

Winter 1933

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### Recommended Citation

James E. Bulger, Part II: Automobile Thefts, 23 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 806 (1932-1933)

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## II. AUTOMOBILE THEFTS

JAMES E. BULGER<sup>1</sup>

1. Millions of dollars annually are being lost by automobile owners throughout the country through automobile thefts. The business of stealing cars has become scientific and organized. The record of stolen automobiles in various cities reaches such annual proportions as the following: Chicago, 35,000 machines stolen, 30,000 recovered; New York 12,153 stolen, 8,885 recovered; Los Angeles, 9,888 stolen, 7,756 recovered; Omaha, 1,535 stolen, 1,473 recovered; New Orleans, 2,352 stolen, 2,266 recovered. Owing to the business depression the liquor traffic has not been so profitable as in former years, and with Congress about to consider repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, many bootleggers, seeing the handwriting on the wall, have deserted the liquor trade and have entered the business of stealing automobiles.

In commenting upon this situation, James Braden of the Chicago Daily News says: "The same old methods of bribery, mob direction, court continuances, unseen political influence, mass production, difficulty of conviction, and daring, characterize the gangs now engaged in stealing cars that were used in the bootleg wars. The mass killings have not appeared, because the "pin money" from this industry is merely that when compared to the larger sums of the bigger racket. That there is some directing head or heads of the car thieving group is borne out by studying the methods and in piecing together remnants that are left along the trail."

Mr. Braden was thinking of the Chicago situation and it is true that car stealing in Chicago has assumed alarming proportions. The loss is said to approach ten million dollars. Until recently, at least, the daily rate averaged 100 thefts.

2. The car-stealing industry has changed character materially within the past decade. Formerly the majority of cars stolen were resold. Today, however, the majority of cars stolen are recovered—that is, the shell of the car is recovered. Spotlights, batteries, horns, door handles, upholstery, tires, and even the motor, may be removed. The stolen parts, of course are resold. It is much more difficult to trace a stolen part than it is to trace a stolen car.

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The methods of car-strippers are ingenious. An insurance company, for example, discovered an attendant in a garage who daily made out a number of cards which contained the ignition number and license-plate number of the larger and newer cars that came in. He would make out from four to six such cards each day, and when he was arrested it was found that he was paid \$5 for each card made out. Every evening a man, about whom the attendant declared he knew nothing except that he was the man who paid him for making out this information, appeared, collected the cards, and paid him \$5 for each card.

If you were one of the persons who used that particular garage, and if your car appealed to the attendant in question, here is what might happen to you. You might park your car in front of your home some evening, and because it was your infallible habit, you would lock the car. We will say (because this has happened in numerous instances) you would return to the car within three or four minutes, only to see your car being driven down the street, or perhaps out of sight. Naturally you would be mystified, but the explanation is simple. The man who took the cards from the garage attendant checked your license number with the license books issued by the secretary of state. As a matter of fact, he might even have called at the police station for the information. He would say, "My name is Brown. A fellow ran into me a little while ago and damaged my car. He got away, but I have his license number, it is 2222. Can you give me his name?" And perhaps the police department helpfully gave him the information. It makes little difference how he got the name, for with the license number it is an easy matter to get the owner. So this man found out where you lived, and after parking near your home, discovered your habits with reference to the car. In the meantime, of course, you may be sure that he had keys made to fit your car. That, too, is an exceedingly simple job. When the time was ripe, two men went out to steal your car. They drove up behind you and when you went into the house, one man slipped into your car and drove it away.

3. Figures from many cities show that fewer cars are being stolen this year than last, and in such cases a certificate-of-title law is responsible for the reduction. But Illinois has no such law. In Chicago, a drive on the part of the mayor, the police and the judges is being undertaken for the purpose of cutting down automobile thefts. Such a campaign will be only partly successful, it is pointed out, because the State is almost entirely surrounded by other States

in which anti-theft acts are in effect. In these neighboring States, if an attempt is made to sell a stolen vehicle, the title records will aid recovery. However, the thief can easily drive the car into Illinois, where a fraudulent bill of sale enables him to dispose of the automobile.

Wherever the State has enacted an anti-theft statute, car stealing is cut down. Twenty-five States now have such a law; it is known as a certificate of title law. These States, Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin and the District of Columbia, have struck at the root of the evil. When other States follow their example car stealing will become an almost unheard of activity. This, at any rate, is the opinion of the American Automobile Association.

