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**More grunt work than glamour: Private detective's job isn't all high-tech sophistication**

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Stacy Innerst/Post-Gazette

"I can't tell you how many times I've gone through garbage — hundreds of times," said Keith Scannell, owner of William Keith Scannell & Associates in Southpointe and Downtown.



**By Karen Kane / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

It's a Saturday night and Steve Braden is loading up his vehicle. The packing list is be-prepared lengthy: camo clothes, formal wear, night-vision camera, cell phone, writing paper, snacks and pee jug.

Pee jug? Yes, a jug in which a person can relieve himself.

A seasoned private investigator and owner of Check Your Mate Investigations of Butler, Mr. Braden knows the evening ahead could be a long one and, once he's on the trail of the guy or gal he's following, bathroom breaks may not be an option.

"It's just one of the realities of the job," he said.

Glamorized in the fiction of novels and movies, the day-to-day stuff of the PI's world has its TV-worthy moments but, detectives here say, it's more about the pragmatic combination of diligence, persistence and hard work. Perhaps the only misconception broader than the romanticized image of a real-life so-called gumshoe is how far one will delve into the world of technology to dig up or track down what a client wants to know.

Camera-equipped drones that can hover above a house, listening devices that can hear through walls, electronic trackers that can be attached to vehicles or activated on cell phones — these no longer are the hallmarks of sci-fi future worlds. They are used by government and tested by industry and some items even are available in the online gray market.

"Yeah, I could go on the Internet and get my hands on a laser listener from another country easy enough," said Keith Scannell, owner of William Keith Scannell & Associates in Southpointe and Downtown. "Could we stick a GPS [tracking device] on someone's car? Sure. But we won't. It's pushing the envelope and no one who cares about staying in this business is going to risk his license."

Louis Gentile, founder of the largest PI firm in the region — CSI Corporate Security and Investigations Inc. — agreed. "We're conservative. It's all about integrity in this business, and we don't do anything to jeopardize that," he said.

While it has been a long-tested legal rule that conversations cannot be captured and recorded without knowledge and consent in lieu of a court order, there's recent precedent that makes even eavesdropping iffy if it's done with the assistance of a device or among people who have an expectation of privacy.

"We used to use the Miracle Ear to help us listen in. No more. Won't take the chance," Mr. Scannell said.

Likewise, with GPS units, the current thinking is that one can be attached to a vehicle only if the PI's client has title to that vehicle.

None of that really matters, anyway. Local detectives concur that high-tech gadgetry has its place, but the tried-and-true tricks of the trade — a good camera for shooting surveillance; thick gloves for combing through garbage; strong coffee for staying awake — is what helps.

One place where fiction meets fact is when it comes to surveillance, the bread-and-butter of many investigations operations. Whether the probe is about a cheating spouse, a workers' comp case or insurance fraud, waiting, watching and following usually is involved.

"We have a staff of eight, and there isn't anybody in the office [because] we're on the road," Mr. Scannell said. Most of his clients are attorneys and insurance companies.

"We've done everything from finding stolen dogs, to going under cover in churches to catch pastors sleeping with guys' wives, to reuniting mothers and children. It all involves following people," said Mr. Braden, who noted that those who "try to do their own sleuthing" generally fail and then turn to the experts. "There's an art to mobile surveillance," he said.

Mr. Scannell said that art and the other skills that go with being a PI are based in patience and perseverance. A typical case: An insurance company is paying a workers' comp claim but there's reason to be suspicious of the soft-tissue injury that was reported. The client's question for Mr. Scannell: "Is this guy trying to hustle us?" Mr. Scannell said he might obtain a junk car, park it on the street near the man's home, flatten a tire to avoid suspicion, equip it with a mobile Internet router, put a camera in the grille of the vehicle, and wait. And wait. And wait.

"We'll put an investigator down the street a mile away. We can see [via the remote camera] when the guy leaves the house and then follow him. When we catch him exceeding his physical limitations — that's what we call it — we've got it on video," he said. He concedes it sometimes requires caffeine in addition to patience.

The same goes with another common investigative technique: dumpster diving and garbage picking.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve gone through garbage — hundreds of times,” Mr. Scannell said, recalling how once he found an Amway card in a garbage can that led to criminal insurance fraud charges against a local man who claimed to be too sick to work.

“It can be plain-Jane boring or even disgusting, but it works,” he said.

Lisa DeFloria-Schneck, a former agent for the state attorney general’s office and owner of LDS Investigations in Greensburg, said when she tells a new acquaintance her profession, the stock reply is, “That’s probably so much fun.”

And she’s thinking? “Fun? That’s not the word I would use. Dangerous, sometimes, yes. I’ve been screamed at when I’ve served a subpoena. I’ve been caught doing surveillance on a cheating spouse and been chased. But, most often, it’s a lot of tedious hard work,” she said.

“Try sitting for four hours in a car, staring at a door, waiting for someone to walk out. You can’t even glance away to send a text or you can lose your opportunity [to take a picture]. It’s not as glamorous as people think,” she said.

Although Mr. Braden, a former Marine, deputy U.S. marshal and prison corrections officer, said he wouldn’t trade the job of PI for any other, it boils down to this: “You freeze your butt off in the winter and you swelter in the summer time.”

Although his firm specializes in “infidelity cases,” Mr. Braden said he often is retained by businesses that are trying to stem in-house theft. And this is where Sherlock Holmes meets James Bond.

From covert cameras — think ink pen with a camera lens or a jean jacket with a camera button — to video recorders with night vision lenses, Mr. Braden has used it all. Still, he said, there’s no substitute for his own eyes, ears and instincts.

“I’ve had a guy hire me to check out his girlfriend or his wife, and I’ve approached her myself [to see if she was susceptible to cheating]. I don’t use a device other than my own ears when it comes to listening in. Audio is forbidden. You don’t cross that line. Even when you shoot video, you have to have the audio killed,” he said, alluding to wiretapping and privacy statutes.

When it comes to private investigative firms, CSI Corporate Security and Investigations Inc. and its founder, Mr. Gentile, are in a class unto themselves. Based in Center, Beaver County, the firm has offices in Denver, Atlanta, Arizona, Erie, Philadelphia and North Carolina. The largest “professional investigative firm,” as Mr. Gentile likes to call it, in the region, CSI has some 400 people on the payroll, including two in-house attorneys and about 48 in the investigations end versus security.

A former state police officer who worked undercover in the organized crime unit and a director of the state attorney general’s Bureau of Narcotics from 1989 to 1998, Mr. Gentile established his private investigative practice in 1996.

Whether big or small, he said, a PI firm is more about the watching and the digging than the high-tech gadgetry.

On this particular day, Mr. Gentile said his firm’s to-do list included doing a background investigation on a potential new CEO, putting the finishing touches on a case that involved serving a subpoena in France, doing research for the defense of a local public figure accused of corruption, working on an arson case for an insurance company, giving a helping hand in a criminal case to a local police force, monitoring a suspected cheating spouse, watching eight people accused of medical fraud in workers’ compensation cases, and going undercover in two local businesses where the owners suspected drug dealing.

“Basically, we do everything that a police department does. We delve into sophisticated data bases. We surveillance from trees and weeds and cars,” he said. “But whether it’s police work or private investigative work, it boils down to the human factor: combing through search warrants and going through files; interviewing witnesses and making sure the facts the police gathered were right. We’re there to find the facts and that involves a lot of grunt work.”