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FBI Agent's Life: Glamour, Tedium

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Second in a series

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To Arthur G. (Jerry) Richards, the world must sometimes seem like a string of small banks tied together by a traffic jam.

Richards, 34, is an FBI special agent assigned to the Los Angeles field office's bank robbery squad. He doesn't lack for work, since Los Angeles, which may have as many as six such holdups a day, is known in police circles as "the bank robbery capital of America."

This means that Richards frequently may find his normal working day stretching into an all-night stakeout. He has also done his share of breaking down doors with gun in hand to apprehend a suspect.

Mostly though, his time is spent behind the wheel of an FBI squad car, crisscrossing the Los Angeles freeways on an endless round of the tiny branch-bank offices that are the favorite targets of the city's gunmen.

This is the real core of FBI

investigative work — the tedious, systematic job of "making a case" by interviewing victimized tellers, by waiting for witnesses to thumb through stacks of mug shots, by rounding up lists of potentially tell-tale license plate numbers.

It's a rare day when Richards gets to complete all his scheduled calls. He takes it for granted that at some point his squad car radio will crackle out the message of "bank robbery in progress." Then, his job becomes one of racing to join other FBI agents and local police also converging on the scene of yet another embryo investigation.

"Around 3 o'clock, we can usually start relaxing a bit, because that's when the banks close," he notes. "But that doesn't mean you get to work banker's hours on this job. Something's always happening. I really love it."

It's more than 1,000 miles from the Los Angeles smog to the clear mountain air of central Idaho. And there, another young agent, 31-year-old Richard C. McDaniel, uses the same words — "I really

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ARTHUR G. RICHARDS
. . .L.A. bank squad agent

RICHARD C. McDANIEL
. . .patrols Idaho reservation

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"love it" — to describe a very different kind of FBI assignment.

McDaniel is part of the bureau's Montana-Idaho division, with headquarters at Butte, Mont. In the days of the late J. Edgar Hoover, "Butte," as the division is known in FBI shorthand, was his favorite exile post — the place where out-of-favor agents were sent for punishment.

McDaniel's job is to cover the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, a 500,000-acre tract that is the home of the Shoshone and Bannock tribes. Under the tribes' treaties with Washington, the reservation is, in effect, a sovereign nation, where most state laws do not apply and where the federal government acts as a caretaker to keep the peace.

That makes McDaniel the modern equivalent of an old-time U.S. marshal. Known to the Indians as "Custer" because of his blond, modishly long hair, he roams the reservation dealing with crimes — murder, rape, assault, burglary — that most FBI men never encounter, since elsewhere they are not covered by the federal statutes.

Sometimes his job is the routine task of discreetly checking the swinging-door bars in the nearby town of Blackfoot for signs of the heavy, Saturday-night drinking that could spell impending trouble. But sometimes, too, McDaniel must fight his way through snow and forests to trail a fugitive, who, in time-honored western tradition, has taken to the hills.

The jobs of Richards and McDaniel are only two among the diverse array of law-enforcement tasks performed by FBI agents across the country. Yet, this diversity is something that the American public has tended to forget.

It has been crowded out of the public's consciousness by a parade of headlines detailing past FBI abuses of privacy and civil rights. To many people who once regarded the bureau with unabashed admiration, it now seems a frightening and politicized secret police apparatus — an organization that one critic describes as "sniffing the air for the scent of groups with 'Afro' in their name or people who take books about socialism out of the library."

That's part of the FBI story — a very big part and one that was submerged for too long from public view. Still, it's not the whole story.

As the principal law-enforcement arm of the U.S. government, the FBI has responsibility for roughly 185 areas of investigation that include everything from the cashing of bad checks to the illegal sale of switchblade knives.

The bureau has grown into an organization of about 20,000 employees, and its investigative resources read like a list of superlatives: the country's biggest files of fingerprints and criminal records, laboratory and technical facilities that are unmatched anywhere, a nationwide network of underworld informers, a police-training school whose campus would be the envy of many a college.

