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An Interview with Larry Ragle

Interviewed by Daryl Clemens

D.C.: *Tell us a little about how you got started in your career as a criminalist. I understand you studied under Paul Kirk?*

L.R.: My career interest was law enforcement even before graduating from high school. All the aptitude tests pointed towards working with science and/or people. Our football coach convinced a friend and me to join the Air Force Reserves. Our unit was activated (for a year) and I ended up in the Air Police. When my tour of duty was over I learned of the program, Criminalistics, at UC Berkeley. It was exactly what I wanted to do. Kirk was the head of the program and had recently published his book, Crime Investigation. There were only 4 students in our class so we got a lot of his time. Much of his book is still state of the art, at least, philosophically.

D.C.: *In the introduction to your book, you write about the popularity of the show "CSI". Have you seen its influence on any of your cases? I know that I certainly have a lot of crime victims who are now terribly interested in what I'm doing.*

L.R.: In one of the classes I teach, at UC Irvine, a general interest course, a lot of would be writers are looking for ideas. The enrollment swelled after OJ and then again when CSI first surfaced. Now due to tax cuts, this class is in limbo.

The second ongoing class is offered by Cal State Long Beach, and is for police personnel. I teach on 4 days of a two week (80 hours) program. The class is offered 6 times a year. These students all seem to look at CSI as a joke. I don't think they see it as a role model.

D.C.: *What's been the biggest change in how we process crime scenes since you began your career?*

L.R.: First, it is the universal understanding (well almost) that a scene usually contains items that can prove or disprove that a crime has been committed. Today most police personnel are aware of the value of physical evidence. Old timers relied on eye witnesses and / or the power to obtain a confession but when Miranda (1966) came along, the emphasis switched to physical evidence. Further, the process has been formalized (or standardized) to a large extent. Certification of personnel is growing as is laboratory accreditation specific to scene investigation. I'll mention crime scene specialists below.

Second, there is a ton of portable high tech equipment to enhance the search, sketch the scene and preserve the evidence.

D.C.: *There have been a number of challenges to fingerprint evidence recently, and a high profile mis-identification by the FBI with the so called "Madrid Print". Any comment on the state of fingerprint science?*

L.R.: It's not the science; it's the examiner's failure that is the problem. A "make" should require two qualified examiners to work the print independently and agree on the ID. It doesn't matter whether it is a numerical standard, 12 to 15 minutiae points, or the ACE-V approach. There has to be better training and more proficiency testing. Regardless of any computer technology skilled examiners should always make the final call.

D.C.: *When you started your career, most criminalists were generalists. Over the years we've seen more and more specialization. Do you think that's good or bad?*

L.R.: It's a bad situation if a generalist is not present at the scene. Ideally, before a specialist is turned loose, they should have been trained in scene investigation and evidence procedures. However, technology, DNA analysis and court presentation for example, requires knowledge far beyond that offered in any "generalist" program. Unfortunately, a specialist without an understanding of all forms of physical evidence can overlook or even unwittingly destroy significant evidence.

There should be a generalist (either a criminalist or technician) at every major scene. A generalist is defined as someone who can recognize the nature of the scene and the relative importance of the evidence, what physical evidence is present, what is missing and what additional evidence may logically be found elsewhere.

In the laboratory, the same generalist should over view the priority and sequence of the processing of all the evidence. The decision to examine the evidence must be made by the scientist, not solely by the attorney or the police investigator.

D.C.: *What new techniques or technologies do you see having an impact on the field in the next few years?*

L.R.: Re: techniques. I sense, from many of my students, even before I have a chance tell them, a far more aggressive attitude about protecting the scene from fellow officers and department brass. The use of mandatory "Order of Entrance" forms requiring a written explanation for entering the scene has limited the curious sightseer. One recent student told me when someone other than a "team member" insists on entering the scene, she writes "nosey" as the reason.

Re: technology. DNA will continue to amaze us. I made a prediction in my chapter on DNA in 1994, that within 25 years we would see a complete image of what the source of a sample might look like. It could happen sooner. Our favorite TV show is Monk. Last season, they where mocking CSI by using a device that analyzed DNA just by pointing a device at it. It was a lawn trimmer.

D.C.: *If we could do one thing to improve how we process crime scenes, what would it be?*

L.R.: Keep an open mind. There may be more than one logical explanation for the conditions at the scene.

D.C.: *What skills or abilities do you think are important for a crime scene investigator?*

L.R.: Common sense and curiosity. Knowledge of the probative value of all types of physical evidence and the awareness that anything that appears out of place, unusual or defies gravity

needs consideration and documentation. The ability to remain impartial regardless of the nature of the suspected crime is needed.

D.C.: *What advice do you have for people seeking a career in crime scene work?*

L.R.: Before embarking on any forensic science career, check with a local agency to determine their requirements, for example education and physical requirements. Then, have a complete physical examination for color blindness, hearing, blood pressure or any other health problem that could exclude one from employment. Take a major in some form of science. Chemistry and/or molecular biology are majors to be considered, if the desire is to be a criminalist.

D.C.: *Any plans to write another book?*

L.R.: Not at the moment.