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AN UNUSUAL SUICIDE

Charles M. Wilson

(In this account of an unusual suicide, Mr. Wilson describes how an examination of a revolver found at a death scene gave conclusive indication that death was by suicide and not a murder. Brief accounts of this case were published in the *American Legion Magazine* (August, 1941): "The Woman Who Died Twice." An abbreviated account of this was published in the August, 1941 issue of *The Reader's Digest*. Mr. Wilson is the director of the Chicago Police Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory and is an Associate Editor of this Journal.—EDITOR.)

The Cleveland Police Department was called in March, 1932 to investigate a shooting in a home where police found the housewife, lying across the bed fully clothed, shot through the heart. Her right arm was outflung from the body. A superficial examination of the premises revealed the absence of any gun. From her clothing two metal-point .38 S. & W. revolver projectiles were recovered. Only one entrance wound and one exit wound was found in the body. Her husband, who was the only other occupant of the premises at the time death was estimated to have occurred, was charged with murder. A careful check of the premises was subsequently made by Inspector David Cowles of the Cleveland Police Department. At a distance of approximately ten feet from the victim's body behind a trunk he found a nickel-plated Smith & Wesson break-open, 5-shot, .38 S. & W. revolver. In the chambers of this gun were found two Remington fired .38 S. & W. revolver cartridge cases.

An examination of the revolver revealed a bulge in the barrel approximately midway between the breech end of the barrel and the muzzle (C). (See Figure 1.) This suggested that at some time a bullet had become lodged in the barrel and the gun barrel had become bulged as a result of firing with this obstruction in the barrel. Examination of the gun revealed that, as is customary with this type of weapon, the cylinder rotates in a clockwise direction. In the chamber under the hammer as it was found was a fired cartridge case (S_2 , Figure 2). The primer cup, due to excessive pressure, was blown partly out of the head of the cartridge case and gave evidence of an unusual amount of set-back at the time of firing. In the adjacent chamber in a counter-clockwise direction was found the fired cartridge case (S_1 , Figure 2). This cartridge case and primer cup appeared normal. The two bullets recovered (B_1 , B_2) were examined and it was observed that the base of projectile B_1 had a much deeper indentation than is usual with this type of metal point projectile, the base of B_2 having a normal shallow indentation (see CB_2 , Fig. 2); its contour corresponded with the original conical tip of this type of projectile.

Woods metal casts were made of the base portion of B_1 and B_2 and are referred to in Figure 2 as CB_1 , being the cast of the base of projectile B_1 , and CB_2 being the cast of the base of projectile B_2 . Photographs are also included of the cavity in the base of B_1 and B_2 , and of the casts which were made of these cavities, CB_1 and CB_2 .

The conclusive indication shown by this is that the first bullet (B_1) lodged in the barrel. B_2 was then fired, compressing air and gas leakage between the nose portion of B_2 and the base of B_1 , the nose of B_2 actually striking the base portion of B_1 . The combined action of this striking, plus the action of the gases propelling B_2 , bulged the barrel slightly and expelled both projectiles from the muzzle at the same time. The pressures that would be produced in the weapon under these conditions accounts for the gun having been thrown by the recoil a distance of some ten feet from the victim's hand. It was found in a location which was consistent with this theory. It was subsequently concluded by Inspector Cowles that the case was one of suicide and not murder as originally presumed.

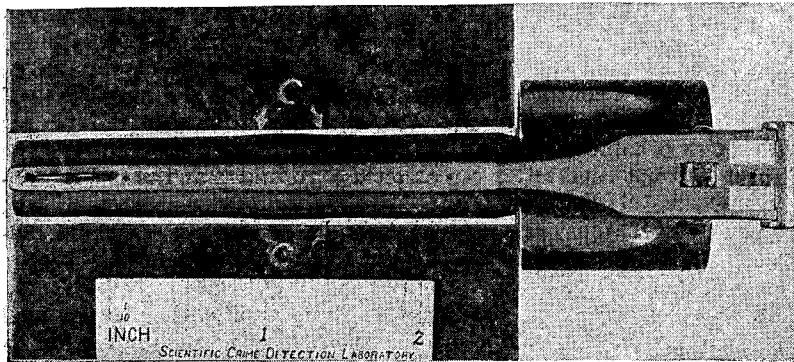


FIGURE 1

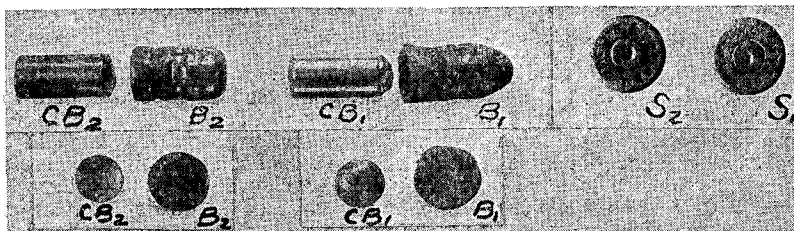


FIGURE 2