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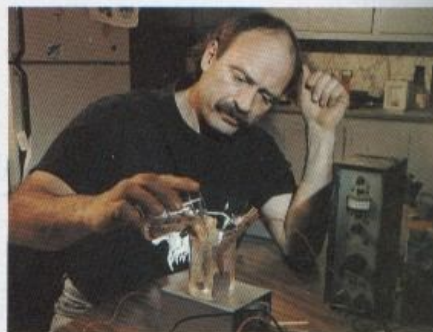
THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN AMERICA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY SULTAN

Uncle Fester cranks out best-sellers on how to make bombs, poisonous gases, and crystal meth for crackpots like Timothy McVeigh. He's a mad scientist who's wreaking havoc and driving the feds mad. *By Rene Chun*

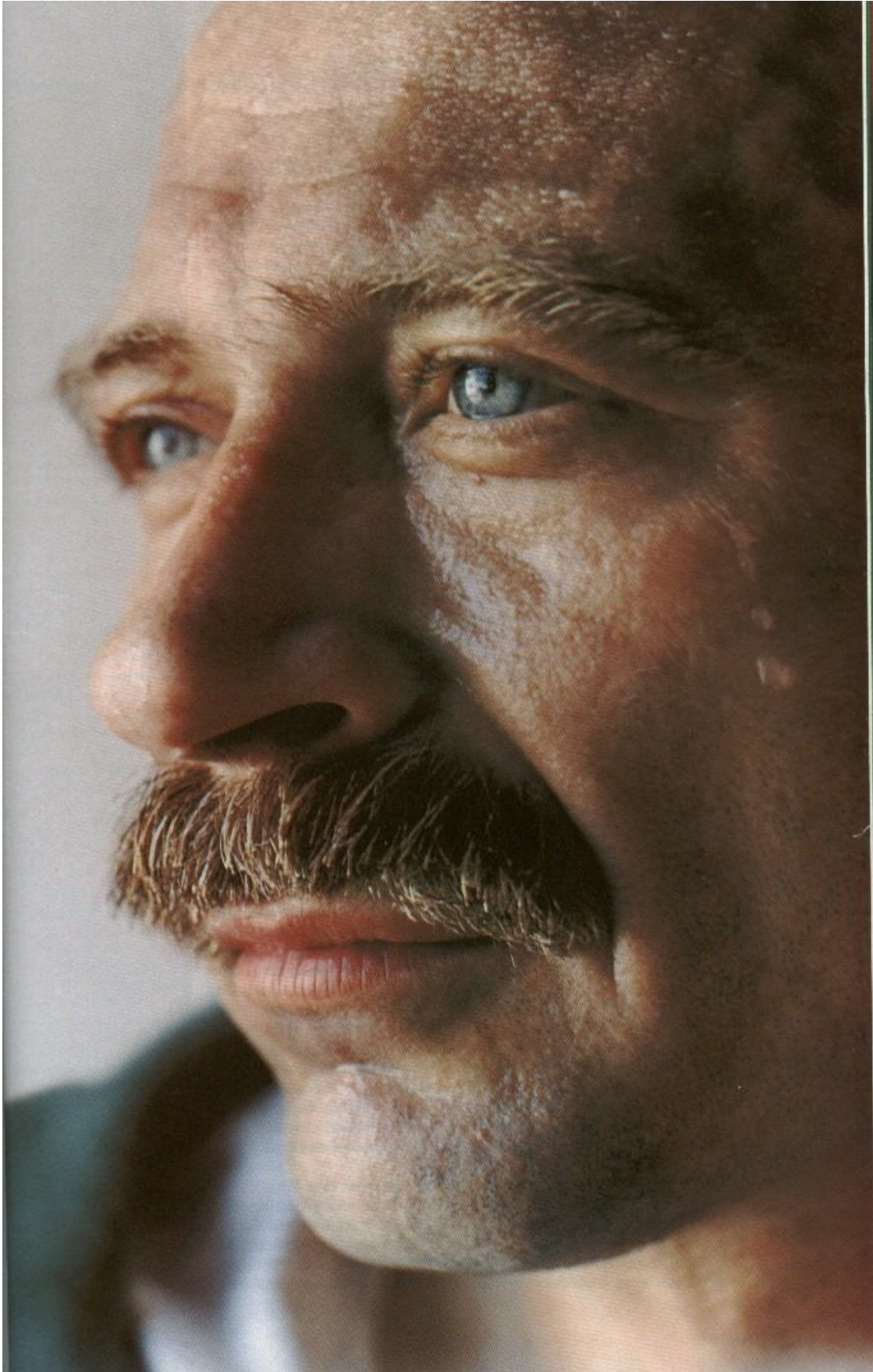
After reading *The Cobra Event*, Richard Preston's thriller about a catastrophic bio-warfare attack on New York City, Bill Clinton was so shaken that he instructed his intelligence experts to assess its credibility and sent a copy to former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. When told that such a scenario was indeed plausible, Clinton and his National Security Council discussed how they might respond to terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction. Six months later, Clinton asked Congress to tack on \$2.8 billion to the 1999 budget to prevent such a catastrophe from ever occurring.

