Uncovering crime

Fingerprinting computer helps police crack cases

By Chad Lorenz
Senior Reporter

Crimes that might have remained unsolved can now be cracked wide open by Lincoln police with the help of a fingerprinting computer.

Gene Rauscher, coordinator of the Lincoln Police Department's identification lab, said since its arrival last August, the computer had matched 70 prints to help solve crimes.

Before getting the computer, police kept ink-pressed fingerprints on thousands of cards labeled with the owners' names, Rauscher said. To find a match, police already had to know names of suspects.

If there were no suspects, police had a problem. But the computer eliminated that problem.

"That's the beauty of having the whole database — letting the electronics do the labor," Rauscher said.

The computer compares fingerprints found at the scene of a crime with more than 145,000 sets of fingerprints kept in a state-wide database, Rauscher said.

The computer matches the latent prints, which criminalists digitally scan, with any other prints that share at least seven similar features such as whorls, loops, deltas and ridge endings.

Once the best match is made, the computer gives the name of the person belonging to the identified prints.

The fingerprints scanned by the computer are usually better quality than those produced from ink prints, Rauscher said. The computer also magnifies and enhances the images for easier inspection, he said.

"We can do some things mechanically that we couldn't do with the printed fingerprint," he said.

> *"That's a lot of new tricks to teach to some old dogs."*
>
> **GENE RAUSCHER**
> identification lab coordinator

Rauscher said he was using prints found years ago to solve crimes still within the Nebraska statute of limitations.

Nebraska was one of the last states to catch on to computerized fingerprinting, Rauscher said, but waiting had an advantage.

Nebraska's system is more advanced than any other state law enforcement agency, he said. The system cost the state $1.5 million.

The computer automatically identifies most of the unique features of each fingerprint — intricate work usually done by the criminalists, Rauscher said.

The computer used by LPD is one of five networked across Nebraska, he said. The Omaha police department uses one, and the state patrol uses three.

Ten "livescan" units stationed at Nebraska correctional facilities replaced black ink pads and messy fingerprint cards, Rauscher said.

Correction officers now place the subject's finger on a plate-glass scanner, which digitizes the fingerprint and files it in the database, he said.

Sometimes the prints lack quality, but Rauscher said the officers were still getting used to the new technology.

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Corrections & Clarifications

Because of an editing error, a news analysis in Monday's Daily Nebraskan incorrectly stated that no planets had been found outside the solar system until this month.

In October, however, scientists announced the discovery of a planet circling the star 51 Pegasi in the constellation Pegasus.

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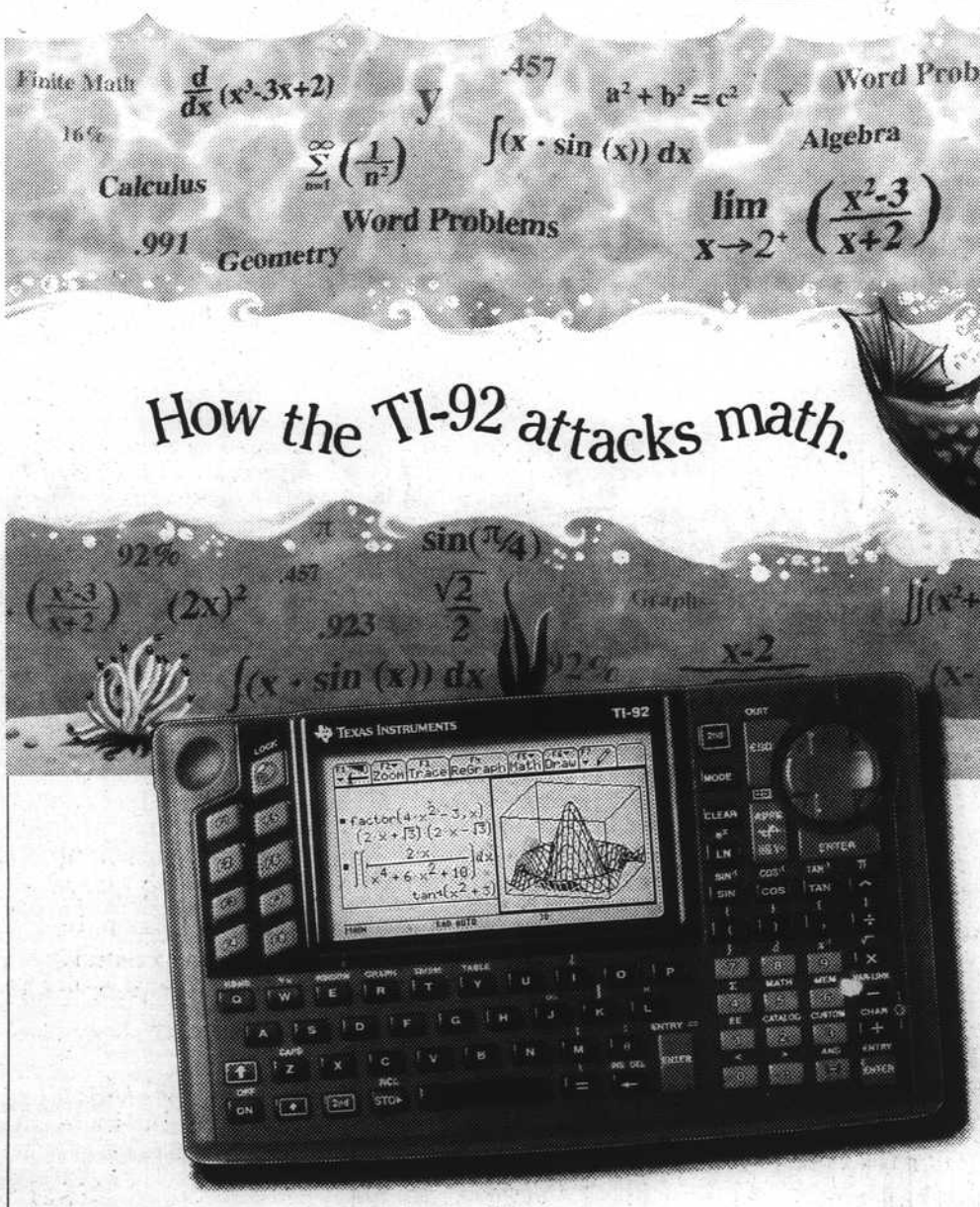

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