

LAST WORD SOCIETY

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Luke May of Seattle—"America's Sherlock Holmes"

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ABSTRACT: This paper provides a brief biography of Luke S. May (1886-1965), whose pioneering work in forensic science in the United States has not received full recognition. May began as a private detective in Salt Lake City, Utah, shortly after the turn of the century and later established his own agency, the Revelare International Secret Service, which he moved to Seattle, Washington, in 1919. Although basically self-taught in scientific matters, May built a solid reputation among police agencies and attorneys in the Pacific Northwest and Western Canada as a serious and effective scientific investigator in the era before public crime laboratories. This reputation as "America's Sherlock Holmes" also led to his being consulted on the establishment of the first American crime laboratory at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois, and on a laboratory for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police at Regina, in Saskatchewan, Canada. He contributed to a landmark case of court acceptance of toolmark identification, invented specialized instruments, and founded an institute to teach scientific criminal investigation to police officers. His earliest associates were John L. Harris and J. Clark Sellers, both of whom became recognized document examiners on the West Coast and were followed by a second and a third generation of practitioners.

KEYWORDS: criminalistics, historical background, Last Word Society, Luke May

One of the most remarkable but least known chapters in the history of forensic science and questioned document examination in the United States is the career of Luke S. May (Fig. 1) and his Revelare International Secret Service.

This story began in the unlikely location of Salt Lake City, Utah, where May was first a private detective and later a scientific investigator. He established one of the early crime laboratories, and over a period of years, he came to have considerable influence on developments in this field, particularly in the West.

Luke May was born in Nebraska in 1886 and moved to Salt Lake City with his family as a young boy. Luke was studious by nature, and at age 12 he was reading serious subjects, such as psychology and criminology. Later, in his teens, he would study chemistry, physics, biology, botany, anatomy, handwriting and fingerprint identification, and such subjects as would be useful to a budding Sherlock Holmes.

He was interested in the writings of Lombroso on the subject of the criminal mind, and one of the books that specifically influenced him was *Criminal Investigation* by Hans Gross of Prague. Since this book was not then available in English translation, May had

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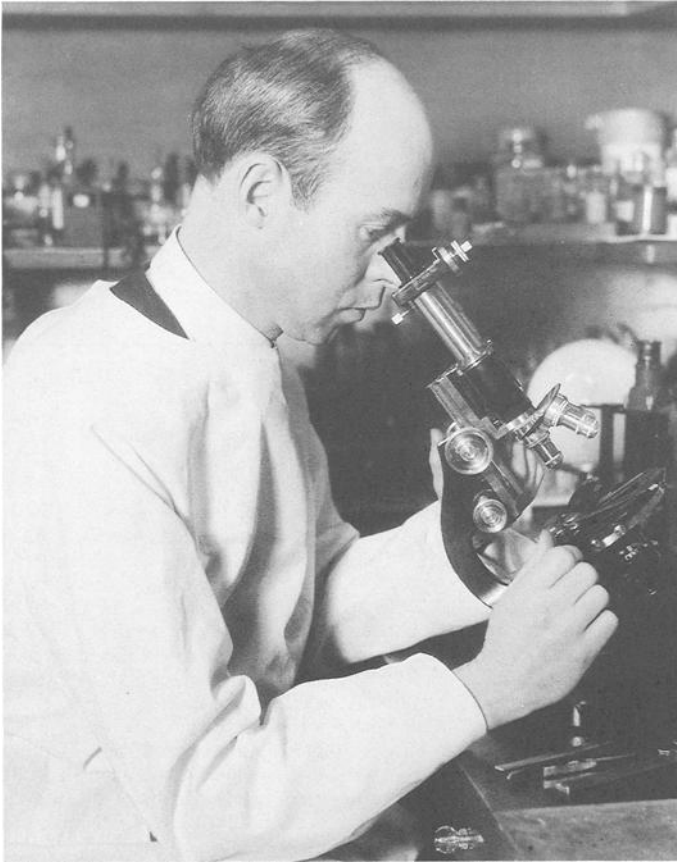


FIG. 1—*Luke S. May (1886–1965).*

a German-speaking friend translate it for him. This bit of precocious initiative reveals something of the single-minded devotion to crime investigation that characterized the rest of his life.

