

The Story of Charles A. Appel, Jr., Founder of the FBI Laboratory

by Edward J. Appel, Sr. (1969-1997)

SA Charles A. "Uncle Charlie" Appel, Jr. (1924-1949) was a contemporary of J. Edgar Hoover, and a fellow Washingtonian, born in 1895 and raised in DC. His father was Chief IRS Auditor and plumbing company owner, and his grandfather, Charles A. Appel 1st, was a Civil War cavalry hero. His ancestors arrived in the U.S. from Alsace Lorraine in 1737, and fought in the Revolutionary War. He seemed predestined for distinguished government service.



CA Appel, 1924

As a boy, Charlie became an accomplished violinist. He graduated from McKinley Technical High School, where he was a sergeant in the 1911 award-winning uniformed cadet corps. He learned Gregg shorthand and typing, skills he shared with his father. He worked in San Francisco, CA, during the Panama-Pacific Exhibition in 1915, playing concert violin.

He clerked in his father's DC plumbing business, before moving to Dallas, TX, where he was an engineer and dispatcher for the Texas Power and Light Company. In May 1918, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps, trained at the University of Texas at Austin School of Military Aeronautics, and after flight training in a Curtis JN4 "Jenny" biplane at Ellington Field, TX, he was certified as a pilot in March 1919, after World War I ended.

Charlie entered Georgetown University Law School in 1919, working part-time as a stenographer for the federal Board for Vocational Education (BVE) and playing violin in the 60-member "Washington's Own Opera Company." He invented a device to protect the signatures on checks, and was granted Patent No. 470,435 on June 10, 1920. In October 1920, he married Lasalia McCaffrey, with whom he had worked at BVE, and they had two sons, Charles A. Jr. and William. In 1922, he graduated from law school and quickly found that D.C. was awash in attorneys. As his income was intermittent, he took further training as a reconnaissance pilot at Langley Field, VA in the summer of 1923.

In 1924, Charlie was appointed an SA of the Bureau of Investigation and was sent to Detroit. Successful prosecution of a police corruption and prostitution case there caused headlines reporting the defense claim that he imbibed illegal liquor and used prostitutes in order to entrap the pimps and police. When the mob planned to assassinate him, Appel was transferred to Dallas, TX, where he distinguished himself pursuing bankruptcy fraud cases. In 1929, Hoover transferred Charlie back to headquarters to oversee bankruptcy fraud, intelligence, and Mann Act cases, among other things. He quickly solved a multi-million-dollar bankruptcy fraud case involving the F. H. Smith Co. commercial real estate empire, which resulted in the 1930 convictions of Board Chair G. Bryan Pitts and several co-conspirators for fraud and embezzlement. Document expert Albert O. Osborn testified that defendants forged and post-dated telltale documents using a new typewriter.

Frequently, Director Hoover and headquarters' Agents (Harold Nathan, Assistant Director, Divisions 1 and 2; Vincent Hughes, Division 3 and Appel, Division 4) discussed the need to improve the use of scientific methods in investigating crimes. Charlie, who recommended a separate crime laboratory for evidence processing and research into the latest technology, was undoubtedly inspired by his brother, William "Dunford" Appel, MS, FSDC, who was the lead expert in fibers at the National Bureau of Standards. The Bureau lacked the resources for its own crime lab, so it turned to outside experts like Osborn when needed for examinations and testimony.

On January 31, 1931, Charlie's wife, Lasalia, was killed in a tragic traffic accident near their home in Chevy Chase, MD, in view of their five- and seven-year-old sons. Charlie's parents helped care for the boys. In March-April 1931, Charlie requested permission from Director Hoover to take a course in forensic examination of evidence at Northwestern University's Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory in Chicago, IL, at his own expense and on leave. Hoover sent Charlie on Bureau time and expense. In April-May 1931, Appel's NU classes included serology, toxicology, handwriting and typewriting analysis, and moulage (the making of impressions or casts). On Friday, the last day of the course, he received a telegram from

Hoover with orders to proceed directly back to Washington, DC upon completion, to teach what he had learned to assembled SACs from around the nation. On the train back that Friday night, Charlie typed up his class notes, as he had daily during the course. On Sunday at 9:00 AM, he began teaching the summarized contents of the course to the assembled SACs, finishing at dinner time on Monday.

Charlie applied his new knowledge to Bureau casework, and sought out additional training opportunities, while researching the development of a crime laboratory. With Director Hoover's permission, he visited police crime labs in St. Louis (founded in 1906), New Orleans and Detroit. On July 7, 1932, in a memorandum to Hoover, Appel proposed "a separate division" within the Bureau where "the criminological research laboratory could be placed."

