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Everybody in Here Is Under Arrest

Cop Talk

"You try to think like a fugitive to catch a fugitive," says Detective Sergeant Gordon Redding, who retired as commander of the San Diego Police Department's Fugitive Apprehension Unit in 1992. "How would I get away? How could I change my identity? How could I adjust my Social Security number? And then you think, who is his best friend? Who is his closest relative? And where would I ask them to hide me?"

The violent or recidivist felon became Redding's forte — murderers, child molesters, grand larcenists. Not all of them were men. "The ratio is 65 to 35, or maybe 70 to 30, men to women.

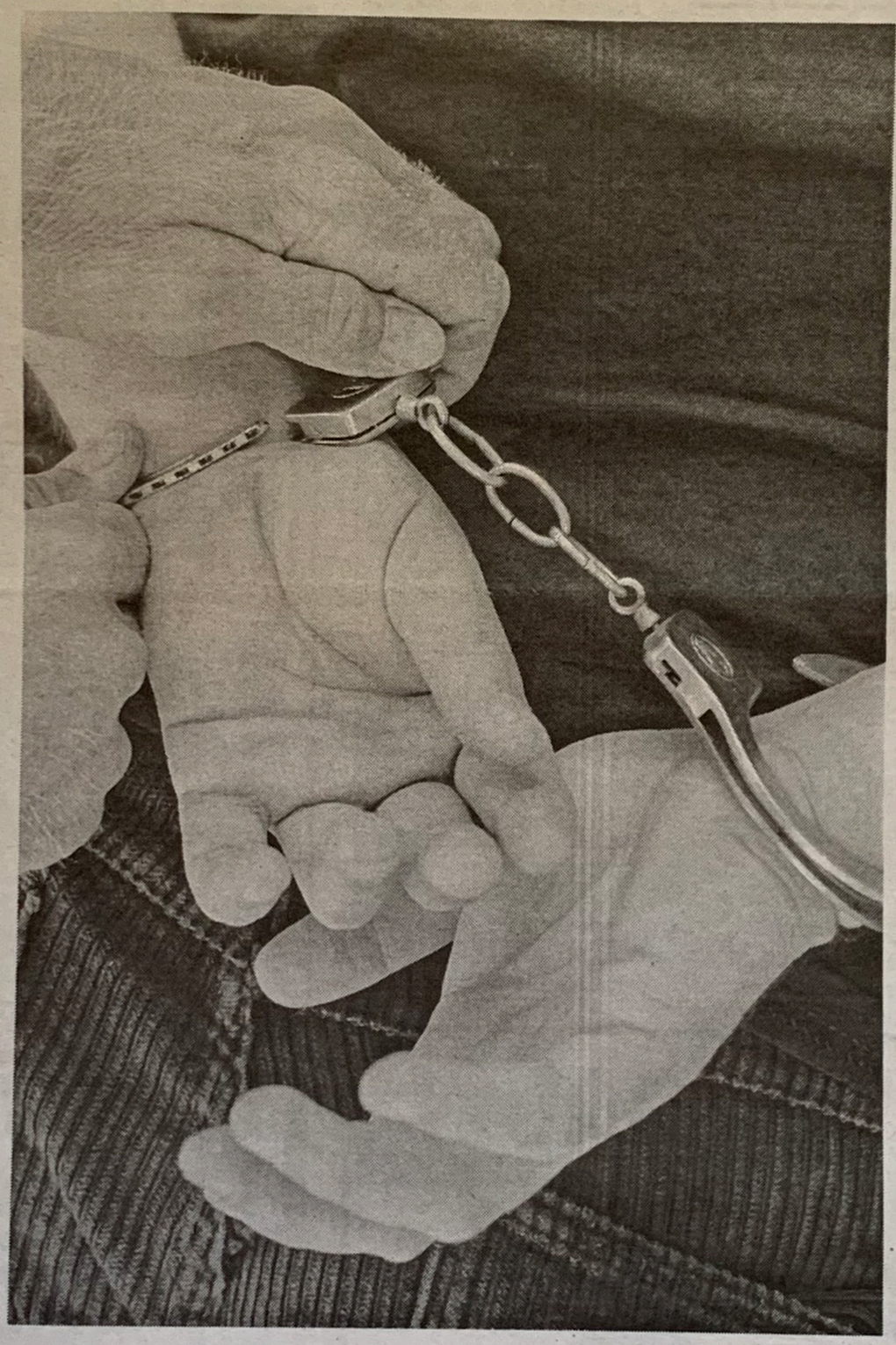
LOCAL EVENTS

It's pretty amazing how many female felony fugitives we have running around out there. Their crimes generally deal with the financial end of things, like forgeries. But others become involved in violent crimes, all the way to murder. Bank robbery is not unpopular with them."

Redding attributes much of his team's success to its "informational spider webs," local as well as world-wide.

"On one occasion we called a civilian agency that has nothing to do with law enforcement but that had acquired lots of information on lots of folks. We were told by them that the man we were seeking — a murderer — had a doctor's appointment at a San Diego hospital every Tuesday at 3:00 p.m." The hospital cooperated. "They gave us doctors' smocks, stethoscopes, and invited us to be the patient greeters at the window that day. And when he was on the examining table, I went in with some other 'doctors,' and said, 'I'm Dr. Redding, this is Dr. Wagner,' and so on, 'and the reason there are so many doggoned doctors here is because we're actually police officers. You're under arrest.' And he just lay there in shock while we asked him to roll over and handcuffed him."

But if Redding's connections have benefited him, a felon's connections have worked against Redding. "The most difficult type of criminal to catch is one who has the assistance of friends or family," he says. "They'll shield him because they think blood is always thicker than water, even though he may be the perpetrator of a heinous crime."



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

Redding and his unit have used guile more often than guns. "Shooting was almost nonexistent. If you have the element of surprise and professional, trained people, you're not going to have a guy who wants to fight his way out of five police officers." A relatively easy surrender is common especially if he or she is alone.

