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A MODERN ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION

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Automobile accident investigation has become an increasingly important police activity. Moreover, in many accidents involving criminal responsibility—such as those of the “hit-and-run” variety—police investigation must assume obligations commensurate with those created by felonious killings or assaults with firearms or other weapons. Likewise, modern methods of investigation are equally as appropriate.

A recent case from the records of the Police Department of Wichita, Kansas, illustrates very clearly the advisability, and necessity, of applying a careful, common-sense technique to the investigation of a serious automobile accident.

At the intersection of a state highway with a street in the City of Wichita two women were struck by an automobile. The driver of the car failed to stop, and witnesses were unable to determine the license number of the car or even to ascertain with certainty the type and make, due to the excessive speed of the car as well as to the fact that the accident occurred at night. One of the victims survived serious injuries; the other died.

Upon arrival at the scene of the accident, a uniformed investigator from the police department, to whom is assigned exclusively the duties of searching for and preserving physical evidence to be found at the scene of accidents such as this as well as of serious crimes in general, began a critical survey of the vicinity of the collision. The police car lights as well as a flashlight were used in inspecting the area for a considerable distance from the apparent point of impact.

A coat button was located, as well as a small piece of metal $\frac{1}{4}$ inch square at the large end and $\frac{13}{32}$ inch in length—apparently the beak of a bird ornament on a radiator. Some distance away there was discovered a spring clip, such as is used to hold the winter cover in front of a car radiator. No other objects were found, not even headlight glass.

As soon as the investigation at the scene had been completed a check was made to determine the kind of ornament from which the

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broken object originated, and also the make and model of the car on which it appeared. Witnesses had said the hit-and-run car appeared to be a Chevrolet, and the first check at a Chevrolet agency revealed that the bit of metal found was identical with the beak of the eagle ornament which constituted the standard equipment on the 1934, and some few late 1933, models. A further investigation indicated that about ninety per cent of the dark colored late 1933, and all 1934, models were black, and from these facts and the statements of witnesses, it was decided that the car probably was a black 1934 model Chevrolet sedan or coach.

The very minuteness of the broken piece of ornament was both a help and a hindrance: a hindrance in that it would be difficult to locate the car with the tip of the radiator ornament broken, but a help in that it was not so likely to be noticed by the owner.

A careful check was made of every possible lead, and of all likely places where the car might be found. Used car lots, parking lots, sales agencies, and garages were visited one after another.

The details of the case were given to every member of the department. An ornament of the type in question was obtained for a sample. The downtown area of the city was divided equally, and each officer of the traffic squad was assigned to a district, with definite instructions to check every garage, used car lot, parking lot, and rent service in that district, and to keep a lookout among the cars parked along the street and passing in traffic. Patrol officers were given the same information, with instructions to check every car on their beat, in an effort to locate the one with the tip of the radiator ornament broken.

Before noon of the day following the accident two cars had been located bearing the type of ornament sought, each having the beak broken in a manner similar to that of the car in question. The investigator found that although the beaks were broken in the same manner the broken piece matched neither of them exactly.

The following day, almost forty-eight hours after the accident occurred, the same investigator discovered parked in front of an apartment house a 1934 Chevrolet sedan equipped with an eagle ornament from which the beak had been broken. He took the broken piece from his pocket, placed it on the ornament of the car, and found that it matched perfectly.

There was no one around the car, and the investigator did not know where or who the owner was, or what difficulty might be encountered in making the arrest. Without waiting to examine the

car further he called the station and asked that another officer be sent to his assistance immediately. He then proceeded with the examination. The front of the radiator had a winter cover on it, and he found that the spring clip in the upper left corner appeared to be practically new, while the other five were quite dirty. The top of the radiator, on the left side, bore scratches to indicate that it had recently been forced back under the hood by some very heavy impact. There was also a small dent in the front of the radiator shell on the left side.

