

## **A Day in the Life of a Private Investigator**

### **“The Early Bird Gets the Worm”**

Investigator Aimee gets up at 4:30 a.m. in the morning. She does not always start her workday this early but today she is going on surveillance and needs to be on site by 5:30 a.m. The subject is a claimant who has a “total disability” claim and pending lawsuit from a car accident and says he cannot work at all. The claims adjuster is suspicious; it was a minor accident and the claimant hired an attorney very early in the claims process.

Aimee arrives in the vicinity of the claimant’s residence at 5:20. There are three cars parked in the driveway. She finds a suitable position that is not too conspicuous. She watches and waits. On many surveillances she has sat for hours with nothing happening, but today she doesn’t have to wait long. The claimant is observed coming out of his residence at 6 am and entering his vehicle. Aimee’s adrenaline starts pumping immediately. There is always a rush of excitement and anticipation when activity is observed. There is anxiety as well—what if the subject notices her? What if she loses him?

The claimant pulls out of his driveway, driving fast with an obvious purpose. Aimee follows him cautiously at a distance but is able to stay with him without being too obvious. So far so good. He arrives at the local High School and turns into the school's back parking lot where the bus yard is located. Is he dropping someone off? Perhaps a small child that she didn’t notice? There are a few early morning construction workers at this site, but other than that, the area is dark. She doubts that anyone is with him. Due to high risk of detection, Aimee waits a couple of minutes before turning into the school parking lot. Aimee can see the claimant across the school parking lot, not parked in a spot, car still running with the passenger side door open and the brake lights on. She does not see anyone get out of his car. Aimee cannot tell what he is doing and must keep a safe distance so as not to be detected. Meanwhile she gets some film using the night vision on her camera. It may not be definitive at this point but getting whatever film she can is always better than nothing. The claimant then pulls out of the school parking lot quickly and turns left onto a main road.

After following the claimant for several miles on the freeway, he exits the freeway suddenly, arriving at an unmarked duplex that appears to be used for a business office. The front of the duplex has large initials painted under the window. The claimant backs in next to the door on the back of the duplex, which is completely unmarked. There is a porch light on. The duplex is located on a "Dead End" so the investigator establishes surveillance from across the street in a bread outlet store parking lot. The claimant is observed and filmed loading something into the trunk of his car. A dead body? Drugs? The possibilities are endless and intriguing.

Just moments later, the claimant pulls out back onto the main road and drives extremely fast through a yellow light. Aimee is barely able to stay with him. The claimant pulls into a bank parking lot and is observed walking up to the door of the entryway to the bank and appears to be leaving something. The claimant is not looking around and seems to be in a hurry. He then departs the area and proceeds forward two more blocks. The claimant does a u-turn and turns left back onto the main road. The investigator quickly turns around but then proceeds slowly so that she is not too obvious. When following someone who drives this fast and makes frequent stops and u-

turns, it is challenging to stay with them without getting “burned.”

The claimant arrives at another bank and leaves something on the front steps of the entryway. The claimant then departs the area southbound and turns left into a gas station parking lot, stops briefly, and departs just as fast. Aimee must put a “loose tail” on the claimant as the risk of detection is becoming very high. Unfortunately, this results in her eventually losing contact with his vehicle. She searches the area where he was last seen (the standard procedure) for thirty minutes but is unsuccessful in relocating him. Aimee then goes back to his first stop to try to determine what the claimant left there. She examines the parcels that the claimant left and sees that they are advertisement fliers from a local business. The mystery is solved! The claimant is delivering advertisement/coupon packets. This is most likely some type of paid work and will be very good information for the client.

Aimee returns to the office to inform the client of her findings. She feels good about her work day because she got some good results for the client. On days where nothing happens, or worse, if something bad happens (like losing them or getting burned), the day can be downright depressing! She arrives back at the office by 7am. There is still lots of time left to work on other cases.

## **Background Investigations**

After finishing her surveillance report, Aimee begins to do investigative research. Most of the research is for background investigations, but she also has a couple of “locates,” (trying to find someone that a client wants to find that is not necessarily “missing”).

A background investigation may not be especially intriguing, such as a pre-employment check on a prospective employee for a corporation, but the process of search and discovery is always exciting. It is the main reason, as everyone seems to know, that the work of an investigator is truly an exciting job. When one seeks to find some truth, however small or benign, discovering what you are looking for is always a thrill.

Aimee begins with searching court records in several states. Courts in many states have information available online, but some out of state courts have not put their information online yet or the information they do have is limited. Aimee calls the court clerks if she cannot get the information online. Sometimes it is necessary to find an out-of-state investigator to assist her if she cannot get any information online or by telephone.

Many times there are no findings in the courts. Sometimes the findings in the courts are highly significant to the client; such as the person she recently checked who had applied for a job driving a vehicle for a company and was found to have had a citation for driving while intoxicated. The information was not readily available through a Washington State Patrol search; these only show convictions. Employers frequently do this type of check themselves and often do not realize that the information supplied by the State Patrol can be limited. The subject had received a “deferred” prosecution, so this did not show up as a conviction and was therefore not in the WSP search. Aimee had to dig deeper; first finding out which counties the person had lived in, and then checking each local court in each county where the person had resided.

