

A Modest Counterfeiter

In 1890, Edward Mueller, a 13-year-old boy from Austria, went to America, seeking a better future. He settled in New York City and led a quiet life. By 1918 he was already a married man with two children, working as a maintenance man at an Upper West Side apartment complex, when suddenly his wife died in the Spanish flu epidemic. Left alone with two young kids, he turned to collecting and reselling junk to make a living.

In 1937, with his children grown, now aged 61, Edward found himself a lonely man, struggling with unemployment during the Great Depression. With the country's economy in ruins, unable to earn a living and desperate, he came up with an idea that changed his fate: making fake money.

At the time, counterfeiting was an expensive craft and a dangerous crime, typically carried out by large criminal organizations. But Edward was determined. One morning in November of 1938, he snapped pictures of a \$1 bill, transferred the images to a pair of zinc plates and then filled in small details of the bill by hand. On a small hand-driven printing press in his kitchen, he began minting fake \$1 bills.

The next day, the Secret Service received a curious \$1 bill from a cigar shop. It was unlike anything they'd ever seen. First off, no self-respecting counterfeiter had ever taken the time and trouble to replicate \$1 bills. Secondly, counterfeiters usually were masters of their craft and created currency so artistically sound that it was indistinguishable from the real deal.

This bill, however, was so poorly done that the Secret Service thought the criminal was making fun of them. It was printed on cheap paper that could be found at any store. The serial numbers were crooked. George Washington's portrait was badly drawn. **And just for good measure**, the name of the nation's capital was misspelled as "Wahsington, D.C.!"

Within a month, 40 more of the very same \$1 bills showed up at the Secret Service. By mid-1938, the tally grew to 585. The Secret Service called the mystery man "Mister 880," after his case file number. Mister 880 used just enough of his bills to survive, never more than \$15 per week. He also never spent money in the same place twice, so no individual shop owner ever lost more than one dollar. The worst counterfeiter in history was also the most elusive. 10 years came and went, and the search for Mister 880 turned into the largest and most expensive counterfeit investigation in Secret Service history.

Ten years later, seven schoolboys found "30 funny-looking dollar bills" and zinc plates in the snow. While shopkeepers all over the city had accepted the bills without hesitation, the gaggle of 12-year-olds immediately identified them as fakes. The Secret Service traced the bills back to Edward's apartment.

Agents expected to find a criminal mastermind. Instead, they were greeted by jovial 73-year-old, Edward Mueller, the old junk collector — short, with a healthy pink face, bright blue eyes, a shiny bald dome, a fringe of snowy hair over his ears and hardly any teeth.

In September 1948, Edward stood trial in federal court, facing 3 counts, each bearing a possible 10-year sentence — possession, passage and manufacturing of fake bills. However, he was sentenced to just one year and one day in prison. The judge also imposed a \$1 fine, which made people inside the courtroom laugh.

Edward's case became a sensation. A New Yorker reporter covered his story in a three-part series, and in 1950, a film adaptation, *Mister 880*, was made. The movie was a success, and Edward ended up earning more from it than he had in his entire counterfeiting career.

Among the Secret Service agents Edward was known as "Mister 880" because...

- 1) he made 880 fake dollars in the first year of his criminal activity.
- 2) it was the official number of his case in the Secret Service records.
- 3) the Secret Service spent 880 dollars yearly trying to catch him.
- 4) that was how many fake dollars Mueller spent every year.