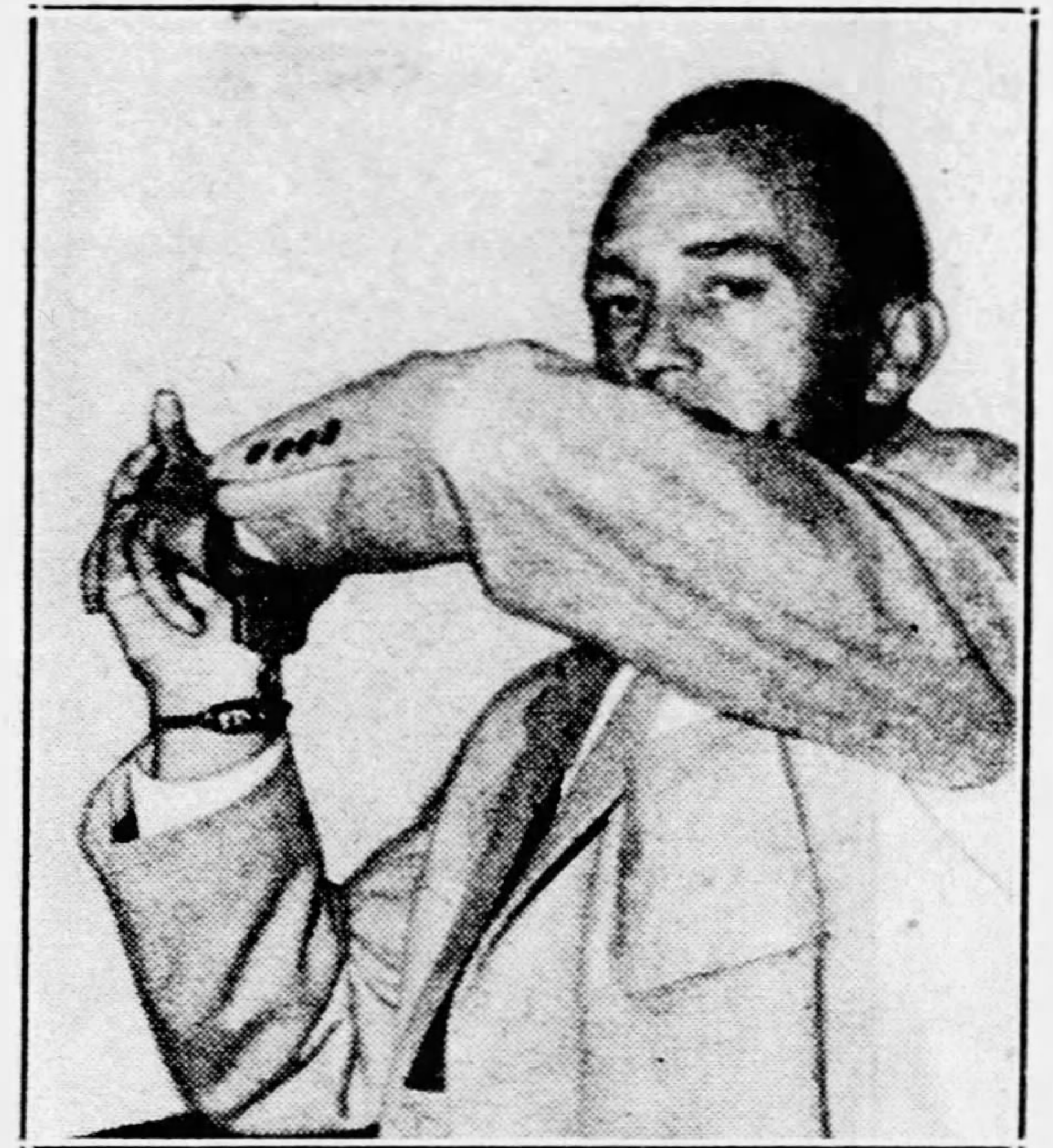
