

**S**unlight filters through the blinds of a private dining-room on the top floor of the Public Ledger Building in the centre of Philadelphia. Lunch – a small salad, followed by chicken and spaghetti topped with cheese and peppers – concludes with lemon tart. Most of the diners gathered around the half-dozen circular tables are finishing their coffee by the time Detective Charlie Fairbairn approaches the lectern to go over the events of August 29, 1985.

A short man with close-cropped grey hair, Fairbairn has flown across three states and driven straight in from the airport to be here, hoping to find a solution to a crime committed when he was only 14, long before he was assigned to cold-case homicide in the police department in Columbus, Georgia. His face glistens with sweat as he describes the details of the murders – of a woman and her two children, killed in the kitchen of their home, with blows from an elongated axe designed for clearing undergrowth. Fairbairn outlines the crime scene in careful technical language, as photographs are projected on a screen behind him: ‘The body of Erica Currie, a four-year-old white female, was located between the kitchen table and the side door. Several feet from Erica, a section of her upper jaw and her glasses were located...’

The images advance: a pool of blood on linoleum; an axe on orange shagpile carpet; a child’s leg protruding from beneath a table. The few dozen assembled members of the Vidocq Society stare at the screen with professional detachment; at a table near the front a big man in his early seventies bounces a toothpick in his mouth impassively. Another photograph shows a close-up of the body of Ann Currie, eight months pregnant at the time of her death, her head propped up for the camera by a man who is out of shot. A woman in the audience gasps. But, being a forensic anthropologist from the New Jersey State Police, she is simply horrified at her colleagues’ lack of procedural rigour: ‘No gloves,’ she hisses at her dining companion, a world authority on ritual murder.

**It is almost two decades since the original members of the Vidocq Society first gathered at the Officers Club of the Philadelphia Navy Yard to enjoy lunch and consider the deaths of others. But since that meeting in September 1990 the organisation has developed from a quirky curiosity into a law-enforcement resource taken seriously by police across the United States; one that has inspired**

several books and a Hollywood bidding war.

Vidocq Society meetings – billed on its website as ‘Cuisine and Crime-Solving’ – now take place in Philadelphia on the third Thursday of every month; members gather beneath the electric chandeliers of the wood-paneled Downtown Club to have lunch and, afterwards, to help find a solution to a cold-case homicide. With 82 full, and more than 100 associate, members – a mix of men and women who must be invited to join by a committee – the society is a voluntary brains trust of retired and working criminologists. Over the years membership has been drawn from the entire spectrum of judicial and crime-fighting institutions: from the local district attorney’s office to Interpol; from

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Philadelphia’s medical examiner to renowned FBI profilers. The society boasts members from 17 US states and 11 other countries around the world.

Members, who like to describe themselves as ‘crime solution catalysts’, pay an annual \$100 subscription fee, and agree to attend at least one meeting a year, regardless of where in the world they live. Each meeting attracts about 60 members. Funded in part by a cut of a reported \$1.3 million film development deal signed with Danny DeVito’s Jersey Films in 1997, the society pays for travel and accommodation expenses – so that underfunded detectives from across America can present their most perplexing cases at the Downtown Club. ‘We’ll never see the FBI or the New York City police bring a case to us,’ says Vidocq’s chairman, Fred Bornhofen – a 70-year-old private security consultant and former spook for the Office of Naval Intelligence. ‘But we’ll get all the state and town cases, because they just don’t have the training, background or sophistication to handle it.’

Despite the restrictions the society places on the crimes it will consider – only unsolved deaths more than two years old; the victims cannot have been engaged in criminal activity such as prostitution or drug-dealing; the case must be formally presented to them by the appropriate law enforcement agency – there is no shortage of work. Bornhofen says there is a mounting backlog of crimes to consider. New cases come in at the rate of two a week, a hundred or so a year. ‘Some have value, some

don’t,’ he tells me over lunch. ‘All these cases are old; everyone has tried to solve them. It’s not a matter of us jumping in when the horse is at the finish line. The horse is dead by the time we get there.’

