

Keys to
The Jail—II

Proud Bondsmen, Like

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FBI, Track Down Their Men

Second in a Series

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Washington's bondsmen say they are better at tracking down and catching bond jumpers than the FBI.

Two years ago, one of them, David E. Resnick, posed as a magazine photographer to trap a bail jumper in his lawyer's office.

Max Weinstein, who runs Washington's biggest bail bond business, once caught a man he had on bond and who had escaped from the city five years earlier.

"I have paid informants everywhere," Resnick says. "One man I had on bond skipped to New York recently. I heard through the grapevine he was coming back here to get his belongings.

"He was in Washington only a few minutes before I got six phone calls telling me where he was, and I sent an agent to a rooming house to arrest him."

A 19th Century U.S. Supreme Court decision effectively gave bondsmen the power to pursue the bond

jumper anywhere, break into his residence or place of hiding, arrest him without a warrant and bring him back to trial.

Resnick tells of one case where a woman he had out of jail on bond failed to show up in court and went to California, where a bondsman there spotted her.

"I just wired him the authority to arrest her," Resnick said, "and the bondsman put her on a non-stop jet to Dulles Airport, where I picked her up."

If a defendant out of jail on bond fails to return to court for trial, the bondsman who posted the bail bond must forfeit its face value to the court. But if he chases the bond jumper and brings him back to court, he often gets his money back.

Last year, General Sessions judges forfeited 119 bonds worth more than \$50,000, but the bondsmen later got nearly \$28,000 back for returning 49 bail jumpers to court.

Washington bondsmen say that most bail jumpers from

here flee to North and South Carolina, where many of them have families.

"I can tell you name of every sheriff in every county of North Carolina," Resnick says. "I know every back alley in both states," Weinstein added.

Among their paid informants in the Carolinas are the local law officers, who are furnished names and descriptions of the bail jumpers by the bondsmen's agents.

"The rewards to people who help us out down there

aren't too expensive, either," Weinstein says. "I'm just sure to pay off a \$25 reward, for instance, in 25 brand-new \$1 bills. That impresses them."

The bondsmen have long memories for the names and faces of jumpers. Resnick remembered how he heard the name "Wesley L. Beckwith" as he walked through the Traffic Branch of General Sessions Court one day a few weeks ago.

"He had jumped bond on me two years ago," the bondsman said. "Evidently

he was there in court on a traffic charge. I got permission from the judge to borrow him long enough to turn him in for bond jumping in the U.S. Branch courtroom down the hall."

As soon as the burly bondsman got Beckwith in the hall, he recalled, the defendant tried to run away.

"I quickly shoved him up against a wall," Resnick said, "put my handcuffs on one of his wrists and literally dragged him to the other courtroom."

Beckwith was found guilty

of contempt of court for jumping bond and sentenced to ten days in jail before being tried on the charge lodged against him two years before.

"What will the courts do if they release everybody without bond and there is no bondsman to bring them back to trial?" Resnick asked.

He was referring to legislation now before Congress to require judges to release most defendants awaiting

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D.C.'s Proud Bondsmen, Like FBI, Usually Track Down Their Men

trial on their promise to return to court.

Resnick said that if the law is approved, "it could wipe us bondsmen out completely."

This is just what the bail bond reformers want. They believe the present bond system—and the powers it gives bondsmen — is all wrong.

"But instead of confining their criticism to the system," Resnick complains, "they go after us because it is easier. We've been hurt pretty bad lately."

While Resnick was talking in General Sessions Court hall recently, another local bondsman, Howard Robinson, hurried up to him and grabbed his arm.

'The Judge Wants You'

"C'mon," Robinson said excitedly, "Judge Howard wants to see you right away." He quickly pulled Resnick into a court elevator.

Later, in his office across from the courthouse on Fifth Street nw., Resnick admitted that "no judge wanted to see me. Robinson and the other bondsmen just didn't want me talking to you."

Unfounded criticism and bad publicity, the bondsmen

believe, have led to things like the experimental D.C. Bail Bond Project, which obtains the pre-trial release without bond of defendants with close community ties.

Resnick said he would be in favor of the project if it released only defendants who could not afford bail bond premiums. "But they are getting others out, too," he complains, "most of them good risks who could afford a bondsman."

Last year, lawyers representing the bondsmen (there are seven principal bonding firms here) even threatened to take the Ford Foundation to court to stop the project from obtaining personal bond release of "non-indigents."

Junior Bar Study

The 1963 Junior Bar study of Washington's bail system, which led to the Bond Project's establishment, recommended, however, that it "embrace all bail applicants . . . whether indigent or not."

"Our entire object was to show that monetary bond was unnecessary," one project worker explains. "Besides, the average defendant who can 'afford' a bond premium fee has to take it from the family food budget, borrow it, or in some cases, steal it."

The bondsmen claim the project has cut deeply into their business, but records in the Court of General Sessions show that bondsmen wrote just as many bonds there last year as in 1963, the year before the Bond Project began.

Weinstein alone, according to General Sessions records, wrote about 1600

bonds for defendants there which would have netted him an estimated \$80,000 in premium fees. Resnick's computed totals were 1700 bonds written for \$70,000 in premium fees.

Won't Reveal Income

No similar totals were available at the U.S. District Court. The bondsmen themselves will not reveal their incomes, although Weinstein said that unpaid premium fees and forfeitures when defendants jump bond "keep this from being a lucrative business."

Both Resnick and Weinstein say they do not refer clients they take out on bond to certain lawyers (this is illegal). But both "guess that some of that happens because lawyers are allowed to send their clients to us and we are expected to return the favor."

'They Forget Our Service'

"What people seem to forget," Resnick said, "is the service we perform the court and the community—getting these people out of jail at our risk, bringing back the ones that jump bond—all at no expense to the taxpayers."

But the Junior Bar's 1963 study of Washington's bail bond system noted that the defendants left in jail by bondsmen to await trial cost taxpayers an estimated \$500,000 a year in jail-keep alone.

"We can estimate," one lawyer asked "the cost in terms of human beings pent up in that cramped jail because a bondsman said, 'NO?'"

TUESDAY: An Experiment in Bail Reform.