

CURATOR'S CORNER

By Emily Ruby, Curator

Joseph Modispacher

The ability to detect whether or not someone is telling a lie is a vital tool for law enforcement. The lie detector, or polygraph machine, has its roots in the early 1900s when changes in a subject's blood pressure were used to determine truthfulness. John Larson, a police officer in Berkeley, California, coined the term polygraph in 1920 when he invented a machine that tested both breathing and blood pressure. The term referred to the "many writings"

or various methods of measurement used in this system as opposed to just blood pressure. When a polygraph examination became part of the evidence in a 1923 court case, the case was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled that the scientific evidence did not yet support polygraph results as valid evidence. This ruling was later upheld in a 1998 Supreme Court case as well.

Despite these rulings, investigators continued to use the machines to procure confessions and aid in investigations. For

many years the Pittsburgh Police used the county examiner to conduct tests; he also ran polygraph tests for attorneys, corporations, and even private couples. Starting in 1966, the Pittsburgh Police decided to have its own trained polygraph examiner on staff and sent Detective Joseph Modispacher, who had been with the force since 1955, to be trained in Chicago. In his first case using the machine he discovered that a rash of fires at a local hospital was set by a nurse's aide who craved the attention of saving the day when she "discovered" the fires.

Each test took about two to three hours to complete. Modispacher familiarized himself with the case and then interviewed the suspect to determine if they had any medical issues. He then stated all the questions that would be asked: four "hot" and four "spacers." These questions were asked several times and in different orders. Modispacher claimed that in his experience the tests were 97 to 98 percent accurate.

For 10 years, Modispacher served as the sole staff polygraph examiner for the



Above:
Modispacher at work with a polygraph machine.
HHC Collections, 2011.127.415 a-g.



Left:
Polygraph machine, 1948.
This is an example of an early lie detector test that measured only blood pressure and heart rate. Modispacher never used this machine during his time on the force but donated it to the Pittsburgh Police Historical Association before its collection was donated to the History Center.
HHC Collections, 2011.127.415 a-g.



Stoelting Deceptograph, 1966.

Stoelting Company of Chicago, which had produced polygraph machines since 1935, made this Deceptograph. It recorded blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, and electrical skin resistance among other things. All instruments came packaged in an aluminum Halliburton case. The police bought this machine for \$2,000 and used it for 10 years before Modispacher took it home to use for extra parts. He never took it apart and donated the machine to the History Center in 2011.

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Pittsburgh Police, conducting more than 3,500 tests. In 1976 the police sent two more detectives for polygraph training and they joined Modispacher in his investigations, although he remained the lead examiner. Modispacher retired from the force in 1988 as a Detective Sergeant but continued to conduct polygraph exams for local attorneys and corporations. In a 1994 interview with the *New Castle News*, Modispacher claimed that although the tests were not admissible as evidence, they were “a tool used specifically to eliminate people. It’s used for investigation purposes.”

In 2011, the Pittsburgh Police Historical Association donated its collection to the History Center. That same year, Joseph Modispacher also made a donation of his personal collection to us. Included in both donations were examples of polygraph machines.

Newspaper article about the man behind the Deceptograph, July 16, 1966.

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**Modispacher's Pittsburgh
Police badge.**

HHC Collections, 2011.135.5



Device Catches You Just Thinking A Lie

City's 'Deceptograph' Proves Trap For Any Verbal, Mental Dishonesty

By CHARLES DURDEN

Lying just isn't what it used to be.

Not, at any rate, in the Pittsburgh Police Detective Bureau, where they have a new device called a "deceptograph". But a lie detector by any other name is still a lie detector.

This one is unbelievably sophisticated.

City Detective Joseph Mod-
ispacher is the
man behind the
machine. De-
spite the new-
ness of his job
and the decep-
tograph, he
has already
tested four
suspects.


Mr. Modispacher finishes strapping a person in the chair by means of several gadgets and gizmos, the police are set to determine his honesty.

Unfortunately, for some, a
it doesn't have to be

...ust thinks a lie the
...aps with erratic
...he graph paper.
...arks, similar to
...hen-wall art
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...dress.

Reveals Lies

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sideration in detect-



On the machine, Mr. Modis-
pacher instructed a volunteer
to answer "no" to all ques-
tions concerning the number

on a card he had plucked from
a small stack.

After connecting the machine to the volunteer, Mr. Modispacher asked six questions three of which were "did you pick number 16"? The others, alternately interspersed, concerned other numbers.

He switched off the machine and pointed to the graph—it showed when the participant had lied.

While this machine isn't foolproof the chances of beating or cheating the test are near zero, the detective-operator contended.

Near Perfect

"Given a perfect machine and a perfect operator," he said, "you can have a perfect test most of the time."

The deceptograph, installed about one month ago, cost the City \$2000.

Assistant Superintendent of Police Eugene Coon called the deceptograph "another step in using scientific detection methods."

"It benefits the innocent and all the tests are strictly voluntary."

Mr. Modispacher said the test results are not admissible in court, either for or against the defendant.