

The Significant Contributions of David J. Purtell to the Field of Forensic Document Examination

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David J. Purtell was invited to attend his first meeting of the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners in 1959, and was voted into Regular membership in 1961. He was one of the first government document examiners to hold membership in the Society. His document examination career dates from 1947 through 1985, and encompasses a myriad of contributions to the profession of forensic document examination and to the advancement and goals of its professional organizations.

Introduction

David J. Purtell had the good fortune to combine 2 great professions into 1 significant career. He began his law enforcement position in 1941 as a police officer with the Chicago Police Department. Leaving for service in World War II, he returned to the police department and was assigned to the Document Section of the Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory in 1947. He trained in documents with Herbert J. Walter, who was then in private practice in Chicago. During this time, Mr. Purtell was also working toward his PhD degree from Northwestern University, which he received in 1949. As Chief Document Examiner, Mr. Purtell rose through the ranks to become Captain of Police in 1961. He was promoted to Director of the Crime Laboratory in 1968 and retired in 1974 to enter private practice in Chicago.

Participations and Accomplishments

Mr. Purtell was active in the formative years of the Questioned Document (QD) Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS). During the 1950s and 1960s, he served as Secretary and Chairman of the QD Section, as QD representative to the Executive Committee, and chaired the Local Arrangements Committee for many years. Because the AAFS met yearly in Chicago during that time, he organized an all-day program for document examiners on the Wednesday preceding the Thursday program. He was anxious to share the educational opportunities available in Chicago with other examiners.

A significant period in Mr. Purtell's career was his first invitation in 1959 to a meeting of the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners (ASQDE), then an organization comprising the premier private examiners in the country. He, along with James Conway and Alwyn Cole, became the first government examiners invited into membership in 1961. Mr. Purtell went on to become President of the ASQDE in 1970, and last attended a meeting in 2005.

Mr. Purtell was always a staunch advocate of professionalism in one's field, and felt it was incumbent upon examiners to continuously educate themselves and to contribute to the profession. One of his often-heard admonitions was, "Are you just a worker, or are you a scientist?" In this vein, as Director of the Chicago Police Crime Laboratory, he convened the first meeting of firearm and toolmark examiners, later to become the Association of Firearm and Toolmark Examiners (AFTE). Additionally, with the aid of the Director of the Illinois Department of Law Enforcement, meetings of forensic chemists were convened, later developing into the Midwestern Association of Forensic Scientists (MAFS).

In addition to his significant presence in the professional organizations, he authored numerous articles on document examination which were published in the leading forensic science journals. Over the years, he trained several document examiners and was especially encouraging to young examiners in their initial encounters at professional meetings. He lectured widely on documents to law enforcement groups, at university and college courses, at law schools, and to



primarily in the civil arena. His final retirement was to Florida, where he still resides. Mr. Purtell and his late wife, Elizabeth, celebrated their 61st wedding anniversary in 2003.

Acknowledgment

The author trained with David J. Purtell in the Chicago Police Crime Laboratory. Mr. Purtell has been a mentor, colleague, and friend for over 40 years.

business and civic groups. In 1978, he was designated a Diplomate of the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners, Inc. (ABFDE).

In recognition of his professional accomplishments and significant contributions to research and activities in support of the Academy and other professional organizations, the AAFS awarded David J. Purtell the designation of "Distinguished Fellow" in 1994. In 1998, Mr. Purtell received the Northwestern University Alumni Merit Award, presented to alumni who have demonstrated outstanding achievement in a profession or endeavor, thereby bringing honor to themselves and their alma mater.

Conclusion

David J. Purtell was proud to be both a Chicago police officer and a forensic document examiner. It afforded him the unique opportunity to be a part of the significant advances in forensic science over the years and to observe their impact in the law enforcement community. His later years in private practice brought another dimension to document work, as his concentration was