

# Former Maine trooper pens book on career

BY JOHN HOLYOKE  
BDN STAFF

Mark Nickerson is the first to admit he had quite a ride during his 28-year career as a Maine state trooper.

But he never thought he'd transition from that job to a new one as a writer, sharing tales gathered over the years.

"I hated paperwork," Nickerson said with a laugh. "The worst part of being a trooper was doing paperwork."

Mining tales from his memory banks and a daily log he was required to keep, Nickerson released his second book, "Behind the Blue Lights: More Real-Life Stories from a Maine State Trooper," last fall, through North Country Press in Unity.

Nickerson credited former Belfast-area newspaper editor Beth Staples for discovering the fledgling writer.

Staples had been publishing stories by Nickerson's pal, retired game warden John Ford Sr., and many of those tales had a common thread.

"I wish I could have been in the back seat to watch that one unfold."

MARK NICKERSON

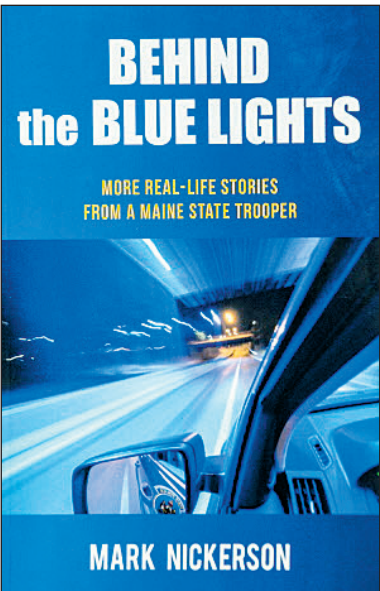
"He was throwing insults at me in all of his stories," Nickerson said. "After hearing them so many times, Beth called me and said, 'You must have a story about John.' I said, 'How many do you want?'"

That was back in 2004 or 2005, Nickerson said. After that, Staples ran Ford's column one week and Nickerson's the next.

"We sparred back and forth in the paper for seven or eight years," Nickerson said.

Those columns have provided the content for both Nickerson's books and three penned by Ford.

In "Behind the Blue Lights," Nickerson tells a variety of stories. Some are poignant and illustrate the potential consequences troopers may face every day. Others feature Nickerson's favorite foil, Ford, and are hilarious. Still others have been passed



along to the writer by others with interesting law enforcement tales.

The end result is a veritable police blotter — without the good stuff redacted — that leaves readers shaking their heads, often thinking, "I wish I could have been

in the back seat to watch *that* one unfold."

The names — except for a few colleagues, such as Ford — have been changed to protect the not-so-innocent, and Nickerson clearly strives to keep the tales at a PG rating. And while some of the stories were plucked from his daily logs, many simply emerged during regular bull sessions with former colleagues.

"When you start meeting up with your trooper friends or law enforcement friends, you'd start telling war stories, and that would trigger other memories," Nickerson said. "That's where most of my stories came from."

Nickerson is proud of his career as a state trooper, during which he removed more than 1,000 drunken drivers from the state's roads. Those episodes often show up in his stories, and each is different.

Even as he recounts those stories, though, Nickerson is able to laugh at the situations he found himself in and able to realize that even many of the lawbreakers he

arrested had redeeming qualities.

"It's not that everybody's a bad person who drinks and drives. It's just a person who made a bad decision," he said. "And I always treated everybody with respect. ... I wouldn't want any bad-assed cop coming up to me and being pushy."

Nickerson retired from the Maine State Police in 2005. Since then, he and Ford have parlayed their local literary success into another part-time career, as they keep a busy schedule speaking to interested audiences across the state.

"We go mostly to libraries and historical societies and groups. John and I just tell our stories," Nickerson said. "It resonates. It's mostly humorous. There's some poignant parts to it, but it's mostly funny and we love to see people laugh."

Especially, it seems, at each other's expense.

"It's working, and we haven't had too many complaints," Nickerson said. "Mostly [the complaints] are about John."

Clifton Boudman and the Jaina figures, replicas of Mayan ancestral art on display at the Mark & Emily Turner Memorial Library.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

## Art

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Mayan art and history combines the unique designs that evolved in the Americas before European contact with the sober acknowledgement that violence and economic inequality were ways of life, as in many societies at the time (and even today).

Held in the hands of the deceased Mayan elites, the figures "suggest an emphasis on

different types of blood sacrifices," Boudman said. "To understand the early cycles of the world, they went through continual blood sacrifice. Your team loses the soccer game? Part of the sacrifice."

The ancient Maya civilization originated around 3,000 years ago and lasted through the 1600s, after political rulers collapsed and civil wars started in the ninth century and after the Spanish came to occupy central America. The Maya have long-fascinated artists, archeologists and his-

torians, in part because their society was relatively complex, with cities built through masonry architecture, trade networks, a writing system, astronomy, as well as religious customs that merged worship and human sacrifice.

