

•I Did It•

Why do people confess to crimes they didn't commit?

By [Robert Kolker](#) Published Oct 3, 2010



Frank Sterling, near the scene of Viola Manville's murder, this summer.
(Photo: Eric Ogden)

The woman was naked from the waist down, her pants and underwear tossed into the weeds. Her down jacket was pulled to her chest, exposing her left breast to the autumn chill. Her head and face had been pummeled, and embedded in the blows were pellets from a BB gun; smashed shards of the gun were found nearby in the brush. Her hair was so gummed with blood that the hunter who stumbled on her body couldn't tell that it had once been all white.

By nightfall on November 29, 1988, the whole upstate village of Hilton was talking about Viola Manville•74 years old and a grandmother, a free spirit, outspoken, and now a homicide victim. Hilton is a small, blue-collar farm town on the edge of Lake Ontario west of Rochester where a good number of people once worked on the assembly lines at Kodak. The town can be rough•one neighbor from a wealthier suburb calls it •a little Appalachia here in New York••but Hilton had never seen a murder like this. The Monroe County Sheriff's Office interviewed dozens of people: neighbors, family members, an ex-boyfriend, troubled teenagers.

They learned that Manville often had been seen walking along the same set of abandoned railroad tracks where her body was found, even after having been the victim of an attempted rape there three years earlier. The man arrested in that attack, Glen Sterling, was still in prison.

Glen Sterling had a brother named Frank. He was tall but hunched and painfully shy. Frank Sterling grew up just 100 yards from the abandoned railroad tracks, a mile from the spot where the victim's body was found. Both his parents were janitors, and Frank was the middle child, a chain-smoker so lonely that as a teenager he'd do almost anything to make a friend. His classmates at Hilton Central High called him Bug Chower, after a story got around that he ate insects to get attention. The name stuck. •He was the kid in school that everybody berated, says a former classmate, Rob Cusenz. •An easy mark. •

At the time of the murder, Frank was 25 and still living at home, working as a school-bus monitor. He had a clean criminal record, but to the police, he had the makings of a motive. What if Frank had been angry that his brother Glen was in jail? What if he'd been nursing a grudge against Manville ever since she accused his brother of trying to rape her? What if this wasn't a sex-related murder but revenge? It was all just speculation, and indeed when the police questioned Sterling, they found his alibi was solid•he'd been seen working on the school bus all morning, and he recited the plots of the *Smurfs* and *Chipmunks* episodes he'd watched that afternoon. There was no physical evidence linking him to the crime, and Sterling was not arrested. Within a few months, other leads also dried up, and the Manville murder went unsolved.

Almost three years later, on July 10, 1991, an unmarked police car with two plainclothes detectives pulled up to the Sterling family's house. This was the third time in four years that the police had come to see him. He was now almost 28. He had become a truck driver and moved to Alabama for a year, then came back when work dried up. That afternoon, he was tired; he'd just finished a job that took him through a half-dozen states over two days. The detectives said they'd been assigned to reinterview people of interest in the case, and they realized Sterling had never been polygraphed. They asked him to come with them to a Rochester police station. He agreed.

At 7 p.m., Sterling followed a polygraph technician, Mark Sennett, into a small room on the fourth floor, where he sat at a table and waited. Before hooking up Sterling to the lie detector, Sennett spent more than two hours asking him questions: Did he know why he was there? Why would the police think he might have killed Vi Manville? Early on, Sennett told him that Glen had told his fellow inmates that one of his brothers had killed Manville—a lie he'd made up on the spot to see how the suspect might react. Sterling was startled; he said (maybe a little too defensively, Sennett thought) that there was no way his brother would have said that. Sennett told Sterling he was in for a long night. When the polygraph man left the room at 10:45 p.m., Sterling began to panic. If he stayed, he feared, the police wouldn't stop—but asking to leave or for a lawyer, he thought, would be as good as admitting he was a murderer.



Frank Sterling's videotaped confession. Patrick Crough is on his right, Thomas Vasile on his left.
(Photo: Democrat and Chronicle)

At 11:20 p.m., another interrogator came to see Sterling. Patrick Crough, a young, confident detective, had worked just two homicide cases before the Manville murder, but he had already shown a natural talent for bonding with suspects. Crough spoke softly and leaned in close to Sterling, taking his time explaining his theory of the case. He talked about the love Sterling must have had for his brother and the anger he must have felt about his not being home for Thanksgiving. He told Sterling he thought he might have bottled up his anger about Glen being in jail. Maybe, Crough said, it was the reason for his upset stomach, his bad teeth.

