

A Fingerprint Fable: The Will and William West Case

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The Fable

There should be very few people in the identification field who do not know the story of Will and William West, two inmates at Leavenworth Penitentiary, shortly after the turn of the century. In its purist form, the story is as follows: "When he was received at Leavenworth, Will West denied previous imprisonment there, but the record clerk ran the Bertillon instruments over him anyway. He knew the reluctance of criminals to admit past crimes. Sure enough, when the clerk referred to the formula derived from West's Bertillon measurements, he located the file of one William West, whose measurements were practically identical and whose photograph appeared to be that of the new prisoner.

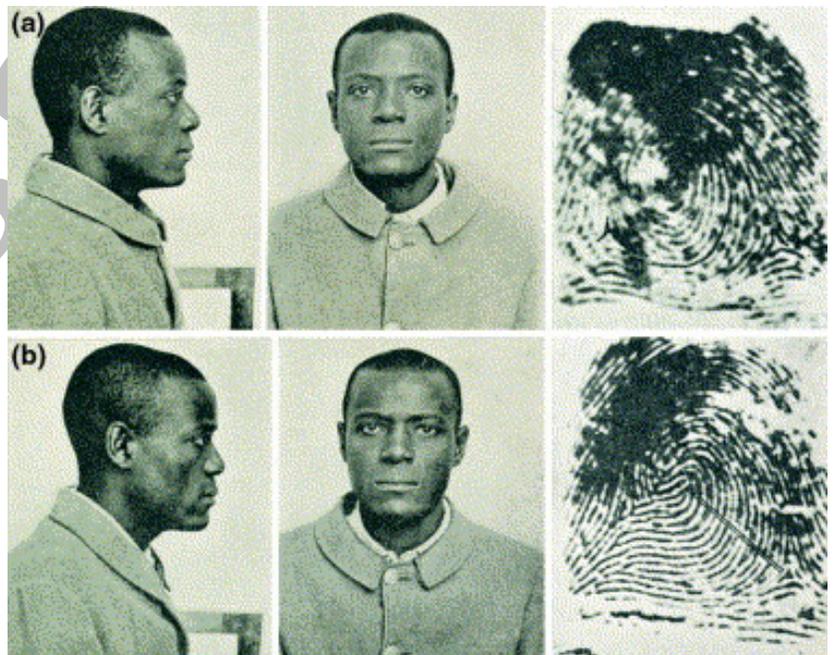
"But Will West was not being coy about a previous visit to Leavenworth. When the clerk turned over William West's record card he found it was that of a man already in the Penitentiary, serving a life sentence for murder. Subsequently the fingerprints of Will West and William West were impressed and compared. The patterns bore no resemblance." (3,4,6,26)

Some authors have elaborated on the story, perhaps in an effort to make to a more interesting tale. Browne and Brock (3), alleged that upon taking the fingerprints of the two inmates, William West's prints were primarily loops and Will West's were primarily whorls. In fact, the primary classification of the former was 13/32 and that of the latter was 30/26, therefore, each had seven whorls and three loop type patterns. Like other writers, Browne and Brock also confused the warden and the records clerk at the penitentiary as one and the same person when they were actually father and son. One is also compelled to point out that Browne and Brock also misspelled the name as McClaughty.

Faulds (5) presented an entirely different story in his account of the incident, retaining only one inmate's name. Faulds stated that William West had been arrested in Kansas as a murder suspect and shortly afterwards another man with the same name and Bertillon measurements had been arrested on a minor offense. After taking both men's fingerprints, the authorities identified the second man as the actual suspect and the first William West was cleared.

Chapel (4) stuck to the basic story, but added a dialect to Will West's dialogue with the records clerk. The dialect may have seemed appropriate to someone familiar with some of the questionable radio programs of the 1930's, but the subservient attitude conveyed would hardly fit anyone from the Indian Territory in the early 1900's. None of the other accounts of the incident included this racial bias.

A search of the literature on fingerprint identification reveals that the alleged Will and William West case was not reported in print until Wilder and Wentworth's account in 1918 (26). Please note that of the twenty--six books and articles listed in the bibliography, eighteen were published prior to the release of Wilder and Wentworth's book and none of the eighteen mention the West case. Of particular note is that two of the items listed in the bibliography (14,15) were by the records clerk who took the Bertillon measurements and the fingerprints of Will and William West, but who never mentions the incident. One is immediately struck with the thought that a pioneer in the establishment of fingerprint identification never attached much significance to a case in which he played a very important role. Perhaps the case was not as important as we have been led to believe?



