



*Instant identity: FBI device can electronically scan fingerprint cards in half a second. Six million U.S. citizens have voluntarily submitted prints for filing.*

## Your Fingerprints on File —Good or Bad?

by Mort Weisinger

**R**ecently, in a Baltimore department store, when a neatly dressed man wrote out a check to pay for his purchases and presented his driver's license and two major credit cards for identification, he encountered something new. The cashier politely asked him to press his thumb on the back of the check—then inserted the check into a little black box. A second later, despite the fact that no ink had been used, out came the check with the whorls and ridges of the customer's thumbprint clearly marked on it.

The man reacted to this phenomenon of instant identification by grabbing back the check. He darted for the exit only to rush into the arms of a security guard. Subsequent investigation revealed that he was a professional check-forgery and that he was using stolen and altered credentials.

The little box that had panicked the forger was a print-developing device

known as Identicator, an invention of Detective Division Chief Hugh McDonald, formerly of the Los Angeles sheriff's department. The device, produces, from natural skin oils, an indelible thumbprint.

Introduced in March, 1973, by a San Francisco firm, Identicator systems are now being used by hundreds of retail stores in 45 states, ranging from mom and pop groceries to major department chains like J.C. Penney and Lane Bryant. Other users include some 50 banks, supermarkets, car rental agencies, air-

lines, hotels, motels and a host of establishments usually victimized by fraud artists.

Michael Blewett, Identicator's vice president, told PARADE: "Each year bad-check passers fleece businesses of an estimated \$4 billion—far more than bank robbers get. Clients report that our system has helped cut phony checks by 90 percent, because it provides a powerful psychological deterrent to swindlers."

In Indianapolis, pawnbrokers must thumbprint customers before making loans on merchandise. "This ordinance has helped us clear up numerous burglaries, robberies and larcenies," says Sgt. Sam Davis of the Indianapolis Pawnshop Detail. "It has also aided in the recovery of thousands of dollars in stolen property."

### Anti-crime weapon

The Identicator and the Indianapolis experiences underline the case for "protective fingerprinting," a growing procedure which experts declare might become one of our most powerful weapons against crime. It would hamstring the criminal without imperiling the liberties of honest citizens.

However, many persons link fingerprinting to criminality, while others object to it as an invasion of privacy. But protective fingerprinting no more violates personal rights than submitting to preventive vaccination, supplying financial information to the Internal Revenue

pose compulsory fingerprinting, deems this anti-cheating measure "proper" so long as the prints are not sent on to the FBI or local police—a condition that school boards honor.

In New York City, applicants for liquor licenses, gun permits, hack drivers, etc., are fingerprinted for public protection.

During World War II and the Vietnam war, the government fingerprinted over 30 million men for the Armed Forces.

### Criminals spotted

In 1941, when the U.S. Civil Service Commission began requiring fingerprinting of job-seekers, those with criminal records ran one in 13. Robbers, rapists, arsonists and other criminals were thereby exposed. Swiftly the word passed through the underworld and the Civil Service became No. 1 on the criminals' allergy list. Today only one in every 100 applicants is found to have a record—usually a minor one.

Meanwhile, the trend toward protective fingerprinting is making significant strides. A leading Washington law firm is one of many that advises clients to stamp their fingerprints on wills, deeds and conveyances, to prevent forgery or false claims. "Contested documents will become a rarity in law courts when a fingerprint accompanies a signature," says Cyrus Vance, prominent trial lawyer and president of the Bar Association of New York City.

### Prints instead of 'X'

In numerous banks across the nation, illiterate depositors who sign their name with an "X" are being urged to affix their prints on application cards, to protect them against unauthorized withdrawals by relatives or friends who may have access to their passbooks.

A famous sculptor has chosen this method of digital defense to identify her works for posterity. Her fingerprints are impressed on her sculptures, and the authenticity of her works is easily established with the Non-Criminal Fingerprint Register at the New York City police headquarters, where more than a million persons have voluntarily submitted their fingerprints.

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Service, or queuing up at airports in anti-hijack lines for an electronic frisk.

Actually, we have been living with protective fingerprinting for years. In many states, prospective grand jury members are fingerprinted, as insurance that a criminal will not be sitting in judgment on the accused.

