

Pinkertons: America's 1st sleuths

"Who are those guys?" Paul Newman and Robert Redford kept asking of the dogged pursuers trailing them after a robbery in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid."

"Those guys" were Pinkerton detectives, and as Butch and Sundance were to find out, the Pinkertons live up to their motto: "We Never Sleep."

Butch and Sundance, members of the Wild Bunch, eventually headed for Argentina to continue their bank robbing. In 1909 reportedly they died in a shootout with a cavalry troop at San Vicente, Bolivia.

Before he founded Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, Allan Pinkerton might have fit right in with some of the characters of the Wild Bunch. As a young man in Scotland during the tumultuous Industrial Revolution, Pinkerton was considered a rogue, an enemy of established society.

He was among the more radical adherents of a reformist movement which advocated violence, if necessary, to democratize Parliament. A warrant was issued for his arrest, and in 1843 Pinkerton headed for America.

Upon arrival, Pinkerton apparently forgot his unconventional past and established himself in Dundee, Ill., as a barrel manufacturer. This innocuous profession led to a flowering of his hidden investigative instincts.

One day, while collecting staves for his cooper trade on an uninhabited island in a nearby river, Pinkerton discovered the remains of a fire. Convinced something strange was going on, he returned late one night with the county sheriff and spotted figures there silhouetted in the dark. They turned out to be coin counterfeiters.

THUS BEGAN Pinkerton's nearly 40 years of checkmating shady capers. He died in 1884, but his sons, Robert and William, who started working with the agency as teenagers, kept the business growing.

In the wake of his Dundee success, "I suddenly found myself called upon from every quarter to undertake matters requiring detective skill," Pinkerton said years later. In 1848, he readily accepted when the sheriff of Cook County asked him to come to Chicago to serve as deputy. A year later, he was appointed Chicago's first full-time detective.

Pinkerton's talents seemed to demand an arena of operation that was larger. In 1850, he gave up his job on the city force to establish his own private agency.

One of the first of its kind in the country, the new enterprise thrived from the start. In 1856, having signed lucrative contracts to protect the property of several Midwestern railroads with requests for his services growing daily, he wrote to a friend in Dundee: "I am overwhelmed with business."

TODAY, PINKERTON'S is headquartered in New York City, with a staff of 36,000 around the world, providing security and investigative services on a private contract basis. As in the past, agents often make citizen's arrests, holding suspects in custody until authorities arrive.

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They were also doggedly patient. Take the case of Max Shimburn, skilled bank robber of the Eastern seaboard. By the time he turned 30 in 1870, Shimburn had become an expert safe cracker, even devising a set of tools specifically for opening safes.

The Pinkertons and the police relentlessly trailed Shimburn. So he moved to Belgium, establishing himself as a respectable, prosperous silk entrepreneur — and self-proclaimed nobleman.

Shimburn's attempts at the straight life soon failed. His investments turned sour, and he returned to his old lifestyle in the states. The Pinkertons had him arrested for theft in New York, and, after serving time, the ex-convict wound up poor and alone.

William Pinkerton did not forget him. He asked Shimburn to describe some of his techniques, and Shimburn obliged with an intricate and carefully planned diagram on the art of safe-cracking.

The Pinkertons were even sought out by crooks in trouble. Such a man was Adam Worth, whose career was studded with diamond heists, forgery operations and bank robberies and was crowned in 1876 by the theft of Thomas Gainsborough's priceless portrait of the Duchess of Devonshire.

Worth had hoped to use the painting as ransom to spring a buddy from jail, but the friend was released before Worth could act.

The painting was too hot to sell, and Worth, afraid to return it lest he be caught, simply rolled up the canvas and shipped it to a warehouse in America, where it remained for more than 20 years.

Then, aging and poor, Worth contacted the Pinkertons and offered to return the painting for cash. William Pinkerton paid the requested sum, but doubtless felt he had gotten the better of the deal. Not only did Worth return the portrait, he also recounted the details of his biggest exploits and confessed to crimes of which he had never been suspected.