Joseph H. Braun, general counsel for the Chicago Motor Club, who has prepared an anti-theft bill for the State of Illinois, and who will have it presented at the forthcoming session of the Illinois Legislature in behalf of the Chicago organization, quotes a report of the Pennsylvania Motor Vehicle Department to this effect: "Until the forty-eight States of the union are operating under the same system, there will always be a dumping ground for stolen automobiles."

Another of the principal factors in the large increase in this class of theft is the ease with which stolen vehicles may be disposed of in States where there is no system for complete dissemination of information concerning stolen cars. The purpose of a certificate of title act is to remedy this deficiency by making available such information through the careful maintenance of motor and serial number indexes in the office of the Secretary of State. Reports of stolen automobiles should be made out by the police to the Secretary of State, who would publish these records regularly, and in turn furnish them to the police authorities throughout the State, and to the motor vehicle departments of other States. It will be seen that such an arrangement would permit the ready identification of stolen or abandoned vehicles. Furthermore, the recovery of vehicles would be facilitated by a dual system of identification by cross-indexing motor and serial numbers of all vehicles registered. These would be permanent records, which would identify registered cars regardless of the registration-license number, which changes annually, and regardless of the persons claiming title other than the owner of record.

It is apparent that all States ought to enact a certificate of title law which would require the establishment of rightful ownership of a vehicle, and which would prohibit the issuance of registration plates unless an application for certificate of title had been made. Such a certificate ought to be valid until ownership changed. Upon transfer the certificate of title ought to be endorsed by the owner and delivered to the transferee, who would surrender it to the Secretary of State, with an application for a certificate in the name of the new owner. The application would then be checked against the official indexes to determine the validity of the title. Alterations of engine numbers, or the forgery of a certificate, would avail nothing, since in every instance the title would be checked against the official records. With such laws prevailing in all States it would be almost impossible to dispose of a stolen vehicle without detection.

4. As a general rule, automobile dealers oppose laws which make it difficult for a car owner to use his car, and this attitude is in general a beneficial one to the motoring public. It is shared by the motor clubs of the country. In this instance, however, the motor clubs and the automobile dealers are more than willing to waive the slight difficulty that surrounds the obtaining of a certificate of title, because of the benefit that such a law would confer upon all the motorists of the country. Automobile dealers are particularly interested in the enactment of such a law, because in most instances it provides that dealers in second hand automobiles and parts must be licensed and required to keep records of all used vehicles and used parts bought or sold. This provision, of course, protects the purchaser of a used automobile against innocent acquirement of stolen property. Also, it is of benefit to the bona fide dealers, in that it helps to stabilize the used car market, which, under present conditions, is affected by stolen cars offered at low prices.

In Oregon the dealers at first offered opposition to the enactment of such a law; but after the law had been in effect and received a fair trial, the general opinion in that State was that there was not a dealer opposed to it, and in fact all legitimate dealers favored it. Observers report that the same condition is true in Michigan.

A very important objection is made to the enactment of an anti-theft law at this particular time, in that it imposes an additional tax upon the already over-burdened motorist. There is no question but that the motorist is the most heavily taxed individual in the country today, and at first it might seem as if this law would be an additional burden for him to bear. However, the experience of States which

have the law in effect is that the cost of the fee is more than offset by lowered insurance rates. In South Dakota, for example, the representative of one insurance company reported that, after the passage of such a statute, the insurance rates were reduced approximately 65c per hundred valuation.

In Illinois, where a campaign is now being waged to enact such a law, it is pointed out that the surrounding States of Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana and Missouri have anti-theft statutes in operation, with the result that Illinois is a dumping ground for stolen vehicles. The Illinois proponents of the law point to the statement of Hal E. Hoss, Secretary of State of Oregon, who said: "All of the States of the northwest and Pacific coast now have certificate of title laws except the state of Washington, and it furnishes a very instructive contrast when conditions in that State are compared with those of the States having title laws. The contrast is so outstanding that it makes Washington seem just like a dumping ground for all the stolen cars in this section of the country."

The public generally must be aroused to the seriousness of the situation. Spasmodic efforts on the part of law enforcement officers will do little permanent good. While the "heat" is on, the gangs will lie low, and as soon as it is removed they will start operations again. Motorists must be made to realize that they too have a responsibility. If it is at all feasible, the motorist coming home from business should put his car in his garage at once. He should make it difficult for a thief to steal his car. In addition to this, he can use his influence to have the Courts mete out severe penalties for car stealing and he can further use his influence to have his State pass the kind of laws that are necessary to protect the motoring public. Gangdom is organized in car stealing, and society must organize against it.