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The CIA man

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NORMAN — WHEN JOHN Gittinger was a young man, his father could recite the county seat of every county in the United States.

"I can remember being at parties and he would meet someone from some state and tell them what county they were from," Gittinger says. 'He had grown up in Iowa on a farm. But he wasn't suited for farming and liked to read. The only book he had was the 1889 almanac, so he memorized every county and every county seat."

Roy Gittinger became a history professor, author and dean of undergraduates at the University of Oklahoma. "Dean Gitt," they called him.

"For a time, he could call by name almost anyone who had been to the university and usually recall their maiden name," Gittinger says.

His father's phenomenal memory "terrified" young Gittinger. "I have a bad memory for names," he says.

But in his line of work, that would be an advantage.

John Gittinger became the Central Intelligence Agency's chief psychologist for clandestine services. In his work, he had to *forget* names. And, he says, "Nine times out of 10 the names I knew weren't their real names anyway."

IN 1979, AFTER 28 years with the CIA, Gittinger and his wife, Mary Frances, came home to Norman to retire. They live in a modern house in a subdivision — a house with no windows on the front. Inside, it is filled with light, plants, Mrs. Gittinger's paintings and Gittinger's books.

They are mostly history books — his study is filled with them. Newspaper front pages heralding the United State's involvement in various wars, are matted in red, framed and hung over his desk.

CIA memorabilia is scarce: a signed photograph of Lyndon Baines Johnson; a photograph of CIA director Richard Helms awarding Gittinger the Distinguished Intelligence Medal in 1973. Scrawled at the bottom: "To John, whose contribution the operation will never forget, Dick."

The citation detailing his contribution is framed and hung also. The medal sits in its box on his desk.

"It's the Agency's second-highest award," says Gittinger. "You have to get shot for the first, so I'm glad I didn't get it."

Articulate, thoughtful, 68-year-old John Gittinger wears a gray gotee and constantly smokes a pipe. The details of this life are secret. And while he says he would like to reveal some of them, he also appreciates the mystery the secrecy gives his reputation.

"People always think I did more than I did."

WHAT HE DID, in general terms, is this:

He set up a system by which CIA case officers could evaluate foreign nationals to determine whether they would be effective spies in their own countries.

He assessed and helped rehabilitate defectors.

He helped prepare agents so they wouldn't fall into traps.

He helped case officers, who recruit and oversee the agents, interpret human behavior.

He studied cultural attitudes so agents would understand the people they were dealing with.

He worked up something called "elite assessments" — the cultural and psychological makeup of foreign leaders.

He became a specialist in understanding brainwashing techniques.

Specifically, he briefed President Dwight D. Eisenhower before Nikita Khrushchev's visit to the United States and President John Kennedy before his visit to Vienna.

He studied prisoners of war following the Korean conflict to learn Soviet and Chinese brainwashing techniques.

He took LSD as part of the CIA's infamous study on the effects of that drug.

FOR YEARS, GITTINGER operated one of the CIA's undercover companies. His was called the Psychological Assessment Association. He can tell this because, during the Watergate scandals, Chuck Colson charged that Gittinger had made the psychological assessment of Daniel Ellsberg, thereby exposing him and his company. Gittinger says he had nothing to do with Ellsberg.

He also was involved in the late '50s and early '60s with something known as the Human Ecology Fund. It funded, unbeknownst to the recipients, various research projects that the CIA deemed valuable. One of the recipients was a Canadian psychiatrist who was doing research on how the human voice could indicate a person's stress level. But the psychiatrist also was using LSD as therapy for his patients. Now some of those patients, including the wife of a member of Canadian Parliament, are suing the CIA for funding the psychiatrist who administered LSD to them.

Gittinger has been to Canada to give a deposition in the case.

"I'm very proud of the things I can't talk about and least proud of the things I have to talk about," he says.

"This doctor, who is now dead and didn't even know he was receiving CIA money, was the former president of the American Psychiatric Association, founder of the best psychiatric clinic in Canada and an acquaintance of a trustee of the Human Ecology Fund. His research had interesting implications because he was making initial attempts to measure stress from voice, which would be good to know in an interrogation setting. We were interested in him because of this research, not because of his use of LSD."

Another CIA idea turned sour — tragically sour — was the anonymous administration of LSD in the early to mid-'50s. Uncovered in the mid-'70s by the Rockefeller Commission, the LSD experiments and their fatal consequences are well known. One participant, Frank Olson, jumped to his death from a New York City hotel room a week after he had ingested LSD. It wasn't until the commission report that the Olson family learned of the experiment and the cause of his suicide.

That was when Gittinger heard of the Olson incident too, though he had been involved in the experiments himself. In fact, it was the Olson incident that brought Gittinger into the experiments. He was assigned to help predict how people would react.

Gittinger was a personal friend of the man who accompanied Olson to New York to see a psychiatrist.

"It ruined the man's career," says Gittinger. "Be-

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cause he didn't keep him from jumping, but more, because he was a friend of Olson's and it was a terrible, shattering experience. He was unable to be effective after that."

BUT IT WASN'T until the Rockefeller Commission's report that Gittinger learned what had happened to his friend and his connection with the Olson tragedy.

"I was only in this area of the agency for three or four years out of 28," says Gittinger. "But I have had to live with it, and I'm still having trouble with it. I wish I'd never been involved, but that's a Monday morning quarterback's hindsight."

At the time, Gittinger says he felt the experiments were justified.

"There was a belief at the time that the Soviets had esoteric brainwashers because startling things had happened. Prisoners of war from Korea were making confessions that were not true. They confessed they had dropped germ bombs and that wasn't true.

"LSD was a brand new drug. This was long before the drug culture. No one was experimenting with it except us. No one believes it, they think we wanted to use it for mind control, but we were not experimenting to use it. We were trying to find out if it was possible that the Soviets and Chinese were using it.

"Now we know that it was through the interrogators' pressure that the American pilots made such confessions. The Chinese were convinced that American pilots had dropped the bombs, and now we know that if you are convinced of something there are certain methods that will cause certain kinds of people to crack and admit anything. That's why confessions aren't as admissiable in court now — because false confessions can be forced."

Of his own personal experience with LSD, he says, "It was one of the most ghastly experiences I've had. I learned a lot about how people with my kind of personality would react."

The participants had agreed in principal to take LSD over the next few months but they would not be told when they were given it.

"If we'd known more, we would have done it differently," he says now. "One of the reasons we were terrified — and it seems absurd now — but because it is tasteless and odorless, we were afraid it could be put in an air conditioning system or a city's water supply. It turned out that it couldn't be put into an air conditioner system and it would take a lot to influence a whole town."

BY HIS OWN system, the Gittinger Personality Assessment System, Gittinger determined that he has a personality with what he calls an E factor; that is, he responds to his environment. And when he ingested LSD, the walls seemed to be closing in around him and he began to shake violently.

Olson, he says, was also an E.

"We were more careful about experimentation after that. LSD is a great imitator. It exaggerates certain characteristics. Paranoics become more paranoic; people with manias become more maniacal. Olson couldn't get away from the fact that he thought he was losing his mind.

"The Olson tragedy haunts me. I can live with it because I had nothing to do with it. I wonder what I would have done if I had been directly involved."

Gittinger says he feels good about most of his career. And he feels the charges against the CIA — that it ignored moral restrictions in the interest of national security — are blown out of proportion.

"I don't feel we were as guilty of ignoring moral restrictions as we were accused of. Some of it was blown out of proportion. The people I knew in the CIA were sincere, dedicated, moral people. They thought what they were doing was right. If anything, we didn't catch up to the United States' changing morals. But I think we are falsely accused in general. That's not to justify our mistakes, but as an agency policy, I think it had an ethical framework.

"Intelligence gathering has to be done in secret, but the American system of democracy isn't geared for this. We've always had the paradox of an intellgence system in a democracy — thank God, but it's difficult."

THE CITATION ON the wall specifically attributes Gittinger's contribution to the agency to his research of behavior and his creation of the personality assessment system.

This man evidently knows how to recognize good spies and how to keep them out of trouble; though he says they don't all perform as predicted.