In another memo two weeks later, Appel outlined his vision for the laboratory: "I believe the Bureau should be the central clearing house for all information which may be needed in the criminological work and that all police departments in the future will look to the Bureau for information of this kind as a routine thing..." In September 1932, the lab began to take shape, when an ultraviolet light machine, a comparison microscope, a moulage kit, a wiretapping kit, photographic supplies, chemicals, a drawing board, and other office equipment and supplies were moved into room 802 of the Old Southern Railway Building (until then used as a break room) at 13th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC. — the first Bureau space designated for forensic laboratory work. Crime scene evidence had been examined at FBI offices, but now there was a central lab for the purpose.

The Director then approved a separate Criminology



Laboratory for the FBI, which was formally introduced on November 24, 1932, with Charlie as its first head and sole examiner.

In its first year of operation, the Laboratory performed 963 examinations. In June 1933, the Laboratory was renamed the Technical Laboratory. In December 1933, the Director named Edmund P. Coffee supervisor of the Laboratory, but told Appel to continue to oversee all administrative matters. In September 1934, the Lab was relocated with most of Bureau Headquarters to the new Department of Justice Building at 9th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, where it occupied two large rooms on the seventh floor and attic, sharing space with the Identification Unit, the Single Fingerprint Section, and the Photography and Printing Section. Public tours passed through the Laboratory's workspace, so sensitive evidence could not be examined

until visiting hours ended. The Lab's clerical section occupied desks crowded next to the windows in the hallways.

By 1940, the Laboratory expanded in the Justice Department building, and the staff had grown to 46. Most of the Special Agent examiners held advanced degrees and expertise in a variety of scientific disciplines. A "who's who" of the Lab's early days included Special Agents Don J. Parsons, Ivan W. Conrad, Walter G. Blackburn, Frank T. Baughman, Robert F. Pfafman, Richard L. Millen, Fred A. Miller, George W. Dingle, Dale Gasteiger, Paul A. Napier and Ramos C. Feehan.



Appel in Lab, 1932

Case successes, favorable publicity and field SAs convinced police departments around the country to present their evidence to the FBI for no-cost examination, exhibits and testimony. As the FBI's forensics capabilities quickly grew, Lab results increasingly contributed to the solution and prosecution of cases. In 1941, with a number of Special Agents being called up to military service, the Bureau for the first time selected women as laboratory examiners. The first two women selected were Bureau support employees Mary A. Cullen, a graduate of Trinity College, DC, with one and a half years of law school, and Page Beckemeier, also a college graduate, and they were sent to Quantico for training at the FBI Academy (where only men had previously trained).

On November 24, 1942, the FBI celebrated the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Laboratory with a turkey dinner and dance at DC's Mayflower Hotel, where Charlie was honored as the Lab's founder and dean. Photos of the occasion showed Appel and Mary Cullen, then his assistant and a document examiner, dancing. They would marry in May 1945, and have 35 years and five children together.

Even before the Lab's official opening, the country was galvanized by the kidnapping of 20-month-old Charles A. Lindbergh Jr., son of the famous aviator, on the night of March



100th Anniversary of Lab Celebration, left; Assistant to the Director Edward A. Tamm presents scroll to Charles Appel

1, 1932 from the family home nursery near Hopewell, NJ. A handwritten ransom note demanding \$50,000 was found on the windowsill. For weeks, New Jersey State and local police and the Bureau (without a federal kidnapping statute) looked in vain for the victim, tried to identify the kidnapper and

waded through a slew of false ransom notes, self-appointed detectives, false leads and charlatans that appeared. Assistant Director Harold Nathan responded immediately to the scene, offered police any assistance possible, called in the Secret Service, and prepared gold-certificate bank notes with serial numbers recorded for a ransom. The infant's partially decomposed body was found on May 12, 1932.

SA Appel and his colleagues conducted 129 examinations on such evidence as gold certificate currency from the ransom payment, typewriting, and compared thousands of handwriting samples with the 13 genuine ransom notes. After an alert gas station clerk recorded the license plate of a man who used a gold certificate to pay for gas, Agents placed Bruno Richard Hauptmann under surveillance. Breaking the FBI surveillance, police in the Bronx arrested Hauptmann. An alert SA Leon Turrou took Hauptmann's handwritten car registration and brought it to Appel, who identified him as the ransom note writer, citing writing motion habits from his education in Germany. FBI Agents and police took Hauptmann to search his residence, and when police gave up without finding any money, Agents carefully watching his reaction to places being searched found a total of \$42,000 of the ransom money hidden in the garage and a false closet ceiling. Appel testified before the Bronx Grand Jury, which indicted Hauptmann for extortion. When New Jersey finally indicted Hauptmann for murder, the Governor of New York surrendered Hauptmann to New Jersey in October 1934.

