

HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION

PRACTICAL INFORMATION FOR
CORONERS, POLICE OFFICERS,
AND OTHER INVESTIGATORS

Eighth Printing

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HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION

To

*Those unknown and uncounted persons,
prematurely deprived of life by malicious assault,
and whose assassins have gone unpunished—
this book is respectfully dedicated.*

Foreword

EXPERIENCED policemen know that the majority of serious crimes cleared by them is due to their knowledge of the *modus operandi* of criminals, and to the facts concerning criminals collected by them from established "lines of information." The police mean by "lines of information" the facilities whereby the officials can get in touch with "informers" who are a part of, or who are indirectly connected with the underworld. These men and women, for various reasons, aid police in identifying offenders and in recovering stolen property. Without the help of "informers" the small force of men charged with the responsibility of protecting life and property would be handicapped in combating the vast army of criminals who constantly wage war upon others in the social family.

The majority of homicides are not committed by professional criminals, hence police cannot rely upon "informers" for aid but must depend upon their own resources for solving such crimes. Because policemen ordinarily do not have the scientific training requisite for homicide investigation, there have been occasions when a homicide has been classified by them as suicide, and they have also arrested and prosecuted persons for homicide where the evidence subsequently proved that death was the result of suicide or accident.

The author of *HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION* has written in language easily comprehended how the policemen can improve their investigative potentialities; discover their many limitations; learn to know what the scientist can do for them; how best to prevent evidence left at the scene of the crime from being destroyed or contaminated; and, finally, whom to call upon for scientific assistance in preparing a case for presentation in court, or when help is needed in conducting an investigation. For these reasons *HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION* should be required reading for all policemen.

AUGUST VOLLMER
Berkeley, California

Preface

IN THE INVESTIGATION of deaths suspected of having been due to violence, the need for scientific methods has become increasingly acute in the United States during the past few years. Except in two or three localities, no responsible organization exists in the United States and Canada to correspond with the soundly established medicolegal institutes in Europe and Latin America. However, some North American cities and counties have developed astonishingly well equipped laboratories to help police agencies investigating violent deaths.

But the finest laboratory is powerless to give practical assistance unless there has been an equal degree of scientific work done on the case at the time when the dead body was *first found*. And in only a few areas have investigating police officials received adequate training to enable them to perform this important task. Consequently, when attempting to deal with their special and important public problems, the investigating officers may do certain things or fail to do others which result in the criminal case becoming hopelessly involved.

So it may be said that the purpose of this book is to make available to coroners, police officers or others, whose duty it is to inquire into the nature of a homicide, tested practical plans of procedure to follow in adequately investigating the death. Scientific names, which are not self-explanatory, have been eliminated, and it is intended that this book shall be simple and practical. The trained medical examiner may find little of interest in these pages, but it is hoped that this synopsis of factual information will be of practical use to men without scientific training whose duty requires that they shall investigate what appears to be a violent death.

Outside of our larger cities, it is usually impossible for the investigating officer to have the services of a trained medical pathologist to perform autopsies which may be required. Generally the community doctor is the man called upon to do this

task, and, if he is without special training in the field of legal medicine, the autopsy is apt to be entirely inadequate. Consequently, with each chapter dealing with a particular type of homicide, there has been outlined a brief section which covers the medical aspects of that particular type of death. It is suggested in many instances that the coroner or other investigating officer will find it of advantage to have the doctor read such sections prior to performing the autopsy. If this is done, serious errors of commission or omission will not be so apt to occur.

L. M. S.

East Lansing, Michigan
October, 1950

Acknowledgments

TO NAME individually all the persons who have contributed ideas, pictures and information to help make this book is an impossible task. But to August Vollmer, that great pioneer of modern police methods who contributed the Foreword and to Charles Wilson, Clarence Muehlberger and Harold Mulbar, each of whom wrote chapters—my sincerest and deepest thanks.

Then there is Mrs. Lee, who has done more for Legal Medicine than any one individual in the United States, and the group from Harvard Medical School—Moritz, Leary, Walker, Jetter, Dutra, Ford, Fisher and Breyfogle—to mention only a few. From the Atlantic to the Pacific the list could continue—such people as Keeler, Lyle, Pinker, Harper and Roger Greene—Gerber, Smith and Ralph Turner—all great scientists and marvelous friends. It's hopeless to name them all.