As harrowing a piece of fiction as *The Cobra Event* is, if the president is looking for a truly bone-chilling read, he should pick up *Silent Death*, written by an industrial chemist named Uncle Fester. This no-nonsense how-to manual is a real-life thriller, packed with enough mass-murder and mayhem recipes to keep even the most jaded terrorist riveted. Topics run the gamut from chapter 4, "Nerve Gas: The Poor Man's Atom Bomb," to chapter 10, "Ricin: Kitchen-Improvised Devastation" (ricin is a biochemical agent 6,000 times more toxic than cyanide).



What makes *Silent Death* particularly unnerving is that Uncle Fester doesn't just regurgitate formulas cribbed from patent literature and technical journals. The text is accessible, almost entertaining. It is "a celebration of that ancient and fine art of poisoning," Fester writes. "Instead of the quiet dignity of an effective poison, those with a homicidal intent impulsively reach for a gun, knife, or club. What are we, swamp animals or technological warriors?"

"I'm on a mission," declares **Uncle Fester** (above, concocting some Fester Formula in his kitchen). "I'm going to shove this drug right up the government's ass. Everybody will be cooking their own meth. You work quickly, clean up after yourself, and leave no evidence."



HE'S BEEN CALLED THE **DEVASTATOR OF TOKYO** EVER SINCE THE CULT BEHIND THE NERVE

Even more disturbing is the blatant appeal to extremists who subscribe to the Timothy McVeigh school of do-it-yourself terrorism: "Many other strongholds of the power system (yes, *those* places!) are equally vulnerable to the kind of insidious attack that is possible with phosgene... Why this idea has not been put into practice before, I cannot imagine."

Phosgene is a nasty poison gas used to great effect during World War I. Death is slow and painful; victims eventually drown in the fluid that seeps from their lung tissue. It's covered in chapter 3: "War Gases." Uncle Fester also includes pointers on how to deliver the goods to the target successfully. The preferred nerve-gas delivery system, for instance, is a homemade, one-seater airplane (ordered in kit form from the back of *Popular Mechanics*): "A very satisfactory altitude is 1,000 feet...high enough for the safety of the pilot yet low enough that errors in the height of bomb detonation will be kept to a minimum." For millennium cultists on a budget, the Roman candle "blast dispersion" method provides considerable bang for the buck.

Don't be fooled by Fester's droll pseudonym. *Silent Death* is very real. According to Bill Patrick, the country's foremost authority on biological weapons, the book is so real it may constitute a breach of national security. "I was surprised," Patrick says incredulously. "Fester has the details down." Patrick isn't easily impressed. He pioneered America's secret biowar program in the '50s and '60s and continues to work as a consultant for the government. Scanning *Silent Death's* lethal recipes, Patrick finds little to fault. "Not bad," he says, flipping through the pulpy pages at a rapid clip. "He has a credible outline for producing botulism, and the ricin formula would yield a decent product." Patrick pauses to study some especially troubling nomenclature. "No doubt about it," he concludes. "There's enough in here to cause some real problems."

To put it mildly, the Aum Shinrikyo cult used *Silent Death* as a blueprint for its nerve-gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995. The book's detailed instructions on how to make and disperse sarin gas were followed to the letter by cult members. Although the job was botched (Uncle Fester gives low marks to the "fruit-loop cult" for its poor planning, shoddy execution, and lack of creativity), 12 people died and 5,000 more were hospitalized.

