Now, he says, he devotes himself to being a ""responsible quack."

He's an armchair genealogist who traces his lineage from a Plantagenet queen to the outlaw Jesse James; a theologian who theorizes persuasively that Jesus Christ was a pirate.

He's a man with a penchant for jokes, both good and bad. He coins his own money, one-half troy-ounce silver coins with the inscription "Big Water U.S.A." on one side. He carries a revolver, a nickel-plated, engraved .357 Magnum with the inscription "For Christ's sake" on the handle.

Now, with a condition that is considered life-threatening, Joseph finds his idiosyncratic outlook unchanged.

"I'm wacky as a wooden watch," he said.

He's also less active than he once was. He speaks little about his cancer, but said he is ""85 percent cured."

"And, if I'm not, it doesn't mean that much. When they diagnosed me a year ago the doctor sat down and told me, 'Mr. Joseph, you're dying.'

"Well, I thought about it for a minute and I looked at him and said, 'And you're not?'"

"The thing is, I've lived the way I wanted to.

"Most people want to talk to me about polygamy, but I don't find anything very remarkable about polygamy. It comes perfectly natural to me. It comes perfectly natural to a lot of men. Who, besides a stupid, ugly man, would have anything against polygamy?"

"I mean, Jack Kennedy and I are the same. I just happened to have married all mine.

"What I didn't find natural was monogamy. I was never meant to be a husband to one woman. I like women, a lot of women, and they like me. Every one of my wives has approached me about marriage. I didn't instigate any of them.

"Polygamy isn't everything it's cracked up to be. With eight wives, they fight sometimes. But I'll say one thing, I've never struck one of my wives and that's more than a lot of men can say.

"I've got 21 children and they all speak to me and not one of them has ever been in jail."

JOSEPH GRAVITATED to polygamy by choice, not upbringing. He was born in a farm labor camp in Modesto, Calif., in 1936 to a family that traced its religious origins to the Greek Orthodox Church.

He graduated from high school in Modesto, joined the Marines and later served on the Modesto Police Department from 1958 until 1962.

He was married then, to one woman.

"We were married in 1960 and stayed married for 10 years," said Joseph. "I'd had enough of police work by 1962 and I did a lot of things - sold cars, managed a horse ranch, figured people's taxes - but I finally got a job in the