

SECRET WITNESS

by Paul E. Lacy

The Secret Witness program is sponsored by the *Sacramento Bee* newspaper in cooperation with the Sacramento Police Department and the Sacramento Sheriff's Department. The program allows individuals to provide, without revealing their identities, information on crime and criminals to these law enforcement agencies. Information that results in an arrest will earn the caller a reward.

The *Bee* began its Secret Witness program in 1971, but the idea originated in Chicago during the gangster era. A man known only as Mr. Finistad conceived the idea during the days of Prohibition. In the 1930's, Al Capone and his gangsters controlled the illegal liquor trade in Chicago, much like the gangland murders and violence associated with the illegal drug trade today. Finistad tried to sell the Secret Witness program to the Chicago papers. He believed there were many people who had information on murders and other crimes but were afraid to come forward. The idea, however, did not sell for many years, and not until after Prohibition had been repealed. No one knows for sure whether the Chicago papers turned down the idea out of fear or because of some other form of persuasion.

It was not until 1949 that the *Chicago Sun-Times* picked up the idea and implemented the first Secret Witness program. The program at that time was limited to murders. Soon after, the *Detroit News* followed suit. However, the program failed in both cities and within a year they were dropped. The apparent reason was lack of public interest.

The program was not used again until 1967 when assistant editor Martin Hayden of the *Detroit News* revived the idea which his newspaper had dropped twenty-seven years previously. 1967 was a year of violence in Detroit, and it had become known as the murder capital of the world. Hayden, like his predecessor Finistad, believed there

were people in the city who were willing to identify criminals but feared retaliation. Hayden sold the idea to his editor, Boyd Simmons, who arranged a meeting with the Detroit Police Department. Police management was very skeptical of the idea, but agreed to give it a try.

There were no results from the program for the first few months. Then Simmons received a call that resulted in the arrest of an armed robber who had been terrorizing merchants in downtown Detroit with dozens of robberies and shootings. The police then realized the tremendous potential for the program and began sending Simmons information on numerous unsolved crimes. The program became more and more of a success, and the business community began contributing more money for rewards.

In Sacramento, the *Bee* first learned of the program from an article in the *Reader's Digest*. The *Bee* contacted officials in Detroit to learn more about the Secret Witness program. The *Bee* met with then Chief Kinney of the Sacramento Police Department and former Sheriff Lowe of the Sacramento Sheriff's Department and began local implementation of the program.

The Secret Witness program is similar to Crime Alert in that citizens respond with information without identifying themselves. Callers are given separate codes and advised to call back in several weeks. Secret Witness officials forward the information to the appropriate law enforcement agencies for investigation. A disposition is then returned to the *Bee* so that when citizens call back and give their assigned codes,

they can be advised of the disposition. If a reward is to be paid, the caller arranges to come into the *Bee* and is paid in cash only after being identified by code.

Secret Witness publishes information on numerous felonies and instances of school vandalism. A reward amount is assigned to each of the listed crimes. Rewards range from \$500 to \$2,500, depending on the seriousness of the crime. Officials from Secret Witness set the rewards for the crimes, and a panel of three people, consisting of two judges and a former mayor, assigns rewards for crimes not published in the paper.

Secret Witness officials say that information on crimes not published, or unknown to authorities, make up the majority of the calls that result in rewards. The *Bee* also says that the reporting of drug offenses is far and away the single leading type of criminal activity reported.

The Secret Witness program has had a long history since its inception during the days of Al Capone. However, the nature of crime and the motivations behind criminal behavior remain unchanged and have travelled full circle. Armed gangs shooting it out in the city streets for control of territory in the illicit drug trade are as real in Sacramento today as this form of violence was in Chicago during the gangster era of the 1930's.

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