Hauptmann was convicted of kidnapping in a five-week trial beginning January 3, 1935, at Flemington, NJ, with evidence including identification of handwriting on ransom notes by Bureau Agents and other examiners, wood from the ladder used to reach the nursery window that came from Hauptmann's attic, notes on Hauptmann's wall and possession of ransom money. He was sentenced to death. Meanwhile, Charlie was testifying in a Binghamton, NY



trial in which 13 subjects were convicted of conspiracy and kidnapping of the son of Albany's political boss. The Lindberg case led Congress to pass a federal kidnapping statute, assigning the Bureau jurisdiction. The case also led to strict evidence control policies in the Lab. Legend suggests the case also led to the Lab mantra: "Send more samples!"

In many major cases, the Lab's forensic evidence was crucial. A good example was the Kansas City, MO vote fraud in the 1934 elections, where the notorious T. J. Pendergast machine ran the Democratic Party and a corrupt city.

J. Edgar Hoover sent a team, including SA Appel, who set up a lab on-site, to support a federal investigation under U.S. Attorney Maurice M. Milligan in 1936-38. Evidence presented to grand juries included ballots where X's were changed, leaving clear impressions in ballots piled beneath when the changes were made, fingerprints and other evidence. Appel's

field laboratory examined thousands of ballots.

Charts and photos identifying the handwriting and fingerprints of those who changed ballots resulted in indictments of 278 election judges, precinct captains and clerks for vote fraud. Though Pendergast raised a \$100,000 defense fund, at trials, with Appel's expert testimony, photos and charts, juries convicted 63 people, 36 others pled guilty, 162 pled nolo contendere and 17 were nolle prossed, and \$60,000 in fines were assessed. Pendergast himself was later indicted for tax evasion in an IRS case, pled guilty and served 15 months in federal prison. During the investigation



Appel examining ballots, and some of thousands seized



The Lab at work, 1942

and trials, Harry S. Truman, then a Senator and later Vice President and President, supported Pendergast, whom he declared his friend.

In the 1930s and early 40s, SA Appel coached the Bureau ladies' softball team, known as "Charlie's Chickens," who played on the Ellipse, near the White House.

During World War II, a large number of espionage and sabotage cases were worked in the Lab. In training for Lab work, Mary Cullen (later Mrs. Charles Appel) and Page

Beckemeier were given cigarette packs and told to find the microdots. After hours finding nothing but tobacco, they were told to “put the cigarette packs back together.” Their solution was to buy new packs of the same brand at the corner drugstore. Such challenges involved the Lab in daily, delicate work, with intercepted letters, concealment devices, secret writing and ciphers. The Lab assembled a large number of specialized tools, for example, long tweezers used to extract letters from envelopes, then replace them, chemicals used to expose secret writing, microscopes to read microdots and conversion tables for codes.

In one case, SAs followed a known German agent, who filed his reports by mailing letters to a mail-drop address in the Netherlands. Agents retrieved the letters from mailboxes and sent them to the Lab, where the contents were carefully extracted, copied, and then substitute contents on identical paper with identical ink were forged to appear exactly like the spy’s handwriting by Appel and SA Joseph English. The Germans never discovered that many of the spy’s reports were forgeries containing misleading information. Appel and English, a talented artist as well as handwriting expert, worried that if their forgeries became known, testimony in criminal cases could be impeached or become an issue.

World War II spy cases included unusual concealment devices examined by the Lab, such as decorated black resin Couroc trays, and many items intercepted by British and U.S. mail censors examining posted items en route to Europe through Bermuda. In the summer of 1942, sophisticated explosives, detonators, time-delay devices and other sabotage equipment brought ashore from Nazi submarines by eight German saboteurs, four of whom landed in Long Island, NY and four near Jacksonville, FL, were examined. All eight saboteurs were apprehended, tried by a military tribunal, convicted, and six of the eight executed (in the only attempted act of sabotage by Nazi Germany).

The FBI rounded up the 33-member Duquesne spy ring thanks to excellent counterespionage work, including operation of a double agent, and all were convicted as of December 13, 1941. Many types of evidence, including microdots, secret writing, concealment devices, covert photography and shortwave radio communications, involved the Lab. Velvalee Dickinson, “the Doll Lady,” pled guilty to



Lab, 1944, Appel and Mary Cullen, later Appel, on left behind speaker

espionage for the Japanese in the summer of 1944, admitting that she had typed and forged others’ signatures on letters using open-source code referring to dolls (she ran a doll shop in Manhattan) to convey information on U.S. warships, as the Lab had already detected.

