



Sonja Rougild, picked up for prostitution. Feb 3, 1963, Minneapolis.

AMERICAN MUG SHOT

Some people collect rare vinyl. Others prefer a different type of record.

WORDS ANNE FULLERTON

We all know the photos that changed history. The images that stopped a war, unified a country and proved we could walk on the moon. But what about the photographs that didn't change much of anything, except perhaps the life of a small-time horse-blanket thief? It's the latter type that interests Mark Michaelson, an art director who's worked for publications like *Newsweek*, *Allure* and *New York* and has been a passionate collector of mug shots for more than a decade.

"I'm a pack rat, and I've always stashed away tons of odd and interesting ephemera that crossed my desk," says Michaelson. After receiving an authentic wanted poster for Patty Hearst, the heiress hostage turned bank robber, as a birthday gift from a friend, Michaelson decided to check out the intriguing new site where his friend had unearthed it. EBay. Here, he encountered his first mug shot.

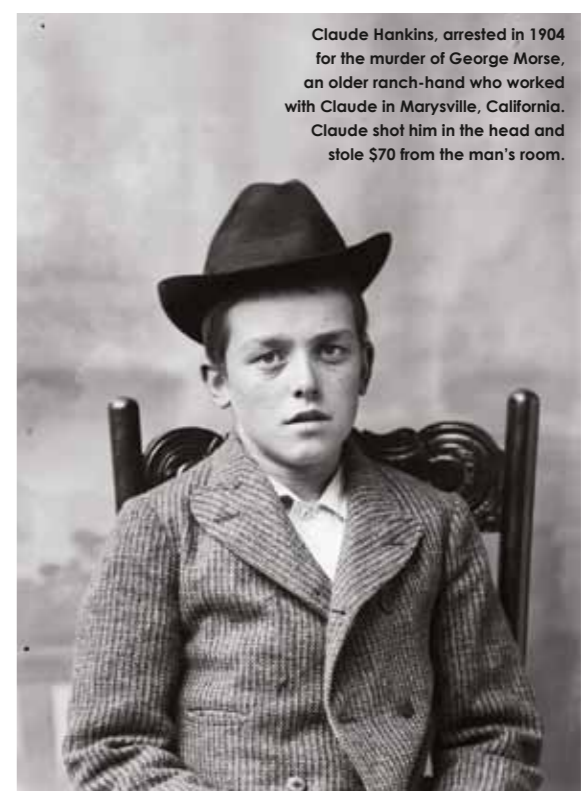
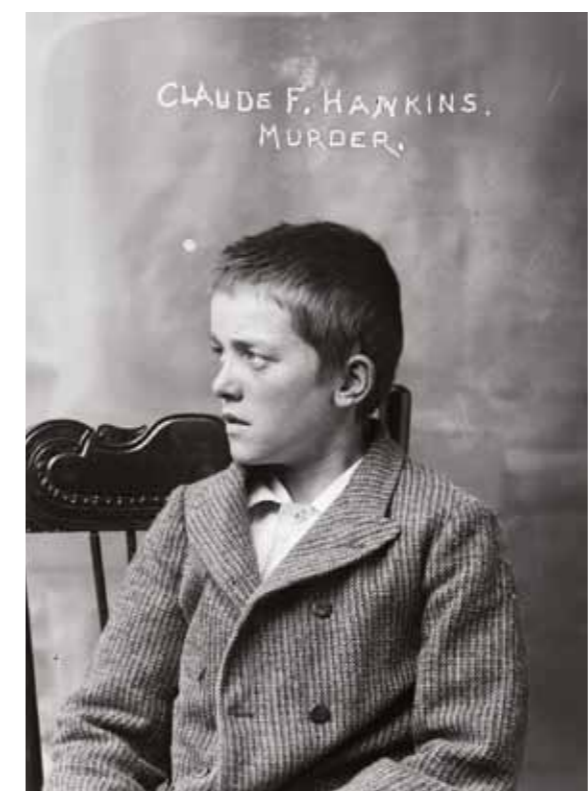
"It was gorgeous. A double-view photo of a man from Minneapolis, 1930s, attached to a card which was housed in a manila sleeve. Typewritten, rubber-stamped and stapled. It was an amazing object, a ready-made. Vernacular and Pop. All of my fetishes combined. Before long I was completely obsessed and the collection started to grow," he says.

While mug shots of notable historical figures and celebrities hold an obvious appeal, seemingly the logical extension of society's star obsession, they weren't what Michaelson was after.

"I was drawn to the small-timers, the 'least wanted'.



Chas. Macklin, San Joaquin, CA, Grand Larceny, 1 year, age 31, May 19, 1910.



Claude Hankins, arrested in 1904 for the murder of George Morse, an older ranch-hand who worked with Claude in Marysville, California. Claude shot him in the head and stole \$70 from the man's room.