At this time a man and woman came out of the apartment house and inquired about the inspection of the car. The man admitted ownership of the car and in response to questioning he stated that he alone had driven the car on the night of the accident. His attention was called to the spring clip which appeared new, and he was questioned as to the time of replacement. He stated that it had never been replaced. The investigator then pointed to the broken ornament and asked him how it had been broken. He stated that he did not know it was broken. In his presence the investigator fitted the broken piece to the ornament.

The car was taken to the police garage, and while other members of the department were questioning the driver, the investigator, with some assistance, began a thorough examination. The right side of the hood was found to have a dent which apparently had been recently straightened. The right front fender showed a recently ironed out dent, and the right rear fender had a dent about the size of the top of a man's head in the front side. The right headlight was found to have a large dent in the rear and on the under side, and there was a mark on the fender which was the exact shape of this dent, and in a comparative position. The driver admitted that the lens in this light had been broken out, and that it had been replaced at another town. The headlight had been forced back by the impact, twisting it on the cross arm in such a manner that the front of the light was pointed upward, forming a container in which the broken glass was caught. This explained why no glass had been found at the scene of the accident. The left headlight lens also was cracked.

Close inspection revealed two small spots which appeared to be blood, less than a quarter of an inch in diameter, on the left front fender, just above the point of contact with the frame. At the bottom edge of the radiator cover, on the left side, was another spot about the same size. On the front license plate, which was

on the right side, were two small red spots, not larger than fly specks. A hair about an inch long was found on the right arm of the bumper. In the crack of the right door of the car another hair was found.

All damaged places were carefully photographed. The broken eagle ornament was photographed on the car. The supposed blood spots, encircled with chalk, were photographed. After photographing, the two spots on the fender were scraped off and the scrapings carefully preserved. The radiator cover and the license plate were removed from the car and the spots on them left intact.

Having completed the examination of the four sides of the car, it was then placed over a mechanic's pit and the under side examined with equal care. On the drive shaft housing was found a hair about two inches long. The bottom of the transmission case was found to have a relatively clean spot amid a thick coat of grease and dirt. The bottom of the dust pan on the left side of the crank case also showed a spot where the grease and dirt had been wiped off. These spots were photographed, and the hair from the drive shaft housing removed and preserved.

All photographs were taken by the investigator, and it was he who developed and printed them. All evidence removed from the car was retained in his possession, never being out of his sight or immediate possession except while under lock and key. It was he who had found the beak broken from the ornament, and this too, had never been out of his possession.

The broken radiator ornament was removed from the car in the presence of the driver, and at the investigator's request the driver placed his initials on it, for future identification. It was also initialed by other officers present, as well as by the investigator. The new-appearing spring clip was handled in the same manner.

Specimens of hair were obtained from both victims of the accident for the purpose of a comparison being made with the hairs found adhering to the suspect's automobile. An examination of all specimens by an experienced microscopist revealed the fact that the hair from the bumper, the drive shaft housing, and the specimens from one of the victims were strikingly similar in appearance and structure.

The various blood stains removed from the automobile were subjected to tests not only for the purpose of establishing conclusively that they were blood but to further establish the supposed fact that they were of human origin. The results, indicating the



FIGURE 1
View of broken ornament on
"hit-and-run" car.

FIGURE 2
Enlarged photographs of two
views of the matching of piece
of metal found at accident
scene with the broken beak on
ornament of "hit-and-run car.



presence of human blood, were extremely important in view of the suspect's later statements to the effect that he had a faint recollection (the suspect admitted at that time he was driving his car while intoxicated) of experiencing a "slight jolt" on the night of the accident, which he thought resulted in his car hitting a dog.

Photographs were taken of the various spring clips for the purpose of showing, principally, the difference in appearance between the replaced clips on the cover and the older clips on the cover as well as the clip found at the scene of the accident. All clips were placed in weather-proof cellophane.

The broken beak was photographed in its original position on the ornament. Enlargements were made to illustrate the matching of the broken edges on all sides.

All this evidence was very carefully preserved and arranged for presentation at the trial of the car owner on a charge of manslaughter. However, it became unnecessary to use it for this purpose. The defendant entered a plea of guilty.