# Carrie Morgan Whitcomb

## “A Body of Evidence”

### by Linda Perry

She was one of the first to see a triggering device used in a mail bomb made by the infamous Unabomber. In fact, Carrie Morgan Whitcomb is no stranger to the word “first” in regards to her career. Among her accomplishments, she was one of the first two women appointed toxicologists in the Alabama Department of Toxicology and Criminal Investigation crime laboratory, a position requiring the approval of then Governor George Wallace. And perhaps as a testament to her hard work in a somewhat non-traditional role for a woman, she became the first female director of a federal crime laboratory in Washington, D.C., when named to head the U.S. Postal Inspection Service Headquarters Crime Laboratory in 1988. She currently is the director of the National Center for Forensic Science in Orlando, Fla., a joint venture between the National Institute of Justice and the University of Central Florida.

The NCFS acts as a clearinghouse for forensic science information, providing education, training, research, and technology for forensic scientists, law enforcement and the criminal justice system. The center has prepared two National Institute of Justice guides that assist first responders to fire and explosion scenes, and training criteria that match those guides are being developed. Forensic fire and bomb investigators will become certified based on that training material.

Whitcomb was the logical choice for the new position because she had experience in fire debris analysis, was an experienced forensic scientist, and knew the needs of the forensic science community (she was president of the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors in 1995).

A 1967 College of Arts and Sciences graduate, Whitcomb grew up as Carrie Louise Morgan in Hyden, a small town about 10 miles southwest of Hazard. She was the youngest of four children of Leona and Gillous Morgan, born when her mother was in her 40s. As a child, Whitcomb spent many an afternoon on the creek banks, fascinated by the insects and small animals. “I grew up climbing around in the mountains and catching crawdads in the creek. I explored the woods and observed nature and I was totally fascinated by fossils that I found,” said Whitcomb. She also was good at math and science, so it was only natural that she was drawn to them by the time she was in high school, part of which she spent at a small, private girl’s school in Versailles.

Whitcomb had strong, female role models as a young girl, both at home and in the community. “My mother was the best role model ever. She overcame so many obstacles. There was nothing that she couldn’t do,” said Whitcomb. Her mother was a nurse and involved with the Frontier Nursing Service (FNS) founded by Mary Breckinridge in the 1920s. Breckinridge was the first to bring nurse-midwifery to the United States. Her nurses provided medical care to families in eastern Kentucky, travelling on horseback over treacherous terrain in the early days to reach remote homes. Whitcomb was an FNS-delivered baby, and she became the first junior courier for the organization when Mrs. Breckinridge’s young cousin came to visit for the summer and needed a companion. That meant being responsible for grooming the horses that the nurses rode to make their rounds and accompanying the nurses to help out. Later, when she was old enough, she was the first Leslie County courier during one of her summer breaks as a student.

Breckinridge, a descendant of U.S. Vice President John C. Breckinridge, knew philanthropic individuals from all over the world, and many visited the FNS. She also brought nurses to Kentucky, a lot of them coming from England. Whitcomb first heard opera at Wendover, the FNS headquarters, because the British nurses played their records. “It was almost like a cultural enclave dropped in the middle of southeastern Kentucky. My mother would make cakes and take them up to tea and there would be people from all over the world there. They would talk about the most marvelous adventures of travel and fighting disease around the world. It just opened my mind.

“Tea at four, sherry at five, and dinner at six,” said Whitcomb. “Very British . . . a little silver bell would ring and then servers would bring in the new biscuits. It was a British enclave in Leslie County.”

Whitcomb remembers overhearing a conversation between two women talking about flying airplanes when she was a junior courier. “Two women! They talked about flying in here (Kentucky) and flying in Africa. This stuck in my mind that *women* can fly airplanes,” said Whitcomb.

Later, while living in Washington, D.C., Whitcomb obtained her own pilot’s license.

**Getting Started**

At UK, Whitcomb majored in zoology, minored in chemistry, and obtained her secondary school teaching certificate. But she briefly flirted with the idea of becoming a banjo player during her junior year when a friend of hers taught Whitcomb how to play a song learned from the legendary J.D.Crowe. On Thursday nights, Whitcomb and friends would congregate at a Lexington establishment to hear Crowe play. One night Crowe let her play *“Cripple Creek”* on his banjo in the back room. She did pretty well until she realized she didn’t know how to end the piece. After that, Whitcomb took a fancy to the banjo and told her mother she wanted to take a semester off and be an apprentice banjo picker with J.D. Crowe.

“My banjo career lasted about as long as it took my mother to inflate her lungs to speak to me,” chuckled Whitcomb. “So Crowe never knew of my musical aspirations.”

Whitcomb’s first teaching job after UK was a half-year assignment at a middle school in Lexington. Family obligations took her to Alabama, where she landed a job as a science and chemistry teacher. But money was tight and Whitcomb learned she could earn more working nearby for the Alabama Department of Toxicology and Criminal Investigation. She applied for the job and was hired, she believes, because of her familiarity with the equipment being used in the Alabama lab.