Uncle Fester is like a mutating Pokémon in Japan. Prior to the Shinrikyo strike, "Fester-san" appeared on TV Asahi and gave the Japanese a crash course in Nerve Gases 101. While newscasters waved copies of *Silent Death* in front of a shell-shocked television audience, the flamboyant author, covered head to toe in a bright-yellow rubberized plastic suit, simulated sarin production on his kitchen table. After screening his taped appearance, Fester's drinking buddies dubbed him the Devastator of Tokyo.

Silent Death is a cult classic here too. Nine months after the Tokyo incident, Thomas Lavy, a 54-year-old Arkansas farmer, was arrested and charged with possession of 130 grams of ricin. Customs agents seized four guns, 20,000 rounds of ammunition, and \$89,000 in cash. Rather than offer a lame explanation, like any true-blue militiaman, Lavy hanged himself while he was being detained. When investigators searched Lavy's farm, they found a dog-eared copy of *Silent Death*.

Stephen Charles Preisler lives a quiet life in Green Bay, Wisconsin, where he works as an industrial chemist in an electroplating factory. Slouched on a leather sofa in front of a console television, watching his beloved Packers, this 41-year-old single parent looks less like the mad scientist bent on world destruction than the ESPN junkie bent on draining a six-pack before halftime. His compact, muscular

FESTER'S GREATEST HITS

SILENT DEATH

The only how-to book on the market that's devoted to weapons of mass destruction. The Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo used this collector's item to make the sarin gas necessary for its deadly Tokyo subway attack.



SECRETS OF METHAMPHETAMINE MANUFACTURE

It may not look sinister, but this is the most insidious drug book ever written. One DEA agent predicts it will cause mom-and-pop meth labs to sprout up around the country like Starbucks.



HOME WORKSHOP EXPLOSIVES

Although many of the bomb-making recipes contained in this anarchist primer are grist for hate group Web sites, Fester regards it as the least dangerous title in his "murder-and-mayhem" anthology.



VEST-BUSTERS

"Cop-killer" bullets were banned in 1986, which makes this ballistics manual required reading for everyone from Trench Coat Mafia groupies to drug dealers. It's considered his most controversial work, but Preisler is quick to point out that if David Koresh had made *Vest-Busters* required reading for his Branch Davidians, the Waco massacre wouldn't have been such a turkey shoot.



GAS ATTACK ON THE TOKYO SUBWAY USED FESTER'S *SILENT DEATH* AS A BLUEPRINT.

frame, the result of endless hours of pumping iron, is concealed under a baggy pair of Tommy Hilfiger jeans and a voluminous sweatshirt. Whenever the Packers make a bad play, he tugs the hairs of his neatly trimmed mustache and grimaces.

Preschool detritus is scattered around the room like day-old confetti: an open box of Cap'n Crunch, stray Crayolas, an Elmo poster, Happy Meal toys. Preisler may be an expert in bio-war terrorism, but he is no Martha Stewart. Dirty dishes cascade over the sink, food stains dot the kitchen floor like Rorschach blots. Over the televised roar of the crowd, the family's St. Bernard, Bud Lite, can be heard lapping water from a toilet bowl.

It is a rare day of relaxation for Preisler. His five-year-old son, Casey, and two-year-old daughter, Alyssa, are away for the weekend with Doris, Preisler's ex, whom he refers to simply as "the lunatic." Which may not be far from the truth, considering that the judge granted partial custody to Preisler—a convicted felon who writes death manuals under a comic book alias—rather than the children's natural mother.

This particular Sunday is an especially busy day on the Green Bay social calendar. The Pack is at war with the Minnesota Vikings, but it's also opening day of deer-hunting season. The streets are deserted: Everyone is either watching football or stalking bucks. Given a choice, Preisler always chooses football. For him, the game is not just entertainment, it's a source of inspiration.

"I got the idea for one of the dissemination methods in *Silent Death* while watching a football game," he says between quaffs of Budweiser. "On the sidelines, they have what's known as the cool zone, which is basically a spray of water shot into the back of a big fan. The fan aerosolizes the particles, and you get the cooling effect of evaporation." His piercing blue eyes suddenly become animated. "I thought to myself, 'That would make a mighty fine mist!'" Preisler's loud laughter fills the room, as if discovering a better way to kill people were the funniest thing in the world.