Sterling admitted to Crough that he was angry enough to have •killed the bitch••and threw his lighter across the room, saying, •I didn't kill her, but I sure as hell could have.• Still, as midnight approached, Sterling maintained his innocence•and even asked to be hypnotized to prove he wasn't hiding anything. At about 12:45 a. m., Sennett returned and suggested what he called a •relaxation technique.• He had Sterling lie down on the floor and keep his feet elevated on his chair. He told him to take four deep breaths, then slid his own chair up to Sterling and held his hand. He asked Sterling if he could picture himself on those railroad tracks, running into a lady with white hair, arguing with her, seeing her lying naked in the bushes. He asked him how he felt about seeing her this way. •Happy,• Sterling said.

Seconds later, Sterling jumped to his feet and snapped, •This is a bunch of bullshit! I didn't do nothing!•

•You're right, this is bullshit,• Sennett said before walking out of the room. •I think you killed this lady, and I'm going to prove it.•

Sterling was trembling now, verging on hysteria. He had been in the small room for close to eight hours. Crough came in again at 2:40 a.m. and started rubbing Sterling's back. •I was whispering,• Crough said later, •simply that we would not dislike him, that we were here for him, we understood•we felt he should tell the truth to get it off his chest.• Crough's partner, Thomas Vasile, held Sterling's other hand, and the two detectives huddled around him for a long time, gently reassuring him. Finally, according to the police report, Sterling blurted out, •I did it • I need help.•

Just before dawn, at 5:22, Sterling made a videotaped statement. Onscreen for just over twenty minutes, Sterling can be seen speaking in a slow, defeated monotone, the ash of his cigarette burning to the nub. With Sennett working the camera, Sterling nods and agrees to every detail Crough and Vasile ask about•the BB gun, the naked body•breaking into sobs now and then as the two officers console him. He mentions the purple color of Manville's jacket•a crime-scene detail police said no one else could have known. Sterling's motive, he explains on the videotape, is exactly what Crough had said: •I was already upset about not having my

brother home for Thanksgiving. Turned out later she was that one my brother was in prison for. She said the wrong thing at the wrong time. Things transpired • After she said, •Your brother got what he deserved,' I hit her. •

Without witnesses or physical evidence linking him to the crime scene, prosecutors made the videotaped confession the centerpiece of their case. On September 29, 1992, Frank Sterling was convicted of murder and later sentenced to 25 years to life in prison, and sent to the state prison in Elmira. And several days after the trial, when a number of people in Hilton came forward saying that a 19-year-old man named Mark Christie was telling everyone he knew that he'd just gotten away with murder, the police didn't pay them much attention. The killer, after all, had confessed.

In the criminal-justice system, nothing is more powerful than a confession. Decades of research on jury verdicts has demonstrated that no other form of evidence—not eyewitnesses, not a video record of the crime, not even DNA—is as convincing to a jury as a defendant who says •I did it. • The police, of course, understand the power of confessions and rely on interrogation techniques to produce them quickly so they can clear their cases. This is the stuff of countless TV procedurals—the small interrogation room with a bare table and two-way mirror; the good-cop-bad-cop routine; the deployment of outright lies like •You failed the polygraph• or •Your prints are on the knife. • As a society, we have come to view these as acceptable, if blunt, tools of justice. We count on the integrity of police and safeguards like Miranda rights to prevent abuses, and we take it on faith that innocent people would never confess to crimes they haven't committed.

But, of course, they do. In recent years, the use of DNA evidence has allowed experts to identify false confessions in unprecedented and disturbing numbers. In the past two decades, researchers have documented some 250 instances of false confessions, many resulting in life sentences and at least four in wrongful executions. Of the 259 DNA exonerations tracked by a major advocacy group, 63 of them—or one out of every four—was found to have involved a false confession. Counting just the homicide cases,



Frank Sterling in 1992.
(Photo: Democrat and Chronicle)

the proportion shoots up to 58 percent of all exonerations. Even this number could be an underestimate. •Most of the documented false confessions have been in highly publicized murder cases,• says Steven Drizin, of Northwestern Law School's Center on Wrongful Convictions. •There is no reason not to think the same tactics would be as effective if not more effective in lesser cases, where the punishment that could flow from a confession would be less. • False confessions appear to be particularly common in New York State, in which twelve of the 27 DNA-based exonerations have turned out to be based on bogus admissions of guilt.