Part of what Boudman also finds interesting in the Maya is how their culture shares some universal themes with others, past and present.

"There are many societies that incorporated the blood ritual, for a variety of reasons," Boudman said. "We have a connection with blood ritual today. If you go to [Catholic] Church on Sunday, you drink the blood of Christ and eat his flesh,"

In the past 20 years, the Mayan language has been deciphered, so researchers are gaining more understanding into the Central American society, and Boudman said he's anticipating new books that explore the society in a fuller context.

Another exhibit at the library showcases traditional artworks from Africa that were among the major influences on the style of cubism and in turn some of the most recognizable paintings in the world — notably Pablo Picasso's.

Boudman's hand-carved wooden African ancestral masks were produced in Accra, Ghana, more than 100 years ago, and now grace the walls of the library's 2nd

Street Gallery, displaying the range of human emotions in subtle abstractions and deep colors.

In the west African societies, the masks were made in a craft passed on from fathers to sons to tell the stories of their families, and they were used in song and dance to connect with others.

"When a person puts on the mask, you become whatever that ancestor suggests," Boudman said.

Among those who found these kinds of African masks inspiring were painters Pablo Picasso and Andre Derain. Although the masks came to be acquired by western museums through the age of colonialism, artists such as Picasso "found these to be the most fascinating art of any kind," Boudman said.

"They had hundreds of these in their studios, and the expressiveness and the strength of the pieces they took to create a lot of modern art," Boudman said.

One potential lesson from Picasso drawing on influences from another, older culture to create something new, is to visit a museum or library, Boudman said.

"Artists used to learn from museums a lot more than they do today," he said.

The African masks, he said, are "great especially for young people, who can see these designs and work with them."



GEORGE KINGHORN

Kat Johnson, education coordinator at the University of Museum of Art and one of the organizers of the Winter WigOut Weekend, tacks handcrafted flowers onto an enormous wig made of metal, papier-mache and cotton for the upcoming weekend of events.

## WigOut

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some of Bangor's own businesspeople.

"It was a very grassroots effort," George Kinghorn, director and curator of the UMMA and one of the organizers of the event, said. "It was getting together and saying, 'Let's make something happen that's light-hearted, quirky and fun and a way to get people out and about during the winter.'"

Participants are welcome to take a look around at the museum, where they'll find some displayed art that coincides with the event.

"There's a nice connection to the collection, so we installed some of our works that have focus on hair and hairstyles, like Andy Warhol's image of Farrah Fawcett. ... We thought it was a neat way to bring in some new faces to the museum," Kinghorn said.

Amy and Lance Blackstone, who will host The Winter WigOut Dance Party, were two others who helped create the weekend of tomfoolery. On Saturday, the party will encourage the community to shake off the cold from 8 to 11 p.m. at 58 Main St. An RSVP is required, and attendees can expect DJ Thermomatt,

dancing, beer and custom cocktails.

An enormous papier-mache wig, reminiscent of Marie Antoinette's updo, will be available to try on and take photos with at Wigtopia at UMMA and at the dance party at 58 Main St. Kat Johnson of UMMA, one of the organizers of the event, helped create the wig.

The weekend will conclude with a Wigtastic Brunch at Blaze starting at 11:30 a.m. Sunday. The restaurant will donate 10 percent of all food sales to UMMA's exhibition and educational programming.

Penobscot Theatre Company is even offering wig rentals from their seemingly endless supply of costume hair for \$25 for the week, so if you don't have one on hand, there's always someone to turn to, namely Emma Dean, who works for PTC. If you're looking for something more permanent, Retro Swagger at 10 Harlow St. has some wigs in stock for purchase.

But Kinghorn says that everyone, wig or not, is welcome — as long as they're over 21.

"Even if you don't have a crazy wig, you can still come out and be part of it," he said.

For more information, visit facebook.com/WinterWigOutWeekend-984356014935081/.

## Frenzy

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acters, comes up from Boston to help her dad out. One of the first things her mother said to her was that she needed to get her hair cut and told her to go to Hair Frenzy to visit Tina. It seemed to be a logical step for the next part of the story about Clara," Baker said.

"As I'm writing more about the town, more stories are popping up. More characters are kind of standing up at the town hall and saying, 'I have a story I want to tell you,'" he said.

For Baker, the deeper meaning of this story is about the struggle of trying to make a living in Maine.

"The main character Tina is a small-business owner. She's also a single mom raising a teenage daughter," Baker said. When her best friend Toryn shows up again in town, the allure of going away — the allure of making it somewhere else — is something that's hard to resist.

Newport added to that with some of her own takeaways from the show.

"It deals with the notion of home, it deals with friendship, small-town life and the virtues of it, how things change over the course of a lifetime — universal human themes that are relatable to anyone," Newport said.

Much like "One Blue Tarp" before it, "Hair Frenzy" was a carefully considered choice for Newport.

