

True detective stories involve more than luck

By JACKIE KLEIN

Detective stories make good reading.

Plots of the most popular television series and best-selling books are staple. They relate the saga of an individual nailing his man after weaving together the elusive threads of a case. This tale has been retold more times than "Romeo and Juliet."

But crime isn't fiction. Sometimes it happens down the street. A teen-ager girl finds herself staring at a gun in the hand of the customer she was waiting on. He's ordering her to give him the money in the cash drawer.

What happens then? When robbers get caught, they're usually picked up either shortly after committing the crime or after months of investigation, according to a Southfield police detective. If it takes months to arrest a suspect, he has usually robbed a few more stores in the meantime.

The story of how a crime is investigated provides insight into both modern crime and modern police work. It took the detective two weeks of investigation to break the armed robbery case in which the teenager girl was held up. Some of it was luck, but it wasn't like a Serpico, Colombo or Starsky and Hutch adventure.

A call into the police station for an "RA (robbery armed) in progress" alerts all squad cars in the district. Only one goes to the scene immediately.

OTHER CARS attempt to come in different potential escape routes, particularly a description of the getaway car is immediately available.

"The patrolman starts lining up witnesses," the detective said. "He gets statements and a description in 30 minutes or less, and then investigators are called. As soon as possible, a BOL (Be on the lookout) radio call is put on the air."

Surrounding police departments, as well as local police officers, get the call. This begins a network of shared information. Sometimes a car escaping through a neighboring community will be stopped by that police department.

Detectives, arriving after the patrol-

men, should find the crime scene protected against anyone disturbing potential evidence. Witnesses should be already identified.

"We really do look for clues and some of us even carry magnifying glasses," the detective said. "But clues don't often lead to an arrest. Their main function is in the courtroom when hard evidence is needed for conviction in a trial. That could be a year after the incident."

"You have to maintain the chain of evidence. That means someone must be responsible for it at all times. The date, case number and identification of each bit of potential evidence is recorded every time it changes hands."

THE JOB of a detective takes on another dimension—that's the tedious, repetitive job of record keeping. A case doesn't show up in court as a slam-bang action adventure. It comes sealed in little plastic bags, fingerprints and small personal items tagged and labeled.

At the scene of the armed robbery, money was scattered on the floor when the gunman ran out the door. The cash was picked up and fingerprinted.

The cash register, the counter and the door were dusted for fingerprints. Fingerprints seldom lead directly to the suspect, according to the detective. But they help a lot in court. The biggest help in this case was an alarm-triggered camera which filmed the actual robbery. Detectives wish more businesses used this device.

"We interview witnesses again," the detective said. Sometimes we have to ask leading questions "What did he say? Was he taller or shorter than me? People don't always remember right away."

After the first night, the real work begins. Teletype messages have

already been sent to surrounding police departments with information about the armed robbery. Messages are returned with records of crimes and other facts.

AGAIN, THE working detective sets sail on a sea of paper. Cryptic descriptions of people, crimes and cars are sifted daily. Similarities must be checked out.

This entails talking on the phone to detectives in other departments, often driving over to examine mug shots of potential suspects. A conversation with a neighboring police officer produced a lead in this case.

A "snitch," (an informer) told the nearby community's police that a local man had confided in him that he had robbed a store in Southfield. Mug shots presented to witnesses, however, failed to identify the suspect.

The detective said he was convinced he had his man. He found it hard to shake the feeling the suspect was getting away. He said he had to keep an open mind. A flood of information and pictures from other departments kept him busy. Many investigations bog down at this stage, and sometimes other cases intervene. But the working detective keeps going, often for an amazingly long time.

Case files remain open, sometimes even after a suspect has been picked up across the state. It can take a year or longer to close a case. Some crimes are never solved. In this armed robbery incident, a similar hold-up occurred in a neighboring community and the suspect was on the alarm film.

That community's police department had someone under surveillance and the suspect was identified from the first film kept by Southfield's police force. The actual arrest was routine, and the driver of the getaway car was also picked up.



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