

The Laying On of Hands for Fingerprints

Woman Expert Thinks System Will Not Be Confined to Criminals, but Will Become Universal —Chinese Used It for Identification Sixteen Centuries Ago

HAVE your fingerprints been taken?

Perhaps you bridle at the question. Probably you think that none but criminals are listed in the fingerprint indexes, and that the procedure is, in consequence, extremely bad form. But the fingerprints of every sailor and soldier serving the United States are on record, and the same is true of most bank employes and all the du Pont employes. In Argentina it is true of every civilian. In time it may be true of all the world.

In cases of unidentified dead, of kidnapping, of loss of memory, of babies exchanged in hospitals, of forged documents, of masqueraders and pretenders for romantic or criminal purposes, consider the value of the fingerprint. No man could drop his old life and begin anew. For by their hands ye shall know them. It is scientifically conceded now that the little ridges at the tips of your digits afford the most conclusive system of personal identification known, and that in all human probability they are infallible. They are unchanged from babyhood to death, and have been observed in Egyptian mummies.

Fingerprints are unalterable, except temporarily by the use of acids, an expedient to which criminals have on occasion resorted. Criminals are learning also to use gloves. They have resisted fingerprinting on constitutional grounds, as giving testimony against themselves, but have been overruled. They have good reason for objecting to the system, and for seeking to evade it. But what reason have you?

Miss Gertrude Meredith Sullender thinks you have no reason. Miss Sullender is the only woman fingerprint expert holding a civil service position in New York City. Mrs. Mary E. Holland, wife of a Chicago detective, was one of its pioneers in this country, and taught the men who established the bureau for the United States Navy. Miss Sullender was a pupil of Mrs. Holland's, who died four years ago. Several other women are now engaged in the work for the Navy Bureau at Washington.

"The popular prejudice against fingerprinting is so great," Miss Sullender said the other day, "that it may be a long while before it is universally applied. It has been valuable chiefly in the detection and conviction of crime, and people as a rule think that is all it is good for. As a matter of fact, it is valuable as much for protection as for detection. It has saved criminals, for instance, when they were falsely accused on account of their bad records.

"I remember that when I was finishing my studies at Washington, in the Navy Bureau, a man came in and asked that his fingerprints be made. He was going to the Far East, and thought something might happen to him there. It was an unusual request in those days, long before the war, and it happened that the man had no occasion to identify himself; but it was evidence even then of an intelligent attitude toward the system.

"We hope some day to see a general appreciation of the advantages of the system. If documents were signed with fingerprints as well as the name, for instance, forgeries would become impossible. It was so that the Chinese used them. A Chinese when he was ready to make his will would call in all the beneficiaries and read it to them, and then ask them to fingerprint it as evidence that they acquiesced in its terms: It was a kind of ritual, but it was an identification also. It must have been hard on the Chinese lawyers.

"A universal fingerprint system would be of constant value, not just to the

police, but chiefly to the average citizen. Dr. Juan Vucetich, Chief of the Bureau of Identification of Buenos Aires and of the Argentine War Department, who visited the United States in 1913, tried to explain to us then how valuable the system was, for they apply it to everybody in Argentina, but it was too new then for him to make a great impression. I believe that in time the public will come to a realization of its advantages."

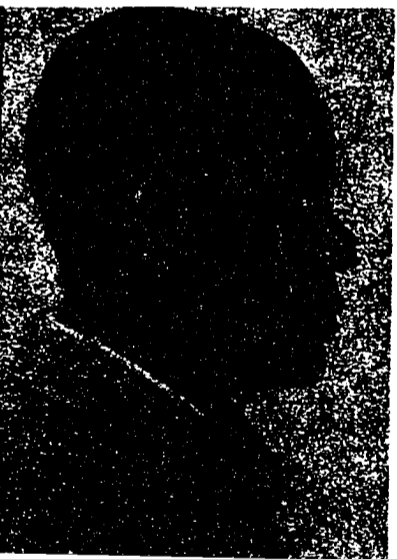
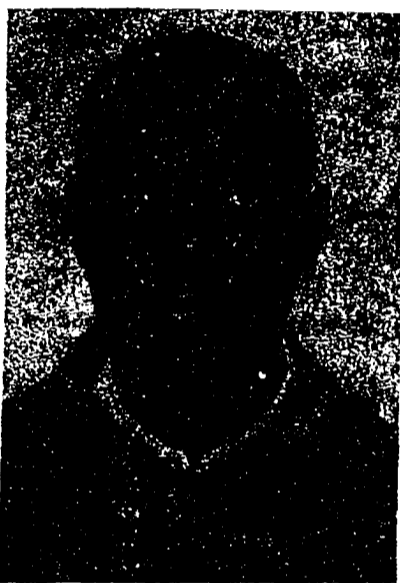
It was not until 1917 that a society was formed in New York on behalf of general fingerprinting. It was called the First National Scientific Registration Society, and was organized at the home of Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer "for the protection of life and property." But amid the sound and fury of the war