Nineteen years after they conceived the idea of a crime-solving dining club, the three founding members of the Vidocq Society – Bill Fleisher, Frank Bender and Richard Walter – still make an unlikely trio: the policeman, the artist and the psychologist. Affable, thick-set and wise-cracking, Fleisher, 63, holds the title of society commissioner. He orchestrates the monthly meetings, and came up with the idea of naming the organisation after Eugène François Vidocq – the 19th-century French criminal-turned-detective who pioneered

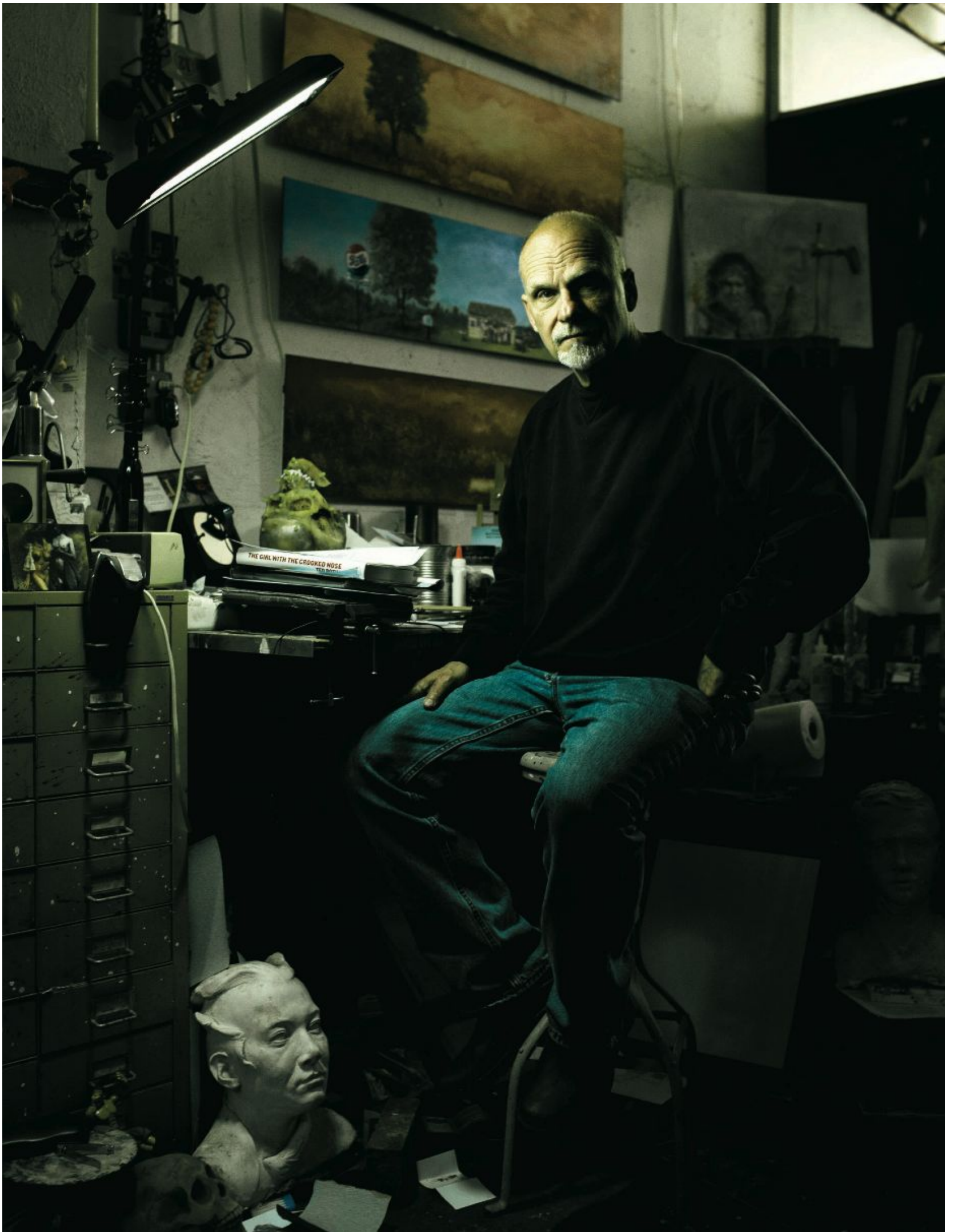
the use of ballistics and fingerprinting, and provided inspiration for the world’s first detective story, Émile Gaboriau’s *L’Affaire Lerouge*. At the private detective agency he now runs in downtown Philadelphia, Fleisher’s office is filled with mementos of a life in law enforcement – his graduation certificate from the City Police Academy, his FBI special agent badge mounted in Perspex, a vintage polygraph machine. Fleisher knows a great deal about murder: during his time with the FBI in the early 1970s he worked the area of Boston known as the Combat Zone, and was later assigned to organised crime, arresting men he describes as ‘characters out of a B-novel’. And 30 years ago, through an introduction by the Philadelphia medical examiner, he met Frank Bender.