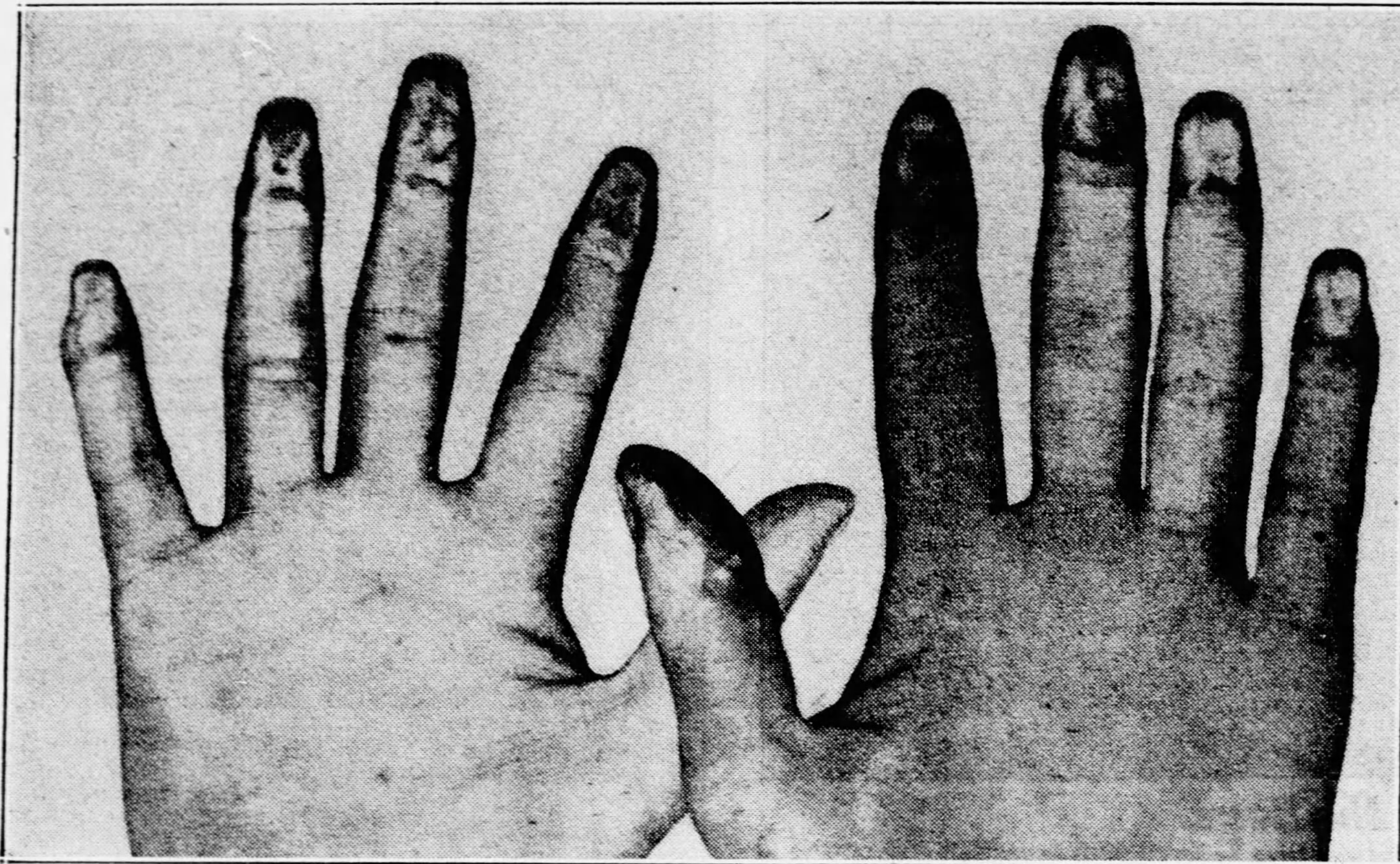