May attended public schools, business college, and the Gordon Academy in Salt Lake City, but the available references do not state whether he graduated. It is a reasonable guess that his intense interest in criminology would tend to overshadow any ordinary academic schooling. He was only 16 when he became involved in his first murder investigation—presumably only as an amateur consultant. At the same time, he also became friendly with the local police detectives and court personnel, making contacts and picking up ideas on how crimes were investigated and prosecuted.

He was only 17 when he started working as a private detective, and it was not long before he opened his own agency. One reference dated in 1911 identifies May as “for the past three years President and Chief of the Maylon Detective Service.” He would have been only 22 years of age at the time of opening his own agency.

A major change in May’s career occurred in 1914 when he established the Revelare International Secret Service (“revelare” being Latin for “to reveal”). That same year another young man still in his 20s, J. Clark Sellers (1890–1973), joined the new agency. In 1915 May decided to move his operation to Pocatello, Idaho, presumably because it was a more central location for the Northwest area. It is also possible that his move was prompted by reasons of competition from other agencies in Utah.

Before the move to Pocatello, a third young man, John L. Harris (1894–1986), entered the picture, first as a friend of Clark Sellers, who introduced him to Luke May. Harris did not join the detective agency right away, because World War I intervened, and all three men entered military service. After the war, May sent Harris a job offer, which he accepted. Harris once remarked that he didn't really want to be a detective, and throughout the years that the three were associated, he was the office manager, while Sellers was a detective and May was president and the person who brought in business, "the chief."

To place May and his associates in proper historical perspective, we need to consider that private detective agencies were well established in that era, whereas the forensic specialties of questioned documents and fingerprint and firearms identification had only recently been introduced. What is interesting about May's operation is that it combined the two fields of investigation and physical evidence analysis in one agency—just like the fictional Sherlock Holmes. Since police and government agencies did not yet have such capabilities, these early practitioners did much of their work for sheriffs, police departments, prosecutors, and state and federal agencies.

It is probably not an exaggeration to call Luke May's agency unique in the history of scientific detection. It is without question "one of a kind" when one considers the influence that May's efforts had on future developments in the field, particularly his influence as a promoter of this kind of service and as a teacher.

The kinds of cases that May and his associates worked on ran the gamut from cattle rustling and missing persons to burglary and homicide. The equipment and instruments were undoubtedly the standard ones used at that time, augmented by certain innovations of May's. One article of 1916 describes, with photographs, a number of electric and "wireless" devices that May had designed for surreptitious listening and for recording interviews without the subject being aware.

The next major change in this history of the Revelare agency was its relocation to Seattle, Washington, the largest city in the Pacific Northwest. This took place in 1919, a remarkable year for several reasons. It was a time of post-war labor unrest, strikes, and radicalism, as well as of considerable anti-radical sentiment. It was the year of the first general strike in the United States history, one that was put down in a few days by the mayor of Seattle. It was the year when Prohibition started and the year of the first of two robberies that resulted in the conviction of Sacco and Vanzetti (in Bridgewater, Massachusetts), a celebrated case in the history of firearms identification.

It was in November of 1919 that the so-called Centralia Massacre took place in a small logging town in the Southwest portion of Washington State. In this incident, some "Wobblies" (the nickname for members of Industrial Workers of the World, one of the most radical of labor unions) opened fire on unarmed veterans parading on the first anniversary of the World War I armistice. This case became Luke May's first notable investigation in his new location.

The year 1919 is remarkable also for the coincidence of the moves of two of May's contemporaries in the Northwest. One of them was Edward O. Heinrich, who had been both city chemist in Tacoma, Washington and a scientific detection consultant, who later moved to Berkeley, California. Heinrich left the area in 1916, and in 1919 one of the earliest document examiners in the Northwest, J. Fordyce Wood, left to start a practice in Chicago, Illinois. Wood had been a court reporter in Portland, Oregon, and had built a reputation as a qualified document examiner. Interestingly, he had a successor who also had started as a court reporter in Portland, Vernon Faxon. Faxon, in turn, moved to Chicago to assume Wood's practice after he died. It may actually be the case that Luke May knew of Heinrich's and Wood's moving out of the area and made his decision to move to Seattle for that reason.

