

WILDERNESS TRACKING 101

The Mojave Desert! Think sidewinders and space shuttles. Dirt roads and the SR-71 Blackbird. Blazing summers and frigid winters.

But mostly, think about 100-plus square mile patrol areas for a single unit! Areas with a unique assemblage of hermits, meth cooks, survivalists, tweekers, and outlaw bikers amidst the normal folk who simply appreciate wide-open spaces and glorious sunsets.



Picture trying to get to know an area where the landmarks aren't street signs, addresses and buildings, but instead are rock formations, bushes and hills. It's still Los Angeles County, 21st Century, but for the deputies working unincorporated Antelope Valley areas, it's more like being a Texas Ranger west of the Pecos in 1935. Sure, cars and walkie-talkies had just replaced horses --but what still mattered most was a mix of self-reliance, teamwork, common sense, and shrewdness. And so it is still.

...Radio Alert tone... 265A Days... 925A... 32200 block 106 St. E... Blue Pontiac Firebird stuck on a dirt mound... contact informant Ed Blackburn.

Palmdale 265A Deputy Carl Osterthaler had worked the East Side County areas of Little Rock/Pearblossom/Llano on and off for years. Wait a minute. Point of clarification. He had *worked* those areas. His many shifts had given him the opportunity to learn the geography, sociology, and lifeways of the desert. Like several other deputies at both PAL and Lancaster Stations, he had taken advantage of the opportunity by scarfing the local knowledge and applying it to outsmarting crooks.

With this innocuous 925A (suspicious person in auto) call, he demonstrated how he and his seasoned desert partners had done it many times before.

Upon 10-97 (arrived at scene), Carl saw the stuck car as the nearby resident/informant met him. While noting the contents he could see from outside the car, he heard the informant explain, "I saw a guy and a girl get out of this car and run through the hills over there toward Hunzell's place."

Carl quickly drove the half mile or so to the property NE of where the Firebird was stuck, to Hunzell's spread on Butterfield Stage Road (shades of the Old West, or what?).

There he saw the described couple walking across the desert hills toward the residence. Carl invited them to his car by means of his p.a. speaker, and they cooperatively came over.

"Hi, deputy. Our car got stuck back there, and we were gonna borrow a phone here. I'm Frank O'Hara."

Carl immediately recognized the male's name from comments made by two of his previous receiving-stolen-property arrestees a month earlier. At the time, they had claimed that "Franklin Daniel O'Hara" had brought them the stolen motorcycle that Carl was at the time pinching them for possessing.

"OK, Frank, how'd you get into this predicament?" Carl started with.

"Well, my girlfriend here and I were driving the back roads after having sex in the hills. I didn't realize I was on private property, but I got my car stuck on that dirt berm back there."

To quote from Deputy Osterthaler's police report, "During this conversation, I noticed O'Hara's hands were covered in automotive grease, which I thought was hardly a romantic or sanitary enhancement to having sex in the hills with his girlfriend."

"So, Frank, what's with all the grease?"

"Oh, I got that trying to jack my car off of the mound."

By this time, Carl's assisting deputies, Greg Minster and Mike Reddy had arrived. Carl got the same basic story from Frank O'Hara's girlfriend, Sally, who added that they had hot-footed it over here because the resident back where the car got stuck had chased them off his property with a shotgun.

The three deputies offered to drive the pair back to their car and help extricate it. The couple gratefully hopped into a black and white for the free ride.

Back at the informant's house, Greg and Mike watched the couple while Carl rapped with the informant.

"Say Ed, have you still got the east access road to your property all tilled up with tractor rippers and blocked with a berm?"

"Oh yeah. Always trying to keep out the riffraff."

Very interesting, thought Carl. *The only other way into Ed's property is from the south, down a steep dirt road from the hills above. And to get down here from there, these two would have had to drive by the old, abandoned house that's back in the hills up there.*

Carl also knew that the vacant place had been used for everything from social tweeking to car stripping. He walked over to look at the dirt road. When he noticed tire tracks coming down the hill, he decided *time for some exploring*.

Deputy Reddy stayed with the "stranded" couple while Carl and Deputy Minster drove the main road half a mile south, then turned east onto a dirt road that climbed a steep ridge, descended into a valley through a defile and on to the thoroughly vandalized, empty house. They were about a mile off the pavement.

While snooping there, the deputies were not surprised to discover a stripped GMC Blazer. Naturally, it came back as a stolen, from three days ago. Carl noticed several other things, such as the missing carpet and insulation from the sides of the storage area that *looked just like what he'd noticed in the high and dry Firebird one-half mile north.*

He also noticed two sets of footprints in the dirt around the Blazer and filed the designs in his memory banks. As he and Greg drove from the vacant house along the dirt trail leading to Ed's lot, Carl noticed and followed a single set of tire tracks that led right up to the back end of the stranded Firebird! And wonder of wonders! The shoe prints matched both of the couple's shoes.

It all sounds great for an arrest, but so far it's not enough for even a filing, let alone a conviction. It was time to apply Field Interview Techniques 101--the seeking of contradictory-but-informative statements.

Carl took the male suspect aside. "Ok partner, here's the deal. I know you drove past the abandoned house, and from your footprints, I know you stopped there. I know you have things in your car that came from a stripped, stolen..."

"I didn't steal that truck!" interrupted the suspect. "Richard and Jackson stole it."

"Well, there are parts from that truck in your car here..."

"I didn't take them off the truck. Richard left the stuff by the road for me."

"Sorry, but the footprints and the grease on your hands lead me to believe differently!"

Carl next went to the suspect's girlfriend, whom Mike Reddy had been detaining some distance away, and told her, "Sally, your boyfriend has spilled the beans. You're not under arrest yet, but you need to be truthful as we talk. I know about your footprints being at the stripped, stolen Blazer."

"Richard stole that car!"

"Ok, earlier this morning, did you and your boyfriend stop anywhere back on the highway to pick anything up?"

"No, we turned onto the dirt road and drove straight to the house where the truck was parked!" Carl smiled.

She also copped to moving some parts from the truck to their car -- thus the grease on her hands.

Carl's next thoughts gravitated from the thrill of detection/capture to the purposeful business of ensuring prosecution. He requested a video camera. Sergeant Vince Burton rolled with it, whereupon Carl and Greg re-interviewed the suspects. Carl took photos of the house, truck, footprints, stolen parts, etc. Then, while Greg booked the suspect, Carl and Mike drove Sally around, and she pointed out where "Richard" and "Jackson" were supposedly holding the stolen Blazer engine.

As it turned out, Richard and Jackson didn't have a "hot" engine lying around their place, so Carl's suspect, Frank, was left holding the whole bag. When Detective Bill Gordon got the felony filing on Frank O'Hara, he gave the credit to Carl, about whom both he, and later the GMC owner himself, stated what the reader now knows -- there are deputies doing a heck of a job of police work out in the High Desert.