Preisler is constantly thinking of

more efficient ways to move toxic fumes and droplets through the atmosphere. "Stephen's genius lies in his willingness to consider anything," says Jim Hogshire, a friend and fellow underground author. "I put him in the same league with Werner von Braun, the guy that invented the rocket. He's open-minded and has a very flexible brain."

Others are less enthusiastic about the plasticity of Preisler's gray matter. "Uncle Fester is the dark side of Yankee ingenuity," mutters John Sopko, a former member of the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. In a hearing subtitled "A Case Study on the Aum Shinrikyo," Sopko presented evidence in the Senate that highlighted Preisler's sarin recipe. According to Sopko, *Silent Death* has raised a number of unchartered policy issues: "How much money should we spend on chem-bio defense? How does this affect the Bill of Rights? What about monitoring the Internet? Should the FBI be allowed to go into chat rooms? Uncle Fester has made us address all these questions. The man is a menace to society."

The legitimate publishing world also condemns Preisler's work. "Uncle Fester is a very sick puppy," writes book critic Alan Bisbort in *The Hartford Advocate*, one of the few mainstream publications ever to review his work. Bisbort compares Fester to the Unabomber and Tim McVeigh. Preisler's writings "grow from the same seed that spawned the right fringe's bible, *Mein Kampf*." Not exactly a scathing indictment when one considers Uncle Fester's demographics, which are skewed toward skin-heads, bikers, white supremacists, and other assorted malcontents.

Preisler goes to great lengths to distance himself from the politics of his readership. He claims to be a social libertarian and an economic nationalist (he voted for Ross Perot in the last two elections). But his library reflects a far more radical political agenda. On his bookshelf sits a copy of Dr. William Pierce's anarchist manifesto, *The Turner Diaries*, and back issues of *The Spotlight* are stacked on the kitchen counter (McVeigh and Terry Nichols were both regular readers of this far-right, extremist tabloid). Peppered throughout Preisler's conversation are oblique references to racism (he believes in an "ethnically homogenous population"), Holocaust revisionism (he insists more Jews died working in factories than in gas chambers), and Pierce, an icon on the white-supremacist circuit (he listens to Pierce's short-wave radio show on Saturday mornings).

Preisler vehemently denies any affiliation with extremist groups. But according to former neo-Nazi Frank Mienenk, the underground author is connected with notorious hate-group leader Ryan Wilson. "Of course, Fester and Wilson know each other," Mienenk says. "They're associates. It's Fester's bomb-making recipes that are on the Alpha HQ Web site. They write to each other." Preisler says he has never heard of Wilson. He concedes that he might have received a "fan letter" from Wilson, but he receives hundreds of letters from readers and answers every one. He pulls an envelope from a shoe box and begins reading: "Dear Uncle Fester: I need to write to somebody I can trust. I need to get my hands on some ricin. I want it mixed up in cold cream. It's got to be the really strong, pure stuff. Not the weak stuff.—The Salty Dog." Like most writers, Preisler craves attention. "I live for that stuff," he says merrily. "All readers, no matter how wacko, are greatly appreciated."

Silent Death is just one dimension of Preisler's Yankee ingenuity. The Uncle Fester oeuvre has something to offend everyone. Even First Amendment advocates concede that *Vest-Busters* strains our hallowed freedom of speech. Cherished by hate groups and privately condemned by law enforcement officials, this ballistics treatise shows readers how to make Teflon-coated projectiles—so-called

CONTINUED ON PAGE 125

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 119 cop killer bullets—that will penetrate Kevlar vests, which police officers use to protect themselves. “It’s an act of insurrection when you shoot a police officer,” howls ex-cop Bill Brierlex, the founder of the Du Pont Kevlar Survivors’ Club, an organization devoted to police officers whose Kevlar vests have stopped bullets in the line of duty. “Somebody ought to throw a net over Uncle Fester.”