Bender, 67, is a small, animated man with a snow-white beard and a constant twinkle in his eye. He now works as a sculptor and watercolourist, but at one time or another has been an advertising photographer and a commercial diver inspecting the hulls of tugboats in Philadelphia harbour. He fell into catching criminals by accident: in 1975 he was taking evening courses in painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. To help him see ‘in the round’ he started attending sculpture classes, but there were no anatomy lessons available to evening students, so a friend in the medical examiner’s office offered to let him sit in on some autopsies to learn about the human form. ‘I go to the morgue. He shows me around. Bodies had been

# Murder on the menu

Nineteen years ago three men had the idea of a regular lunch club for crime experts that would try to solve some of the United States’ most baffling homicides. The Vidocq Society has now been instrumental in solving hundreds of crimes. **Adam Higginbotham** meets the founding members. Photographs by **Jens Umbach**

Frank Bender, a sculptor specialising in facial reconstruction and one of the founding members of the Vidocq Society





cut up, burnt. They had this one woman,' Bender says, 'her whole body was decomposed, they didn't know what she had looked like or who she was'.

The woman had been shot in the head, the bullet smashing her skull open, but Bender told his friend, 'just out of conversation', that he could show him what the woman had looked like, and recreate the features of her face in a sculpture.

'I just knew what people looked like,' Bender tells me when we meet at his studio. Five months later the woman was identified from Bender's bust as Anna Duval, an Arizona woman who had come to Philadelphia to collect money on a property deal that had gone sour. She had been executed by a Mafia contract killer who would not be convicted of the murder for another 20 years.

Bender had discovered an apparently intuitive gift for facial reconstruction and, as word spread of his success, was called first to work on more 'skull-to-face' cases; later, he began creating aged renderings for the FBI and Federal Marshals Service to help them find fugitive criminals.

Bender's skill made him something of a celebrity. 'I've helped the government catch seven of their most wanted fugitives – I've got more IDs than probably anyone else,' he says.

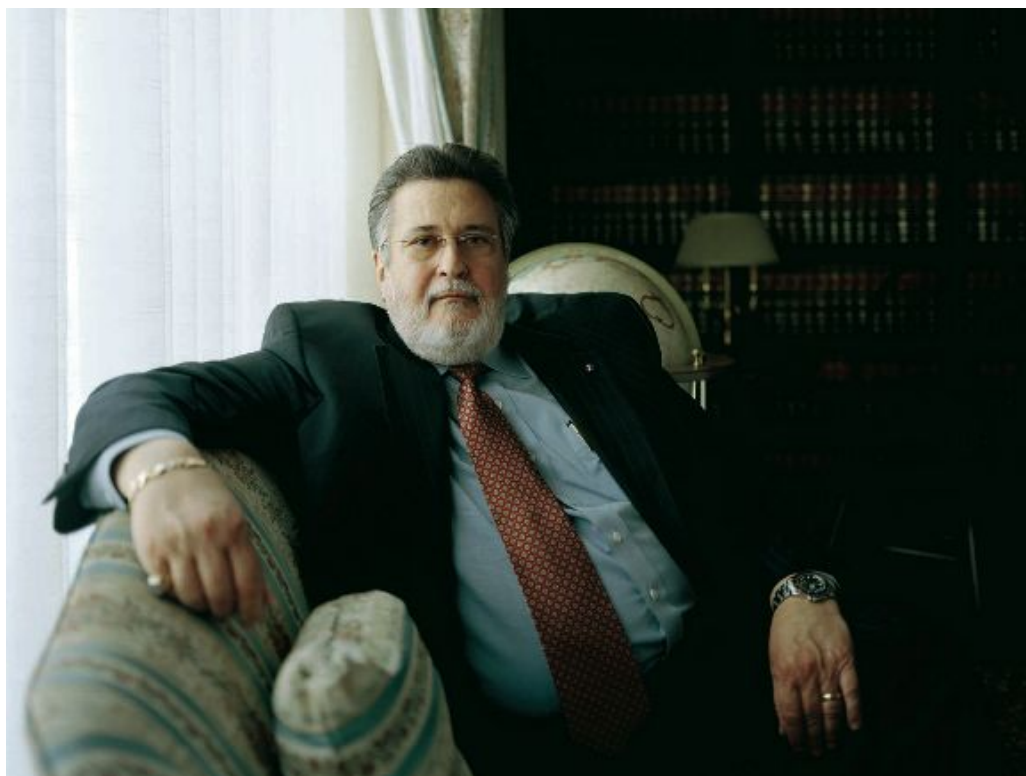
Fleisher was immediately fascinated by what Bender was capable of, and the two men began to have lunch together every week. 'He seemed to have a sixth sense,' Fleisher says, 'almost a spiritual intervention in his cases.'

