



Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County
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Child Abuse and Mongolian Spots

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By Gilbert Gia, as told by Millie Munding
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In the late 1960s nine detectives were assigned to Juvenile and Adult investigations at the Kern County Sheriff's Office. I was in Juvenile and did child abuse and run-a-ways, but some cases overlapped both offices, so sooner or later Adult division got involved in Juvenile cases. That meant I sometimes worked with officers who'd never seen a child abuse case before.

In 1967 a woman called about a five-year-old she'd seen in a parking lot. The caller had been out on Rosedale to get groceries, and when she pulled into the parking lot she saw a little boy crying in the back seat of a station wagon. She pulled in next to it and asked him what was the matter. He said his daddy spanked him. His nose was bleeding.

She'd just about got to the store when she looked around and saw the station wagon pulling out. Fortunately she got the license number. After I talked to her, the Office teletyped the number to Sacramento.

The plate had a Shafter address, but I recognized the owner's name from a Pumpkin Center case I'd done two years before in which a man beat up his daughter. She was placed in foster care. He did a year at Lerdo, so we had reasonable cause and didn't have to investigate. Two male deputies, one of them a new hire, went out to pick him up.

I saw the new officer that afternoon, and he looked annoyed. They'd entered the house and arrested the man, but the rest of the family was there, too. His wife had a black eye, and two of the younger kids had seen some hard use. The way I understood it from the deputy's partner, the whole time they brought the man in, the new officer was begging his partner to make a detour into the oil fields.

That was against regulations, but child abuse cases change people. Even into the 1950s, some suspects were worked over before they were booked, but by the Sixties, officers were a lot more careful about their jobs. The father was lucky.



Photo: www.pbase.com/ronhrl/image

I saw a lot of bad cases, but the first time I ever saw Mongolian Spots was about two years after the Pumpkin Center case. In that one, a woman called me about a juvenile who'd been beaten up. I took a car out to Edison Highway and found the address around on Fairfax. It was really five or six little cottages that looked like they'd been a motel.

Half a dozen little kids were kicking a ball around on the dirt driveway as I eased in. In about a minute a white woman, about 50-years old, came out with a towel in her hands. She said she'd been babysitting the kids of parents working in the onions out around Lamont. That morning she was changing the shirt of one of the kids, and she saw that he'd been beaten pretty bad.

The woman called over a sturdy-looking three-year old and pulled up his shirt. Well, he had bluish-black stripes all across his back, like somebody'd taken a belt and beat the hell out of him. The marks went from his shoulders right down to the top of his pants. She pulled down his underwear, and his buttocks were even worse, just a mass of bruising.



I gave her my card and said, "I'm going to take him. When his parents get back, tell them to call me." I opened the passenger-side door, smiled, and motioned, "Come on, let's go for a ride!" He jumped right in.

I took him to the jail for pictures. In those days we had a doctor assigned to the jail who pretty much took care of everybody and everything. I put the kid up on a chair, and the doctor looked him over and told me that the bruises were about three days old. The ID bureau took pictures.

In those days, Shelter Care was south of Heritage Park and on the west side of Juvenile Hall. The drive from the jail to Juvie was about 15 minutes, but I wasn't in any hurry. The kid was standing on the front seat looking around and enjoying the ride. I guessed they'd probably keep him a week until the county found foster placement.

About an hour later I was back at the office writing up my report when the mother called. I identified myself and asked sympathetically, "Who beat-up your kid?" Silence. The mother told me straight out that nobody'd done nothin' to him, and she was positive of that. Her husband came on next, and he wanted to know why I'd taken his son. I asked, "What about the bruises?" He said, "What bruises?"

I was getting the sinking feeling that somebody'd made a big mistake, and now I had to tread water. I told him his son was safe at Shelter Care and I'd take him back home right after I called my commander. Well, I didn't call my commander. I hustled back to Shelter Care, picked up the kid, and took him over to Kern General Hospital.

The doctor came in and I showed him the kid's back. The doctor looks, he feels, and he says, "Well, those are Mongolian Spots. It's nothing." I didn't ask him to explain.

The parents were more relieved than anything else. I don't remember how many times I said "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. He's such a nice little boy." And you know something, that whole time the kid never showed a bit of anxiety.

Later on I found out about "Mongolian Spots." It's a condition mostly seen in children of Asian, Mexican, or Native American parents. It's like birth marks. The doctor called it dermal melanosis. I never forgot that name.

If police today goofed like that, parents would be suing everybody. I was awfully nice to the parents, but I don't think that's what helped the county dodge a lawsuit: The next day at Shelter Care, they told me that for the hour they had the little kid he really enjoyed himself. I'm sure he told everybody about his big adventure.

[In the mid 1970s, after 25 years of service, Detective Millie Munding retired from the Kern County Sheriff's Office.]