A dragnet is more like it. The self-explanatory *Home Workshop Explosives*, a do-it-yourself guide to concocting nitroglycerin, nitroglycol, nitromannitol, and PETN (an explosive used in plastic bombs), is a modern-day *Joy of Cooking* for unhinged castaways. Fester not only provides the recipes, but also the editorial vitriol to incite massive destruction. “How, in an unfree [sic], heavily surveilled [sic] country, where the citizens are trained from infancy to be informers for the state,” Fester writes, “does one obtain explosive materials without being arrested or killed?”

Of all his writings, Preisler is best known for his popular drug books, including such underground classics as *Practical LSD Manufacture* as well as the awkwardly titled *Advanced Techniques of Clandestine Psychedelic and Amphetamine Manufacture*. The most infamous one, though, the one that made him a legend on the crank scene and has sold more than 40,000 copies

The guy is a loaded weapon,” says drug agent Perri Williams.

(a blockbuster in the microniche world of underground publishing), is *Secrets of Methamphetamine Manufacture* (known colloquially as *SMM*). This unholy tome made meth, as the Clinton administration has frequently pointed out, “the crack cocaine of the ’90s.”

With *SMM*, Preisler did away with many of the noxious and volatile chemicals usually associated with meth production, practically eliminating the ele-

ment of danger (before *SMM*, meth labs tended to spontaneously combust). Using Preisler’s techniques, not only was the turnaround time fast, but the stuff was exceedingly pure. “Fester gets a qualitative yield of nearly 100 percent,” explains one meth cook. “In organic chemistry, if you get one-third of your product out of the precursor, you’re doing okay. Fifty percent is considered good. It’s rare to get a reaction that will yield more than 80 percent. Fester is getting meth that’s just as pure as the stuff coming out of a pharmaceutical lab!”

Preisler scrupulously revises the text every couple of years to keep readers abreast of his latest breakthroughs and one step ahead of the law. For instance, when the feds designated several basic meth ingredients as illegal “listed precursor chemicals,” Preisler instructed readers how to synthesize their own precursors by using inconspicuous, uncontrolled materials. The new, fifth edition of *SMM* includes the long-awaited Fester Formula, a revolutionary meth-making technique, powered by flashlight batteries, that turns Sudafed into pharmaceutical-grade speed. It’s practically foolproof. “Easier than setting a digital watch,” raves one satisfied customer.

In the wake of the book’s publication, narcotics agents are bracing themselves for the second meth boom. “We’re all familiar with Uncle Fester,” says Perri Williams, the former director of operations at the North Central Missouri Drug Task Force. “We know he’s trying to outsmart us, and generally he does. It’s a frustrating situation. We’ve dealt with organizations and gangs—a group of people, you can handle that. But we’ve got one guy out there who is a loaded weapon. That’s pretty scary.”

Uncle Fester chuckles when he hears this. Nothing gives him more pleasure than to jerk the feds around. It was the feds, after all, who put him behind bars. And they must pay. “I’m on a mission,” Preisler says matter-of-factly. “I’m going to stick this drug right up the government’s ass.” Thus far, he’s succeeding. Meth labs are multiplying exponentially in the United States. According to DEA statistics, 317 meth labs were busted in 1991. The 1998 figure stands at 1,623. Ironically, the DEA is one of Preisler’s best customers. *SMM* is an unofficial DEA textbook, required reading for every agent who’s serious about keeping up with what’s going on in the field.

Preisler claims that his books—seven

titles and counting—are payback for a petty-drug conviction for which he ended up doing time. But for all his rhetoric about Big Brother, narco swine, and government mind control, he’s mainly in it for the money, which amounts to about \$30,000 a year. Raising two young children can be costly. “If I didn’t get my 15 percent royalty, I wouldn’t bother to turn out the books,” he says sheepishly. “On the other hand, my writing is also a fame vehicle and an effective soapbox, so I can do my favorite rant of the day.”

By all accounts, Preisler is a devoted and loving father. Indeed, he spends so much of his spare time with his kids (camping trips are a favorite diversion) that there is little time left for his writing. Out of necessity, he cranks out his transgressive manuscripts during his spare time at work. Hunched over an ancient Smith Corona 110 typewriter in his office cubicle, he peeks out a few hundred words a day. “They ought to be charging me rent,” he says with glee. “Maybe I’ll dedicate my next book to my employers.” Preisler’s voice drips with sarcasm. Preisler doesn’t trust the people he works for. He’s convinced they are in cahoots with the DEA, helping it monitor his every move. He’s also convinced that his phone line is tapped.

