



Members of The Vidocq Society gather monthly to try to solve unsolved murders. Photo: Rob Schoenbaum

The club where America's top cops solve old murders

Some of the world's top homicide investigators—FBI agents, prosecutors, and forensics—meet monthly to solve cold cases. Over the years, the group has helped American police with hundreds of unsolved murders. SvD visited the club and was given insight into their latest mission.

PHILADELPHIA. In the hall with chandeliers and white linen tablecloths, the food has just been laid out. While waiters pour coffee, a photograph of a brutally murdered woman appears on the projector screen in front of the lunch party. The victim is lying on his back, in a pile of broken plasterboard. She is almost naked, wearing torn pantyhose. A large pool of blood is visible under the head.

But no one in the room is holding their breath – they’ve seen countless similar images before.



The group gets a run-through of an unsolved murder that took place in 1980. Photo: Rob Schoenbaum

Some of the sharpest homicide investigators in the entire United States **sit here** . The group calls itself the Vidocq Society and takes on cold homicide cases - investigations that few police districts have the time or resources for anymore.

The group is a potpourri of skills: they are former police chiefs, researchers, psychologists, forensic scientists, retired FBI agents, prosecutors, doctors and fingerprint experts. Cops from all over the United States line up to come here and help the group with their most baffling and chilling murder cases.

The dead woman in the photo is 17-year-old Deborah Ann Brooks. In front of the Vidocq Society, the two police investigators who hold the presentation tell us that Deborah disappeared on her way to the pharmacy in Washington DC 40 years ago. The next day she was found in the woods, three miles from home, by two hunters. No one has yet been arrested.

A hand is raised in the air. "Do you know if the cuts and the head injury occurred at the same time?", asks one of the members. "Could the superficial cuts have been inflicted after the moment of death?", wonders someone else.



During the 1960s, American police solved roughly 90 percent of all murder cases in the country. Today, roughly 40 percent of all murders remain unsolved. Photo: Rob Schoenbaum

More images are displayed. We get to see the forest section where the victim's clothes are scattered along the road. Then the victim is seen on the autopsy table, eyes closed, with scars all over the torso. Members of the Vidocq Society react to her cuts; they are rare because the cuts are diagonal, in a cross pattern.

- It makes me think that she was tortured, perhaps to try to extract some information from her. It does not look like the cuts were made during a combat situation, said Barbara Cohan-Saavedra, a former federal prosecutor.

This is exactly how the group twists and turns scores of murder investigations, and has done so for nearly 30 years. It all started with the society wanting to go through historical crime cases - such as the Jack the Ripper murders or who shot Meriwether Lewis in the 19th century - but with today's investigative methods: dna, blood spatter patterns and psychological profiling. Back then, the investigations were a mental exercise, for fun.

But after two years, everything changed.

Then a club member went to a conference organized by parents of murdered children. He came back, shaken by all the strong stories, and determined that the group needed to change

its direction; from historical cases, to at least two years old cold cases - then they could deliver justice for real.



William Fleisher. Photo: Rob Schoenbaum

William Fleisher, one of the group's founders, former FBI agent and lie detector expert, says they quickly got a pile of unsolved murder cases on the table. The group was lucky and came up with several crucial findings for the investigations.

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When I say we "solved cases" it doesn't mean that someone has gone to jail every time.

- Over the years, we have solved hundreds of murder cases. We don't keep an exact count, but I estimate that we have solved roughly 80 percent of all the cases we have taken on, he says.

- When I say we "solved cases" it does not mean that someone has been arrested or gone to

prison every time, although some have. Sometimes we can figure out with certainty who carried out the murder - although we have to be able to prove it as well. It's not always that simple.

One of the most high-profile murders the group tackled was that of 24-year-old Scott Dunn, who disappeared in Texas in 1991. Local investigators got nowhere, and the missing man's father appealed to the Vidocq Society if they could help.

They didn't have a body, crime scene or weapon yet - but one of the club's experts determined through psychological profiling that Scott's ex-girlfriend was a psychopath.



Just four years ago, they finally found the body in
a flower bed.

After a forensic examination of Scott's apartment, it was also seen that part of the carpeting had been cut away. Blood was found under the carpet, as well as strands of hair from the girlfriend and another man. Although the body was not found, the two people could be convicted of the murder.