But the FBI's life-blood consists of the 8,600 special agents who are deployed throughout the 50 states in patterns that vary according to the size, geography and federal crime incidence of each.

In the Los Angeles division, where Jerry Richards works, this means more than 500 agents serving a single metropolitan area and pursuing such dissimilar cases as organized crime's gambling activities, police brutality against Mexican-Americans and the pirating of films from the movie and TV industries.

In the Montana-Idaho division, Dick McDaniel is one of 39 field agents who divide up a territory averaging 5,000 square miles per agent. In addition to covering Indian reservations, they work with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to apprehend border-crossing fugitives, help provide security for a government atomic energy installation, and teach the latest crime-detection techniques to local police forces.

Inevitably, there are differences of opinion about how well the FBI performs these various functions. Most people in law enforcement — police chiefs, prosecutors, criminologists — who were interviewed for this series seem to agree with the judgment of former Watergate Special Prosecutor Henry S. Ruth Jr., who says:

NICHOLAS CALLAHAN
. . . hits press reports

"Setting aside those subjects like espionage and internal security that touch on the political area, my personal view is that the FBI does a very good job. It's a tremendously professional investigative organization — probably the best that we have in this country."

That doesn't mean that the FBI is a collection of supersleuths. Its recent record shows a goodly share of failures (its lack of success in the Watergate investigation), misfortunes (the killing of two special agents in a still mysterious shootout with Indian militants on a South Dakota reservation), cases that provoked controversy (the general feeling that it took the bureau too long to catch Patricia Hearst) and investigations where the verdict still isn't in (the search for former Teamsters union boss James R. Hoffa).

But recently the FBI also has managed to chalk up some major successes, particularly in those areas of violent, nonpolitical crime where it originally made its reputation in the 1920s.

It uncovered the evidence required to convict former United Mine Workers President W.A. (Tony) Boyle for ordering the murder of a union rival. It quickly cracked the sensational kidnaping of liquor heir Samuel Bronfman II. It played a big role in ending the wave of airplane hijackings that had plagued the country. And, as FBI Director Clarence M. Kelley likes to point out, "Despite all the criticism, the fact is that we did the needle-in-the-haystack job of finding Patty Hearst."

Commenting on these achievements, Kelley's principal deputy, Associate Director Nicholas Callahan, contends: "Sure, we've got a lot of trouble on this domestic security thing, and we've got to get out of the woods on that. But the controversy isn't damaging our morale or our ability to operate in other areas of crime — not anywhere near to the extent that people who read the newspapers might suppose."

Some agents in the field, especially those stationed in the South, the Midwest and the Far West, say that in their areas the charges of illegal activities simply have not received the attention or provoked the indignation that might be felt in Washington or along the Atlantic seaboard.

"Out my way being an FBI man still commands a lot of respect," says Dick McDaniel. "It's sort of like being on a par with the town doctor or lawyer." In perhaps the most significant underscoring of this point, applications to join the bureau are still outstripping vacancies by more than two to one.

Still, there's no question that the scandal over intelligence improprieties has left its mark on bureau morale. Although few rank-and-file agents will dispute the fact that the bureau was caught red-handed in some highly improper activities, they also are very resentful of what Callahan calls "the frequent and inequitable failure of the press and others in not setting forth the accomplishments of the bureau and putting them in perspective with the incidents that are being criticized."

The reaction of some agents, particularly old-timers, has been to denounce "the liberal press" and "liberal politicians" for what they perceive as some sort of plot to coddle criminals and subversives by rendering the FBI powerless.

That's not surprising, since FBI agents aren't usually people who pay dues to the American Civil Liberties Union or vote for presidential candidates like George McGovern. As Kelley notes, "Police work has a natural attraction for people who are inherently conservative."

For years, the ranks of FBI agents seemed to be filled with

men drawn from two strands of the population — Southerners with roots in the small-town antebellum culture of their region, and Irish Catholics schooled in the rigidly moralistic theology then taught at universities like Fordham, Loyola and Holy Cross.

Cheryl C. Garrett, one of the women agents now being recruited into the FBI, finds striking parallels between the bureau atmosphere and her early life as the daughter of a career Air Force officer in the South.