Erle Stanley Gardner, who is a thoroughly grounded student of investigative methods, has contributed in many ways.

Charles C Thomas, the publisher, has taken a tremendous personal interest in this book and his varied and unusual talents have proved invaluable.

And finally to Louise Drew Snyder, who has spent uncounted hours on this task—thanks and more thanks!

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HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION

CHAPTER 1

General Considerations of Homicide Investigation

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE INVESTIGATING OFFICER

APPROXIMATELY *twenty per cent of all persons die under circumstances that require an official inquiry into the cause of death.* Therefore, the coroner or police officer carries a heavy responsibility when called upon to investigate a sudden or violent death, *for he stands in the dead man's shoes to protect his interests against those of everyone else in the world.* The zeal and intelligence which he brings to bear on the problems confronting him may make the difference between a murderer being convicted or a homicide not even suspected. If he interprets an accidental death as due to natural causes, a widow and family may be deprived of benefits and other property which the deceased may have gone to great pains to provide. If he interprets a death due to natural causes as a homicide, an innocent person may be placed in jeopardy and put to extreme discomfort and expense to defend himself. Consequently, the investigating officer must proceed with extreme caution and with a full realization of the disaster which may result from a mistake on his part.

The investigation of a violent death is quite different from most other types of scientific work because a mistake once made cannot be corrected, and further work on the case, however well done, may be of no avail.

The Investigator Burns Three Bridges Behind Him.—In the course of conducting his investigation the officer crosses three bridges which he burns behind him. It is vitally important that the case shall be adequately handled *before these bridges are burned.*

Bridge 1.—The first bridge is burned when the dead body is moved. *Before this is done*, it is *imperative* that photographs be taken, measurements made, fingerprints searched for and a host of other tasks carried out, because, when the body is once moved, it can never be put back again and the investigation repeated *exactly*.

Bridge 2.—The next bridge is burned when the body is embalmed. Embalming effectively destroys traces of alcohol and several other poisons. It also makes the determination of many other substances (see page 261) much more difficult. Consequently, if there is the slightest reason to suspect poisoning, *the organs should be removed before embalming*.

Bridge 3.—The investigating officer has burned his last bridge when the body has been buried or cremated. It is a difficult and expensive procedure to disinter a body. The lapse of time greatly increases the difficulties of a scientific examination and diminishes the likelihood of a successful conclusion as to the cause or instrument of death. Cremation, of course, destroys any possibility of further scientific work on the body.

THE MEDICOLEGAL AUTOPSY

The real beginning of any homicide investigation should be to establish the cause of death accurately. Frequently time and money are spent on checking up rumors, listening to the theories of casual neighbors and relatives, or of even searching for a murderer when there is no adequate proof that a homicide has been committed. Consequently, an autopsy should be the first thought of the coroner when there is the slightest reason to suspect the possibility of a homicide. *A medicolegal autopsy* requires a much higher degree of care and thoroughness than do autopsies generally. The pathologist must not be content with merely establishing *the cause of death*. He should carefully examine the entire body to rule out *all other possible causes or contributing factors to the death*.

When the examiner feels that a postmortem examination is required, he should *proceed with care in his selection of the physician to do the work*. Experience and training in this par-

ticular field far outweigh any amount of good intentions. Performing an autopsy is an expensive procedure but the microscopic examination and the determination of poisonous substances in the tissues removed cost much more if the autopsy is inadequately done. The laboratory work to follow a superficial autopsy has not much value. It is far cheaper in the end to pay the cost of having a physician experienced in this particular field perform the autopsy than it is to try to get by with the minimum of expense.

There are certain minimum requirements for performing an autopsy properly. It should not be done outdoors unless the state of putrefaction is so advanced that it is impossible to attempt it inside. Running water is helpful. Most funeral directors with modern equipment have embalming rooms with a tilting table, and with adequate lighting, plumbing and ventilation to carry out the operation properly. Their equipment should be utilized whenever possible.

The officer in authority should bear in mind that an autopsy is not a sideshow and *persons not officially concerned with the investigation should be excluded from the autopsy room.*

Cases are on record where the surviving relatives of the deceased have collected damages against persons performing the autopsy when newspaper reporters, curiosity seekers and others have been present. The awards have been granted by the courts on the basis that their feelings have been outraged by the lack of privacy at the examination.

