

## Thumbprinting Experiment

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# A Very Personal Check

By Tim Findley

About 500 stores in the Bay Area now want your fingerprint as well as your signature on checks, and promoters of the little black box that does it predict that thumbprints may become standard for everything from entering buildings to checking your baggage.

All it takes is a little finger pressure on the corner of your check, the clerk slips that into a device the size of a telephone, pushes a lever and presto, a permanent impression of your fingerprint is made — no ink, no mess.

The box is manufactured and sold by Identicator Corporation, San Francisco firm formed 18 months ago around the invention of a Los Angeles detective determined to counteract the estimated \$2 billion a-year cost of fraud in America.

The fingerprinting routine has no effect on the average citizen who might bounce a check off the supermarket, but is aimed at fraud artists who use phony identification or stolen checks and credit cards, the promoters say.

"It's no different than signing your name," said Identicator president Oscar Pieper, "except you can't forge a fingerprint."

The print is made on the check. No records of it are kept by the store, but if it comes back marked "no account," it does to the fraud detail of the nearest police station.

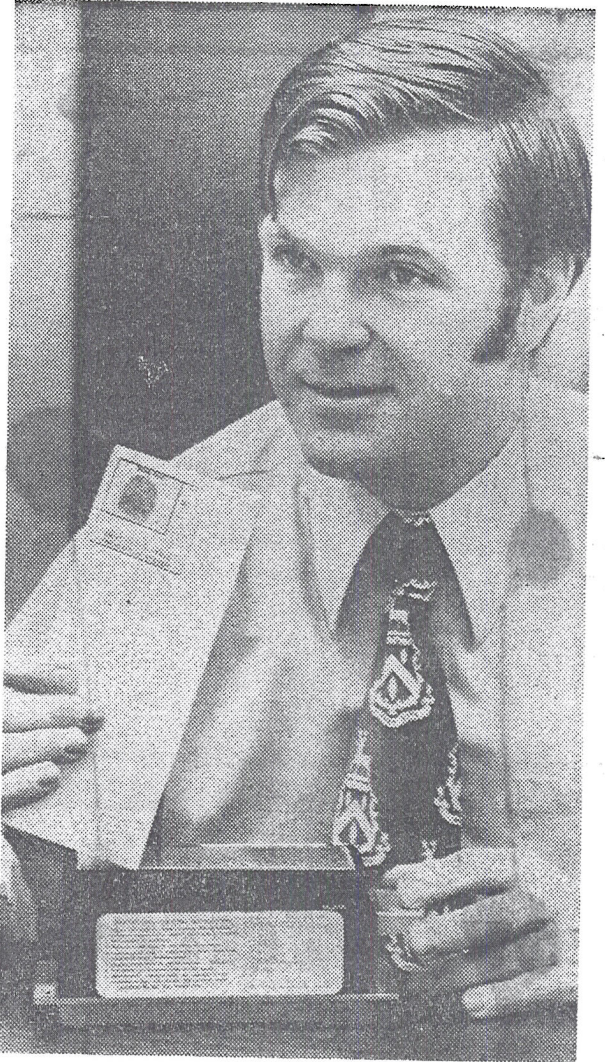
Pieper and his associates consider it a deterrent device, because the last thing a forger wants to leave behind is his true identity.

### PROCESS

The process is quick and simple and unlike other methods tried, leaves no mess behind. The device relies on natural oils in a person's finger to make a dry photostat.

It was first tried for six months earlier this year in several stores in Redwood City. Stores participating reported they reduced their losses from bad checks by \$10,000 in that period.

The box, which costs \$200 and is good for some 50,000 impressions, is currently being tested in Sears, J. Magnin, Liberty House, Rhodes, J.C. Penney's and even some Howard Johnson motels in the Bay Area. The test is limited to a few indi-



Oscar Pieper with a thumbprinted check and the Identicator

vidual stores in each chain. So far, spokesmen say there have been few complaints from customers.

### STORES

Eventually, Pieper contends, the process should make check cashing easier, because stores that once were forced to merely write off losses in bum checks now have a means of tracking down the culprit.

But aside from checks, the implication of the little black box are enormous. Identicator Corporation is already trying to sell its box

to airlines as a means of deterring hijackers.

It is conceivable, company spokesmen say, that the device would someday be made even more elaborate, tied into computers and used as a means of positive identification for almost any need.

You might, for example, someday just walk into a store, stick your thumb down on a piece of paper and whirr, buzz, the computer tells the clerk if you can afford a Frisbee. It's all in the thumb, you know.