Researchers who study false confessions say the roots of the problem lie in the interrogation tactics themselves. The most influential such method is the Reid technique, a decades-old nine-step procedure designed to isolate and persuade a suspect to reveal his deceptions. Virtually every police department in the country has been influenced, directly or indirectly, by the Reid technique. Its defenders see it as the cornerstone of good police work, but its detractors say it places too much power in the hands of interrogating officers. In light of the new research documenting the scope of the problem, reformers in New York and elsewhere are calling for a wholesale reevaluation of the way the police question suspects. Frank Sterling's story should help their cause; it demonstrates just what can go wrong with the science of interrogation.

In 1940, a burly, clean-cut Irish Catholic cop named John E. Reid was thinking of quitting the Chicago police force. Reid was tough, a former guard on the DePaul University football team, but was never comfortable carrying a gun. At the last minute, he applied for a transfer to a desk job at the Chicago crime lab. He arrived in the midst of a technological revolution in police work. In 1931, a presidential panel known as the Wickersham Commission had exposed abuses brought by the •third degree,• the use of force by police to extract confessions. Police across the country had held suspects' heads underwater, hung them out of windows, and beaten them. In 1936,

the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Mississippi*•the brutal case of three black men who were beaten and whipped until they confessed•effectively outlawed confessions brought by brute force. Crime labs like Chicago's began developing new, more scientific means to solve cases: ballistics, document examination, and lie detection.

As much as anyone, John Reid can be credited with leading American law enforcement into the modern age. Reid's advances began with the lie detector. In 1945, he designed a chair that used inflated rubber bladders to detect a subject's jitters. In 1947, he essentially created the modern polygraph procedure with the •control-question technique,• a way of measuring a suspect's reaction to provocative questions. That same year, Reid left the crime lab and founded John E. Reid & Associates, which went on to train scores of polygraph analysts, including members of the CIA and the Mossad.

Reid's most influential work focused on the art of the interrogation. Soft-spoken and sincere, he had a knack for gently persuading suspects to confess. •It was almost a priestlike approach,• says George Lindberg, who worked for Reid for thirteen years. •He'd hold your hand and say, •You should really get this off your chest.'•• Reid played an important role in a number of high-profile Chicago murder trials, and other cities shuttled him in as a closer for their most sensitive cases. He was credited with personally helping to solve some 300 murders and coaxing 5,000 thieves to confess. Some in law-enforcement circles called him the most famous name next to J. Edgar Hoover. Reid's aim wasn't always true•in 1955, he got a Nebraska man named Darrel Parker to admit to killing his wife, and the real killer confessed 33 years later•but his faith in his own ability, and in the professionalization of his craft, led him to believe interrogations could be systematized to the point of being foolproof. •It's almost as if every crook reads the same book on what to do and say to give themselves away, • he liked to say.

In 1962, Reid and his mentor, a Northwestern Law professor named Fred Inbau, co-wrote the first edition of *Criminal Interrogation and Confessions*. Criminologists and law historians credit their method with defining the culture of police-interrogation training for the past half-century. The procedure basically involves three stages meant to break down a suspect's defenses and rebuild him as a confessor. First, the suspect is brought into custody and isolated from his familiar surroundings. This was the birth of the modern interrogation room.

Next the interrogator lets the suspect know he's guilty—that he knows it, the cops know it, and the interrogator doesn't want to hear any lies. The interrogator then floats a theory of the case, which the manual calls a •theme. The theme can be supported by evidence or testimony the investigator doesn't really have. In the final stage, the interrogator cozies up to the subject and provides a way out. This is when the interrogator uses the technique known as •minimization•: telling the suspect he understands why he must have done it; that anyone else would understand, too; and that he will feel better if only he would confess. The interrogator is instructed to cut off all denials and instead float a menu of themes that explain why the suspect committed the crime—one bad, and one not so bad, but both incriminating, as in •Did you mean to do it, or was it an accident?•



Mark Christie.
(Photo: Deomcrat and Chronicle)