- It was an interesting case. Just four years ago, they finally found the body in a flower bed. By then the people had been convicted for several years, it feels good that we managed to help with that, says William Fleisher.

That same year, they took on a murder case in Arkansas, where a wrongly convicted man was freed. Thanks to fingerprint analysis, the man could be dismissed from the case in 45 minutes.

The following year they investigated the murder of a student who was strangled at a university in the 1980s. The victim was found barefoot, prompting one member to suggest that investigators look for a foot fetishist. Later, a guard at the school, who had been expelled from the army precisely for stealing women's shoes, was sentenced.

During the meeting in Philadelphia, police investigators continue to present possible motives for the murder of Deborah Ann Brooks. One theory is that she fell victim to a drug deal between corrupt police officers; it is known that police officers sold marijuana in the area at the time. In addition, Deborah's mother was with a police officer who allegedly tried to influence the murder investigation in a suspicious way.



The number of cold cases is increasing in the USA - since the 80s, a quarter of a million cold murder cases have ended up on the shelf. Photo: Rob Schoenbaum

One member suggests that the positioning of the victim looks staged.

- It's like a pose, and I think the cuts were made after the moment of death. Someone knew what they were doing, he says.

Another thesis is that the perpetrator was a total stranger.

- Attacking black women like Deborah was a sport at the time in DC, says investigator Frank Tona.

The meeting ends. Now the Vidocq Society will appoint members who are suitable experts to work further on the murder case, which they can do, among other things, by reviewing autopsy reports, going back to the murder scene or offering new forensic analyses.

The cold case club serves as an asset to US police, but does not conduct its own independent investigations. The work is done pro bono – without cost – and they don't want to steal the star shine of police investigators, says founder William Fleisher.

- We don't take the credit. If the authorities want to share that we contributed to the investigation's solution that's fine but we don't want to do it ourselves. Virtue is our reward –

investigation's solution, that's fine, but we don't want to do it ourselves. Virtue is our reward we do it because we want to help.

The police investigators who have just told about the murder of Deborah, say they wanted assistance from the Vidocq Society, because the group has a long experience and the members come from a variety of disciplines. In this way, they can think outside the box and avoid having to deal with the usual bureaucracy that police investigators may otherwise have to contend with.

Although the investigation has stalled for decades, they hope to arrest someone for Deborah's murder eventually.

- We only hope that witnesses remain and that they remember what they saw, and that suspected perpetrators are alive and can be arrested. It's a battle against the clock, says investigator Frank Tona.

The number of cold cases is increasing in the US - since the 1980s, a quarter of a million cold murder cases have ended up on the shelf.



The leaders of The Vidocq Society. John Maxwell, Barbara J Cohan-Saavedra, William L. Fleisher, and Thomas C. McAndrew. Photo: Rob Schoenbaum

During the 1960s, American police solved roughly 90 percent of all murder cases in the country. Today, roughly 40 percent of all murders remain unsolved, according to an FBI report (2017). The stations rarely have time for the dusty folders of old murders, and according to police investigator Frank Tona, that is a real problem.

- Many stations suffer from budget cuts and reduced staffing - then cold cases are not a priority. Most people rather want to focus on what is going on right now, the hot cases, which can be seen in the media, he says.

- But the wounds will never disappear for the victims' families, no matter how many years have passed. The pain repeats itself every year, with every birthday and holiday that passes. It is therefore important that groups such as the Vidocq Society continue to raise awareness of all cold case murders.

This is The Vidocq Society

A club in Philadelphia that meets monthly to solve cold case murders.

Consists of 82 experts from various disciplines who can contribute to the criminal investigations; psychologists, researchers, prosecutors, FBI agents. Provides pro bono expert assistance to law enforcement in solving homicide cases at least two years old in the United States.

Started 30 years ago by William Fleisher, former FBI agent, Frank Bender, forensic sculptor and Richard Walter, prison psychologist. One of the group's former members was Robert Ressler, the FBI agent who coined the

Svenska Dagbladet

Signed in as
Macneil Investigations

The name comes from Eugène François Vidocq, who is considered the first private detective, the father of modern criminology who founded the French security service in the 19th century.



Emelie Svensson

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