



The Vidocq Society

An all-volunteer
group dedicated to
solving cold cases

By William L. Fleisher

Eugène François Vidocq (1775-1857) was a police detective who practiced his craft in early 19th century France. In view of his earlier life as a reformed criminal, he also was Victor Hugo's inspiration for both Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert in *Les Misérables*. Vidocq founded and was first director of the "Sûreté, forerunner of France's national investigative service, the Police Judiciaire. The Sûreté was so far ahead of its time that Sir Robert Peel modeled Scotland Yard after it. Vidocq's use of innovative investigative methods and his successes made him among the most famous personalities of his day.

Lunch on President's Day 1990 attended by three forensic experts spawned a Philadelphia organization named in Vidocq's honor. As often happens on such occasions, the conversation on that day quickly turned to crimes, solved and unsolved. The extended, academic discussion prompted the diners to formalize their meetings and invite crime professionals, active and retired, to try to solve "cold" cases over lunch.

The Vidocq Society has been convening every month at the Downtown Club for 18 years. Today, it boasts more than 160 members in the U.S., Europe and the Far East, including prominent investigators, government and private, as well as internationally-renowned forensic experts in the fields of pathology, criminology, dactylography (fingerprints), forensic dentistry, psychology, polygraphy and anthropological facial reconstruction. The District Attorney of Philadelphia, several past and current federal prosecutors and luminaries at the bar are members, along with persons having no formal credentials save an interest in mysteries.

The Society offers pro bono advice to any law enforcement agency with an especially difficult unsolved case. In response to a demonstrable need over the years, members of the Society have presented free "cold case" homicide seminars for investigators around the country. At a black tie dinner each fall, the Society presents medals to recognize remarkable achievements in the art of investigation. Past honorees include a number of Philadelphia homicide detectives for a wide range of cases. In connection with new investigation leading to the confession of Marie Noe to smothering eight of her 10 children between 1949 and 1968, the Society recognized Stephen Fried, former editor of *Philadelphia* magazine, the late Dr. Halbert Fillinger, former Montgomery County coroner, and former medical examiner investigator Joseph McGill.

Every month over dessert, a Vidocq Society member or a guest presents facts and evidence concerning an unsolved homicide. Society members pose clarifying questions and offer suggestions. Presenters often come away with new avenues of inquiry even in cases unsolved for more than a decade and where witnesses are

missing or known to be dead. Many cases are contributed by small police departments with modest investigative resources.

Homicides unsolved in the “first 48” (hours) are exponentially more difficult to crack. Society members offer a fresh look at the case and act as a catalyst among police, prosecutors and the family, to prompt interest in a renewed inquiry. Typical questions from members to detectives include whether they searched for ‘doer’s’ nucleic skin cells, whether old property has been reclaimed for

DNA analysis and whether old polygraph charts have been preserved for review of “cleared” suspects.

A few examples of the more than 150 cases the Society has considered formally illustrate the range and challenges of cold cases.

In 1992, James Dunn brought the Society the case of his son, Scott, last seen alive in Lubbock, Texas the previous year. A cursory search by local police of the apartment

Scott shared with his girlfriend Leisha Hamilton disclosed no evidence of foul play. Hamilton seemed unconcerned with Scott’s disappearance, and because no body was found, the case was relegated to the missing person category. On the other hand, Mr. Dunn was convinced that Scott was murdered in the apartment because of a crudely cut and replaced piece of carpet the police had found there. At his prompting, the police conducted a Luminol examination; that is, a chemical search of the apartment intended to reveal blood evidence under special lighting. The presence of blood was found but not enough to persuade the local prosecutor that there was evidence of anything more than a fight. Vidocq Society member and former Philadelphia Homicide Commander Frank Friel suggested that, if the area of carpet removed and replaced was sufficiently large, an expert could testify that the volume of blood on it would be inconsistent with life. With Vidocq Society help,

such an expert opinion was obtained. Additional investigation by member and former Michigan Department of Corrections forensic psychologist Richard Walter helped Lubbock detectives obtain indictments of Hamilton and her new boyfriend in November 1996. Hamilton was convicted of murder and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Her boyfriend was tried and convicted of a lesser charge.