WHEN JUSTICE



Fingers Sans Prints

Robert James Pitts [▲] got Dr. Brandenburg to erase his fingerprints. But now Pitts' hands [←] make him more quickly identifiable than ever before. These are probably the only fingers in the U. S. without prints.

Trapped Himself When He Got Rid Of Fingerprints

By RUTH REYNOLDS

WASH LADD'S general store was about to be robbed, but the 72-year-old proprietor didn't know it.

He dropped the coin in the cash box, turned his radio a little higher and called good-night to the squat purchaser of the bottle of soda pop—his last customer.

Outside the small emporium, set back from the highway at Salem Crossroads, S. C., a masked man waited. He gripped his blackjack tighter and, as the customer stepped out, snarled, "Whyn't you go through with it?"

After a brief whispered consultation the pop-purchaser returned to the store. His masked companion watched through the window. The watcher cursed. For after buying cigarettes, his accomplice started out again.

"The old fellow's got on a crime don't pay program. Its—" the explanation was cut short by a stream of expletives from the man with the blackjack.

"Why don't we wait till he closes up and goes home?" pleaded the other.

"I've told you why a dozen times!" his companion stormed. "That old monkey doesn't go home. He's slept in the store ever since somebody held him up a couple of years ago. Here, Chicken Heart—"

Gun drawn, the thug pushed Chicken Heart ahead of him through the door and fired into the floor at Ladd's feet.

"Old man! I've come back for you! I've got you!" the gunman announced.

The robbers worked fast, binding Ladd's arms and legs with rope, taping his mouth. Chicken Heart, heeding directions, ran upstairs to the store owner's sleeping quarters. He clattered down carrying a tin box.

"It was under the bed just like you said. It's locked," he reported. "I got the key off the old guy. Here, open it."

The key clicked in the lock. The lid went back. Chicken Heart stared at an empty tray.

"Nothing here," he muttered. "Fool!" stormed the other. "Here,

give me that." He left off binding his victim and lifted the top tray. The smell of mothballs filled the store.

Chicken Heart grunted, then exclaimed as he watched his companion take pack after pack of neatly-banded bills from the bottom of the box, thumb them, then stuff them into the tin.

Now the two men carried their victim upstairs. Ladd squirmed.

"If you do that again I'll bust you, brains out!" threatened the man with the gun, but at Chicken Heart's suggestion he helped lift Ladd from floor to cot. Chicken Heart placed a pillow under the gray head, muttering, "I didn't believe I could go through with it!"

"You yellow-bellied s.o.b.," snarled the thug. "I ought to kill you both!"

Ladd Managed To Summon Help

The store owner heard them go down the stairs, heard the front door slam, heard a car start up and drive away.

Rage at the thought of having 35 years' savings snatched from him gave the old man superhuman strength. He rolled off the cot, managed somehow to bump his way down the stairs, and wriggled to the drawer in which he kept his gun. Somehow he managed to get his fingers free; somehow he contrived to get the gun and fire it three times. Hearing the reports, a neighbor came over to see what was going on. Ladd's wife, in his house 100 yards from the store, slept undisturbed.

All this took place last Aug. 13,



Dr. Leopold Brandenburg

and news of the robbery set off a three-state manhunt.

Ladd's descriptions of Chicken Heart and the masked robber eventually reached the attention of Frank N. Littlejohn, shrewd police chief of Charlotte, N. C.

"The tough guy sounds like Roscoe Pitts," observed Littlejohn. "I thought he was behaving himself. Well, boys, better go out and check up on him."

AND now we turn from Ladd and Chicken Heart to the amazing story of James Robert (Roscoe) Pitts, a marked man in the annals of crime, not for his misdeeds—for they are petty—but because he is probably the only man in the United States without fingerprints.

The North Carolinian, now 39, was 22 years old when he had his first brush with the law in Roanoke, Va., where he was convicted and sentenced to 18 months for auto theft. At 23, an identical charge jailed him in Chillicothe, Ohio. At 24, he was imprisoned in Charlotte for housebreaking and larceny.

Pitts was 25 when, early in 1935, he drove a stolen car across a state line, thus bringing himself to the attention of federal authorities, and, eventually, to the federal penitentiary at Atlanta.

Quarrelsome and incorrigible, the young prisoner was transferred from Atlanta, where prisoners are ordinarily tractable, to Alcatraz, where felons are reputed to be as hard as the rocky California island upon which they are isolated. As a parting gift from a fellow convict at Atlanta, Pitts carried a long facial scar to his new home.

In Alcatraz, Pitts was a little

fish in the criminal pool, but eager to learn from the bigger fish. One of Pitts' tutors was Ludwig Schmidt, a Charlotte, N. C., mail robber. Schmidt had a lot of advice to offer a young fellow on his way up in the criminal world—advice which Pitts apparently never forgot.

Early in May, 1941, Pitts, out of Alcatraz, was back in business. His two companions were soon picked up and charged with looting a Wilkesboro, N. C., warehouse of \$400 worth of cigarettes and robbing a gasoline station proprietor of \$60 worth of tires. Pitts was gone—leaving his fingerprints behind.

The time had now come, Pitts told himself, to act upon convict Schmidt's advice. And this he did.

Five months later Texas State Police arrested a tall, blonde young man near Austin because he had no Selective Service registration card.

The young man said his name was Robert Pitts. More than that he refused to say, but the State Police were unperturbed. If Pitts had a criminal record—and he acted as though he wanted to curtain his past—the surest way to find out would be to take his fingerprints.

