

# Forensic Evidence and the Zodiac Killer

## The Folly of Biological and Fingerprint Evidence in the Exclusion of Suspects

by Chris Yarbrough, December 19, 2007



Researchers of the Zodiac case often find that certain suspects have been ruled out by official investigators because of DNA evidence, fingerprints, and other forensic criteria. But how dependable is this type of evidence when investigating this case? This report will examine the use of forensic evidence and its importance and relevance in determining suspects and excluding persons from suspicion. This report will focus on biological and fingerprint evidence as a tool in determining a suspect's involvement, or lack of involvement, in the Zodiac crimes. Other forensic sciences, such as graphology, are beyond the scope of this document and are not part of the study.

First of all, the various sources of evidence, fingerprint and biological, to this date will be described, along with their sources. In this manner, mere rumor and innuendo can be avoided. The evidence and its relevance can be examined and questioned without the inaccuracies that may be in circulation.

The forensic evidence used to exclude suspects is as follows:

### **DNA Evidence:**

“Genetic traces from envelopes that contained the serial killer's apocalyptic and police-taunting letters in the 1960s appear to have cleared a school teacher and child molester whom Vallejo police and others once identified as the Zodiac, according to inspectors Kelly Carroll and Michael Maloney.”

“Although they had been analyzed for handwriting and traditional fingerprints, DNA analysis, Carroll pointed out, “was science fiction back in 1969.”

An effort was made to DNA-test the letters six years ago, with inconclusive results. But powerful new technology has been developed since.

(Dr. Cydne) Holt retrieved saliva traces beneath a stamp and was able to replicate a DNA sample large enough to test. ”

**Source: “DNA seems to clear only Zodiac suspect,” San Francisco Chronicle, October 15, 2002**

“In 2002, Carroll revealed that a partial DNA profile had been extracted from genetic material found on the envelopes holding letters written by the Zodiac and sent to newspapers, including The Chronicle. The DNA results seemed to clear Arthur Leigh Allen of Vallejo, the only suspect

ever named by police. Allen, who was never charged, died of a heart attack in 1992 at age 58.

Even though the Zodiac is believed to have committed just one homicide in San Francisco, police here may hold the best evidence with which to catch him.

Carroll said San Francisco police still have untested DNA evidence -- with no immediate plans to analyze it because of an overworked crime lab -- that finally could unmask the Zodiac."

**Source: "Files shut on Zodiac's deadly trail," April 7 2004, San Francisco Chronicle**

### **Fingerprint Evidence:**

"Just over an hour after the (Lake Berryessa) attack, the Napa Police Department received a call from a man claiming responsibility for the stabbing. The call was quickly traced to a phone booth in downtown Napa and fingerprints were later recovered."

**Source: ZodiacKiller.com**

"Specimens examined and one latent fingerprint of value developed on second page of letter, Q2, and one latent fingerprint of value developed on third page of letter, Q3.

**Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation Report of the Identification Division, Latent Fingerprint Section, Refers to the July 31, 1969 Letter to the San Francisco Chronicle**

"I've just had a conversation with Lt. Tom Bruton of the SFPD regarding elements of the \*ongoing\* Zodiac investigation."

"I asked Bruton about the existence of fingerprints from the Stine cab and received the answer that many, many sets of incomplete prints were lifted from the vehicle. When asked about the so-called \*bloody\* print he informed me that there was one such print, that it could not be ascertained whether the print had been made in blood, and that it had been lifted using powder. I followed up the question by inquiring whether, as some have suggested, traces of airplane glue could be found on any of the prints. He scoffed at this suggestion, stating that nobody within the SFPD would have made such an assertion."

"Bruton underscored the fact that none of these prints can be identified as a Zodiac print, and that the use of fingerprints is at best an inclusionary, not an exclusionary tool."

**Source: Google Groups, alt.true-crime, November 23, 1998, by poster Mignarda (Douglas Oswell, author of "The Unabomber and the Zodiac")**

### **Why the Forensic Evidence Cannot Be Used Exclusively**

Can the above exemplars be used as criteria to absolutely exclude a suspect from being the actual Zodiac killer? The author of this report has to say no. To eliminate a person based on the evidence at hand is irresponsible and seems to be presumptuous and apathetic.