Sometimes, though, Redding has caught large groups of unrelated felons together, with a single ploy, and it went just as smoothly, he says. "We'd claim to be giving away vacations to Hawaii and would send all the invitations to wanted felons. We'd have a setup in a big field down in Mission Valley some place, where there would bands playing, limousines coming up, and balloons. And they'd walk in, going, 'All right! I won! I'm goin' to Hawaii!' And soon enough we'd get them into the building and lock all the doors and say, 'Everybody in here is under arrest.' I remember one lady pleaded [in falsetto], 'Please just let me go to Hawaii! I promise I'll turn myself in when I come back.' And we said, 'Lady, you don't understand.' "

Some felons, finally caught, are relieved the chase is over, according to Redding. "I've had so many of them say, 'Oh, man! You just don't know how bad it is. Every time you hear a noise, you think, *That's them!* And every time you ride a bus, you think, *How come that guy keeps looking at me?* And every time you walk down the street and see a guy twice, you go, *That's the cops. They're following me.'* Try living like that for two or three or four years."

The 58-year-old Redding continues to watch his own back, hesitating to provide just anyone with his phone number. And because he still does undercover work, he refused to be photographed.

He occasionally gives talks about his experiences, however, and has accepted an invitation from the local chapter of Sisters in Crime to speak at its monthly meeting. In the past, the organization of writers and readers of mystery books has heard from all sorts of other crime experts, including a private detective, psychic detective, bomb-dog handler, medical examiner, police artist, forensic dentist, tracker, and entomologist.

Redding, for his part, says that the pursuit and capture of fugitives, some of whom elude authorities for decades, is "without a doubt the most satisfying kind of police work."

"If you're a cop at heart, this is what you want to do, because it's so needed! Plus, you don't get bogged down with paper work. You catch the guy, and it's a one-line arrest report: 'Arrested for felony warrant. Seven-six-two-five. Period.' Next case."

— *Jeanne Schinto*

"Nabbing Fugitives"
Lecture by Gordon Redding, Detective Sgt. SDPD (ret.)
Sponsored by Sisters in Crime, San Diego Chapter
Thursday, July 6, 7:00 p.m.
Joyce Beers Community Center, Hillcrest
Fee: $3
Info: 858-481-6411