



Questioned Documents Section – 2011

J4 Handwritten Documents as the Only Remaining Physical Evidence Linking a Person to Five Homicides

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to see the relevance of forensic document examination in criminal investigations.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by reinforcing the knowledge that a broad spectrum approach to the use of forensic fields gives the greatest chance of success in developing physical evidence which can either corroborate or refute witness statements.

A broad spectrum approach to forensic evidence is used by many investigators. It matters not to these investigators where the focus of financing is in forensic laboratories, nor where criticism is directed. Government-funded forensic laboratories provide multiple areas of forensic examinations to meet these needs.

Questioned document evidence in any form is the only type of physical evidence which conveys thoughts or statements. Handwritten information, identified to a person, is the only line of physical evidence which conveys thoughts and statements that are definitively linked to a person. In the case presented here, there was a "tsunami" of verbal evidence; however, the handwritten documents were the only physical evidence linking either defendant to five murders.

In 1993, a federal witness, his girlfriend and her two young daughters, and another potential federal witness, went missing. The two witnesses had been two Iowa-based buyers and distributors of high purity methamphetamine manufactured in Arizona by one of the defendants. As investigators put pressure on the criminal enterprise, potential witnesses began cooperating with law enforcement agents. A few days before one defendant was scheduled to plead guilty to drug charges, four people disappeared. The defendant backed out of his plea arrangement. A few months later, a fifth person disappeared. In 1996, a poor quality copy of a permit to acquire a handgun was submitted for comparisons of the handwritten information and signature to the known writings of the defendants. In February of 1997, following the arrest of one defendant, a deteriorated scrap of paper was submitted to attempt to make the handwriting more readable. The note contained names and phone numbers of federal witnesses in the case. The second defendant was arrested in 2000. This second defendant confided in two inmates regarding her involvement in the five murders. Shortly thereafter, one inmate provided investigators with five scraps of white paper bearing very faint pencil writing. The notes provided information about the five murders and two maps to where the bodies were buried. The information was used to locate the five bodies. The five pieces of paper were eventually submitted to the Iowa DCI Crime Laboratory in order to make permanent readable images of the entries and to process the papers for latent prints. At about that same time, a note from one decedent's home was submitted for comparison with earlier known writings. A request was made for normal daily writings of anyone suspected of involvement with any of the notes. Eventually, in 2003, adequate known writing was submitted for comparison to allow an identification of the writer of the notes about the murders. One of the two defendants was identified as the writer of the notes.

This presentation will cover document evidence associated with: (1) the drug manufacturing; (2) purchase of a handgun; (3) conspiracy to destroy evidence and the state crime lab; (4) conspiracy to kill law enforcement officers and others in the judicial system, other witnesses; and, (5) the eventual information about the five murders and the locations of the bodies. Lines of forensic evidence examination included: forensic archaeology, firearms, drug identification, and questioned documents. At the time of each trial, the only physical evidence connecting either defendant to the five murders was the five

small pieces of paper describing the murders and showing maps of the locations of the bodies. In separate trials, each defendant was convicted, leading to the one defendant becoming the first female on the federal death row since 1953. In retrospect, the broad spectrum approach to forensic examination of physical evidence was nearly stymied by the determined criminals.

Forensic Document Examination, Handwriting Comparisons, Homicide