On Nov. 30, 1984, Drexel University student Deborah Wilson was found strangled in a stairwell outside a computer lab without her shoes and socks. Eight years later, Philadelphia Police Homicide Division Sgt. Robert Snyder and retired FBI agent Andrew Sloane presented the case at the Vidocq Society. Snyder noted that the police considered a Drexel University security guard to be the prime suspect, but evidence did not develop to charge him. Former forensic psychologist Walter developed a psychological profile that again pointed to the security guard. Dr. Fillinger, a former coroner, suggested that the ligature might have cells enough for DNA testing. Other members suggested new interviews of the suspect’s wife or girlfriend about any foot fetishes. As the suspect had enlisted in the U.S. Army after leaving employment at Drexel, Society members suggested a review of military records. They disclosed a number of complaints and, crucially, the suspect’s dishonorable discharge after court martial for stealing women’s sneakers and socks. The suspect’s ex-wife told the detectives her husband kept a collection of women’s sneakers. Former security guard David Dickson Jr., who came to be known as “Dr. Smell,” was arrested and convicted of murder in 1995.

On a Saturday morning in February 1984, Terry Brooks, the assistant manager of a Roy Rogers restaurant at Fairless Hills, Pa., was found brutally stabbed, beaten, strangled and asphyxiated in the restaurant’s kitchen. She was to have closed the restaurant the night before. The safe was found open with little money in it, and Brooks was found with her coat on. After 14 years, no suspect had been identified. Detective Sgt. Win Cloud, of the Falls Township Police Department presented the case to the Vidocq Society. His department had many suspects but the evidence connected no one to the crime. Several significant suggestions were offered by members. Member and retired Philadelphia Police Department Major Crimes Detective Edward Gaughan was assigned to further assist Sgt. Cloud. With the help of profiler Walter, the team identi-

The Society is not in competition with law enforcement agencies; but we share a common goal – justice and the search for the truth.

What we in the Vidocq Society try to do is to offer the investigator a fresh look at the case and to act as a catalyst between the police, prosecutors and the family, to get something going.

fied and located a previously unknown boyfriend of Brooks. A trash run at his residence developed DNA from a cigarette butt. The boyfriend's DNA matched DNA collected from the fingernail scrapings taken from Brooks years before. The boyfriend was picked up by the police and polygraphed by Vidocq polygraph experts Nate Gordon and me. After failing the examination, he confessed to the police, was convicted and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

In 2004, Detectives from the Hudson, Wisc., Police Department came to Philadelphia to brief the Society on a puzzling 2002 double homicide of funeral director and his 22-year-old intern. Traveling to Wisconsin, Vidocq member and former profiler Richard Walter reviewed the case file and profiled the killer. Based on the file, Walter suggested that detectives interview a priest who appeared at the funeral home crime scene while police still were there. Walter felt something about the priest's reported demeanor and subsequent interview was suspicious. Detectives re-inter-

viewed the priest, who had been transferred to another parish after the murders. Concluding from the interview that the suspect knew more about the crime than expected, they developed significant information that implicated him in the murders. Within days of his final interview, the priest hung himself. It was learned that he had confided in a church deacon who had not come forward. Based on team work with Vidocq Society members, a "John Doe Hearing" convened at which the sitting judge ruled that the dead priest was most likely the killer of the both victims.

Much more than a gathering of individuals fascinated by murder and mayhem, the Vidocq Society today is an expert organization devoted to serving the public by discovering the truth, some of it fairly old. Fittingly, the Society's motto is *Veritas Veritatum* - truth begets truth. In support of, rather than in competition with, law enforcement agencies, Philadelphia's Vidocq Society considers its proceedings a practical expression of the tradition started by the world's first great detective, Eugène Vidocq. ■



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