Accounts vary as to whether Sellers or Harris was the first to move to Seattle as the advance man, to be followed by May later in the year. In any case, the agency wasted

no time in getting established and in building a reputation for its operatives' skill in solving crimes.

The Pocatello office remained open for a few years as a branch office run by Clark Sellers. After that office was closed, it was only a few years until Sellers decided to go on his own, and in 1924, he moved to Los Angeles, California, a much larger field of operations. Sellers' new practice in California was the same type of generalist agency as Luke May's, a combination of criminal investigation and questioned documents and other evidence examinations. It was only later that Sellers became exclusively a document examiner.

In the next year, 1925, John L. Harris also cut his association with Luke May and opened his own practice right across the street from May's office (then in the Arctic Building, where the writer of this paper also had an office for many years). Harris stayed on in Seattle until 1936, when he also decided to seek a larger field by moving to Los Angeles.

The decades of the 1920s and 1930s were the heyday of Luke May's professional success and reputation. He was not only intensely involved in his practice and in the study of scientific detection, but he also made strong and lasting contacts with the law enforcement community in the Pacific Northwest. He was for many years president of the Northwest Association of Sheriffs and Police, which included officials from Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, Colorado, California, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming, as well as British Columbia and Alberta in Canada. Under the sponsorship of this organization there was established, in 1923, a Northwest College of Criminology to promote "teaching scientific criminal investigation, practical methods of detection, systems of identification, and laws of evidence and procedure." The association's resolution to start this academy was recognized by a telegram from President Calvin Coolidge.

Attendance at this new school required two years of college study or its equivalent and was planned as a two-year residence course. The name of the school was later changed to the Institute of Scientific Criminology, where advanced third-year students were allowed to study directly under Luke May in his Scientific Detection Laboratories, which was the new name of his agency. Ironically, Seattle had another school of "detection" that was run by one Herman P. Wunderling in the same time period, but it apparently never had the reputation that May's school enjoyed.

In 1922 May brought out his most unusual invention, the giant comparison microscope dubbed the "Revelarescope." This instrument, which looked like a giant stovepipe on a drill-press stand, was an ingenious device with dual objective lenses that projected a split image on a ground glass screen. The two objects to be compared were mounted on microscope stages with extension rods for controlling the focusing and the movement of the stages. In 1928, May filed a patent application for the improved version of this instrument.

The giant comparison microscope figured in one of May's most celebrated cases, a child abduction and assault case in Roy, Washington, in 1928. In that case, May identified the pocket knife of the abductor as the one used to cut pine branches for a hideout in the woods nearby. It was a landmark case of toolmark identification (*State v. Clark*); it was later appealed but was upheld by the Washington State Supreme Court. It is also prominently referred to by Prof. John H. Wigmore in his text on evidence, *The Science of Judicial Proof*. In 1935 one of the Seattle newspapers ran a side-bar story on the Bruno Hauptmann trial to the effect that it was Luke May's identification of knife marks in wood that would be a precedent for the identification of Hauptmann's plane having been used to finish the extension to the notorious ladder.

In addition to his managing the training school for scientific criminology, May was also active as an instructor in criminal investigation, physical evidence, and questioned doc-

uments at the law faculties of the University of Washington, University of Oregon, and Willamette University in Portland, Oregon.

The late 1920s was also the time when May received his single most important recognition as a scientific sleuth. After the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in Chicago, a commission decided that the city needed a crime laboratory on the European model. There were very few Americans with the specialized experience of Luke May in that era. Consequently, Dean Wigmore of Northwestern University called on May to come to Chicago to help set up the new crime laboratory, which became the first in the nation.

About the same time, May moved his laboratory and school from downtown offices to his home, a practice he continued until after World War II. He served in the war as a commander in the U.S. Naval Intelligence Service, where his investigative background became invaluable, particularly in the area of Japanese naval intelligence.

In 1931 May was a member of the commission that established the Oregon State Police. In 1933 he was selected by the mayor of Seattle to be acting chief of detectives in the police department. In that capacity, he was given a free hand to reorganize the Detective Bureau along professional, specialized lines. He served in that position, without pay, until 1934.