Preisler says he isn’t being paranoid, just cautious. With two drug convictions in a three-strikes-you’re-out state, he’s living on the edge. He retrieves a Pyrex flask from his office to illustrate his point. He points to several minute symmetrical lines scratched on the interior surface. “They’ve etched my glass,” he whispers under his breath, as if someone might be listening in the next room. “Trying to find incriminating chemical residue.” A pained expression wrinkles his features. “They must think I’m really stupid.”

Growing up on a farm in Hortonville, Wisconsin, 40 miles outside Green Bay, Preisler gave little indication that he would eventually become public enemy No. 1. Like his five siblings, Preisler was a good kid who kept out of trouble. It was an idyllic but uneventful life. Up at five to milk the cows. At school by eight. More chores in the evening. “One day exactly like the next,” Preisler recalls. “The usual farmboy existence.” His only eccentricity was his insatiable appetite for reading. “Stephen’s nose was always in a book.”

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his mother, Julia, recalls. "He wore out our set of *Encyclopedia Britannica*."

By the time Preisler reached Hortonville High School, he was a walking database. Teachers marveled at the seemingly limitless font of information he dispensed on a daily basis. "Stephen

"When it comes to drugs, Fester is like Mister Rogers. Everybody trusts him," says a fan.

was a terribly bright boy," recalls Jim Fitzpatrick, Preisler's biology teacher. "He had an extremely inquiring mind and understood a lot of very deep scientific concepts." But he was hardly class-president material. "He was a strange boy," Fitzpatrick adds. "He didn't fit in. He was an A-student outsider."

Sally Ebben, a former classmate and now a receptionist at Hortonville High, says the label *outsider* doesn't begin to describe Preisler's adolescent persona. "Oh my God!" exclaims Ebben. "Steve was different. Do you know what his nickname was? Psycho!" Preisler was saddled with this colorful moniker after he bit an opponent's chest during a varsity wrestling match. When he spat the bloody flesh onto the mat, his psychotic reputation was forever sealed. Preisler shrugs off the bizarre incident, dismissing it as if it were a harmless prank. "I took a chunk out of his ribs," he says almost nostalgically. "I guess I always had a penchant for entertaining."

Preisler continued his education at Marquette University, where he majored in chemistry and developed an inordinate interest in explosives, earning him his current nickname. Wishing to conduct some big-boom experiments off-campus, he set up an extensive lab in his dorm room. One of his favorite stunts was to drip nitroglycerin on wads of toilet paper and whack it with a hammer. Police, convinced they had

heard gunshots, would arrive on the scene to frisk him, only to leave moments later scratching their heads.

Finding it difficult to study late after a lifetime of five o'clock rooster calls, Preisler started to experiment with methamphetamine formulas. Even then, his meth was considered extraordinary. "A dose the size of a match head would keep me up for 36 hours," recalls Preisler's cousin, Willy Nussbaum. "I'd drink like a fish to try to sleep, but the alcohol would have absolutely no effect."

Uncle Fester Crank became the stimulant of choice on the Marquette campus, especially during final exams. Michael McKinney, a Marquette chemistry professor, says Preisler was a difficult student who looked like "he was on something. He struck me as a rather unstable person."

Preisler graduated from Marquette with a chemistry and biology degree in 1981. Two years later, he was arrested for methamphetamine possession. Because it was his first offense, he was sentenced to probation. But when he got busted on a meth charge again in 1984, he ended up in the Waupun Correctional Institution. After two years of "quiet time," Preisler was transferred to the Winnebago State Farm. In total, he ended up serving three and a half years of a five-year sentence.

"It's probably the most disastrous petty bust in law enforcement history," Fester says. "If I hadn't been arrested, I'd probably be Joe Blow walking down the street, blending into the crowd. Nobody would even know I existed."

Instead, he found himself in a 6-by-12-foot cell, watching Barbara Walters demand an end to all the bomb-making books that were being marketed by underground publishers. It was a life-defining moment. Outraged, Preisler immediately borrowed a typewriter from a fellow inmate and began writing the manuscript that would eventually become *Secrets of Methamphetamine Manufacture*.