“The instruments they were using for blood alcohol and drug analysis in the toxicology section of the laboratory were the same instruments I had used at UK in the chemistry laboratory. And no doubt, it was my familiarity of the instruments that put me ahead of other applicants,” said Whitcomb.

Whitcomb started on the ground floor in that Alabama forensic science laboratory. Several family moves put her in Washington, D.C., where she obtained a master’s degree in forensic science in 1976 at George Washington University.

**Examining Evidence for the U.S. Postal Inspection Service**

She was then hired by the U.S. Postal Service’s Headquarters’ Laboratory as a forensic chemist associate. Whitcomb worked her way up through the ranks of the Postal Inspection Service to become the first female director of the headquarters laboratory. Later, when the Postal Inspection Service laboratories were undergoing an accreditation process, she took on the role of manager-forensic services, for five laboratories across the nation: Chicago, New York, Memphis, and San Francisco, along with the Washington, D.C., lab.

The Postal Inspection Service, founded by Benjamin Franklin, is one of the oldest federal law enforcement agencies. The agency helps to fight criminals who attempt to attack the postal system or use it to defraud, endanger or threaten the public. Forensic scientists and technical specialists assist postal inspectors by analyzing material to identify and trace suspects. They also provide expert testimony if a case goes to trial.

Collecting evidence properly is very important, Whitcomb said. It must be collected so that it is not contaminated, is labeled properly, and there must be a proper chain of custody.

Lots of photographs are taken at the scene of a crime because one must be able to extrapolate back to where each piece of evidence was found. Once the evidence is collected, bagged, tagged, and properly stored, it’s sent to the laboratory.

“Forensic means debate,” said Whitcomb. “And forensic science is debate of science in the arena of the court.”

Whitcomb agreed that the O.J. Simpson trial might have served as a primer for how *not* to collect evidence. “They say that out of every tragedy some good comes,” said Whitcomb. “It has really helped crime labs to get funding for improvements.”

**Mail Bombs**

It’s not unusual for crime labs to work with each other, and Whitcomb worked with the FBI during the early days of what some might consider the most famous mail bomb case in recent history — the Unabomber. She was being trained when one of the first Unabomber devices was submitted to the laboratory for analysis. It had been sent through the mail, and so it fell under the Postal Service jurisdiction. It was one of two such devices in the lab and both were later tied to the Unabomber.

“I did a component comparison chart. Today we’d call it a spread sheet,” said Whitcomb. “Here are all the components from bomb A. Here are the components from bomb B. How do the components compare? What about the diameter of the pipes? What type of wires were used? What was the explosive filler?

“We took the triggering device to the FBI and asked ‘Have you ever seen one of these?’ And they said ‘Yes, we have one!’”

It was deduced that not only was the Unabomber mailing bombs, he was placing them as well, indicating a serial bomber.

“The way he designed his triggering mechanism was so unique they were easily recognized and associated with other devices,” said Whitcomb. “It’s similar to a Picasso expert being able to recognize a genuine Picasso if he saw one.”

The Unabomber episodes spanned approximately 18 years and ended in 1996 when Theodore Kaczynski was arrested. Whitcomb was still with the Postal Inspection Service at that time and managed the transfer of all documents and evidence to the FBI for trial preparation. Kaczynski eventually pleaded guilty and accepted a life term, so no one from the lab had to testify.

**The 21st Century**

Whitcomb was one of the first individuals to recognize the importance of digital evidence. While she was manager of forensic services in the ’80s, the lab received a computer as evidence. It was an obvious outgrowth of the documents section, but what to do with it? “All mail fraud evidence, all drug records, and every kind of con game going is now stored on computers,” Whitcomb said.

Video and audio enhancement also were important as evidence and she realized that as analog tapes became digital, digital evidence would be important in the future. “Instead of computer forensics and audio and video enhancement, why don’t we call it ‘digital evidence’ because it’s all going to be ones and zeros,” Whitcomb said to a colleague. “And it just depends on how you play it out — whether you look at it in typing, sound, or pictures — it’s all going to be digital.”

She was instrumental in getting other federal lab directors around the country to consider the future of digital evidence, and in 1997 held a session on digital evidence during a scheduled lab directors meeting. She asked the directors to attend and bring their chief “geek.” A definition of the term digital evidence was an outgrowth of that initial meeting, and interested parties continue to meet as the Scientific Working Group for Digital Evidence. Whitcomb is currently the executive secretary for that group.

**Personally Speaking**

Whitcomb has several hobbies, although she can’t devote as much time to them as she would like, due to family (she has two children) and job responsibilities. She still pursues the banjo, and she and her husband, a former FBI agent and forensic scientist, spend as much time as possible on their 34-foot trawler in Florida.

And true to form, Whitcomb hopes to get her Coast Guard Captain’s license when she retires so she can take the helm.

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