Reid was hailed in his time as the man who made the third degree obsolete. But if his method wasn't physically coercive, it was certainly psychologically so. The Supreme Court's 1966 Miranda decision singled out the Reid method for creating a potentially coercive environment, citing it as one reason suspects needed to be informed of their right to remain silent. Reid and Inbau made minor modifications to the program, adding some language about Miranda to the 1967 edition of their manual, but they remained true believers. *Criminal Interrogation and Confessions* asserts that Reid investigators could judge truth and deception with 85 percent accuracy, a higher rate than anyone else has ever claimed to have achieved—or, as Reid once put it, •better results than a priest. •

In Elmira, Frank Sterling kept to himself, spending most of his time in what was called the college block, where inmates can study toward degrees. His family visited for a time, but his father died in 1995, and his mother stopped coming to see him after she developed heart problems and moved to Texas to live with her son Gary. Sterling had his own health issues. The dust at Elmira made it difficult for him to breathe, and some of the prisoners referred to him as Shaky because he trembled. •Each time I'd see Frank upon coming back from being at another prison, I'd see he had aged more—his face, his eyes,• says fellow inmate Jeff Deskovic.

Sterling had tried to recant his confession almost immediately after he gave it. He told his lawyer he was so worn down by the police that he didn't even remember what had happened that night. But the authorities weren't moved by that claim. Right after Sterling's trial, Sterling's lawyer filed to vacate the conviction on other grounds: He argued that the rumors surrounding Mark Christie, the man who had been heard bragging about killing Vi Manville after Sterling was convicted, provided sufficient justification to investigate whether he was the real killer. Christie, whose alibi fell apart under new scrutiny, was asked to take a polygraph and agreed. He fidgeted too much for the first test to be considered conclusive but took it again the next day and passed. On December 23, 1992, a judge refused to overturn Sterling's conviction. Christie, the judge said, was simply a young man who liked to brag.

In 1996, four years into Sterling's sentence, Mark Christie reentered the picture. If Sterling had been the weird kid in Hilton, Christie had a creepier reputation: He wore combat fatigues every day and took an eighteen-inch Bowie knife with him wherever he went. Now Christie had confessed to another murder, the brutal killing of a 4-year-old Rochester-area girl named Kali Ann Poulton. His confession prompted Sterling's appeals lawyer, Don Thompson, to file a new motion to overturn Sterling's conviction. If Christie were capable of killing Poulton, couldn't he have killed Vi Manville? A State Supreme Court judge rejected the motion. •Only Sterling confessed to authorities,• read the decision. •Only Sterling had a motive to kill Manville. Only Sterling knew facts that had not been publicized.•

Sterling and Thompson filed a total of four motions to vacate Sterling's conviction over the next eight years, but all of them failed. Then, in 2004, Thompson sought the help of the Innocence Project•the Benjamin Cardozo School of Law•based group led by Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld that has won wide acclaim for its work in freeing the wrongly convicted. The first time Neufeld watched Sterling's confession, even he thought he was guilty. But he soon came to see how everything pointed toward Christie. In 2005, Monroe County District Attorney Michael Green agreed to let the Innocence Project conduct DNA tests on some of Manville's clothing from the crime scene. In the fall of 2008, after three years of testing and legal maneuvering, word came back with what seemed like a match. The samples contained so-called touch DNA•a few skin cells•instead of the more definitive evidence found in blood and semen samples. Still, Neufeld says, •the profile had a very rare

type. And Christie has that type. •

In spite of the apparent match, a year passed, and the Monroe County D.A. still didn't take action. Last fall, an Innocence Project staff attorney named Vanessa Potkin personally visited Christie in prison to try to persuade him to own up to the murder. She spent part of two days talking to Christie, and while he almost seemed to acknowledge his role, and perhaps even to taunt her a bit, he admitted nothing. •His attitude was he's not responsible for Frank being there in prison,• Potkin says. •Frank's the one who talked. •



Patrick Crough in Rochester, this summer.
(Photo: Eric Ogden for New York Magazine)

Sterling's team decided on a new tactic. On January 22, Potkin visited Christie again, this time with a polygraph and interrogation expert named Richard Byington who worked for the leading company in the field: John E. Reid & Associates. Neufeld had been waiting for the right case to ask the Reid people for pro bono help•a sort of Nixon-in-China move•and the company's president, Joseph Buckley, had agreed. The hope was that Byington, an experienced and highly regarded interrogator, could persuade Christie to confess.

