



The Case of the Camera Trap

by William T. Brannon

Art by Lou Peters

JOHN J. GORDON, sales manager of the Central Illinois Gas and Electric Company of Lincoln, Ill., frowned as he read the reports: Quantities of copper wire, essential to the company's operations, were being stolen from the warehouse at nearby Mount Pulaski.

At the time, late 1940, America had not yet entered World War II, but the defense program was in full swing. Copper wire was in great demand and the thief doubtless had no trouble selling it at high prices on the black market.

Gordon took his problem to Sheriff Walter Bauer of Logan County.

"The thief must be a local man," said the sheriff, "somebody who knows the layout of the warehouse. But there is no pattern—he doesn't steal something every night."

The sheriff pointed out that he didn't have enough men to detail one to the warehouse to wait for the burglar to show up. Selective Service had started and there was a manpower shortage.

"There are still some loafers around town," the sheriff said. "One of them might be the thief. But we can't accuse any of them without some evidence." He promised to have deputies on regular patrol make periodic stops at the warehouse at night. "Maybe," he added, "if you get some good padlocks, you can keep thieves out."

This seemed a good idea and Gordon had new locks put on. But they made no difference; the burglar broke them and continued his pilfering.

GORDON mentioned the problem to a friend, L. B. Shroyer, who was an experienced newspaper photographer. "Maybe we can rig up a camera trap for him," Shroyer suggested.

The two men went to the warehouse with fresh supplies of copper wire, which were spread out invitingly so a thief couldn't miss them. Nearby, Shroyer set up a camera so that it was focused on the wire. He attached two cables, one to the shutter and one to a flash bulb. The ends of the cables were mingled with the coils of copper wire so the flash bulb would go off and the shutter would click if they were disturbed.

"That's fine," said Gordon. "But when the flash goes off the thief is sure to see the camera—and he'll probably destroy it or at least take the film."

"Probably," said Shroyer, "but I think I know how to get around that."

The following morning, a Sunday, the new wire was gone, but the camera was still intact and just where it had been left. The flash bulb had gone off, as the photographer expected!

Shroyer quickly examined the camera. The film was there, unexposed. Obviously the thief had spotted the camera and removed the film, replacing it after he had stolen the wire.

Nevertheless, two hours later, Shroyer and

Gordon went to see Sheriff Bauer and presented him with a perfect picture of the thief stuffing the wire coils into a bag.

"Why, that's Mike Hamilton!" Bauer said.

Hamilton was well known in Lincoln as one of the town loafers, who did odd jobs here and there but mostly just hung around. He was quickly located and arrested.

"You got the wrong man, sheriff," Mike insisted. "I didn't steal no copper wire and I ain't been near that warehouse."

Sheriff Bauer produced the picture. "Maybe you can explain this."

Mike couldn't and he confessed the thefts. After he had signed a statement, he asked to see the picture again. "I just don't understand it," he said. "The minute I walked in, I seen that camera. I heard about them burglar traps before. So the first thing I done was take the film out. I had it in my pocket when the flash bulb went off."

"I don't understand that part of it myself," the sheriff admitted.

"I'll explain," said the photographer.

The camera he had set up was, in reality, a decoy. He expected the burglar to destroy it or at least remove the film.

"I had another camera, very carefully concealed," Shroyer explained. "It was hooked up to the copper wire so that the shutter would click when the flash bulb went off. It was, you might say, a case of double exposure!"