Fingerprint Man Astounded by Pitts

The young man let his fingertips be rolled, one at a time on the inky pad, then pressed upon the card. The man taking the prints stared. Pitts grinned.

He had no fingerprints!

"But that can't be. Everybody has fingerprints. No two people have fingerprints alike, but everybody has fingerprints!" exclaimed the fingerprint man, reciting a ritual which every schoolchild has learned by heart.

One state policeman after another examined the "fingerprint" card, then studied Pitts' scarred, printless fingertips, and the mark of a skin graft on his face.

"A burn," Pitts explained. Word of the "man without fingerprints" sped to J. Edgar Hoover, chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, to whom credit must go for the FBI's mammoth fingerprint collection and remarkable print file system.

It had been seven years since Hoover had experienced any trouble with men "without fingerprints."

During the 1933-34 Chicago gangster cleanup, gunmen John Dillinger, Jack Klutas, Willie Sharkey and Gus Winkler had tried, one way or another, to foil fingerprint identification. But surface operations, scraping and burning never fully eradicated the

fingertip patterns of these bad men. Healing brought back the whorls the way they were before.

Consequently, the individual arrested in Texas "without fingerprints" became a personal challenge to the chief G-man. Hoover resolved not only to identify the young man but to learn who operated upon his fingers.

SEVERAL stories are now told of how Pitts was finally identified.

One version is that an FBI man in El Paso viewed Pitts' fingertips under a strong lens and found original whorls visible under transplanted skin.

But, according to Hoover, the "man without fingerprints" was identified only after a long and painstaking comparison of his appearance and measurements with records of appearance and measurements of criminals over the country. At long last, the Roanoke auto thief, the Chillicothe parolee, the Atlanta convict, the Alcatraz inmate and the Wilkesboro, N. C., fugitive were linked to the man without fingerprints in Texas.

Pitts, embittered that Schmidt's advice hadn't made him "law proof," was returned to North Carolina and there identified as the Wilkesboro fugitive. He was sentenced to 16 to 20 years for the warehouse robbery but refused to name the man who had removed his fingerprints.

Hoover didn't give up, however.

The FBI chief had learned of the Alcatraz friendship between Pitts and Schmidt. He also learned that Schmidt had sent several of his pals to a Dr. Leopold Brandenburg of Union, N. J.

Brandenburg was not unknown to police, and his story—or at least a portion of it, for it never seems to end—has already been chronicled in this series.

Asked whether Brandenburg was the one who had operated so successfully upon his fingers, Pitts would only grin. But some weeks later—some say after Pitts failed to "shakedown" the doctor—the North Carolina convict admitted Brandenburg was the man. For consideration of his parole, he agreed to testify against the doctor.

Thus it was that in August, 1942, Pitts was transported to Newark, N. J., to testify in Federal Court against Dr. Brandenburg, who was charged with concealing a fugitive from justice.

Pitts' testimony got down to cases.

Like the expert, though unethical, surgeon that he was, Brandenburg well knew that the only way

TRIUMPHED



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Pitts shows his scars.



Unpleasant Truth

Peggy Jean King [▲] and Harry Russell [▼] believed Pitts when he told them that this type skin graft [←] made him "law proof." Pitts and these two companions in crime were to find out otherwise.

to eliminate fingerprints was to pare the flesh to the bone.

This he did on each of Pitts' fingertips and on his thumbs.

Next, he cut corresponding pockets of flesh on each side of Pitts' chest. He stitched each fingertip into a separate chest pocket. Two weeks later he cut loose the fingers, filled out with regenerated tissue and grown into the flesh.

In his defense, the wily doctor said that he was totally unaware that his patient was a fugitive; that Pitts had told him he wished to go straight but that the straight road was too rocky under his old identity.

The jury convicted Brandenburg. Pitts was returned to North Carolina. Later the U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Brandenburg was prosecuted and convicted for an act not listed as an offense under federal statute. However, he eventually was to get his another way.

(In October, 1947, Brandenburg entered the federal penitentiary at Atlanta on a 4- to 5-year sentence on a narcotics conviction. This was to be served concurrently with a state sentence for abortion committed in New Jersey.)

But to return to the man without fingerprints—

One might suppose that a man like Pitts who spent such a large portion of his time behind bars and so much more as a fugitive, would have little time for romance. One who has that idea will soon discover himself mistaken.

Pitts, it develops, had fallen in love while in school many years be-

fore with red-haired Hilda Shelby, who became a Charlotte textile mill worker when she grew up.

