

Crime

Cracking Cold Cases

Looking at old crimes with new technology—and fresh eyes—special detective squads are turning up the heat on killers who thought they got away with murder



"I feel like this is my contribution to society," says Bill Fleisher (front, with fellow sleuths in their Philadelphia office).

assigned 15 cases a month. "The cases just kept on coming in, they never stopped," says Fikaris, 47. "You had to prioritize: What do I have to stay on top of and what can I put to the side?" But during the '90s the county experienced a sharp dip in homicides, freeing more hours for cold cases. At the same time, new technology, in particular the breakthroughs in DNA testing, made it seem practical to reexamine old murders. "When I worked these cases, we didn't know what DNA was and ballistic testing wasn't as advanced as it is today," says Tommy Thomas, 60, a veteran detective who became sheriff of Harris County in 1995. "It was a different day."

Without any real role models when the squad started, Wedgeworth and Fikaris made up the rules as they went

CRIME-FIGHTING LUNCH BUNCH Philadelphia's Vidocq Society tries to make sure that bad guys get their just desserts

Crime-scene photos and evidence are presented by stymied investigators, questions are asked—and answered. "You name it, we have the expertise," says Bill Fleisher, 59, a former U.S. Customs agent who 13 years ago helped found the group (named for the 19th-century master criminal who became the head of the detective branch of Paris's police). With 160 members comprising some of the sharpest minds in law enforcement—from FBI agents to pathologists—Vidocq's mission, says Fleisher, "is to offer advice and stimulate the people whose job it is to solve the crime."

Of the 150 cases Vidocq has analyzed in the past five years, "in my view we solve 80 percent—but proving it in court is a different thing," Fleisher says. The society's successes include two murder convictions. "People who do this for a living feel they're the last advocate for the deceased," says Frank Friel, 61, the past chairman of Vidocq's board and a former Philadelphia homicide lieutenant. "That's why they're very reluctant to put cases away and admit they can't solve them."

At monthly meetings of the Vidocq Society, held at Philadelphia's venerable Downtown Club, the menu is always the same: green salad, chicken breast with wild rice—and for dessert, along with the raspberry sorbet, a cold case for the assembled investigators to chew on.