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MODERN METHODS OF IDENTIFICATION BY LAUNDRY AND CLEANERS' MARKS

Adam Yulch

(Captain Yulch has spent many years in the devising of systematic means of cataloguing laundry and cleaning marks as a means of establishing the identity of persons. This is a brief accounting of some of the uses of such cataloguing and the results attained. Captain Yulch is Acting Captain, the Laundry Mark Identification Squad, Nassau County Police Department, Mineola, N. Y.—EDITOR.)

The systematic filing of laundry and cleaners' marks on clothing has now become a recognized, effective and time saving aid in establishing the identification of persons.

Certainly, cross-indexed filing systems, although constantly being improved, are not new in police work. These are effectively applied in any modern, well-equipped detective division to produce prompt information tending to speed the closing of a case.

Undoubtedly the most widespread and effective of all identification systems is fingerprint identification, it is generally regarded that positive identification chances recede in proportion to the disintegration of the human body — oftentimes with the fingers, the last to decompose.

When the fingertips are gone, there also goes this form of positive identification. In many instances clothing worn is still identifiable after the body has gone with the elements. In any event the body may outlast the clothing or the clothing may outlast the body and any police department equipped to extract the last shred of evidence or clue from either has a definite ace in the sleeve.

Why the necessity for a laundry-cleaners' mark file? Simply that the marks used by the numerous individual laundries and cleaners are gathered and systematically filed, therefore becoming immediately available when needed, saving time, producing definite clues, and eliminating possibilities of a "tip-off" in an important case.

Without such a file, it would be necessary to send out detectives with an original or duplicate piece of clothing or mark, to personally visit an almost hopeless chain of such shops to find the one from which the article was delivered or the mark originated. While these hours of search are being lost, the trail is becoming cold.

The file of identifying marks from tailor shops, cleaning establishments and laundries has already been used, with great success, in cases under the following general headings: 1. Murder; 2. Drowning; 3. Suicide; 4. Automobile accident victims;

5. Locating ownership of lost or stolen clothing, or other articles taken with clothing; 6. Tracing whereabouts of fugitives, from a coat, vest, trousers, shirt, or other articles of clothing left on or near the scene.

I believe that under certain circumstances, identification through these clothing marks is faster than through fingerprint identification. It has been my experience that in a case where there are no fingerprint records available the clothing mark system is invaluable — one might say, a filing system of the last resort. It is an auxiliary to all present police practices which can not be underrated as a means of securing fast information leading to residences, friends, relatives or acquaintances of the subject.

Not everyone has a fingerprint record on file. But it is my experience that nearly everyone, knowingly or not, has traceable clues in his or her clothing. Practically everyone has a laundry or cleaning mark somewhere in his or her clothing.

The file tells us what shop put the laundry mark on the clothing. The shop proprietor usually has a customers' list and once we find him, he can tell us who the customer was and where the customer lived, and very often he can tell us when the work on the clothing was done. The important thing is that without the file, hours of work are required to locate the shop. With proper records, the shop can be located in a short time.

Consideration was given to the establishment of a laundry mark file many months before it was finally launched. During this time several cases were handled in which such a file would have been helpful.

In one instance I was assigned to find a dry-cleaning shop, which had placed its mark on a coat found in an automobile believed to have been abandoned by thugs who had held up a bank messenger at Farmingdale, Long Island, New York. They had escaped with \$20,000. Every day for several weeks, I visited one cleaning shop after another, nearly 200 in all, before I located the right one. The tracing of the coat from the shop to the customer was instrumental in breaking the case.

Soon after this incident I was assigned to set up a laundry mark file. In the first few weeks, through the co-operation of dry cleaners and laundrymen, 5,000 identifying marks were received.

For convenience of the file, I selected a three by five inch filing card and on each card the name and address of the cleaner or laundry was typed. All information relating to the marks of the particular laundry was entered on the card, either by duplication or by clipping samples to the card. These were then filed alphabetically or numerically, according to the key

letter or number and cross indexed if there was more than one symbol.

Today I have 300,000 marks filed away, ready for instant use, not only from this Department's territory, but from numerous other municipalities in the entire metropolitan area, in addition to communities in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Washington, D. C., Maryland, Delaware, Maine, Rhode Island and St. Louis, Missouri. It is probably trite to say that murder, suicides, or any crime are no respectors of community or state lines.

It was through the filing system of this Department that the "phantom burglar" of 1937 and 1938 was finally identified and a great part of the \$100,000 in loot returned to owners of burglarized homes. The telltale symbol was on a collar worn by the burglar. He had refused to talk, even to giving his right name. The symbol led to the laundry where the suspect's name and address were secured. At his home a great part of the loot was recovered. From clothing among the loot more marks were obtained and traced until the owners of practically all the proceeds of the burglaries were located.

The laundry mark file helped to solve a brutal murder of a jewelry salesman. Bloodstained towels tied together with sash cord provided the clue. In the corner of each towel was the marking "W-K33." The laundry was located within a half hour, the address and name of the customer was secured and detectives soon had their suspect; later convicted.

Usual police practices had been exhausted in attempting to identify a torch victim on the Palisades, the New Jersey side of the George Washington Bridge. Unburned was a section of coat lining with the marking "H 8421-3-5." This was traced to a Mt. Vernon, New York dry cleaning shop, the proprietor of which was the son-in-law of the victim.

One might think that the national attention given the success of the laundry mark filing system would serve to warn criminals to destroy marks. This is not easily done. Many shops use different methods of marking, some pass all customer's articles through a machine which places the mark in invisible ink in the cloth. The mark is not perceptible to the naked eye, but may be quickly read under ultra violet light. As long as victims or criminals wear clothing of any kind, the chances are they will leave some distinguishable clue. There is no more chance of destroying all laundry marks than there is in destroying all fingerprints.

In one case not long ago, clothing brought along by a "stick-up" gang for cleaning rags, led police to the perpetrators. During the holdup a man was shot and killed.

The gang ditched the get-away car in another section of the

city. Some distance from the abandoned car was a pair of old trousers. They had been used to wipe off fingerprints. The cleaning symbols on the trousers were traced and led directly to a member of the gang. The result was a complete solution of the case. The speed of the police action in this instance was a major surprise to those who thought they had overlooked nothing in the way of a "perfect crime."

Neither Commissioner John M. Beckmann, nor my immediate superior, have hesitated in the slightest to give the benefit of the filing system to any other department which feels it may be assisted by what we have already done. I would like to see, however, a similar file covering the immediate and adjoining areas of every police department in the United States so that we might interchange information whenever necessary, in the interest of efficient and effective police work.