May was the subject of a number of laudatory articles in newspapers and magazines, articles that almost invariably referred to him as "America's Sherlock Holmes," an appellation that is not so far-fetched when one considers that he built his reputation in an era before there were any police crime laboratories. But May was also a writer. In 1933 he published a small volume titled *Scientific Murder Investigation*, followed a few years later by a *Field Manual of Detective Science*. In 1936 he published his own story, *Crime's Nemesis*, a collection of accounts of his most interesting cases written for the general public. For several years he also wrote articles on his cases for *True Detective* magazine and a monthly column on crime detection for the same magazine.

After May returned from military service in World War II, the field of scientific crime detection had changed considerably for private consultants. By that time, police and government agencies had started to become independent of private services by establishing their own crime laboratories. Consequently, there was much less need for private experts in criminal cases, and May's practice—like that of other generalist consultants—shifted more and more to civil cases, primarily questioned documents and criminal defense work. Luke May also continued his practice of polygraph work, a subject that had held his interest for a number of years.

Despite the growth of police crime laboratories, not all cities or states had such facilities, and May continued to get requests for services from prosecutors and police departments. One such case in Seattle was the prosecution of Dave Beck, the Teamster president, a case in which May was hired by the prosecution to examine certain handwritings.

Luke May was intensely devoted to his profession, but he also had outside interests and social connections. He enjoyed boating and hunting, and particularly shooting, a sport that earned him a number of medals and trophies. He was a Mason and a member of the Rotary Club, Seattle Yacht Club, and other organizations. He also enjoyed his own small island in Puget Sound, a weekend retreat called Treasure Island.

On the other hand, May was not particularly active in the professional organizations that had been created especially for those in scientific crime detection, nor did he write much for the professional journals. Yet he had joined the International Association for Identification (IAI) early on, in 1918, with membership No. 291. He joined the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners (ASQDE) late in life, in 1960.

Despite a lack of professional memberships and publications, Luke May's professional legacy is undeniable. He was one of the true pioneers in scientific crime detection in the United States, as well as a teacher of others. His early associates went on to become

leaders in the field of questioned documents, and the list of those influenced by him becomes longer with following generations. Clark Sellers became one of the most respected document examiners in the country. He was a founding member of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) and served as the second president of the ASQDE after Albert S. Osborn. Sellers, in turn, trained a young man who also became an outstanding practitioner, later also president of the ASQDE, David A. Black. David Black's son, James, is a provisional member of the Academy.

John L. Harris likewise turned out to be a prominent and respected document examiner, and he trained his son, John J. Harris, beginning with his return from military service in World War II. The son, Jack, became one of the leading lights of document examination, and both he and his father were ASQDE presidents. In turn, Jack has helped train his younger associate of several years, Howard Rile, known for his signature seminars.

Perhaps the least known aspect of the Luke May legacy is the role he played in getting a crime laboratory started in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The RCMP commissioner, who had sent out a request for assistance to major law enforcement agencies abroad in 1931, was apparently most impressed by the reply he received from Luke May. A forensic laboratory was eventually established at Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1937, and its first document examiner was also a graduate—by correspondence—of May's course in advanced criminal investigation. This man, Stephen H. Lett, who was at the time a corporal in the RCMP later studied questioned document examination with the Ontario Provincial Police at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the U.S. Secret Service and went on to train other examiners in the RCMP. He is long retired and lives near Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Finally, the writer of this paper is himself a direct heir of the Luke May inheritance by having established a private document examination practice in Seattle a few years after May's death in 1965.

Luke S. May of Seattle deserves proper recognition for his unique contribution to forensic science and document examination, and following generations of practitioners owe individuals like him a debt of gratitude for establishing credibility for our profession.

End Note and Reference Sources

The Luke May files repose in special collections in the Library of the University of Washington in Seattle. They include case files, correspondence, and miscellaneous reference files, dating from about 1919 (unfortunately, the earliest materials prior to his move to Seattle are no longer extant). There is a very detailed index that May himself made for these files, by case type, name, and year. Access to the files is by permission of May's daughter, Patricia Reid, to whom the author is indebted for her kind assistance.

The reference sources used for this paper are too numerous to list completely, but the principal ones are in the following suggested bibliography.

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