IN THOSE GOOD old days, there were few top-flight women crooks to challenge the Pinkertons. One was Sophie Lyons, described by admirers as the International "Queen of the Un-

derworld." Born in 1850, Lyons learned the art of picking pockets by the age of 6 and went on to bigger and more ingenious exploits. In the 1880s, posing as a prominent society woman, she headed for Paris and there was able to steal more than \$200,000 worth of jewelry from her new-found upper-crust friends.

LYONS ALSO MADE an attempt to lead a straight life. In 1894, she became proprietor of the Great Western Matrimonial Bureau in Detroit. "She claims she has settled down . . . If so, she ought to be encouraged," William Pinkerton wrote in an office memo.

The straight life didn't last. Within a short time, Lyons was under investigation for mail fraud.

The Pinkertons began expanding their horizons then. By the 1870s, their beat included the territories of the frontier West. The Pinkerton name became so entwined with the gun-slinging

bandits they pursued that it was hard to distinguish the romantic adventures of the good guys from the adventures of the crooks.

The Wild Bunch, the band of bank robbers who traveled from Montana to Texas to New York City to the jungles of South America, topped the Pinkertons most-wanted list. Most sought-after were the ringleaders, George Parker (alias Butch Cassidy) and Harry Longbaugh (alias the Sundance Kid).

After robbing \$30,000 from Union Pacific's Overland Flyer in 1899, the Wild Bunch was trailed closely by the Pinkertons. But other robberies followed, each more lucrative than the one before it. In 1900 and 1901, the bandits lifted \$32,640 from a Nevada bank and stole \$41,500 in banknotes from a Great Northern train near Wagner, Mont. — big sums in those days. This last robbery put a posse of 100 men on their trails, and the Wild Bunch disbanded.

The Pinkertons were not perfect. History-minded trade unionists still bristle over their controversial role in bloody 19th-century union-industry clashes, and Civil War buffs argue about the value of Allan Pinkerton's intelligence advice to the Union Army.

But Allan Pinkerton and his sons did secure a place for themselves in the folklore of good vs. bad guys. Long before the FBI and Interpol, they spanned the continents in pursuit of their anticrime motto: "We never sleep."



The Wild Bunch always managed to evade the Pinkerton's, but it is thought that the Pinkerton's pursuit led to the disbanding of the gang. Standing are William Carver and Harvey Logan. Seated (from left) are Harry Longbaugh (Sundance Kid), Ben Kilpatrick and George Parker (Butch Cassidy).

Smithsonian News Service story by Michelle Iloff. Smithsonian News Service photo of the Wild Bunch and drawing of Oliver Perry courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery. Smithsonian photo of the James brothers courtesy of Amon Carter of Museum of Western Art.



Jesse James (standing) and brother Frank terrorized the Midwest, looting bank safes and robbing trains. In the cartoon below, Oliver Perry, described by Pinkerton's as "one of the nerviest outlaws," is depicted in his last train robbery in New York in 1892. Atop a moving train, an upside-down Perry tried to steal gold and jewels said to be aboard.



Smithsonian News Service Art courtesy of National Portrait Gallery

I Hired a SECRETARY AND BOUGHT GOLF CLUBS

I SOLD MY GOLF CLUBS AND BOUGHT A BOAT

I FOUND A JOB AND SOLD MY CAR

I SOLD MY BOAT AND BOUGHT A CHAIR

I SOLD MY CHAIR AND BOUGHT A RANGE

I SOLD MY MOTORCYCLE AND BOUGHT A CAR

WE SOLD OUR SAW AND BOUGHT A MOTORCYCLE

WE SOLD OUR RANGE AND BOUGHT A MOWER

I SOLD MY CLOCK AND BOUGHT A RADIAL SAW

I RENTED MY APARTMENT AND BOUGHT A CLOCK

I SOLD MY MOWER AND FOUND AN APARTMENT

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