

## **Fingerprints**



### **History of Fingerprinting**

Through history, observant people have noticed the ridges and patterns on their fingertips. The Chinese and the Babylonians used fingerprints as signatures on some business contracts over a thousand years ago. But, it was not until the late 1800's that modern, scientific fingerprinting methods were developed. In the 1880's, a British anthropologist, Sir Francis Galton, began working on the first scientific system of classifying prints. His work was published in 1892 as a book titled Fingerprints.

In 1892, the Argentine police used fingerprints to identify a murderer who had cut her own throat to try to pass herself off as one of the victims! In 1901, Britain established a system developed by the head of Scotland Yard, Sir Edward Henry. The United States adopted the Henry System, based on Galton's work, slightly more than one year later. It is still in use today.

### **Why use Fingerprints?**

Another promising method of identifying criminals, called the Bertillon System, required a series of complicated measurements of bony parts of the body. Developed in thirty years. However, the Bertillon system had two major defects. First, criminals do not usually leave their bones behind at the scene of a crime. Therefore, although the system could be used to establish identity, it could not place a criminal at the scene of a crime the way fingerprints can. Secondly, the Bertillon measurements were not infallible. The superiority of fingerprints was proven in 1903, when two prisoners at Leavenworth Prison were found to have almost the same name (William West and Will West) and the same appearance (they looked like twins). More importantly, the two men actually were identical twins, even though they denied it. In a roundabout way, then, we have answered another fingerprint question-identical twins do have different fingerprints!

**Why do we have fingerprints?** The raised ridges on our fingers and hands help us grip things better, because a rough surface can hold on to things better than a smooth, slippery one. Everyone has different fingerprints, although scientists are not sure why this is.



**Do animals have fingerprints?** Monkeys and apes do. Dogs have individual nose and paw prints. And horses have calluses called 'chestnuts' on the inner sides of their legs that are used for horse identification.



**Can you change your fingerprints?** No. Criminals have had the prints surgically removed from the tips of their fingers but they still have been caught because the fingerprint patterns extend all the way down their fingers. You would have to remove all the skin from your hand to get rid of your prints. (If you remove the top layer of skin, the print grows back exactly as it was before.)

**Do other parts of your body have prints?** You can judge from the story of a burglar named Fitts, who tried to avoid being caught by taking off his shoes and wearing his socks on his hands. He left no fingerprints, but he was caught because he left foot and toe prints, which are just as individual as fingerprints.

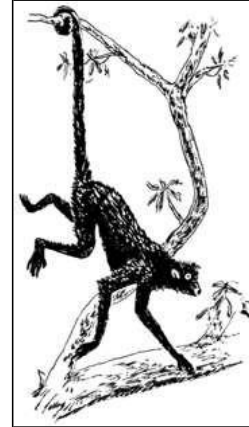


**What else are fingerprints used for besides catching criminals?** Fingerprints have been used to identify amnesia victims, reunite lost members of a family and identify accident victims.

**Do Monkeys and other primates have fingerprints?** Yes, and some monkeys even have fingerprints on their prehensile tail!



A mighty big fingerprint!



Prehensile tail fingerprint