A cadaverous chain-smoker with an acid sense of humour, Richard Walter lives alone in rural Pennsylvania, in a remote hilltop bungalow filled with antiques. He is reluctant to reveal his age. ('That's a state secret. I'm sixth decade... and of course I don't look it.') Perched on a leopard-print chair in his living-room, he says that he first met Bender at a Philadelphia hotel in 1986, at a meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. Walter began his career as a criminal psychologist at the LA County medical examiner's office in the 1970s, and since then has profiled the perpetrators of some of world's most infamous crimes – including the serial killer Colin Ireland, who terrorised the gay community in London in the 1990s. He tells me that much of his work has been confidential: 'Most of my high-profile stuff has been under the radar, in the shadows. I would just be the consultant – it gives me more freedom that way.' He is not keen on having his photograph taken.

When they were first introduced, the psychologist – darkly sarcastic, donnish – and the sculptor, a cavalier self-publicist, could not have seemed more different. 'I really wanted to dislike him,' Walter admits. 'I made some rather pointed comments, but Frank just laughed, so I thought, how can you be all bad if you laugh at my jokes?'

'I thought, this guy sounds like he knows what he's doing,' Bender says, 'and we needed a fugitive profiler at the Marshals Service. So I invited him over.' Together they developed a profile of Robert Nauss, the former head of the Warlocks motorcycle gang who had escaped from prison concealed in a cabinet, and who was still at liberty seven years later: Bender and Walter were at a conference in Australia when they heard Nauss had been recaptured. 'Being vain,' Walter says, 'I wanted to know whether he was driving a black Cadillac, because I had predicted he would be. And he was.'

Later, Walter and Bender would co-operate on one of the most sensational fugitive cases of the



## **'I said, we'll bring a bunch of people with common interests, sit over a good meal, talk about old cases, and see if we can solve them'**

Former FBI special agent Bill Fleisher, an original member of the Vidocq Society

era: the search for John E List, a failed accountant from New Jersey who had been at large for nearly 18 years since shooting dead his wife, mother and three children one night in 1971. Bender imagined how List's face would have sagged and wrinkled since he had last been seen, aged 46; Walter suggested List would still be wearing horn-rimmed spectacles, because he would want to look prosperous. Bender's bust of List was shown on *America's Most Wanted* in May 1989; List was arrested 11 days later in Virginia, where he was living under an assumed name as a happily married, church-going accountant – who wore horn-rimmed glasses.

When Bender, Walter and Fleisher all finally met for the first time at a restaurant in downtown Philadelphia later that year, the three men had a lot to talk about. They traded details of cases they were working on and told anecdotes. Fleisher suggested they make it a regular event – 'I said, we'll bring a bunch of people with common interests, sit over a good meal, talk about old cases, and see if we can solve them in the light of this forensic psychology that you're involved in and the ageing, rebuilding skulls – that type of thing.'

Fleisher sent out invitations to 28 contacts – members of the FBI, the police department, the US Attorney's Office – expecting only a handful of replies. But 26 wrote back accepting his invitation, and became the first members of the Vidocq Society. 'The whole thing, to start with, was for fun,' Fleisher says. 'Maybe that sounds ghoulish, but it was to have a good time with people I liked – and maybe do something good as a by-product.'

The society considered its first case in 1990, at a theme restaurant where the staff dressed in 18th-

century costume. After that their meetings were ad hoc, the cases they considered governed by the information to which members had access. 'At that point we didn't have any credibility with anybody really – except ourselves,' Walter says.

