

Tag switching- new middleclass American crime

by Richard Lemon

Amid all the talk about the rise in crime, little notice has been taken of a strange new breed of thief who operates on such a niggardly level that he is giving a whole new meaning to the term "petty larceny."

He is the insidious, surreptitious, malicious, ubiquitous tag-switcher. He often looks like the man next door; in fact, he often is. And collectively, he is now taking hapless merchants for millions of dollars a year.

The *modus-operandi* of the tag-switcher is simple: he merely takes the price tag off an item in a store and replaces it with the tag off something else costing less. He works large, self-service outlets whose cashiers are often too harried to notice the difference. Even if he is caught, no charge will stick because there is no proof that he himself performed the switch.

And his numbers have grown so large that a single clerk at Arlen's department store in Atlanta these days often encounter 50 tag-switchers a week—counting only those she catches.

No job, moreover, seems too lowly for the hardened tag-switcher. He will swap labels on everything from television sets to underwear. He will remove an aluminum screw-off top with one price and replace it with another marked for less. He will even peel a 31-cent sticker off a can of Hi-C orange drink and pay the old, 28-cent price stamped underneath it.

Just such a Hi-C heist was witnessed recently by a reporter in a Chicago grocery store and the well-dressed, middle-aged tag-switcher, when confronted, showed no remorse. "If it was 28 cents last week," he said, malignantly, "it ought to be 28



cents this week"—and without batting an eye stepped into the check-out line.

Such incidents substantiate the claim of many experts that tag-switching is not the work of society's outcasts. "In many cases, it is the store's regular customers who are doing it," says Sgt. Morris Carstensen of the Oakland, Calif., police department. "It's not that they can't afford the item, it's just larceny in their hearts. I guess we all have it."

The explanation for this rash of middle-class larceny, in the eyes of some sociologists, is simple: it is the dark side of the consumer protest movement. Infuriated by rising prices and customer exploitation, and challenged by the chance to hoodwink a large corporation, the tag-switcher feels not merely tempted but justified in his pilferage. John M. Steiner, a sociologist at Sonoma State College in California, has been studying tag-switchers for three years and believes that most are respectable, middle class, and between 18 and 35 years old.

Other experts, however, have different views. One observer says tag-switching is usually perpetrated in large chain stores that attract "hordes of sleazy people who are always trying to pull fast ones." Another student of the genre claims that most tag-switching is actually done by store employees.

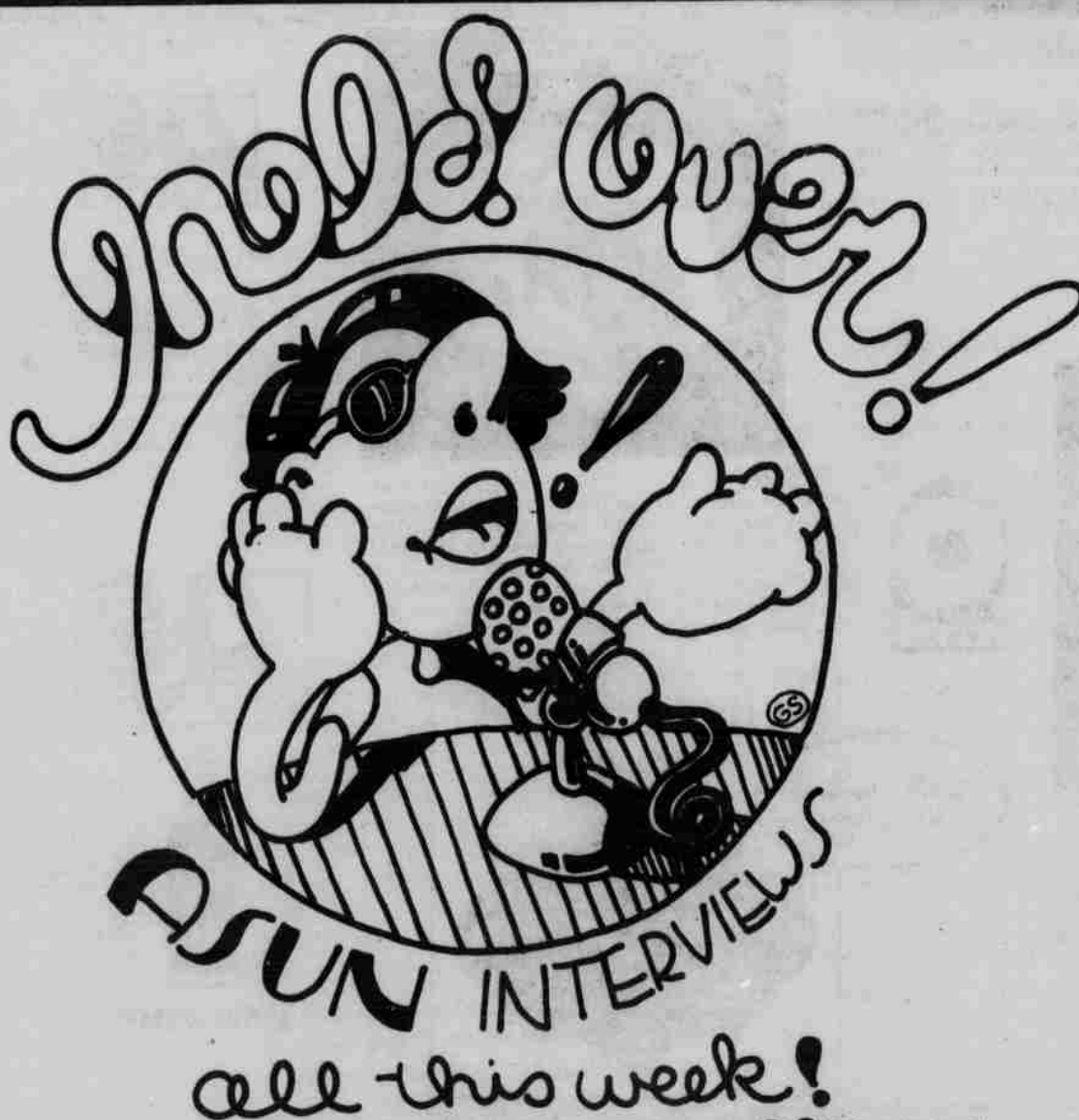
Whoever the culprits are, tag-switching, while less costly than actual shoplifting, has still been costly enough to create a whole new growth-industry: the making of switch-proof tags.

The Dennison Manufacturing Co., of Framingham, Mass., has developed four new devices for tag-switch prevention and is selling them to Korvettes, Bambergers, Zayre, Montgomery Ward and other big retail chains. The most elaborate is "Swiftach," a plastic string which is three inches long, has a large head at each end, and is shot through both a garment and its tag. The string then cannot be removed without tearing the tag.

For their part, many stores are beginning to introduce some preventive tactics of their own. Some are using coded tags, which bear numbers the cashier can check against a master list. If a customer brings up a \$49.95 dress with a \$19.95 price tag on it, the switch will show up when the tag's coded number is checked.

Other stores are giving cashiers a reward for each tag-switcher they nab. Alexander's, a New York departments store chain, now gives a cashier \$1 for every switched-tag she discovers, and handed out more than \$12,000 in the first three months of the year.

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