

DEMARA IN WIEN, MISSOURI

In November 1965 Demara arrived in the small German Catholic Village of Wien, Missouri. After years of posing as various professionals (and often only one step ahead of the law), Demara had written to Catholic Priest Joseph Starmann and expressed an interest in joining an experimental interfaith monastery known as the Brotherhood of Christian Unity at Wien. This group, comprised of men from various religions, worked under the rules and regulations of the Catholic Church. Demara did not conceal his identity from Fr. Starmann, but rather confessed his exhaustion with running and his desire to live peacefully doing God's work. Fr. Starmann accepted him into the group, and Demara lived under his own name, affectionately called Brother Frederick by those who worked with him.

Demara worked with the religious order and taught classes at the school across from St. Mary of the Angels Church. He became a popular teacher well-liked by his students as well as the church's parishioners. Unfortunately, his desire for stability and quiet in Wien did not last. One evening a newspaper reporter from the nearby town of Brookfield attended a PTA meeting and thought Demara "looked familiar." The reporter snapped a photograph, which upset Demara. Using the photo, the reporter checked newspaper files and discovered that Demara was in fact the Great Impostor. Headlines of the *Kansas City Star* as well as other local papers shouted the news: *The Great Impostor at Wien, MO!*

Shortly after his discovery, the Vatican disbanded the experimental order and Brother Frederick left Wien, never to return. He moved to Seattle, Washington and served as a Baptist preacher before moving again to Orange County, California, where he passed away at age 60 in 1982.

DEMARA'S RULES FOR SUCCESS

Demara was so successful at portraying various professionals, he formulated a series of rules to maintain his many facades...for a while anyway.

1. Always paper your arrival- Send fake letters of reference in advance from the biggest names in the profession you can think of. People do not often check up on a letter from a big name thinking they wouldn't want to "bother" an important person or it would be "unlikely" an important person would not tell the truth.

2. Always attack - never defend- If anyone called his credentials into question, he would assume the air of being hurt and/or angry that anyone would dare question him or his qualifications.

3. A man with a good mind who trusts it, can learn anything he needs to know in a few months - One job he held required him to take six college courses: rational psychology, metaphysics, cosmology, epistemology, ethics, and natural theology. Demara enrolled in all six and despite not having but two years in high school, made A's in all of them.

4. In a debate with someone more educated, always manage to lose the debate - Ask them why they think the way they do, then say you have been convinced they are right and you now agree with them!

5. Never encroach on anyone else's domain; make your own committee, head it up and then expand into the power vacuum - In any organization there is a lot of loose unused power lying around which can be picked up without alienating anyone.

WIEN

& The Great Impostor



Ferdinand Waldo Demara Jr.

An "audacious, unschooled but amazingly intelligent pretender who always wanted to be a Somebody, and succeeded in being a whole raft of Somebody Elses."

-*TIME* Magazine, 1957

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Man on the Run



Ferdinand Waldo Demara Jr., pictured in his role as resident of the interfaith monastery in Wien.

"I always find a home. I'm always just belonging when someone comes and takes me away and I'm a stranger again. I'm very tired of that."

Thought provoking words from Ferdinand Waldo Demara Jr., a man known in the mid-twentieth century as the Great Impostor. Over the course of his life, Demara impersonated many professionals, across the United States and even overseas.

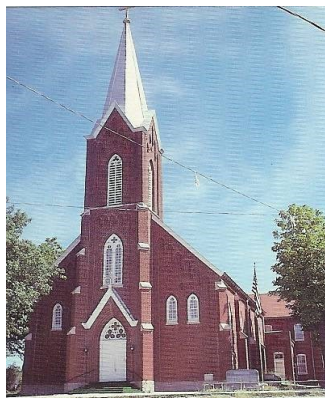
Born in 1921 in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Demara's father was financially well off and the family lived in an upper-class district. However, the Great Depression of the 1930s impacted the community and Demara's father lost his job, forcing the family to move to a poorer district. This angered Demara, who ran away from home at sixteen to join Cistercian monks in Rhode Island, until he enlisted in the Army in 1941.

Thus began his career as an impersonator. A year after enlisting he took the name of a friend, went AWOL and lived in two monasteries. After that, he joined the Navy but became frustrated that he was not climbing the ranks. He faked his death, took another name and became a psychologist. He taught at a college, worked as an orderly at a sanitarium, taught again at another college, but was caught by the FBI and served eighteen months in prison for desertion.

Upon his release he took a new name, studied law and joined a Catholic order in Maine. While there he became acquainted with Dr. Joseph Cyr. This led to his most famous exploit, when he took Cyr's name and worked as a trauma surgeon aboard MNCS Cayuga, a Royal Canadian Navy destroyer, during the Korean War.

Impressively, Demara maintained his façade even in the face of surgery. As the only "surgeon" on board, Demara operated on sixteen Korean combat casualties, performing major surgery. After telling his staff to prep the patients, Demara reportedly went into his office and quickly read through a textbook on general surgery to prepare himself. None of the casualties died on Demara's operating table. However, his removal of one bullet from a Canadian was later reported in a Canadian newspaper. Dr. Joseph Cyr's mother read the article and alerted the Navy, as her son was actually practicing medicine in New Brunswick at the time. The Navy chose not to press charges and Demara returned to the United States.

Following this adventure, Demara joined another brotherhood and proceeded to found a college in Maine. He left the order in 1951, angry that he was not placed in charge of the school and sold his story to *Life* magazine. This forced him to reduce the scale of his personas, as he became well-known and easily recognized across the country. He worked briefly at a prison in Texas, but an inmate discovered his disguise after finding the issue of *Life* detailing his background. This eventually led to him seeking quiet in Wien, Missouri, where he stayed for less than five years before moving on again.



St. Mary of the Angels Catholic Church and Monastery in Wien.

Why did he do it?

Some suggest that Demara's decision to spend his life impersonating others stems from his childhood. Accustomed to a high standard of living, Demara did not transition well to the public school he had to attend after his father's financial loss and the move to a poorer community. He was often ridiculed by classmates because of his demeanor and mannerisms and had difficulties fitting in. Perhaps this spurred his interest in becoming someone else. He could dictate who he was, someone more educated, wealthy, and refined, someone esteemed by the community and in a position of power.



In the Media



- *The Great Impostor* written by Richard Crichton
- *The Rascal and the Road* written by Richard Crichton
- Musical group *The Fleetwoods* recorded a song called "(He's) The Great Imposter"
- Musical group *The Band* recorded a song called "Ferdinand the Imposter"
- The NBC drama *The Pretender* was inspired by the life of Demara
- The M*A*S*H episode entitled "Dear Dad...Again," included a character impersonating a surgeon who was loosely based on Demara
- The 1961 film *The Great Impostor*, starring Tony Curtis, is a fictionalized account of Demara's life

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