

JOHN F. TYRRELL
PIONEER DOCUMENT EXAMINER
1861 - 1955

Anyone who knew John F. Tyrrell professionally would have to agree that he was one of the most colorful and able of the early document examiners. A fiesty, little man, about 5' 4" in height, Tyrrell customarily wore spats, a cutaway coat and bow ties, even during the more modern era of the '50's when I first became associated with him.

Tyrrell was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1861 and came to this country at the age of five. Because of family circumstances, Tyrrell was unable to afford a higher education but he more than made up for this deficiency with self study and a tremendous drive to learn as much about questioned documents and other related fields as he possibly could. Blessed with a highly retentive memory, he could remember virtually all of the details of the cases in which he had been employed, and would recite poetry and quote various passages from the Bible with ease. Tyrrell's early work in questioned documents from the late 1890's to 1928 was done while he was an employee of Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company. The company initially employed him for his skill in engrossing life insurance policies, a practice widely used in the days before the typewriter. Indeed, he was so skilled at this craft that in 1893 he was selected by the Governor of the State to engross a gigantic nine foot tall History of the State of Wisconsin for the Chicago World's Fair. Aided by this keen interest in penmanship came an ever increasing ability to examine and compare writings of various individuals for identification purposes. In the late '90's, following arrangements with Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company to permit him to accept questioned document cases, Tyrrell began his career in earnest. His reputation soon spread throughout Wisconsin and finally to other parts of the United States.

In 1899, Tyrrell was called to New York to testify in the notorious Molineux trial, which also featured testimony by other experts, including William J. Kinsley and the Master himself, A. S. Osborn. In the Molineux case, Tyrrell used his penmanship ability to duplicate on large pads of white paper the letter forms used by Molineux as compared to those on the questioned document. It must have been quite a show! The newspapers I have run across in our files referred to him as "The Wizard of the Pen" or "A man who used a sort of x-ray of handwriting".

Realizing the value of demonstrative evidence, Tyrrell soon supplemented his drawings with photographs and became an expert photographer and avid exponent of their use in court. In the Rice-Patrick case, tried in 1900, Tyrrell used both methods to illustrate the

tracing evidence in the four Will signatures. It was during this period that a friendship and mutual respect developed between Tyrrell and A. S. Osborn. Not surprisingly, Tyrrell was one of the first to be invited to the Osborn home in Montclair, New Jersey for the now famous "brainhardening" sessions, as Tyrrell described them.

In the early '40's, when the number of invitees to Montclair had increased to a point where even the patient Mrs. Osborn started to complain, it was decided to form an organization to meet in various areas around the country. Thus, in 1942, the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners was formed. John Tyrrell was a Charter Member of the Society and assisted in the design of the membership certificate, including the beautiful seal.

In the '20's, Tyrrell was employed by the State of Illinois to examine evidence in the Leopold-Loeb murder-kidnapping case and his testimony was important in the conviction of those two defendants. Tyrrell liked to tell of his confrontation in that case with famed trial lawyer Clarence Darrow. Following Tyrrell's direct examination Darrow approached the witness stand in a seemingly abusive mood and then quietly stated, "I have no cross examination of this witness, Your Honor. We know Mr. Tyrrell's reputation and that he would not say what is not so."

Throughout the years Tyrrell did much experimental work in paper, ink, and typewriting analysis and contributed papers to A.S.Q.D.E. members on these subjects. One of his most important efforts was in the decipherment of charred documents where he found that exposing charred fragments to ultraviolet light and sandwiching them between photographic plates for an extended "exposure" of some six to eight weeks, a latent image would appear which could be developed out, as in the case of an ordinary negative.

In 1928 Tyrrell retired from Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company and henceforth devoted all of his time to the field of questioned documents. It was early in the '30's that Tyrrell was called to Flemington, New Jersey to examine the Lindberg-Hauptmann ransom notes. His testimony at the trial was, as always, colorful and effective. Later in the '40's, Tyrrell along with Clark Sellers testified in another fascinating case, the Allis Chalmers CIO Strike case, involving hundreds of forged crossmarks on ballots.

Tyrrell's later years were, in a way, as remarkable as those that had gone before. When I came to work for him in 1950 Tyrrell was 89 years of age and still examining document problems. When his eyesight started failing a short time thereafter, and Tyrrell had difficulty in maintaining a proper alignment of his own writing, he enrolled in a course teaching touch typewriting. I have the first letter he wrote following these lessons and it is surprisingly good for any beginner, not to speak of a man 90 years of age.

Gentleman, scholar, man of honor and innovator, Tyrrell was all of these. The profession of Forensic Document Examination owes a real debt of gratitude to this remarkable pioneer in our field.