

The Search Probe

By Chris Miller, Deputy (retired)
Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum

The Hall of Justice Jail opened in 1926, and was constructed with the best technology known at that time. After years of use, many cracks and crevices developed, creating locations for inmates to hide contraband.

When I began working at the Hall of Justice Jail in 1975, it was already fifty years old. The metal walls of the jail cells, and at the places where they attached to the cement floors, had deteriorated due to age and constant exposure to water from mopping. The bottom edge of the walls contained many crevices where contraband could be hidden from deputies. Crevices also existed around the sinks and toilets, which inmates used as hiding places for drugs and makeshift weapons.



Hall of Justice Building

When deputies entered a cell to search it, they were limited on the time they could spend in each, and the inmates knew it. The inmates would secrete contraband in a crevice and then push pieces of toilet tissue down behind it. This prevented deputies from seeing the contraband. The tissue and contraband was often pushed down so deeply it rendered it impossible to remove with only fingers. Inmates, blessed with the luxury of time, could spend hours, or days, working the contraband back out again for their use. One frustrated, but creative deputy, finally designed a search tool to accomplish what his and his partners' bare hands could not.



Search Probe

His invention: a metal search probe made from a piece of heavy duty coat hanger wire. These probes were approximately 5 inches long. The last ¼ inch of the wire was bent into a small hook. On the top end, the wire was formed into a one inch diameter circle and bent at a 90 degree angle. This allowed deputies to carry the probe in their uniform shirts next to their pen and pencil so it could easily be retrieved. It also gave deputies leverage to pull back on the probe to remove items blocking contraband or to remove the contraband. This clever, thin wire probe could reach contraband hidden in narrow crevices.

Another way deputies used search probes was to keep the locking mechanisms of cell gates free of debris. Inmates discovered that if they stuffed toilet tissue into the locking mechanism of their cell gate it would not lock shut. It would close, but could be pulled open later when deputies weren't looking down the row. Deputies used their probes when they did row searches to check the cells to locate toilet tissue inserted in the door locks and remove it so inmates couldn't unexpectedly exit.



Search Probe in Use on Cell Gate

In the rear of each jail cell an air vent with multiple small holes led into the pipe chase containing all the plumbing for the cells. Inmates would tie a piece of string between several holes of the vent and then drop contraband out of sight through into the pipe chase retrieving it at their convenience. Deputies also used the search probe to grasp the string and retrieve this contraband.



Search Probe in Use on an Air Vent

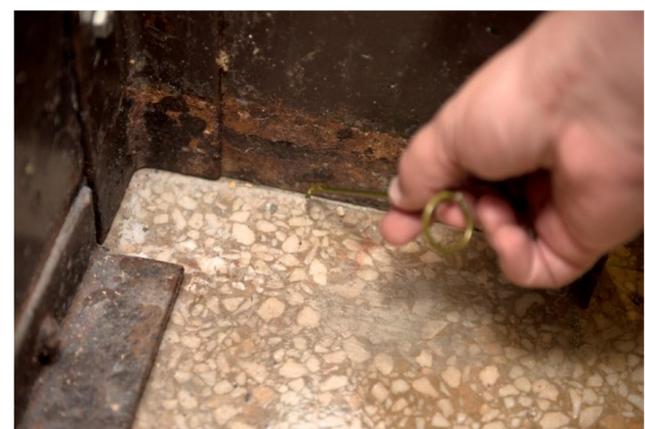
The search probe was used frequently to search areas where deputies did not want to place their bare hands, e.g., the inner lip of cell toilets. Inmates would make jail made alcohol called "Pruno." They would seal it in a plastic bag and then tie a string to it. The string would



Search Probe in Use on a Sink

be attached to the toilet. The bag of pruno would then be flushed down the toilet. The bag would be out of sight but could be retrieved by pulling the string. The search probe was used to locate and pull on the string to retrieve the pruno bag.

Inmates were always trying to create distractions or injure deputies so that their attention was focused away from retrieving the inmate's contraband or conducting a thorough search. Inmates would attach razor blades to the bed frame out of view. Deputies who ran their hands along the inside frames looking for contraband would cut themselves bringing their search to an abrupt end. To prevent injuries of this kind, deputies used their search probes in lieu of their hands to check the inside of the frames to dislodge any sharp objects or contraband.



Search Probe in Use on a Bed Frame

The search probe was a simple tool made from the simplest of devices, but it made a huge difference in both the safety and security of the jail. When I started working at the Hall of Justice Jail all of the prowlers carried a search probe. Over time, module deputies saw the benefits of using the probe during cell searches and eventually created their own probes.

Remarkably, this tool seemed to be unique to the Hall of Justice Jail. Deputies at other jails, such as Men's Central Jail and Sybil Brand Institute, even though their facilities had similar issues, never developed or carried a similar device.



Search Probe

A Moment in History by the Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum