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ANTI MATTER

His business cards used to read MEAN GENE AUSTIN, THE PALADIN OF POLITICS. HAVE MOUTH, WILL TRAVEL. But that was back in the Seventies, when he was a professional kidnapper. Nowadays he's busy investigating UFOs, drugs, and cults. If Austin's past performance is any indication, these fields are in for some interesting times.

Austin started as a high-school electronics geek in Nebraska nearly 50 years ago. One of his favorite memories is the time a lecturer couldn't get his projector working. Soon the call went out. "Get Austin." He ambled slowly to the front of the auditorium, plugged in a wire, and sat down.

Since then, he's been a freelance writer, a soldier, a pipeline worker in Saudi Arabia, a policeman. But his best-known exploits to date grew out of his campaign against the legal maze of divorce courts. A parent might lose custody in one state, win it in another, snatch the kids, and run. Enter Gene Austin. He would find the children and kidnap them back. Then he'd milk it for publicity to undermine the laws that made it possible. He did this 400 times, and he's proud.

Austin got out of kidnapping in 1980, when the law was changed. "Guys like me must never stay in a movement once it gets established," he explains. "We're disruptive."

A chat with Austin is a dizzying experience, one bounces from mass murders to cattle mutilation to a newsletter for necrophiles. Most of it is tinged with the bizarre, and it's all heavily documented in computerized files.

"He's a flaky genius, and his fact gathering is incredible," affirms John DeCamp, a Nebraska state senator who has



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known Austin for 15 years. "He has a network of sources no one can match."

Austin's interest in UFOs came through the back door. "I was looking into cattle mutilations," he says. "It took me about two weeks to figure it out. A lot of the UFO sightings in the West are drug-smuggling helicopters. Hughes 500C's and D's can be so quiet you can't hear them a thousand feet away. The mutilations are just dealers waiting for a shipment. They get bored, take some coke or something, and go cut up a neighbor's cow. A five-year-old child could see it."

Other UFO sightings, he believes, are hallucinations. "Look at the records," he says. "You'll find that most people who see UFOs are city people who find themselves in the country. Suddenly there's no traffic noise, no one screaming at them or trying to sell them something. There are no lights telling them when to walk. They get into a mild state of sensory deprivation and misinterpret what they see. Suddenly Venus is a huge, moving light in the sky."

Just where this will lead remains to be seen, but it's sure to lead somewhere. "He's driven," says DeCamp, "like a mad scientist proving he's smarter than everyone else."

After all the lean years Austin has put a little stability into his life, taking a job as an apartment manager. It pays the bills and supports his research better than kidnapping ever did. But the crusty crusader hasn't let unaccustomed security soften him. "One of the local radio stations did a profile of me the other day," he grumbles. "They called me Clean Gene. I just hate that." —OWEN DAVIES