In several public school systems, teachers taking a license examination are required to be fingerprinted. This precaution is used to detect unscrupulous applicants who engage "ringers," or substitutes, to take the test for them. Even the American Civil Liberties Union, whose 250,000 members fiercely op-



## FINGERPRINTS CONTINUED

Says John Marion, president of Sotheby Parke-Bernet Galleries, internationally famous art auction house: "If Michelangelo, Rembrandt, or Stradivarius, the violin maker of Cremona, were alive and could see how extensively their works have been counterfeited, they would endorse such a system of identification." Many curators of art museums share his view.

Today, as a result of the recent rash of kidnappings, thousands of families all over the country are sending their prints and their children's to the FBI. In this way they are at least sure of identification, as well as authenticity on ransom notes.

It was exactly 50 years ago in 1924, when geneticists convinced the FBI that the chances of two persons having precisely the same prints are one in an undecillion—1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. Since then the Bureau has built up a massive file which today contains almost 160 million fingerprints of living individuals. Of this number, over 61 million represent government employees, in defense and security positions, and with military service. Another 12 million are those of registered aliens, as required by U.S. Immigration regulations. 11 million more consist of cards sent in by the 50 states with the fingerprints of residents who, in accordance with their particular statutes, must have their prints on file.

### Files tell story

How important are these records? The prints of some 21 million convicted criminals are currently contained in this master file, as well as 44 million duplicates related to additional offenses. Of this number, 121,700 are wanted by various law enforcement agencies. Whenever one of these fugitives is arrested, the prints are automatically submitted to the bureau for a prompt read-out. Last year this routine helped identify over 40,000 law-breakers.

This file is also useful for riddling alibis by tracing latent fingerprints left by criminals on cigarette butts, radio set buttons in cars, and other surfaces. In a recent bank robbery, five bandits, wearing plastic gloves, emptied the vault and made their getaway. Their car was located later and the plastic gloves found inside. Latent prints detected on the inside of the glove fingers nailed the members of the gang.

### Identifying victims

Since 1959, the FBI's Disaster Squad—by

securing fingerprints from the bodies—positively identified 1687 victims. This score could have been higher if more civilians had their prints on file.

To evaluate the potential of protective fingerprinting PARADE polled criminologists, government agencies, legislators and leaders in various professions.

Quinn Tamm, executive director of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, points out how it would snare "Hot-Car Harry" and his ring of auto thieves.

"Harry, an ex-convict, operates an apparently legitimate auto-body repair shop where stolen cars are repainted, parts switched and serial numbers altered. The only document



To combat fraud, stores now take customer's thumbprint without using ink.

necessary to market these cooled-off vehicles is a bill of sale.

"But suppose Harry were obliged to fingerprint the bill of sale and his prints sent to Washington for comparison with those in the FBI? Honest men would not object to this procedure, but for Harry and his ilk it would be a rogues' rat-trap, leading to certain identification and conviction. The organized stolen car racket would be reduced to a trickle."

The big-time racketeer cannot carry his spoils around on his person. So, using false names, he rents safe-deposit boxes in several banks.

### Opening caches

If, suggest law authorities, the applicant for

a safe-deposit box were asked by the bank to register his thumbprints, it would be thumbs down on his anonymity. Forwarding his print to the FBI in Washington would instantly identify him. The dope trafficker with a record could no longer cache his smuggled heroin in a deposit box.

Welfare officials contend that a protective fingerprinting blitz would increase the efficiency of relief administration, preventing fraud and duplication of payments.

Although protective fingerprinting has long been a sticky issue among legislators, more and more of them have come to realize that, with crime rampant today, approval of the system by citizens would far outweigh the wrath of sincere libertarians who would regard it as a blow to freedom.

The view of New York's five-term Congressman Lester L. Wolff, who is chairman of the Special Subcommittee of the House on International Narcotics Control, is shared by many of his colleagues. Says Democrat Wolff: "I see no reason why it should not be mandatory for individuals to affix their fingerprints to their passports, just as they do their photographs. It would aid in breaking up the false passport racket, would prevent wanted criminals from fleeing the country and help curb international traffic in dope."

As the late J. Edgar Hoover put it: "A fingerprint flies faster and truer than a loftful of stoolpigeons in leading us to the man we want. These natal marks on his fingers are his signature, an anatomical autograph which cannot be counterfeited nor disguised, nor rendered illegible by the mutations of time."