IMAGES COURTESY OF MARK MICHAELSON AND ARNE SVENSON.

Over time I accumulated an enormous cast of characters. I now have over 10,000. They are transvestites and communists. Hop-heads and pimps. Heart-breaking and hilarious."

Intended simply as a tool to help law enforcement agencies identify criminals, booking photos, or "mug shots", are taken of suspects upon arrest. As for their invention, some people credit Alphonse Bertillon, an eccentric French policeman and biometrics researcher. Others say they were first used widely by Allan Pinkerton, a Scottish American spy who started his own security agency and helped Abraham Lincoln solve a number of high profile train robberies. What we do know, is that their rise coincided with that of commercial photography, and that they've stuck around despite the advent of fingerprinting and DNA testing.

"I've been told that mug shots probably won't go away, because they're still an easy reference," says Dennis Mohr, a filmmaker currently working on a documentary about the mug shot's enduring allure. "It's still a very economical way to ID a person."

While Michaelson's photographs, which date from the 1870s to the 1960s, come with very little information, just a name or a crime or nothing at all – "They tell their stories with their faces, their clothes, haircuts" – fellow mug shot collector, artist Arne Svenson, has spent years meticulously researching the stories behind his images. After finding just 10 glass plate negatives in a Californian antiques shop, Arne set out to find more.

"I could tell that they were beautifully shot. Being a photographer, I could 'read' the negative, so to speak. The fact that the name of the alleged criminal and his crime was written on each negative was extraordinarily intriguing. Over about a year and a half period, I tracked down the man who had sold these negatives to the antiques store and bought everything he had, which was about 1,500 negatives."

That man had himself discovered the negatives after receiving a call from his elderly aunt, who'd told him that she'd seen "little boys throwing glass faces at rocks". He went to the place she'd described and found children on a demolition lot smashing the negatives.

"Later I found out through my research that the building that had been torn down was the photographer Clara Smith's studio," says Svenson. "All the negatives had been stored in a stairwell that had been bricked up. They'd been sitting there for 70 or 80 years."

He also discovered the reason the photographs were so strikingly beautiful. "Because she had been the town photographer from about 1900 to 1910, she [Smith] photographed everyone. The bride, the groom, the baby, the graduating class. She had a contract with the city to photograph newly arrested men and for a dollar a piece they would bring them over from where they were being arraigned to the studio, which was all tricked out, and she

would just put them right there in the same seat and use the same light. One of the reasons these images are so compelling is that they're truly portraits, over and above mug shots."

The other reason is that they come with incredible stories, which Svenson uncovered by going through eight years' worth of daily Marysville newspapers. The tale that left the greatest impression is that of 14-year-old murderer Claude Hankins (pictured p35, bottom).

"He was fourteen, 4'1". Tiny. And yet he was a killer. It kind of embodies everything to me that's fascinating about mug shots, which is that you have a picture of this little boy sitting in a chair looking as innocent as new driven snow, and yet behind that face was really a ruthless killer who went up beside somebody and then shot him in the head," says Svenson.

It's not just the subjects these fragments of biography reflect upon either. Svenson's images include an African American man who had to be chased down by a plain-clothed policeman. Upon questioning, the man revealed that he'd resisted arrest because he feared he was going to be lynched.