At first, Christie appeared to relish the visit. He boasted to Byington that he had stolen a copy of the Reid-

Inbau manual from the Hilton library to try and beat the polygraph he'd been asked to take after the Manville verdict. Of course, he'd aced it. Byington spent several hours trying to get Christie to warm up to him. Eventually, Christie seemed to grow impatient. •What do you want?• Byington remembers Christie saying.

Byington turned more aggressive. •I said, •Listen, here's the deal. There's no doubt that you committed the Manville murder. The physical evidence says it, and the DNA basically says it. Now you need to do the right thing so Frank, who hasn't done anything, can go home.'• But Christie, who still harbored thoughts of getting out one day, still wasn't inclined to talk. •Why should I say anything?• he told Byington.

Then Byington played another card. In a strange coincidence, the detective who had procured Christie's confession in the Kali Ann Poulton case was Patrick Crough, the same man who had gotten Frank Sterling to confess. Byington pulled out a copy of a newly published memoir Crough had written about child-abduction cases called *The Serpents Among Us* and pointed to the page where Crough calls Christie not just a child-killer but, he believed, a child molester. Christie became furious. After thirteen years in prison, he had no real sense of how well he was remembered in the outside world, and he had hoped Kali Ann's murder, and his role in it, might have been forgotten. Now he saw that Crough was working to keep the case alive•and accusing him of raping the young victim as well. He knew he'd never lead a normal life outside of prison now.

•You know more about this than you're telling me,• Byington said to Christie. And shortly after, Christie's confession began.

Earlier this year, on April 28, Frank Sterling was set free. He wept at the courthouse, hugged Don Thompson, and expressed disbelief. Peter Neufeld took a shot at the cops who interrogated Sterling eighteen years earlier. •There's no question that in this case,• Neufeld said, •the police officers had tunnel vision.•

In the early days of DNA exoneration, even the lawyers working the cases didn't know what to make of

the surprising number of false confessions they came across. •It wasn't until the late nineties that we began to see patterns emerge,• says Neufeld. •But still, it was running against 25 years of my own experience. Why would an innocent person confess?•

That question was eventually taken up by a handful of researchers, including the University of San Francisco School of Law's Richard Leo, Berkeley sociologist Richard Ofshe, John Jay College's Saul Kassin, and Northwestern Law School's Steven Drizin. False confessions now are generally understood to break down into three categories. There are voluntary false confessions, in which innocent people come forward on their own. Some, like John Mark Karr in the JonBenet Ramsey case, do it for the attention•others to self-punish or because they've lost touch with reality. Then there are what Leo calls •persuaded false confessions,• in which people are convinced by the interrogator that they actually committed the crime. In New York, 17-year-old Marty Tankleff famously falsely confessed to killing his parents in 1988 after being convinced he must have blocked it out. Finally, there are •compliant• false confessions, in which the suspect is psychologically coerced to confess even while believing he's innocent. They do it, Kassin writes, •to escape a stressful situation, avoid punishment, or gain a promised or implied reward • often coming to believe that the short-term benefits of confession relative to denial outweigh the long-term costs.• This appears to be what happened in the infamous Central Park jogger case. It also seems to explain Frank Sterling's confession.

Critics say the Reid technique is a major source of the problem. What was once seen as the vanguard of criminal science, they argue, is nothing more than a psychological version of the third degree, in which police have •carte blanche in the interrogation room for any tactics shy of physical abuse,• says Drizin. Others believe police shouldn't be able to mislead suspects with lies or manipulate them by suggesting that what they did isn't so bad. Great Britain's police aren't allowed to employ those tactics, and Kassin says the best available data suggest the efficacy with which they arrest and convict criminals isn't diminished by that.

Reid detractors also say that police often feed evidence to suspects, which accounts for why false confessors sometimes know details about a crime that they wouldn't otherwise know. In a recently published study, University of Virginia law professor Brandon Garrett found that in 97 percent of the false-confession cases he studied from the DNA era, the wrongly accused suspects were said to have supplied such telling

details—facts either picked up elsewhere or provided by police. Interrogators also tend to be overconfident of their abilities to spot guilty suspects. No study so far (aside from Reid’s own research) has shown the police to be any better than average at picking out liars. In fact, they’re sometimes worse. In one 1987 study, police officers watched videotaped statements of witnesses, and their record at identifying deceptive testimony was no better than the average person’s. Overconfidence can blind investigators to evidence suggesting that the suspect is innocent. The pressure to resolve cases quickly and tidily can have a similar effect, especially in high-profile cases. Simply wearing suspects down is another issue: At some point, a given suspect will say anything just to make the immediate discomfort stop. •Why don’t they beat people anymore?• asks Don Thompson. •It’s not because they’re particularly enlightened now. It’s because the psychological coercion is so much more effective.•