among the millions which have been made no two have been found alike. The whorls, loops, and arches of the tiny ridges on your fingers differ from the whorls, loops, and arches on other fingers, and each of your fingers is different. There is a minute system of classifying them, so that they can be card-indexed and found quickly. You may alter your appearance in other ways, as by shaving your mustache, but you cannot alter your finger tips; and they afford evidence more positive than photographs, or even the Bertillon measurements, which detail the bony structure. There was the remarkable case of "dual identity," for instance, in the Federal Prison at Leavenworth, Kan.

Will West, a negro housebreaker, was taken to Leavenworth Prison while Will-

which conviction for murder was obtained in a New York court, probably in this country. William Ackerson, a youth of 16, left the mark of his bloody hand on a pillbox he extracted from Flood's pocket in searching for money, and the mark was his undoing. He was sentenced indeterminately from twenty years to life.

The first fingerprint conviction ever obtained in New York was in May, 1911,



TWO DIFFERENT MEN.

Will West at the Top and William West Below. Both Served Sentences in the Federal Prison at Leavenworth, Kan. Will West, Housebreaker, Identified the Photograph of William West, Convicted for Murder, as His Own. Their Bertillon Measurements Are Remarkably Similar. Their Fingerprints Are Quite Different.

it did not make much noise. Bruce Falconer was elected president, and the other officers were duly chosen, and then not much more was heard of it. It may become more active now that the war is done with.

Miss Sullender was a trained nurse before she took up dactyloscopy. Her mother, who is elderly, lives with her, and trained nursing required that she be away from home most of the time. Fingerprinting offered office work with regular hours. That was why she took it up. She wanted to be able to spend her evenings with her mother. But she fell in love with the new work, and even now, after years "in the service," overflows with enthusiasm for it.

It is only to the layman that fingerprints are alike. It cannot be said with scientific accuracy that no prints are identical, for obvious reasons; but

iam West, convicted of murder, was serving there, and identified the murderer's photograph as his own. The Bertillon measurements, registered in millimeters, (the millimeter is about one twenty-fifth of an inch,) so closely tallied that the men could not have been distinguished with certainty thereby. That is, having photographs and the Bertillon measurements, either negro might have been convicted of a crime committed by the other. But their fingerprints were strikingly unlike.

The courts of this and other countries, at first extremely chary of accepting such evidence, now concede that it is the most positive procurable. And not long ago in New York City, N. Y., when John Flood, a taxicab owner, was killed, his slayer was identified not by a fingerprint but by a palmprint!

That was the first palmprint case in

Lynn. Photo.
Miss Gertrude Meredith Sullender,
Fingerprint Expert.

six years after the system was established. Charles Crispi, one of an organized band of loft robbers, removed a pane of glass from a door leading into a Wooster Street loft. Joseph A. Faurot, Inspector in charge of the New York City Police Detective Bureau, found a fingerprint on that glass, and its duplicate in his files; for Crispi, a mere strippling, boasted a dozen aliases and was an old offender. He confessed on the strength of the fingerprint evidence.

Every once in so often the Occidental world makes what it regards as an epochal discovery, only to find that the Oriental world was first in the field. It was so with the mariner's compass, for instance. It has been so with the fingerprint. The Chinese used it for legal purposes sixteen centuries ago. But in this case we may be said to have borrowed the "discovery" from the Orient, for Sir William Herschel, during his service in India (1853-78) laid the foundations of the modern system on what he found there. The Chinese had imparted their knowledge to the Tibetans and thence to their more western neighbors, and Sir William used by indirection from the Indians what the Chinese had learned in 300 B. C.

Rashiduddin, the famous Persian historian, wrote in 1303 as follows:

It is usual in Cathay, when any contract is entered into, for the outline of the fingers of the parties to be traced upon the document. For experience shows that no two individuals have fingers precisely alike.

Even earlier testimony was offered by the Arab merchant Soleiman, who wrote in 851 A. D. that in China creditors' bills were marked by the debtor with his middle finger and index; and contracts found in Turkestan, dated 782 and 786 A. D., were provided with the fingerprints of both parties.