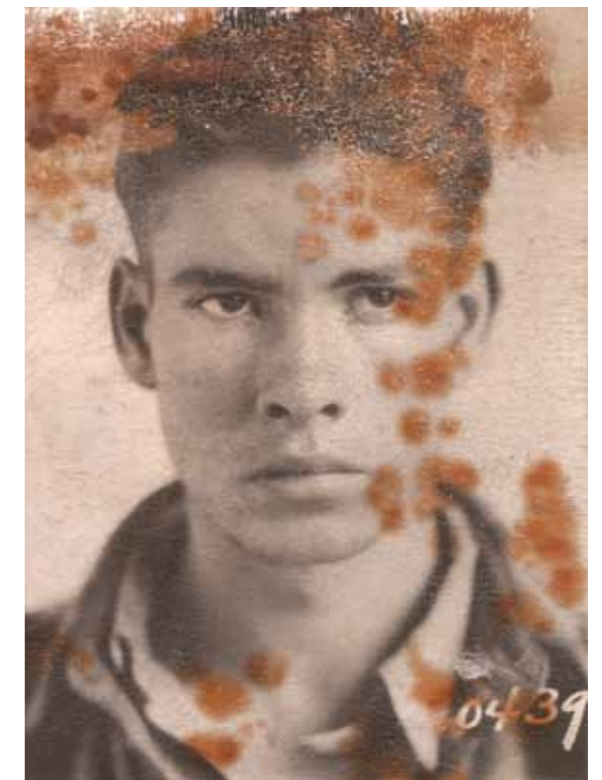
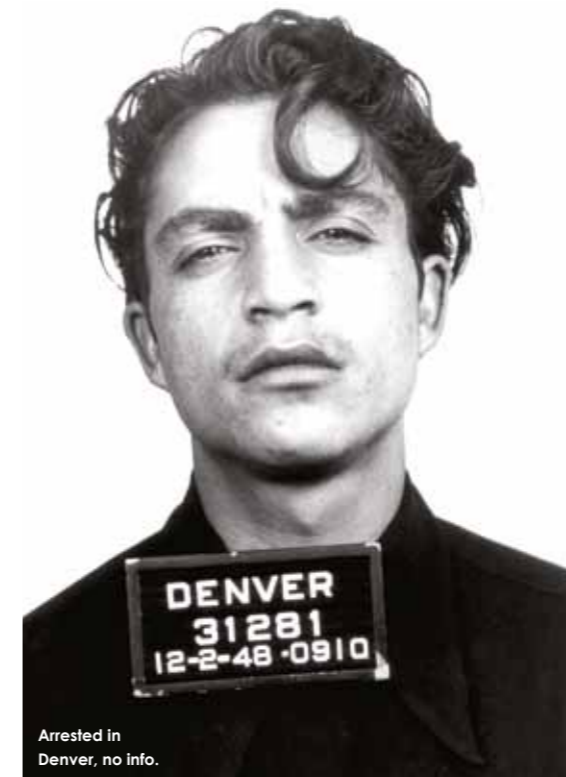
"[There are also] a lot of stories against women which would today be just ridiculous," says Mohr. "Arrested for trying to drive a car, or for smoking in public. The social mores of the day are reflected in these petty crimes. Mug shots are part of an important cultural and social fabric, they tell a lot about the times and the people."

The fascination with beautifully shot historical artefacts and the spectacular haircuts they immortalise is partly self-evident, but the appeal of modern-day mug shots is murkier. While many countries have laws prohibiting the sale and distribution of mug shots to protect privacy, in the US they're considered public property. Publications and websites like *The Slammer* and *Busted!* allow users to search a database of people recently arrested in their area and some police stations post their own pics online, allowing people to vote for the Mug Shot of the Day.

Svenson has his own theory about the fascination. "We spend our lives looking at other people's faces for information about them. When we're presented with a mug shot, we know that a crime has been committed. Something has gone wrong. I believe that we look for clues in the faces as to why something went wrong, but we're also looking for ourselves. We're thinking, 'This person looks as normal as I do, but they are there and I am here!'"

"They're pretty raw nowadays," says Mohr of the aesthetic differences. "But then we don't know how things will appear in 70 years. We have fascination with looking back at ourselves in the strangest ways. Everything's collectable now, even mug shots." 📌

Go to [facebook.com/AmericanMugshot](https://www.facebook.com/AmericanMugshot) to find out more about the documentary *American Mugshot*.





Eva Garcia, entertainer, arrested for vagrancy, San Francisco, 1941.



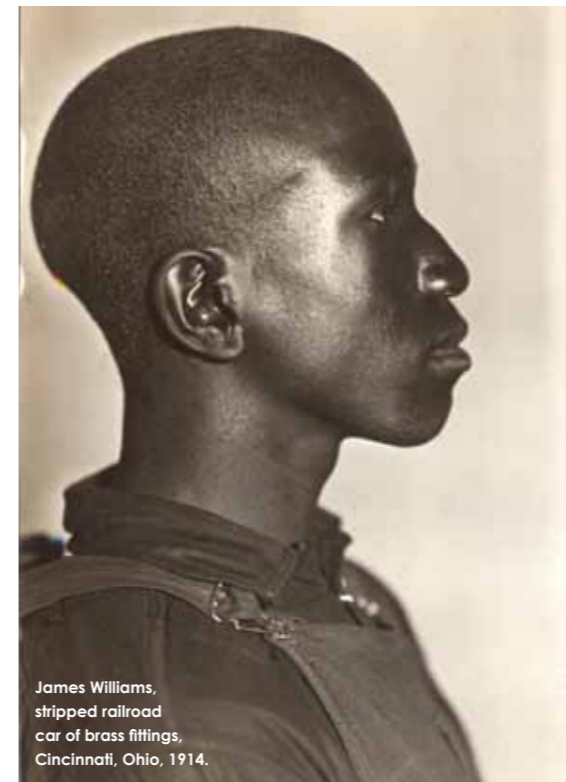
Theresa Rosa, alias Panko. Salesgirl, arrested for narcotics, found not guilty, San Francisco, 1945.



No info. But a personal favourite! - Mark Michaelson.



Arrested on St Valentine's Day. What a haircut. - Mark Michaelson.



James Williams, stripped railroad car of brass fittings, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1914.

