Acadiana Crime Lab Links Clues To Hit-And-Run Automobiles

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It could be a young Army private, bound for Ft. Polk, who tries hitchhiking at night in his dark green uniform and winds up jolted mass on the sloping bank of the interstate. It could be an old wino, stumbling on a gravel road, and broken and twisted next to a car which was one futility tape.

Driver now facing the Need to find the hit-and-run automobile and the victim. The victim's clothing, for help they call at the Acadiana Laboratory near Lafayette. An expert is gathered at the site where the accident occurred. The victims were examined for tiny flecks of paint, almost invariably present.

"We look for the paint primarily to tell the color," said Travis Owen, the lab's director. "We even have a setup here where the police can come in and see what color they're looking for." In times past, Owen said, an analysis of the paint could usually tell what make of vehicle it came from -- some help in narrowing the field. But now individual manufacturer's paints are not that distinctive and cars are repainted more frequently.

Bits And Pieces

The broken pieces of glass, plastic, grillework, etc., found at the scene are important devices in matching a suspect vehicle to the crime. Headlamps and parking light lenses are painstakingly reconstructed like grim jigsaw puzzles. Each piece is marked with a code number identifying it as to the time and place it was found. When pieces from the suspect vehicle itself fit neatly into place, the search stops.

"There are several things we look for on the car," Owen said, using a slide from a past case as an example. "First of all, the center of gravity of the human body is somewhere near the chest, higher than the leading edge of the automobile. So upon impact the torso slams down upon the hood, denting it."

"The legs," he continued, "are caught by the bumper, where they leave something we'll look at later on."

Hair, Flesh

Pointing to a rumpled place on the hood of the car projected on the screen, Owen said the criminals look for bits of hair and sometimes flesh on the dent made by the head. "You'll notice that we have blood on this hood. That very seldom happens, but it's nice when we get it," he said. In fact many times, depending upon the relative position of the body to the vehicle, the hood will be untouched, he added.

He clicked to the next slide, an extreme closeup of the bumper which was visible a cloth-like imprint.

Weave Pattern

"Every bumper, every piece of brightwork has a layer of grime on it. Upon impact, the weave pattern of the trousers is exposed to oxygen, it immediately burns up."

Owen said a filament burned in the presence of oxygen was a characteristic look that sets it apart from one which burns out through normal use. In addition, there will be a light tungsten oxide powder on the mirror surface inside. "That, in itself, doesn't prove a thing except that the light burned out in the presence of air," Owen said, producing a sealed beam with a tiny hole in it. "That hole was made by a rack," he said. "If you look you can see the tungsten powders on the mirror and the film等工作都burned out. Now if this headlamp was involved in a wreck or hit-and-run, we'd have no way of determining when it burned out unless we happened upon it -- very unlikely -- to find the piece with the hole in it."

Grim Jigsaw Puzzle

Travis Owen, director of Acadiana Criminalistics Laboratory at New Iberia, reconstructs a parking light lens from pieces found at the scene of a hit-and-run and taken from a suspect vehicle. Such reconstructions are an important part of the lab's work in linking a vehicle to the crime. (Advertiser Staff Photo by Manuel Chavez)

POWERFUL TOOLS

From the body and the mirror, the burden is placed directly on the shoulders of the police officer -- he has to hunt up witnesses, pull the auto-repair shops and come up with a suspect. The criminal is there to help. But from the time a suspect is singled out until he or she is proven guilty or found innocent in court, that same scientist from Acadiana Criminalistics Laboratory is the most powerful weapon the state has.