The crude manuscript Preisler sent to Loompanics Unlimited over the transom was typed on onion-skin paper using several different colored ribbons. *SMM* was an immediate success and has evolved into a cash cow for the Port Townsend, Washington, publisher. This year, *SMM* ranked No. 3 in sales on the Loompanics best-seller list, behind *Secrets of a Superhacker* and *How to Live Without Electricity and Like It*. Asked to explain the book's phenomenal success

and evergreen quality, former Loompanics editor Vanessa McGrady replies, "When it comes to drugs, Uncle Fester is like Mister Rogers: Everybody trusts him."

But the Loompanics empire is under siege. In 1983, Paladin Press, a renegade publishing house that specializes in "action publishing," published Rex Feral's *Hit Man*, a sort of *Assassination for Dummies* manual. *Hit Man*'s thesis is straightforward: Teach readers how to be killers for hire. In 1993, Lawrence Horn allegedly contracted convicted felon James Perry to knock off Horn's ex-wife and son. In order to bone up for the multiple murder, Perry read *Hit Man*. In 1996, the victim's relatives filed suit against Paladin.

The U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in 1997 that *Hit Man* enjoyed no First Amendment protection because the book's content could amount to the "aiding and abetting of criminal conduct." Just before the Horn case was ready to go to trial, Paladin panicked, shelled out a \$5 million settlement, and pulled *Hit Man* from its catalog.

As if this legal precedent weren't bad enough for business, the government recently enacted a law that makes it illegal to "teach or demonstrate the making or use of an explosive or a weapon of mass destruction or to distribute information about such weapons with the intent of furthering criminal acts." Violators could be slapped with a 20-year prison term. A bill pending in the Senate would prohibit distribution "by any means" of information about "the manufacture or use of a controlled substance" and would carry a maximum prison sentence of 10 years.

The double whammy of the *Hit Man* lawsuit and the new bill has had a decidedly chilling effect on Loompanics. It recently dropped both *Silent Death* and *Home Workshop Explosives* from its inventory. Additional Uncle Fester titles are sure to be axed. "*Vest-Busters* is the next book to be eighty-sixed," claims a company insider. "It's a lawsuit just waiting to happen." Needless to say, if the new law is enforced, Loompanics won't be carrying any Uncle Fester titles. "This is ludicrous," says Loompanics publisher Mike Hoy. "It would make as much sense to sue General Motors because a killer made his getaway in a Chevrolet."

Preisler is unfazed by this latest legislative salvo. He's going multimedia. His debut videotape, *Cookin' Crank with Uncle Fester*, is now available for \$35 from a slightly more adventurous action pub-

lisher. He has already purchased his recently banned overstock and is selling the books himself on the Internet. "It just means more money for me," he cackles.

By halftime, Preisler's beer supply is depleted. Motivated, he hops into his Jeep and heads to his favorite sports bar to catch the rest of the game. On the way, he stops at the local gas station. Mike, the clerk behind the counter, greets him warmly. Pierced and tattooed, Mike is a part-time rock musician and, according to Preisler, a full-time "closet white supremacist."

Mike is well versed in Preisler's body of work, but has particular interest in *Home Workshop Explosives*. As Preisler pays for his gas, Mike pumps him for specific bomb-making information. Preisler indulges him, suggesting that Mike reread the chapter in his book on the nitroglycerin explosive. As Preisler walks out the door, Mike strikes an I'm-not-worthy pose and exclaims, "Uncle Fester is God!" In the car, Preisler reveals that Mike has plans to blow up a local bar that caters to an African-American clientele. "But don't worry," Preisler says reassuringly. "The guy's harmless. He's too stupid to do any real damage." Then again, Tim McVeigh is no rocket scientist. Preisler nods in agreement. "That's true," he replies. The next moment, he is hunched over the steering wheel, laughing uncontrollably.

In the meantime, the antihero forges ahead undaunted, his private jihad against Big Brother in full swing. Preisler bristles at the thought that he is in any way responsible for the ac-

"All readers, no matter how wacko, are greatly appreciated," Fester says.

tions of his readers. "Responsible consumption of the product lies with the individual," says Fester, sounding like a Hollywood studio chief defending *Fight Club*. "People have to use sound judgment. It's not like I can go out and baby-sit the whole country." ■