Their first success was in 1991: in March that year the family of Huey Cox, victim of a brutal murder in Little Rock, Arkansas, approached the society to help win the acquittal of the black dishwasher whom they believed had been wrongly accused of the crime. Richard Walter and a Vidocq fingerprint expert testified at the trial, and the case was dismissed in 45 minutes.

Although they may have begun to solve crimes merely for recreation, as word about the meetings spread, the volume of cases the society was asked to consider increased dramatically, and the organisation's aims began to change. Initial presentations were made both by Vidocqians and by invited members of the public: at one meeting, a murder victim's sister took the podium and accused the assembled senior members of the Philadelphia Police Department of corruption; in another, Frank Bender stood up and suggested that the case presenter, a sex-shop owner whose friend had been killed, had actually perpetrated the crime himself. 'The guy denied it,' Richard Walter laughs, 'and got himself out of there as fast as he could.' But after that, the rules were changed to exclude anyone but professional law-enforcement officers from making presentations. And as the society was approached to look at more and more cases they narrowed their focus to better suit their collective expertise. 'You have medical examiners, homicide investigators, odontologists – who for the most part

deal with dead bodies,' Walter says. 'We realised that our strength was in homicide, because the dead can't speak for themselves. Armed robbery victims can. We decided then that we should focus on cold-case homicides.'

In 1992 the society considered the murder of Deborah Wilson, a student who had been found strangled in a stairwell at Philadelphia's Drexel University in 1984. One mysterious aspect of the case was that the victim was found barefoot; the shoes she was wearing when she died were never found. Walter suggested detectives look for a foot fetishist. Three years later a security guard at the university, who had been discharged from the army for stealing women's footwear, was found guilty of the killing.

In the years since, the Vidocq Society has been credited with an instrumental role in solving several baffling crimes. Most recently, in October last year, Fred Bornhofen made an exception to the society rules about the age of crimes they consider to examine the 2006 case of a student who disappeared one night from a campus in New Jersey, only to turn up dead exactly a month later in a landfill, his body crushed and mangled. Police discovered blood, and a necklace the boy wore, in the rubbish compactor in the basement of his dorm, but couldn't fathom how they had got there – or how he had died. The Vidocqians suggested that, after a row with his girlfriend, he had thrown his necklace down the garbage chute in his building, but regretted it later, and gone down to retrieve it. There, he triggered the electronic eye controlling a hydraulic rubbish compactor: the ram crushed him to death, and pushed his body into a waiting skip. 'So it wasn't a homicide, or a suicide,' Bornhofen says. 'It was a terrible accident.'

**Beneath the dimmed lights of the Downtown Club** the waitresses wander from table to table refilling coffee cups, while the diners study copies of a seven-page floorplan of the Currie family crime scene. From the podium, Detective Fairbairn moves on from the photographs to a list of suspects. There is the family's next-door neighbour at the time of the murders, subsequently arrested for rape and battery: he was given a polygraph test about the crime, and passed; there is no physical evidence to link him to the scene. Then there is the 26-year-old schizophrenic who escaped from a mental hospital the night before the killings, who had a history of violence involving axes; at one point he confessed to the murders, but was unable to provide detectives with any details of how he had committed them. And then there is Michael Currie – 27 at the time of the murders – who told police that he discovered the butchered bodies of his wife and family when he returned home from work that day. A former drug user, Currie had been having an affair with a co-worker for months before the murders. On the day of the crime, he left work for an extended period of time, apparently to buy a fan from a general store, where the clerk distinctly remembers him because he was soaked in sweat. Currie was questioned by detectives, and his clothes confiscated, submitted and resubmitted to the Georgia State Crime Lab for tests: 'No evidence of value, such as blood, was recovered,' Fairbairn says. Currie remains a suspect, but in the 23 years since the murders, the Columbus police have found nothing to conclusively link anyone to the crime. The case remains one of the most infamous murders in the history of the city – and has so far frustrated every single one



**Top** Eugène François Vidocq (1775-1857), the French detective. **Above** John E List with his wife and children, all of whom he murdered. The society helped track him down after he had been at large for 18 years

of the 20 or 30 detectives who have investigated it.

By 1.30pm, half an hour into his presentation, Fairbairn is ready to take questions from the room. This is the point where the members of the society go to work. 'What you have,' Richard Walter tells me, 'is the potential of 82 people thinking, as opposed to one person in their office.'

The cross-examination takes a little more than half an hour. Today, neither Bender nor Walter is at the meeting. None the less, questions about the events of August 29, 1985, and the investigation that followed, come from around the room: Was Michael Currie the father of all the children? Were the drains at the house checked for evidence? Were the victims' hands bagged and scraped? Where is the murder weapon being kept now? Dr Michael F Rieders, a severe-looking forensic toxicologist with an American flag pin on his lapel, asks about the glass from a broken window at the scene. Fleisher wonders if Fairbairn knows the order in which the victims died. 'Could you comment on the apparent disagreement between the original investigators and your medical examiner over the time of death?' inquires a voice from the back of the room. Finally, after one more question from Dr Rieders about Michael Currie – 'Do you still have his clothing? Evidence from his vehicle?' – Fleisher steps up to the podium to wrap things up. He offers Fairbairn a memento of his visit: a magnifying glass in a wooden presentation case. 'The first scientific tool of the investigator,' he explains. 'Keep it handy. I think this case is solveable, somehow. If you need to exhume or get money for DNA testing, we'll be glad to assist you with the financial burden.'

Most of the diners drift toward the exit, but a handful wait behind to talk more with Fairbairn

and his colleague Detective Drew Tyner. Dr Rieders stops to discuss a microscopic examination of the suspect's clothes, and suggests Fairbairn send the murder weapon to his lab for testing: 'I'd be happy to look it over for you – no charge. This case is a horrible thing.' A former CIA man from Florida is especially interested in discussing blood spatter: as the waiters clear away the last of the dinner settings, he and Fairbairn examine the crime scene photographs on an empty table, the grisly 10x8s spread out between the discarded napkins.

**Bornhofen estimates that, over the years, the society has considered more than 300 examples of cold-case homicide.** But ask what proportion of those cases has been solved, and the answers are less clear-cut. There is no formalised follow-up process for those invited to present a case. At the end of each month's meeting, some interested members of the society may exchange cards with visiting detectives, and chat further about possible leads. But there is no guarantee of help with building a case to go before a jury, much less a successful prosecution. 'It's a very grey area,' says Bender, who argues that the primary role of the organisation is to keep cold cases alive, and to provide free of charge the best information possible to under-resourced investigators. 'Our job at Vidocq is purely to help law enforcement solve their own cases with our information. So when you ask, how many cases did we solve? None. How many cases has law enforcement solved through our help? Quite a few.'

'I say we solve 80 per cent,' Fleisher says, 'but solving them and proving them are horses of different colours.'

'We don't keep track,' Bornhofen says. 'We feel that if we make a contribution, that's it. Quite often – I'd say, 30, 40, 50 per cent of the time – we'll find that we made a contribution that resulted in the arrest and conviction of the killer. We'll get a call from the investigator saying, "We got him – thanks for your help." But he gets the credit.'

Six weeks after his visit to Philadelphia, Fairbairn is still no closer to catching whoever it was that killed Ann, Erica and Ryan Currie with a bush axe 23 years ago. When I last speak to Fairbairn, he and Tyner are back at their desks in Columbus, immersed in current investigations, and haven't heard anything from the Vidocq Society since the meeting, though they remain optimistic.

'When you've got a case like this – it's 20 years old, you pretty much know who your suspect is, but you can't prove it – any little thing can spark a fire that might help you solve the case,' Tyner says.

Back in the living-room of his bungalow, beside a table set with a vase of artificial gladioli, Richard Walter talks for several hours about the history of the society, about his lectures on sadism, about the tubs of murder files that clutter his basement, before he finally addresses the issue of insoluble crimes. How many of the cases that come before him, I wonder, prove totally baffling? 'It's going to sound indecent,' he says, balancing an ashtray in his lap, 'but I don't remember one.'

How about one that was simply deeply frustrating? A hush settles over the room for nearly a minute before Walter replies, wreaths of cigarette smoke twisting in the air. 'If you're talking about frustration because of the complexity of the case, I really don't remember any. I wish I could, because it makes me sound like a know-it-all. That doesn't mean I have all the answers,' he says. 'But there's always something.' ■