

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

How do you feel about your bank and the people who work there? Is your bank only a place to store cash until you're ready to use it? Or do you appreciate and utilize the many services it offers? Are its employees "non-persons"? Or friends?

If you own your own home, you probably gave your bank a mortgage when you acquired the property. You may have floated a car loan from your bank. Perhaps you've added a room to your house, built a garage, or enclosed a porch with the help of a home-improvement loan. You may have a personal loan from the bank. If you're in business, it's likely you've borrowed from time to time against accounts receivable.

On savings accounts your bank pays you interest on your balance; on loans it charges interest, of course. Your valuable papers may be kept in the bank's vault to protect them from loss by fire or theft, and to assure you can find those documents quickly when you need them.

You expect a lot of the people at the bank. When you approach a teller's counter, you expect a smile, a cordial exchange of greetings, prompt and pleasant service. If you've a financial problem, you seek advice from a bank officer. It's part of that person's job to guide and help you.

What else does your bank do? Bank people do much we're largely unaware happens. Bankers are ever-watchful to protect us all from fraud.

It's unbelievably easy for the unscrupulous to prey upon the majority of people; those who are honest and trusting themselves are not inclined to be suspicious of others. Most vulnerable of all are the naive, the poor, the frightened, the elderly, the confused... people who can least afford to lose their money.

And the crook who takes advantage of the helpless is as surely a thief as the mugger who robs at gun-point. All who steal operate with but a single goal; to separate you from your cash and make it their own.

Bankers, particularly those in smaller rural banks, are aware the danger exists here as surely as it does in large cities; they work closely with the police and other law-enforcement authorities to identify thieves, prove the case, and bring the criminal to justice.

How are they working together? To help train local bank personnel to provide adequate community and personal services, the Barnstable Police Department conducts Crime Prevention Seminars. At these meetings, bank people learn to spot fraudulent checks, photo-offset checks which can be such nearly-perfect copies they are almost indistinguishable from originals. Every transaction a bank handles could involve counterfeit bills, forgeries, or altered checks.

Recently this training paid off handsomely. It was early in the summer of 1977, when Mrs. Rosamund Fuller, Loan Officer, at the Osterville Branch of Cape Cod Bank & Trust Company, first became concerned about the account of one of the bank's customers. The depositor's account was overdrawn. The customer was elderly, alone, and sometimes forgetful. When the balance was insufficient to cover a check that came in, Mrs. Fuller telephoned the customer.

Certainly, it was agreed, the check was large; but it was quite all right to pay it, and the transfer from savings would be made immediately. Yes, indeed, an insurance premium. Quite all right.

The check for more than \$500 was honored. The customer's covering deposit came in the same day.

A similar incident occurred that August. Again, a call to the customer was made to verify payment. It was not only the large figure involved... \$1,750... that caught Mrs. Fuller's attention, but the check was made payable to CASH. And, once again, a transfer from a savings account covered the overdraft.

Now, however, Mrs. Fuller was deeply worried; a check in so large amount, payable to cash, was not only unusual; it was cause for real concern. Following up was definitely in order.

A quick investigation revealed the account to which both checks in question had been deposited was at the Sandwich Branch of Cape Cod Bank and Trust. Further, the account was held in the name of the Yankee Insurance Agency. The principals of the agency, a Mr. Lawrence H. Keneally and a Mr. Paul S. Vicini, were strangers to the officers in the Sandwich office, and had been in business less than two years. The account showed a healthy balance.

There are, of course, hundreds of different kinds of insurance policies available. Fire, theft, liability, auto, annuities, health, life... to name only a few. Most people purchase insurance for protection against losses, and most insurance companies and agents provide honest service in selling policies to their clients. A few, however, are thieves. Among all professions there are those who, after draining away your money, disappear and leave you with nothing more than the knowledge you've been had.

Mrs. Fuller telephoned the Barnstable Police Department. She talked with Detective Smith, expressing her suspicions. Yes, he confirmed, it certainly looked fishy; but was there any proof? Before the police could do anything, it would be necessary to show undeniable intent to defraud.

The sophisticated machines of the bank were put into action. The computer whirred and buzzed, lights glowed, numbers flashed, cards flipped. Accounts were checked, backwards and forwards; deposits and withdrawals, dates, times, account numbers, bank numbers. All were studied.

A pattern soon appeared. Many of this insurance agency's customers were older people; many were having difficulty keeping their records straight, were forgetful, confused and without guidance.

Mrs. Fuller believed strongly these particular customers of the bank were being bilked; but as yet she had no proof of fraud. Determined to uncover the trickery, if it were there to be found, and the help of bank teller Agnes Rodrigues, the accounts were monitored daily. It wasn't long before another piece of the puzzle fell into place and fit perfectly. A check was deposited, payable to the insurance agency's account; it was an obsolete check from a customer's old account. This was verified by Mrs. Rodrigues who was continuing to monitor each transaction of the accounts.

The net tightened.

And soon there was another check; this one cinched the matter. Mrs. Fuller and Mrs. Rodrigues had their proof at last. The signature was a forgery.

(To be continued next week.)