

Picture Stories 5: The Face of a Criminal

John M. and Nadine A. Hoenig look at the importance of “B cards”

IN THE ARTICLE entitled “Murder and Mayhem: the Dark Side of Genealogy” appearing in this issue of *Family Chronicle*, is a mug shot of Jack Bacher, a New York thief, drug dealer and murderer. Bacher used many aliases, including the name Whitney Heller. He was also arrested once for pickpocketing in Atlantic City, New Jersey. His first known arrest was in 1912, when he was 16 years old.

We learned from the New York Municipal Archives website that the Archives has a collection of 6,000 Bertillon, or “B cards” of criminals from the early part of the 20th century. Each card is 3” x 5” and has front and side photos of the individual on one side. On the back is the person’s name, age, nativity and crime committed, as well as a series of 14 body and head measurements for identification purposes. The Bertillon System was devised by a French police clerk named Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914) to help in the tracking of criminals. Bertillon’s method of body measurements was widely used by police departments throughout much of Europe and North America, until fingerprinting became well established in the early 1900s.

We wondered if Jack Bacher might appear in a B card. The Municipal Archives is just now creating an index to the cards. Fortunately, the Director, Leonora A. Gidlund, agreed to help. She didn’t find Bacher but she found a card for a young pickpocket named Jacob Heller. Since Bacher sometimes used the alias Whitey Heller, and was once arrested for pickpocketing, we thought this might be a match. The photo of Heller bears a passing resemblance to the one of Bacher in the “Murder and Mayhem” article — if you use your imagination.



Above, the Bertillon or “B card” for pickpocket Jacob Heller, arrested in New York City in 1908. He bears a superficial resemblance to another criminal — Jack Bacher — but details of the ear indicate they are different people. (See photo on page xx of this issue).

Below, close ups of the right ear of Jack Bacher (left) and Jacob Heller (right). The arrow points to a cross ridge in Bacher’s ear that does not appear in Heller’s.



Could they be the same person?

It is said that a person’s ears are almost as distinctive as his or her fingerprints. We don’t know if that’s true but it is clear from a comparison of Heller’s and Bacher’s ears that they are different people. Notice the cross-ridge in Heller’s ear (marked with an arrow) that does not

appear in Bacher’s ear.

It would have been a real coup to connect these two stories and obtain another photo of Bacher from an earlier period.

Alas, it was not to be. We did, however, learn about a valuable resource and honed our photo-detecting skills.