Garrett, 28, says of her male colleagues in the Los Angeles office: "They're anti-hippie, anti-homosexual, anti-this and anti-that. It's the same thing you find among most military people. My father and his friends were all the same way."

Times change though, even in those institutions to which the bureau traditionally looked for recruits. The College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts used to boast that it had sent more graduates into the FBI than any other school. In recent years though, the big alumni heroes on the Holy Cross campus have been the draft-card-burning and FBI-baiting Berrigan brothers.

And the FBI itself has started to show some signs that it's not immune to changing ideas.

Mostly, the reason is that the younger agents tend to be more skeptical, questioning and independent in their attitudes. Says J.W. (Jack) Burns, the agent in charge of the Butte division:

"I'm very old-school, and I think that if I have to break down a door, I don't want the agents backing me up to be women or guys who are 5-foot-7 and weigh 135 pounds. I want big 6-footers who look like middle linebackers for the Dallas Cowboys."

"But," he adds, "I know that you can't recruit according to the old ideas. I know that you can't subject young people to the old discipline anymore. So if they send me women or little guys, I'll work with them. And I have to admit that the new breed are the brightest group we've ever had. They may even turn out to be the best agents we've had."

This "new breed" still seems to come mostly from the same backgrounds,

J.W. (JACK) BURNS
...accepts "new breed"

regions and schools that have spawned FBI agents for decades. Although the bureau several years ago dropped a requirement that agents have law or accounting degrees, it still gives preference in its recruiting to persons with such credentials.

Today, however, the FBI has agents whose backgrounds include everything from engineering to insurance adjusting. A large number began as school teachers or career military officers. A powerful recruiting incentive has been a salary scale of about $18,500 to $35,000 a year.

Increasingly, Kelley is broadening the recruiting base—a drive that for the first time has brought into the FBI women and greater numbers of blacks, American Indians, Oriental Americans and Spanish-surnamed Americans.

They are still only a tiny minority. The FBI has only 103 black agents. But that's 103 more than there were during almost all of Hoover's years at the helm.

The FBI is still an organization of inherently conservative people. But it is by no means the monolithic, reflex-action conservatism of old. And many of its agents seem to realize that the clouds over the bureau aren't going to be scattered by blaming a "liberal plot" for them.

Kelley's executive assistant, Bill Reed, says: "I haven't heard anyone suggest that we're going to lick the problem with rhetoric. You overcome it by what you are — what you do. The people in the bureau know that ultimately it's only their performance that will count in convincing the public."

The new minority members share this concern about what one characterizes as "reminding people that FBI agents are also human beings." The blacks, for example, worry that the drive to bring more blacks into the bureau will be seriously impaired by recent disclosures of the surveillance and harassment campaign waged by Hoover against the late civil rights leader, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"I spent 10 years on local police forces," says Larry A. Wamsley, a 34-year-old black agent in Los Angeles, "and I joined the FBI, because I knew that if you're going to be in law enforcement, the FBI is where it's at. It's the best there is.

"When I'm dealing with people in the black community, their reaction is one of admiration and awe over a black being in the FBI. It's something that they just didn't think was in the scope of black aspirations. The kids say, 'Hey man wow! Is it like on TV? Can we get in, too?' I hope that's not going to be spoiled now."

Generally, the agents in the field, for all their determination to keep on with the job, seem like the crew of a becalmed ship awaiting new orders that will get them moving again.

So far, those orders that have come down from Kelley and his new team in Washington — decentralization of authority, eliminating the more annoying aspects of discipline, shifting the emphasis of investigations from petty crimes to big cases — have met with almost unanimous approval in the field.

Henry Ruth says in lauding the bureau's abilities as an investigative agency: "The ability is still there and largely intact. The FBI's real problem was with a fossilized leadership that misused its capabilities.

"The question now," he adds, "is whether those on top can get it back on the track. I think that under Kelley the necessary self-analysis and reform can be accomplished. But it's going to take time — time that will have to be measured not in months but in years."

NEXT: Rules for Intelligence