Background Facts

It has been well established that Will and William West were both incarcerated at the U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas, between 1903 and 1909. Their similarity in appearance and Bertillon measurements is also well documented. When one considers the facts and chronology of the case, however, there is ample reason to doubt the significance of the case with respect to the establishment of fingerprint identification in the United States.

Major Robert W. McClaughry was warden of the U.S. Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas, from 1 July 1899, to 30 June 1913. Major McClaughry was a remarkable man in the history of identification in the United States. In 1887, as warden of the Illinois State Penitentiary, Joliet, he and his records clerk, Gallus Muller, introduced the Bertillon system into the United States and Major McClaughry was instrumental in the adoption of the system by the Wardens Association of the United States and Canada in the same year (14).

A reading of the literature reveals Major McClaughry to be a man of the highest principles and integrity. Although he was a prime mover in the acceptance of the Bertillon system, he did not hesitate to convert to a better system when he learned about the fingerprint system of identification.

Major R.W. McClaughry's son, M.W. McClaughry, was the records clerk at the U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, at least during the period from 1901 to 1905. These dates are verifiable from published facsimiles of the Bertillon measurement cards and the fingerprint cards of Will and William West (5). M.W. McClaughry attended the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, where he met and was a student of Sergeant John K. Ferrier, of Scotland Yard, who instructed many Americans on the fingerprint system.

Upon M.W. McClaughry's return from St. Louis, Major R.W. McClaughry wrote the U.S. Attorney General, on 24 September 1904, requesting permission to install the fingerprint system at the penitentiary. On 2 November 1904, the Attorney General authorized installation of the new system, but prior to this, during October 1904, Sgt. Ferrier visited the penitentiary at Leavenworth, and gave instruction on the fingerprint system (19). It appears the awareness of fingerprint identification by the authorities at Leavenworth came long after Will West's arrival.

M.W. McClaughry took the Bertillon measurements of William West on 9 September 1901, and those of Will West on 4 May 1903 (5). He was also the clerk to take the fingerprints of both men on 19 October 1905 (5). In the two articles he authored (14,15), M.W. McClaughry makes no mention of Will and William West, an indication that he attached no significance to their simultaneous incarceration while he was the records clerk.

During the annual conference of the International Association for Criminal Identification at Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1916, the local paper published an article about the conference and which contained a brief history of fingerprint identification (16). One of the sources of information for the article was A.J. Renoe, who was then the records clerk at the penitentiary. No mention was made of Will and William West in this article, but two years later Wilder and Wentworth cite Renoe as a source (26), as did Faulds (5).

Inasmuch as none of the early authors, including M.W. McClaughry who was directly involved, make any mention of Will and William West, their significance in the establishment of fingerprint identification in the United States must be questioned. It makes a nice story to tell over port and cigars, but there is evidence that it never happened.

It is not necessary to use a fable to illustrate the value of the fingerprint system. The work and dedication of pioneers in the identification field attests to a better story. England is not only the home of the scientific basis of fingerprint identification, but it was, through Sgt. John K. Ferrier, the source of its acceptance in the United States. Pioneers, as Major R.W. McClaughry, should be recognized for their readiness to accept new and improved systems of identification.

Chronology of the Will and William West Case

- 1887 -- Bertillon system first established in the United States at Illinois State Penitentiary, Joliet, by Major Robert W. McClaughry, warden, and Gallus Muller, records clerk.
- 1899 -- Major Robert W. McClaughry appointed warden of the U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas, by President William McKinley.
- 1901 -- William West received at the Leavenworth Penitentiary and his Bertillon measurements were taken by the records clerk, M.W. McClaughry.
- 1903 -- Will West received at the Leavenworth Penitentiary and his Bertillon measurements were taken by the records clerk, M.W. McClaughry.
- 1904 -- Records clerk of the Leavenworth Penitentiary, M.W. McClaughry, meets Sgt. John K. Ferrier of Scotland Yard at the St. Louis World's Fair and learns of the fingerprint system of identification.
- September 24th, Major R.W. McClaughry wrote to the U.S. Attorney General requesting permission to install the fingerprint system at the Leavenworth Penitentiary.
- During October, Sgt. John K. Ferrier visited the Leavenworth Penitentiary and give instructions on the fingerprint system.
- November 2nd, the U.S. Attorney General authorized Major R.W. McClaughry to install the fingerprint system.
- 1905 -- October 10th, M.W. McClaughry, records clerk, fingerprinted Will and William West.
- 1918 -- First published mention of the Will and William West case