When Charlie Appel asked “Speed” (J. Edgar) Hoover in a letter for permission to retire in 1947, he was refused. A year later, Hoover agreed, and Appel retired in December 1948. Taking up practice as a document examiner in civil matters, Charlie helped many victims of forgery, and



Charlie introduced his son SA Ed Appel to Director Hoover in June 1971

participated in several highly-publicized cases. Among them were cases involving Howard Hughes’ 1962 stockholder dispute with TWA, which won a \$175 million judgment, and the 1970 disputed firing of Robert Maheu, manager of Hughes’ \$300 million Las Vegas gambling operations, both involving forged signatures of Hughes. Appel testified in a 1967 case involving contributions allegedly diverted for personal use by Sen. Thomas Dodd, and in a dispute over Al Capp’s “Li’l Abner” cartoon strip where Appel identified Ham Fisher as the one who altered Capp’s cartoons. Charlie qualified and testified in courts in every state of the U.S. except Hawaii, and in Pakistan and in Puerto Rico in person, and by deposition in European and South American countries.

Appel planned never to testify in criminal matters, concerned that he might have to oppose police experts he had taught, and whose efforts he supported. However, Charlie did testify in two criminal cases, refusing compensation for both: In a 1967 case, Appel demonstrated that Clay Shaw, who was charged with conspiracy to assassinate President John F. Kennedy in a New Orleans court, did not write the signature “Clay Bertrand” as accused in the register of an airport VIP lounge. The jury took less than an hour to acquit Shaw. Charlie also testified in a case involving a false accusation based on a forged document against the first black elected to a Memphis, TN, office.

Appel found himself at odds with most private-practice document examiners (and many other expert witnesses) in his time. In law journal articles, courses he taught and in court testimony, he declared that a provider of scientific

evidence must be objective and unbiased, and never take a “contingency fee” or additional compensation from the side that won a case. He said that when an expert has a stake in the outcome of a case, he or she becomes an advocate, and scientific integrity is compromised. This put Appel at odds with associations of document examiners and other forensic practitioners of his time, who accepted higher fees for winning. Charlie’s integrity ran so deep that a manuscript on how to detect forgeries and examine questioned documents remained unpublished after his death, because he feared that it would be a primer for forgers.

Those who remember Charlie Appel the person recall his constant kindness and gentility. But as an ingenious, doggedly determined law enforcement professional, forensic expert and practitioner, his strength and integrity

still set a high bar for all, demonstrating how Hoover’s cadre created a firm foundation for today’s FBI.

The Kidnap Racket by Brian Hunt will be featured in the April issue.

Edward J. Appel, Sr., Charlie’s son, was a Special Agent (1969-1997) specializing in FCI and CT matters, was detailed to NSA, was ASAC in San Francisco, and served as Director, Intelligence Matters, National Security Council, the White House. Charlie’s grandson, Edward J. Appel, Jr., spent 20 years as an IT specialist in San Francisco Division. Pamela Appel, Ed Jr.’s wife, is still a specialist in the San Francisco Division. Ed Sr. is currently writing a book about Charles A. Appel, Jr., and would be delighted if any reader has recollections about Charlie. He can be reached by email at EdAppel@edwardappel.com.

Upcoming Issue of *the Grapevine* Law Enforcement as a 2nd Career

Have you chosen a Second Career in Law Enforcement? We would love to hear about it! Your story may help our associate and other members, who are looking to make the transition. Let us know where you work, how long you’ve been there and why you chose law enforcement as a second career. Please describe how your work in the FBI helped you to prepare for your position. Do you have any advice for those who are looking into law enforcement as a second career?

Please send your submission of 250 words and a photo to grapevine@socxfbi.org or mail it to *the Grapevine*, Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI, 3717 Fettler Park Drive, Dumfries, VA 22025. We look forward to hearing from you!

Re-employment Opportunity with the FBI for Retired Special Agents and Professional Staff

The Security Division of the FBI has an immediate need to rehire retired Special Agent and Professional Staff personnel to assist the Bureau with the FY 2015 and FY 2016 hiring initiative under the Reserve Service Program. The time frame to start is immediately (after approval and necessary clearances are in place) and expected to last approximately two years. Security Division is anticipating needing between 20 to 30 of these reemployed annuitants who retired from the Bureau after 2/31/2012. Candidates local to Washington, DC will most likely work in the Security Division space, however, candidates outside of the local commuting area will be able to work from their local field offices after a period of training at FBIHQ. All candidates should submit a resume to Security Division Deputy Assistant Director Brigette Flynn Class at Brigette.Class@ic.fbi.gov. If you should have questions, please submit your questions to her email address.