"At this time last year I had another play in that spot and Travis asked if I would come to a reading of 'Hair Frenzy' in Orono," Newport said. "And I did. And I believed so much in the play at that time, and of course that was an early draft of it, that I moved things around in the season after already having set out the season — that's how much I believed in it."

That resolve hasn't changed.

After five read-throughs, multiple rewrites and one year's time, "Hair Frenzy" is almost ready to hit the stage. Newport explained the process that she went through when deciding to add the show to the season's docket.

"Choosing a wide variety of plays is number one," Newport said. "We choose plays that suit our wide demographic. Do we have a classic, do we have a mystery, do we have a world premiere, do we have a musical?"

Much like previous selections that Newport has made, "Hair Frenzy" offered audiences a humorous show that went beyond a typical comedy and would reflect life in Maine.

"It's nice for people to go to the theater and see a reflection of themselves," Baker said. "In 'Hair Frenzy,' the consumption of Moxie comes up — which is a unique beverage to our state. That sort of connection brings the audience into the story. They see their neighbors. They see the places they walk into every day. They see the places they work."

Newport said plays are also chosen based on the company of actors. Toryn Bennoch, a Hollywood superstar who is led back to her hometown of Clara, plays on the talents of one of the production's actresses.

"I had AJ [Mooney] in mind, especially after working with her," Baker said. "And Bobtom, played by Brad Labree, was definitely written with him in mind."

Newport hopes these roles will allow the actors and actresses to show the audience something new.

"I feel that plays reach either the heart or the head. Some communities are more heart or more head. I feel that the community here is very much heart," Newport said. "'Hair Frenzy,' I think, will get people out of the house because it is charming and funny, and a story with a lot of heart. And at the end of the

day, that's why it was chosen."

For Dominick Varney, director of the show, taking on his first world premiere has been a challenge, but one he's been happy to take on.

"I feel like Travis has honed into the idea of what Maine communities are like," Varney said. "They come together in good times and bad times. They support each other."

Varney, who also directed "Guys on Ice" for PTC, worked with Baker on the production through its read-throughs and rewrites, and has helped the cast bring the roles and the hair salon to life.

"It's a hair salon, but the characters that come into that hair salon — you see your community on that stage," Varney said. Creating an authentic sense of Maine in the piece wasn't difficult, because the play itself was already full of "Maine-isms," as Varney put it.

"I think it's a modern take on farce. It's a comedy with a lot of physical, fast-paced humor. It's the idea of this

small town coming together. Travis has done such an amazing job writing heartfelt words that are both funny, meaningful and honest," Varney said.

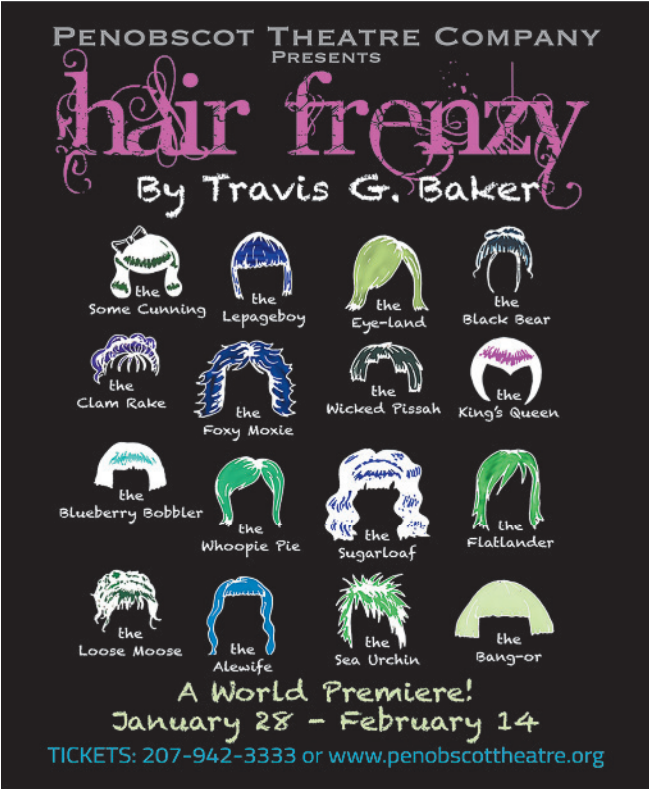
For Baker, his words come from a sincere place. Though some would consider Baker to be "from away" (he was born in Boston and grew up in Texas), Maine has become his home.

"We love it here," Baker, who resides in Orono with his family, said. "I feel at home here."

"We believe so much in this work that no one else has seen, heard or read it. It has no track record. It's only track record is our belief in it, our belief in Travis and our belief in the team we've put in place to bring this story to life," Newport said.

"It is a bright, funny, happy story that was written for us, for here, for this community."

For information about "Hair Frenzy," including showtimes and tickets prices, visit Penobscot Theatre Company's website.



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