The next step is to begin research through the Internet, including social media. World publications for news stories are also checked through a variety of venues. Many people have misconceptions about how easy it is to search the Internet. “Don’t you just put a name in a computer?” they often ask. It is never that simple. The Internet is a wealth of information and that is part of the problem. Combing through the information to find the relevant and helpful bits can be tedious and time consuming.

### **Routine Interviews in a Job that is Not Normally Routine**

Later that afternoon, Aimee takes a recorded statement by telephone from a claimant. It is routine; a “no-brainer” type of investigative work with a predetermined set of questions. The usual stuff; how, what, when, where, why, regarding an injury and questions about the current symptoms, medical progress, and prior injuries. Claims adjusters frequently hire investigators for this type of work because the statement needs to be very detailed, the report-writing can be tedious, and these types of statements often need to be obtained after normal business hours. Also claims-processors have many files to handle, and just can not devote the kind of time necessary for taking this type of statement. They are not done because the claim is suspicious, it is usually a routine part of the claim’s process.

Some claims are suspicious, of course, and when that is the case, the adjuster will usually request surveillance and/or a background investigation. Unfortunately, there are an abundance of workers’ compensation claims that seriously impact the financial well being of businesses, especially those that are exaggerated or fraudulent. Some investigation is required for each and every claim that is handled to separate the legitimate claims from the exaggerated ones. Claims adjusters have been hiring and utilizing the services of private investigators for years. It used to be the mainstay of investigative work. Today companies and individuals are using investigators for all types of information gathering, not just claims work, and there are fewer P.I. companies that rely on claims investigations for the bulk of their work than in the past.

There are many misconceptions about the industry. People (and the media) often assume that investigators mostly investigate cheating husbands and wives. Aimee’s agency rarely does this type of work and many agencies do not do this type of work at all. It is becoming increasingly risky, since spouses can become violent. The investigator never wants to be involved in a case that results in violence. On the other hand, there are times when surveillance of spouses may be justified, such as when there are custody issues and the question of whether one parent may be unfit for custody.

After completing the detailed statement from the claimant, Aimee begins to write the report. The sooner the report is completed after the statement is taken the better.

### **A New Day, A New Case**

After completing the claimant’s statement/report Aimee is ready to call it a day. She was up very early. Tomorrow her workday will be entirely different. She will be going out “into the field” for face-to-face interviews with witnesses for a case that is going to trial.

Aimee has found that she can obtain the best information from a witness if she goes to their home and speaks to them in their own environment where they are most comfortable. Sometimes an attorney/client she works with will initially recommend that she call the witness and have them come into the attorney's office for the interview. Aimee points out to the attorney that the goal is to have the witness tell the investigator everything they know that is relevant to the case. In an attorney's office the witness may feel intimidated and be less likely to talk freely. An attorney's office is simply not a conducive environment to encourage a person to open up. Once this is explained, the attorney generally agrees that Aimee should go to the residence of the witness to obtain an interview.

Aimee has interviewed all types of witnesses in all kinds of cases. Doing this kind of investigative work provides a fascinating slice of life. There are witnesses to auto accidents, witnesses to sexual harassment in the workplace, witnesses to financial scams, witnesses to assaults, domestic violence, child abuse, homicides, etc. They are all unique characters; they all have stories to tell and have differing points of view and lifestyles. Aimee learns a lot about life and the behavior of humans. It is fascinating.

After talking to many witnesses in a case, a picture usually begins to emerge that gives an understanding of what most likely happened; a picture that gets to the truth of the situation, or at least as close to the truth as possible. Aimee has often thought that if only the jury could be out here "on the street" like she is, going into the homes, seeing who these people really are and evaluating their credibility in a natural setting, the jury would be able to make much better and more informed decisions in a case. Unfortunately, in the court room, appearances rule and appearances can be deceiving. On the other hand, most jurors do take their job very seriously and try to do the right thing. Thankfully, they seem to be able to make a fair decision in many cases. Sometimes they don't, however, and that can be heart-breaking for the investigator, especially if it is a case where someone may have been falsely accused of a crime. Aimee has seen a lot of these cases, far more than revealed by the media. There seems to be a strong bias against the defense and the accused in society. There are many news stories about guilty people getting away with murder but very few stories about the innocent people who get wrongly charged and convicted. Society seems to prefer to believe everybody is guilty. They need to have someone to blame, Aimee suspects.

While there are occasional frustrations encountered doing the work of the PI, there are far more rewards than negatives. Aimee likes her job. She is out in the world searching for answers and looking for the truth. It is a challenge, and a fulfilling one. She finds information that often helps the clients to resolve problems, to make good decisions, to stop people from taking advantage of others, to learn the truth. She enriches her own life by the knowledge she gains while searching for answers that are helpful to others. She has learned that answers are usually out there and can be found if you just know where to look. Aimee has already learned so much about humans, about the world, and how to find the truth. Perhaps the latter is the best lesson of all.