With the permission of a prison superintendent, this childhood sweetheart became Mrs. Pitts in a September, 1943, ceremony behind gates at North Carolina Prison Camp 702 at Mount Pleasant. The kindly superintendent let the couple spend five uninterrupted hours together. When they parted Hilda said she would wait 20 years for Roscoe if necessary.

It wasn't necessary, for parole came in 1947 for Bad Man Pitts, a reward for his good conduct and his stellar, if futile, service in the prosecution of Leopold Brandenburg.

PITTS had had quite a stretch in prison to think things out, and to ponder whether he had outfoxed himself instead of the law. True, if he were to commit new crimes he would not leave his fingerprints behind. On the other hand, a printless finger of suspicion would forever point to him, for let a crime be committed and no fingerprints be visible, who would be first suspected? The only criminal in the country known to be without fingerprints! His very lack was his identification.

Pitts 'Behaved' For Short Time

In this dilemma the parolee settled down in Charlotte with Hilda in her mother's home. He "behaved," whether for his wife's sake or for his own safety, isn't known. In October, 1949, their child was born.

That was two months after the Salem Crossroads robbery, when Police Chief Littlejohn asked his men to check up on Pitts.

The detectives found Hilda home and heavy with child. No, her husband wasn't in. No, she didn't know where he was. Yes, she was sure he was behaving.

"Got a new car, huh?" ventured one Charlotte detective.

Yes, Hilda's devoted husband had bought a new car.

Before many hours had passed the police knew the name of the dealer who sold Pitts the car, and knew also that the ex-convict paid for it with \$20 bills. Most of Ladd's savings were in \$20 bills!

"Better get after him, boys," ordered Littlejohn.

Pitts' trail led from Charlotte to Gastonia to Asheville, where he managed to elude the police and steal a car. Littlejohn, aware that Pitts had been born in Hickory, N. C., and that he still maintained associations there, warned the Hickory police that their most-sought native son might return.

The Hickory police were not as



alert as they might have been. Not until a hitchhiker complained to them of a hairbreadth escape in a car driven by a man too drunk to drive, did they discover that the car, parked in front of a Hickory hotel, was the one Pitts had stolen in Asheville.

And in the hotel, where he had registered under an assumed name, lay Pitts fast asleep. There was no need for him to admit his identity—his scarred fingertips did that. But he denied any part in the South Carolina robbery.

Whisked back to Charlotte, Roscoe radiated confidence and proclaimed his innocence. Hilda expressed her faith in him.

But by this time, and by means of their own, police had identified "Chicken Heart." He was Harry Russell, 34, a former Charlotte taxi driver.

His trail led investigators from Charlotte to Florida and back into Georgia, where he was captured one night wrapped in quilts and fast asleep in a Tifton, Ga., church.

Russell, who had to be pushed into the robbery, seemed pleased to be caught.

"You bet Pitts planned that South Carolina store job and dragged me in it with him. And I hope he gets his. I didn't get a square cut. Sixty-five hundred is all I got, and I read in the papers we got \$41,350. That Pitts!"

Russell and Pitts together were taken to the South Carolina state penitentiary at Columbia to await trial, and, incredible as it seems—the man without fingerprints never ceased trying to get ahead in the world via the criminal route.

As he had managed to get on friendly terms with Schmidt in Alcatraz, so did Pitts manage last November to scrape up a friendship

in Columbia with Nathan T. Corn, convicted slayer who, thanks to a successful appeal, was awaiting a second trial for the murder of his employer.

Pitts slipped two notes to Corn, notes which were retrieved by prison guards, who turned them over to South Carolina's Fairfield County authorities. Not until then did they realize that the man without fingerprints had no intention of standing trial.

According to the notes, Pitts had the Salem Crossroads loot hidden in various unidentified spots in North Carolina. He wanted Corn's parents to dig up one \$10,000 cache and pay out various amounts—to a professional bondsman to sign an appearance bond for Pitts, to Mrs. Pitts, to the lawyer who was representing both Pitts and Corn, to Corn, and to Corn's parents.

Once out on bail, Pitts notes pledged, he would get Corn out of jail "in nothing flat." As a favor to Corn, he would also "drill holes" in Solicitor Gist Finley, who had prosecuted Corn successfully once and was prepared to do it again.

As for the future, Pitts suggested that he and Corn form a two-man combine and do "home jobs," robbing people who kept money in their houses.