Frank Sterling’s confession, Thompson believes, was marked by a number of these problems. After Sterling says he hit Vi Manville, Patrick Crough asks Sterling what he hit her with. Sterling says, •My hand.• A moment later, Crough says, •Frank, as best as you can remember, and I know this is difficult for you, did something happen with that BB gun?• Only after being prompted that way does Sterling say, •Yeah, I started hitting her with it.• Mark Sennett, the polygraph examiner, lied to Sterling about his brother Glen. Crough teased out the motive and alternately pressured and consoled Sterling. Sterling knew about the supposedly telling crime-scene detail of Manville’s purple jacket, but Thompson says many people in Hilton would have seen her on her daily walks in that jacket. Finally, there was Sterling’s state of mind. Having been held alone, without counsel, in a small interrogation room and questioned for twelve hours, he became isolated, exhausted, and vulnerable to manipulation. Over the years, Thompson and Crough had crossed paths in Rochester, running into each other around town or at the supermarket. •I’m never really comfortable when I’m talking to him,• Thompson says. •He’s an accomplished interrogator, which translates to being an accomplished manipulator.•

Shortly after Sterling’s release, I had dinner with Crough in Rochester. Calm and self-assured, he did what he could to sound gracious about Sterling’s ordeal. But he couldn’t help but also be defensive. He insisted he did good work that night in 1991. •His responses kept the interview going,• he told me. •As a homicide detective, you don’t walk out on an interview when the person’s giving you a little something.• Crough pointed out that he was the one who visited Christie in prison—he volunteered to do it and talked him into giving his DNA sample when Christie didn’t have to do that—and it was his book that helped persuade Christie to confess. After a

while, though, some contrition bled through. •Like that hasn't haunted me?• he told me. •I've been doing interrogations in major crimes for twenty years. This is the first time I've ever had one go bad on me. That's not a bad statistic, you know. •

The law-enforcement community insists current interrogation techniques are sound. The courts have upheld tactics like deceit and minimization, Reid president Joseph Buckley notes, and without such methods, police would have a far more difficult time eliciting confessions from suspects who are, in fact, guilty. When false confessions do happen, Byington says it's not the Reid technique that's to blame but the misapplication of it. The police's main mistake with Frank Sterling, he says, was starting in on their suspect before they were reasonably sure he was guilty. Then, when Sterling gave Crough and the others questionable information, they blindly barreled ahead. •When they ask Frank what he was wearing, he says he thinks he was wearing a T-shirt and jeans,• Byington says. •Well, if Frank was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, he'd have frozen to death. • In Byington's opinion, Sterling had essentially been fed information over twelve long hours, then encouraged to spout it back over twenty minutes of video. In a good confession, Byington says, the suspect should do about 80 percent of the talking, narrating their experience for the benefit of the police, not saying yes and no to a series of prompts.

To prevent false confessions, interrogation critics say there's a solution so simple that it's remarkable it hasn't happened already: videotaping every minute of every police interrogation. Where the idea was once impractical, they note, the digital era changed that. Some law-enforcement officials fear that if juries see how the sausage is made, they might blanch at convicting even guilty suspects. In fact, Kassin's recent research indicates that when people see two versions of a false confession•one with just the confession and another that includes the entire interrogation•they become more effective jurors, correctly acquitting the innocent and convicting the guilty. Still, eighteen states and more than 800 jurisdictions have already started taping interrogations. New York has moved slowly•when they videotape at all, police tend to tape only confessions, not whole interrogations•but the New York State Bar Association has called for taping the full questioning session.

Earlier this year, the NYPD announced with some fanfare that it would test recording interrogations in two precincts. Last week, spokesman Paul Browne told me the bids have been selected, and that the 67th Precinct in Brooklyn and 48th Precinct in the Bronx will soon be outfitted with interrogation rooms ready for digital recording. Tests should start after the first of the year. Commissioner Ray Kelly •is open to seeing what we learn,• Browne says, though in the spring, Kelly told me deploying such a system throughout the NYPD was a complicated endeavor, and that it wasn't clear to him yet that the effort would be worth the results.

