

The Story Of Bader's Double Life

Editor's note: Mystery still surrounds the figure of John (Fritz) Johnson, a popular Omaha, Neb., television personality, more than a week after fingerprint records showed he was actually Lawrence J. Bader, an Akron, Ohio, salesman who disappeared nearly eight years ago. A UPI reporting team of Robert Heis, of the Omaha Bureau; James R. Warso, of the Cleveland Bureau, and David Smothers, of the Chicago Bureau, was assigned to trace this story of a double life. This is their report.

By DAVID SMOTHERS
United Press International

Something was brewing that spring day nearly eight years ago when Lawrence Joseph Bader loaded fishing tackle into his car. The sky was clear, but a storm was blowing up.

His wife was four months pregnant and he hadn't paid any income taxes in five years.

He had to see about some bad checks he had been stuck with in the course of his business, which was selling kitchen appliances. And maybe, he told his wife, Marylou, he would go fishing.

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't," he said.

NICE GUY

Larry Bader was a nice guy. If he was an outdoors man — he

won a tri-state archery contest and wore genuine buckskin when he went hunting — he was also a face in the crowd.

His education had some holes in it. He dropped out of high school to join the Navy. When he came back 18 months later and was graduated, he put in one semester at Akron University before going to work in a campus restaurant.

A friend recalled him as a "red-blooded, all-around nice guy who could talk your ear off and you'd love to sit and listen. You wouldn't say he was wild, though. He was a family man, too."

And a family man he was.

30 YEARS OLD

On that morning of May, 1957, he was 30 years old. He and Marylou had three children with another on the way, and a home in the very proper West Hills neighborhood. Also a \$17,000 mortgage, a \$10,000-a-year income and almost \$40,000 in life insurance.

He had recently boosted his life insurance coverage by taking out a \$7,000 policy with a double indemnity clause — in case of accidental death.

When he rented a boat at the Rocky River livery near Cleveland that afternoon, the lake was calm. But storm warnings were up.

WAS WARNED

Proprietor Lawrence E. Cotleur told him about the warnings. It didn't matter. At 4:30 p.m. Bader shoved off in the rented motor boat.

The storm came up three hours later. The next morning, Bader's boat was found on the rocks at Perkins Beach. Bader was not in it. The Coast Guard said the lake had been so rough no man could have survived overboard.

Bader was gone. Authorities listed him as presumed dead. But Cotleur noticed that the gas line on his boat was disconnected. Gas lines do not accidentally become disconnected, Cotleur said.

Four days later, enter Fritz. In Omaha, Neb.

In fact, in the old Roundtable Bar at 19th and Harney Streets, where so far as anyone can attest the man known as John (Fritz) Johnson was born. The girl behind the bar, now Mrs. Betty Augustine of Omaha, remembers the moment well.

"He was fascinating, debonair, well-dressed and not broke," she recalled. "He asked me out."

Mrs. Augustine was the first of many to be charmed by Fritz, the stranger at the Roundtable Bar, who bought an old hearse for his bachelor courting and equipped it with a coffee bar, pillow and an in-



Mrs. Johnson
... second wife



Mr. Bader
... married both



Mrs. Bader
... first wife

cense burner. The city licensed the bachelor hearse as a "hunting vehicle."

PERSONALITY

Fritz, who caught the city's eye by perching on a flag pole for one solid month, became successively, a radio station announcer, sports director of a television station, and one of the best known, best liked and most flamboyant personalities in Omaha.

One day he took up archery "to strengthen his back muscles after an injury" (he said). He won the Nebraska state championship five weeks later. He enthralled his friends with vivid stories of a boyhood in a Boston orphanage and 13 years in the Navy. He kept tropical fish — especially the Siamese fighting variety, the kind that devour each other.

And he hated the news. Even though he broadcast it, he hated it. His favorite program at one time was called "Good News of the Day," in which Fritz spoke only of the brighter things in life.

ODD BALL

He was an "odd ball," but everyone liked him. In 1961, he gave up his bachelor ways and married pretty Nancy Zimmer, a 20-year-old divorcee and photographer's model. He adopted Nancy's daughter by her previous marriage and two years ago they had a son of their own.

Larry Bader was declared le-

gally dead in an Akron court in 1960. The insurance companies paid off and the government provided the widow with Social Security payments, slightly reduced because Bader had fudged on his income tax.

Marylou Bader had already learned the life of the widow. She took off her wedding ring and put it away. And she settled down to the business of trying to rear four children alone.

Then Fritz Johnson, archer

extraordinary, came east to Chicago. A Nebraska archery firm sent him to a sports show at Chicago's McCormick place to show off its equipment.

There he was, flexing his bows and chatting with the people a week ago last Friday, when a man from Akron did a double take. He had, he was sure, just seen a dead ringer for the missing Larry Bader.

The man called Bader's brothers from Akron. They flew into Chicago, took a look at Fritz

and said he was their long lost brother. No doubt about it.

Fritz said no. He was never in Akron. He didn't know who the two strangers were. Would he be fingerprinted? Why sure, he said.

Chicago police relayed Fritz's fingerprints to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which compared them with Bader's Navy fingerprints. No doubt about it, the FBI said.

Fritz went back to Omaha and hired a lawyer. He didn't remember a thing about it, he said. The lawyer explained that Fritz recently had an operation to remove a tumor in his head. Maybe his memory was affected, the attorney said.

MENTAL TESTS

Fritz went into the hospital for mental and physical tests. From his room during the weekend came the announcement that since he must assume he is still married to Marylou Bader, he and Nancy will live apart for the time being.

In Akron, Marylou was quoted as saying she was married in the Roman Catholic church and "The church doesn't recognize divorce." She "wants a father for these kids," her attorney said.



LAWRENCE BADER
... 'Fritz Johnson.'

Man With 2 Lives Dies

OMAHA, Neb. (UPI) — John (Fritz) Johnson, Omaha television personality revealed last year to be a long-missing Ohio salesman who had been declared legally dead, died of cancer yesterday. His secret died with him.

The "dead ringer" with the fantastic double life died in St. Joseph Hospital as Johnson. His attorney said he would be buried in Ohio as Lawrence (Larry) Bader.

ONLY JOHNSON, 39, could say for sure whether he recalled a past life as Bader, an Akron kitchenware salesman who disappeared while on a fishing trip on Lake Erie in 1957.

To the end, Johnson denied any knowledge of his life as Bader, although he accepted — after positive fingerprint identification — the "inescapable conclusion" that he was the former Ohioan.

Bader left a pregnant wife and three children in Akron. Three days later he showed up in Omaha, applied for a bartender's job and gave the name of John (Fritz) Johnson.

FRITZ SOON took a job as an announcer for an Omaha radio station and then moved to become sports director at one of the city's three television stations. He became one of Omaha's most flamboyant and well-liked personalities.

While not working, he engaged in his favorite sport, archery, and became the Nebraska men's archery champion.

Oh, my aching back



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