At most autopsies it is necessary to remove and retain portions of organs, bullets or other material for the purpose of further scientific examination. In the chapters to follow details will be given as to how this material should be preserved. In general it may be stated that organs or portions thereof should be placed in *clean* glass top fruit jars and the lids *sealed with sealing wax*. If the purpose is to examine the organs for poisons, no preservative of any kind should be added. The jars should then be labeled with the date of the autopsy, the name of the deceased, and the name of the doctor who made the examination. It is important that the jars pass through as few hands as possible, *because if the case comes to trial every person who*

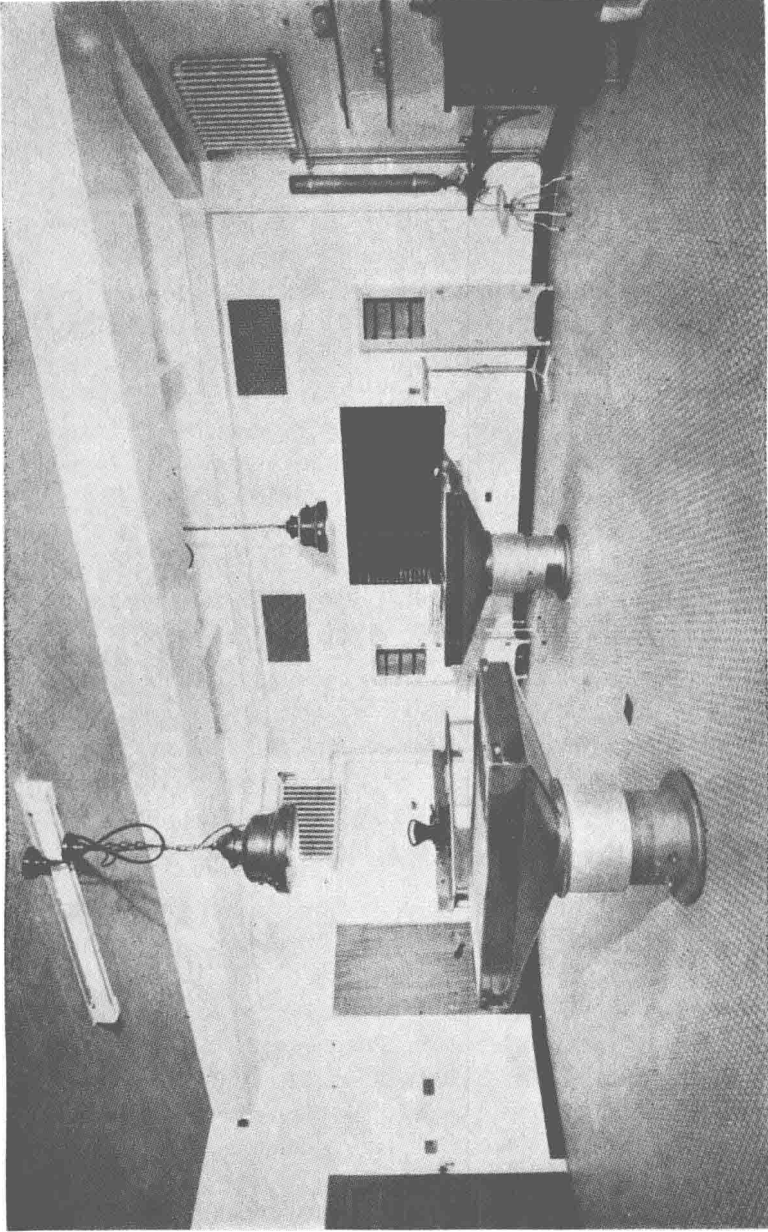


FIG. 1: A modern autopsy room. Note the roominess, adjustable lighting, modern tables and the refrigeration room at the left. From Farber's, *The Postmortem Examination*. (Courtesy of Charles C Thomas, Publisher: Springfield, Ill.)



FIG. 2: An autopsy on a decomposed body. Compare the facilities here, which are usual, with those in Figure 1, which are unusual.

handled the materials must be put on the witness stand to show his connection with the evidence. In general, the material cannot be sent by mail or through other commercial channels to a laboratory, but must be carried in person and a receipt obtained from the individual to whom it is delivered.

What Cases Should Be Autopsied?—Coroners frequently ask what cases should be autopsied. It is impossible to answer this question in a manner which will apply to all circumstances. Frequently the officer is confused when the cause of death seems