The DNA evidence was extracted from stamps from the envelopes sent by the

Zodiac killer. The probability that this genetic material is indeed that of the Zodiac is in the high range, no doubt. Yet, we have to remember the person that committed the Zodiac crimes. This person was deceitful. He was a liar and a fake. That is a large part of the reason that he escaped justice. And how reliable is the fingerprint evidence? How many people placed their hands on that San Francisco taxi-cab? How many fares could a cabbie have in that city by the Bay? A serious searcher for the Zodiac killer should not be fooled so easily. Let us look at the ways in which Zodiac deceived the police, the press, and the public.

"As of yet I have left no fingerprints behind me contrary to what the police say in my killings I wear trans-parent finger tip guards. All it is is 2 coats of airplane cement coated on my fingertips – quite unnoticable & very efective" **from the Zodiac Killer's November 9, 1969 letter to the San Francisco Chronicle**

From this snippet from Zodiac's communication we can draw a few conclusions. If Zodiac was telling the truth, he had the aforethought to prevent leaving fingerprints. He knew the importance that fingerprints could play in his capture. If he was lying, he was trying to deceive readers into believing he was quite clever in his crimes. Regardless, we can see the deceitfulness of his criminal mind. Witnesses to the Stine murder scene recall the suspect wiping down parts of the cab. Again, this had to be a killer's attempt at removing any possible fingerprint evidence. If he was wearing "fingertip guards", as he claimed, why would this be necessary? Maybe he was lying about the fingertip guards. That is the obvious deduction. But then, what if Zodiac was merely trying to soak up more blood on the torn piece of Stine's shirt in order to shock the police, press, and public --and make certain that the author of the letters and the killer would be known as one and the same.

The prints taken from the Napa phone booth should also be questioned. Are we absolutely sure that the prints were left by the Zodiac? We are referring to a phone booth in an era where not everyone owned a telephone. Cell phones were certainly not as prevalent as they are today. The phone booth was sure to have been visited by more callers than just the elusive killer.

Remember Inspector Kelly Carroll said that DNA analysis "was science fiction back in 1969." So the Zodiac killer wouldn't be thinking about leaving evidence as he was licking those stamps. Or would he? It is very true that Zodiac wasn't worried about police developing a DNA profile from his saliva. But if we go back in time, we must remember there were other forensic methods in play. ABO blood typing had been around since the beginning of the century. Saliva and other bodily fluids could be checked for blood types to narrow the range of possible suspects. Also, placement of the stamp could result in his leaving a latent print. Perhaps the Zodiac killer had a friend, co-worker, or even a relative apply the stamps for him. This could have been done before the envelopes were even sealed with their contents and/or addressed. While this may be unlikely, it is very possible. There is serious room for doubt when it comes to excluding someone based on evidence derived from the stamps.

Ted Kaczinski often mailed pubic hairs gathered from public restrooms in an effort to fool investigators. He was also very careful about licking stamps, with the exception of victim Thomas Mosser. While some suspect the Unabomber and the Zodiac to be one and the same, I can only say that there are great similarities between the two individuals. I would have to think that Zodiac would use similar caution and deception to avoid detection and capture.

Let me remind readers that I personally do not believe that the persons excluded using this evidence are in fact guilty of the Zodiac crimes. That is not the point I am trying to make. I agree that the forensic evidence has value in the investigation of the Zodiac case. I do not think that forensic evidence can be used exclusively to “rule out” suspects.

In an era where police dramas and true crime television influence both amateurs and professionals alike, the words “**DNA evidence**”, “**blood evidence**”, and “**fingerprint evidence**”, are very powerful. We must remember that even as such forensic evidence has been used for justice, there have been cases where its very use has impeded justice. A serious investigator must realize that forensic evidence is only useful when it is used properly and all of the right questions have been asked –and answered.

#### Sources for the Data used in this Report:

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