The immediate result of the discovery of these notes was an increase in Pitts' bond from \$15,000 to \$55,000 and an increased guard.

Corn went to trial again for the murder of George C. (Bugs) Beam and was again convicted and sentenced to spend the rest of his life behind bars.

And ten weeks later Pitts appeared for trial on charges of armed robbery before Judge T. B. Greneker in Winnsboro, S. C.

THERE was another defendant in this case, a raven-haired 21-year-old named Peggy Jean King, who might still be working as a Charlotte waitress if Harry Russell's palm had been crossed with enough silver—or greenbacks—to keep him quiet.

Russell turned State's evidence and, pleading guilty, said, "I decided I wouldn't be out of nothing after learning I didn't get a fair share of the money."

Russell testified that the robbery was planned in a Charlotte restaurant; that Pitts got his information about Ladd's savings from a Rock Hill, S. C., man who was to get one-fourth of the loot; and that Pitts and Peggy Jean

went down to look the place over two days before the holdup."

The State's witness said that after the robbery he and Pitts drove to Peggy Jean's home. There, Pitts was dividing the money into four piles when Peggy's mother and brother walked in.

Pitts began to reshuffle the piles of mothball-scented greenbacks and when his manipulations were done, Russell had \$6,500. Although no total had been mentioned, Russell did some quick arithmetic and figured the total haul at \$26,000.

Later that night, Russell saw a friendly farewell to Pitts. It was not until he reached Columbia, S. C., on his "getaway trip" that Russell discovered via newspaper columns that Ladd's savings were \$41,350—and that his quarter should have been \$10,337.50.

Ladd's wife identified Pitts and Peggy as the couple who visited the store two days before the robbery, and Ladd corroborated what Russell had to say about the robbery itself.

Pitts, nattily dressed, sat listening intently to the testimony. He kept his hands folded, covering his well-publicized fingers. Red-haired Hilda, lugging her baby, watched from the rear of the courtroom.

Peggy King, first witness for the defense, insisted that she had plotted no robbery, had never been in Salem Crossroads in her life and had received none of Ladd's money.

Pitts did not take the stand, but, through five alibi witnesses, attempted to show that he was in Charlotte on the day and the evening of the Salem Crossroads robbery.

But the jury saw more truth in the testimony of Mr. and Mrs. Ladd and Russell than they did in the words of Miss King and the alibi witnesses. It took the jurors but 20 minutes to convict the pair.

Peggy was sentenced to five years imprisonment, sentence to be suspended after payment of a \$3,000 fine, or one year in prison.

Pitts got the works—21 years—to be served on South Carolina roads or at hard labor in the State Penitentiary. Russell, commended for telling the truth, was sentenced to a like fate for 10 years.

Thus Hilda faces another long wait. If Pitts should serve his full sentence he will be 60 years old when he is united with his family.

And in prison they don't much care whether he has fingerprints or not.

Shoots Ex-Wife in Face

(Special to The News)

Chicago, April 8.—Protesting his love for his ex-wife, John (Slingshot) Murphy will be given a hearing Wednesday on charges of assault with intent to kill because he shot her pointblank in the face five days after she married another man.

The victim, Mrs. Vera Broderick, 39, had obtained a divorce from Murphy, retired tavern owner, in Las Vegas, Nev., last Dec. 20 after 17 years of marriage. On March 2 she married Redmond Broderick, a motorcycle policeman, who was a friend of Murphy's.

Murphy says that he learned of his wife's marriage plans the night before the wedding. The shock was so great, he claims, that he drew a blank from that time until two days after the shooting. That's when he gave himself up.

Asked immediately after his arrest whether he had shot his former wife, the 50-year-old Murphy replied:

"I don't know. I had a lapse of memory."

Shot in Lawyer's Office.

Mrs. Broderick was shot March 7 in the office of Attorney Daniel A. O'Rourke, where the two had met to discuss a property settlement.

O'Rourke left the room to check on some detail. He was in an adjacent office for less than a minute when four shots rang out.

Murphy, telling Vera, "You've ruined my life," had pulled a gun from his coat and fired across the desk at her. Entering her left cheek, a bullet coursed downward



John (Slingshot) Murphy.
Ain't better than love.

through her jawbone, grazed her right breast and lodged in her elbow.

Although her wounds at no time appeared critical, authorities considered this was through no fault of Murphy's and charged him with assault with intent to kill.



Fellow Convict

Nathan Corn [▲], who met Pitts in prison, was invited to become his partner in crime.