retired English teacher, Mrs. Handlon, who lived across the street from his home. She took Peirce and other neighborhood children to the local library about once a week and often read to them, he said.

"She had a dramatic flair for reading," Peirce said. "In many respects, she fostered my interest in writing."

Peirce wrote for his junior high school newspaper and was a voracious reader. He especially enjoyed reading the works of Dorothy Parker, Noel Coward and Arthur Schnitzler, writers, he said, who were to influence his own writing.

After graduating from high school, Peirce attended the University of Illinois and obtained a bachelor's degree in speech. He followed with a master's degree in theater arts from the University of Iowa at Iowa City in 1942.

Peirce taught one semester of high school speech and drama in his hometown before joining the army

and serving in the medical department for more than three years. He spent 10 months doing administrative clerical work in a general hospital in England.

Peirce began teaching at Texas A&M in February, 1946, two weeks after his discharge. After one year of teaching, he met and married Billie Jo Lochridge, who was the head reference librarian at the Texas A&M Library.

Although Peirce wrote a great deal during his early years teaching, his stories didn't sell well until 1956 when he sold three stories to three national magazines in three months. Thinking he had found the secret of being a successful writer, Peirce faced an important decision.

"I asked myself if I wanted to be a full-time writer or if I wanted to be a teacher who wrote," Peirce said. "At that time, I decided that there was no question about it; I wanted to be a teacher."

"That was a good decision since I didn't sell anything else for another two and a half years."

Peirce said he didn't consider himself a professional writer until a few years later when he had sold several more stories and was invited for the third time to join the Mystery Writers of America, an organization that fosters fellowship among mystery writers.

Since then, Peirce said, he has enjoyed a successful life as a mystery writer. Two of his stories appeared in Mystery Writers of America anthologies. And his short story, "The Final Portrait," appeared in Best Detective Stories of the Year 1972.

Peirce's latest achievements include his short story "Conditioned to



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I've probably murdered more people than anyone else in Texas," said Texas A&M University English Professor J. F. Peirce in a recent interview. "All on paper, of course." Peirce has been writing mystery short stories for the past 20 years.

"Kill," which appeared in the April 1978 edition of the Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine; "The Day of the Dead," which was selected last month for the MWA's honor roll for best detective stories; and "The Caterpillar Hunter," which is scheduled to appear next month in a book entitled Texas Stories and Poems.

Peirce, who has also won the top award at Southwest Writers Conferences on three occasions, spends between two and four hours writing each day.

Peirce said he gets ideas for his mystery stories from many sources, including dreams, newspaper columns and quotations. Sometimes he browses through books of pictures and photographs for ideas.

"I've written two stories by trying to relate the characters that I've seen in a number of pictures and the situations that the pictures suggest," Peirce said.

He wrote the short story "A Promise of Spring" using this technique, basing the story on seven characters he saw in four different photographs.

"But I have no one way of getting ideas," Peirce added. "Mostly, I try to see relationships between things or two people, and then I ask myself questions and give myself answers to them in trying to develop a plot."

Peirce writes down his story ideas and stores them in manilla folders, which clutter his desk. Occasionally, he tries to develop ideas immediately

after conceiving the, but he usually files them away and thinks about them later.

His short story, "The Day of the Bomb," took more than 10 months to complete.

"With other stories, I get an idea and I can't wait to write it," Peirce said.

Peirce explained that it is becoming increasingly difficult to sell his mystery stories. "Anybody who writes a mystery story today," he said, "is competing with a lot of other people."

"About 13 or 14 years ago," Peirce said, "there were over a thousand mystery stories published in the City and Country magazines. Three years ago, there were less than 500. Because of this, the vision, in all probability, of the short story form is declining. The increase in the number of stories being written is the situation getting the most attention at the moment."

Peirce added it would be difficult to support himself solely by writing. He said the mystery market is relatively poor-paying and that only a few percent of the full-time writers and 19 percent of the part-time writers manage to earn a decent living from writing.

"I make more money as a college professor than a vast majority of the mystery writers," he said.

A good portion of the time Peirce earns goes toward his major hobby other than writing. "My wife and I love to travel," Peirce said. "We take one or two trips every year."

During the summer, he and his wife went on two cruises, one to the Baltic Sea and one through the canals of the Netherlands. On previous trips, they have been to the British Isles, southern Europe, South America, Canada and Mexico.

Peirce, who will be retiring in less than five years, said he is looking forward to that day.

"I suspect that retirement will give me more time to travel and more enjoyed teaching, the more time I have with my young people, with my colleagues."

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