

100 MOMENTS

FORENSIC SCIENCE IN IOWA

By Dennis Chapman (1971-2014)

I thought it might be interesting to tell my story of getting into an occupation of Forensic Science. I graduated from Morningside College in January 1970 with a Divisional Science Degree [a little chemistry, a little Physics and a little Biology]. I moved back to Des Moines and applied for a chemist position at the Iowa Department of Agriculture Laboratory. The Ag Lab was located in the former International Harvester Building at East 7th and Court in Des Moines.



I trained under the State Chemist, Don Booton. He was the lone ranger, analyzing narcotics and drugs for the IA State Narcotics officers, who were under the IA State Pharmacy Board. Don also worked drug cases for other law enforcement agencies. The State of Iowa didn't have a crime laboratory so the Ag lab said they would work drug cases. So, here I was now

being trained in a field of forensic science, something I had never dreamed of doing. I worked at the Ag Lab from February 2, 1970, to June 1, 1971, working drug cases, writing lab reports, testifying on the drug reports in preliminary hearings, grand juries and at trials. Seems like I spent more time testifying than doing lab work.

I then applied for a chemist position at the new BCI Crime Laboratory in April of 1971. The lab was located on the 2nd floor of the same building the Ag lab was in. On June 1, 1971, I started work in the BCI Crime Lab [the Iowa Criminalistics Laboratory]. The lab personnel I worked with included the lab director, two chemists, three BCI Special Agents and one secretary. The lab was really unusual using the old furniture from the Lucas Bldg. until real lab furniture was purchased and installed. I was assigned to work drug cases because of my training in the Ag lab.

I also was trained by one of the Chemists to work in Serology [blood, seminal fluid and other body fluids] and in Trace [hairs, fibers, paint, soil, glass and building materials]. My training also included working Toxicology cases [looking for drugs, poisons and alcohol in body fluids and tissues]. The lab started crime scene investigating in June of 1971 and I went on my first crime scene with S/A Tom Randolph. I

learned a lot of information on scene processing through the three agents who worked in the lab. My training even included schools outside the state of IA. In-Service training at the Wisconsin Crime Laboratory [in Serology]. In-Service training at the Michigan Dept. of Health Crime Laboratory [in serology]. The Federal Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD) [drug analysis]. The FBI Academy at Quantico, VA [crime scene school, microscopy of hairs, biochemical and serological methods in bloodstain analysis [serology] and Forensic Microscopy at the McCrone Research Institute [trace evidence] in Chicago. In 1975 I started working fire debris evidence along with another chemist. By 1978 we were also working explosive cases. By 1985, I decided it was no longer good to be a generalist in the lab working so many different types of evidence. It was time to specialize and the lab director agreed. I then began working only arson cases [fire debris] and explosive cases. I again went out of state to get further training. I took the ATF Arson Accelerant Detection Course, The Police Arson School at the FBI Academy, the Instrumental Analysis of Explosives and Explosive Residues at the FBI Academy and the ATF Advanced Fire Debris Analysis Course. Eventually, I was asked to participate in the Technical Working Group for Fires and Explosions [TWGFEX]. This group consisted of lab examiners from Federal, State, County and City crime laboratories nationally who examined fire and bomb debris cases. This was a special time for me because I met and worked with the most talented and knowledgeable examiners who worked in the field of fires and explosives. We put together the best procedures for handling and analyzing fire and bomb evidence. It was a real honor to be a part of this group.

From 1970 thru 2015, I testified in 323 cases in Federal and State courts in Iowa, Federal Court in Omaha, NE and state court in Aurora, Co. I

worked almost 8000 cases by the time I retired and went on 90 crime scene investigations. In July of 1989, there was a mass fatality incident in Sioux City, Iowa from the crash of United Flight 232. There were 12 lab personnel including me, and 8 Special Agents that were sent to help with the processing of the fatalities. The Crime Lab was in four locations during my career, the old International Harvester Building [at E 7th and Court St.], the Wallace Building [at E 9th and Grand], the South Lab [SLAB] at 920 Morgan Street, Suite G and on the Des Moines Area Community College Campus in Ankeny.



NEARLY 200 YEARS OF SERVICE TO IOWA IN THE FIELD OF FORENSIC SCIENCE! (L-R) BOB MONSERRATE (1979-2014), MIKE PETERSON (1972-2010), DENNIS CHAPMAN (1971-2014), NILA BREMER (1979-2019), SANDY STOLTZENOW (1975-2008) AND DARWIN CHAPMAN (1972-2015)

I finally decided to retire in May of 2014 after I learned the lab wouldn't close its doors if I left. I miss the work, the great lab personnel and all the law enforcement people I met and worked with.

Who would have ever guessed that I would have worked in Forensic Science for 44 ½ years? It was a real honor and privilege to have been in an occupation I loved and to see it grow into the crime laboratory it is today.