"The major thing I've learned about human nature is how little I know," he says. "It's so complicated and so diverse. They don't always act the way I thought they would. In some cases they rise to the occasion and in other cases they fail.

"Ideally, you are looking for people ideologically motivated," says the psychologist. "If you're targeting a Soviet-bloc country, you like them to believe in the American ideals. Unfortunately, it is the nature of the business that this is not the primary reason someone becomes an agent. Largely it is monetary. And they are disappointed in their job, having difficulty with their wives; having failed in some way. They are down emotionally: bitter, disgrunted, discouraged. They have emotional problems, like alcoholism.

"The ideal is to try to recruit someone who will remain undercover so [redacted] will provide information that is valuable. It's a tricky business. You just don't know how well they will produce."

GITTINGER INTERVIEWED WITH the CIA in 1950, one year after it was formed, without knowing who was doing the interview.

He had done his graduate work in psychology at OU then trained youth for the Works Project Adminsitration. But his dream was to teach high school, so he became the first director of guidance at Classen High School in Oklahoma City.

When World War II broke out, he signed up with the Navy and served as an aviation psychologist for four and a half years.

Following the war, he joined the University of Tulsa faculty as assistant professor of psychology and assistant dean of men, then worked a year for the Veterans Administration as a vocational guidance counselor. But it was while he was a staff psychologist at the mental hospital in Norman (he was the first,) that he received the letter inviting him to Washington, D.C., to interview for a position as a "government psychologist."

He joined the CIA as part of the assessment staff, helping select case officers for the clandestine services. The rest is secret.

After traveling the world and living tales that he can only tell his wife, retirement in Norman would seem rather tame.

"That's partly why we're here," says Gittinger. "And it's where I grew up. And two of my grandchildren live here. The other two live in Massachusetts and we didn't want to winter in Massachusetts."

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HIS SON IS listed as one of this country's leading neuro-ophthalmologists, an accomplishment that makes his father extremely proud.

"I don't feel I am in any way, shape or form as academically disciplined as either my father or my son . . . I never could do arithmetic. The rest of my family was always smarter. My brother and sister both graduated Phi Beta Kappa. I didn't."

Though he remembers his childhood as "very pleasant," he says he did have a certain amount of stress at being "Dean Gitt's son."

"I always had a considerable amount of difficulty making friends. I was a loner; a non-participating observer. Watching was interesting to me.

"I was always in awe of my father and extremely proud. I had no hostility toward my parents. I was a late-in-life child and I think my parents were mellow with me."

Though he shared his father's passion for history, his choice of a career in psychology, when psychology was a relatively new and foreign idea, was not one he feels his parents were glad about. They never knew of his work for the CIA.

His children didn't know he worked for the CIA until they were grown and married — his daughter to the son of a CIA staffer, his son to a woman who had no affection for the agency.

Mary Frances always knew, but, says Gittinger, "She had to live a very strange life. And it took a pretty good soldier for me to disappear and for her not to know where or why or toward what end. She handled it well and fended for herself."

When the Gittingers moved to Japan to open a branch office of the "company," she ran the office.

Gittinger will not write his memoirs — partly because he signed a secrecy agreement, but mostly, he claims, because he can't write well.

Instead, he spends his time reading history — mostly biography, the result of his insatiable curiosity about human behavior — working crossword puzzles, attending football games, traveling to places the CIA never sent him, like to the Caribbean on a jazz cruise, or to Alaska on the "Love Boat."

He spends a little time each week as a consultant to counselors at OU's medical clinic and to those universities and law enforcement agencies who use Gittinger's assessment system. Once a year he goes to Nelsonville, Ohio, where an institute is devoted to the Gittinger personality assessment system.

"They treat me like a guru and I like the attention," he says, smiling.

The watcher, the non-participating observer, he seems to have chosen a career well suited for him, so for his old stomping grounds, the CIA, he is sometimes reflective, but never in touch.

"With the terrorism and exposure of the CIA people overseas these days, it's more dangerous now. It must be more difficult. It's a shadowy, shadowy world."