One group solidly against tape-recording in New York is the Detectives' Endowment Association, whose president, Michael Palladino, holds on to the belief that what happens in an interrogation room is too messy for some jurors to tolerate. He also worries that juries won't be the only ones influenced. •Every taped interrogation can be used as a training film for criminals on what to expect from the police during an interrogation,• he says. •Certainly, the element of surprise is gone.•

Curiously enough, however, research shows that police and prosecutors forced to tape their interrogations often wind up supporting the practice. One Minnesota prosecutor famously called it •the best thing we've ever had rammed down our throats.• A taped record can mean fewer motions to suppress and fewer claims that suspects were unduly deceived or abused. Joseph Buckley says the Reid method and taping can go hand in hand. •When somebody claims there was coercion, the record speaks for itself,• he says. Even Patrick Crough says he believes in it, calling it •a tool to let the jury see what we see.•

Don Thompson has thought a great deal about what would have happened in 1992 if the jury had been able to see the whole Sterling interrogation and not just the final twenty minutes. •You can't describe to a jury the effects of isolation over a twelve-hour period,• he says. •I'd make them sit through the whole twelve hours. Because at that point, even for the jurors sitting in the jury box, it begins to feel like a hostage crisis.•

Frank Sterling is standing on the railroad tracks in Hilton behind his old house•a small ranch-style building on a two-lane road, about a quarter-mile from the high school. •When we first moved here, the trains were still

running through,• he says, pointing at the tracks. •Then they disbanded it. •

As we walk down the gravel path, Sterling points in the direction of the Big M supermarket he walked to on the afternoon Vi Manville was killed. To get to the store, he had to cross a train trestle over a creek and then leave the tracks, walking along the opposite creek bed. To get to where Manville was killed, Sterling would have had to continue on the tracks away from the market••another mile and a half down the road,• he says, laughing.

Sterling is heavier now than he was when he was sent to prison. His teeth were neglected for so long that a week before his release, he had nine of them pulled. At the time, he joked to his lawyers that he put them under his pillow for the Exoneration Fairy. He can't drive a truck because of medical issues, but he hopes to find computer work. For now, he is living with friends one town over from Hilton. He drives to Rochester when he needs to see his lawyers about finding health benefits, job training, and donated clothes. Sterling says he's angry, but he tries not to dwell on it. •I don't want it to tear me up. • He hasn't decided whether to file a civil suit for wrongful conviction. The first night he was out, he says, he woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of rain on a windowpane. •It was something I couldn't hear for eighteen years,• he says. •It's amazing. Something so simple that happens every day. Something everyone complains about. •

Is it difficult being back here? •No,• Sterling says. •I enjoyed growing up here. • The creek is where he liked to fish for salmon. The train trestle is where kids liked to drink and where Frank walked his dogs Outlaw and Shebia. For a time, he says, he considered Vi Manville a friendly presence on the tracks. •She'd reach into her pocket and give the dogs a cookie. •

When Crough and his partner first came to Sterling's house in 1991, he says, •they claimed they were looking at others. But I have a feeling they were focused on, •Okay, we'll make it look like we're looking into others, but he's the one who probably did it for revenge.'• He agreed to the polygraph, he says, •because I didn't do it. I thought, *Okay, well, I've got nothing to hide, so I should pass with flying colors.* •

So why did he confess? •They just wore me down,• he says, shaking his head. •I was just so tired. Remember, I hadn't had any sleep since about 2:30 Tuesday night. •

He tries to explain what it was like to spar with the police for twelve hours.

•It's like, •Come on, guys, I'm tired•what do you want me to do, just confess to it?'

•No, we want the truth.'

•Well you're not fucking listening to the truth, I'm telling you. What more do you want me to say?'

•We want to know what happened.'••

Sterling says the police never asked him to say in his own words what happened. •••Yes' and grunts•that's basically what the whole confession is about. • Regarding the color of Manville's coat, he says, •I knew in the fall she always wore her purple jacket. •

I ask him what he thinks when he watches the twenty-minute confession video now. •When you look, you'll notice I shake a little bit,• he says. •But to hold on to the whole cigarette and let the whole cigarette go to ash and never take a drag off of it? I'm a smoker. Normally, I would be sitting there dragging on it, not letting the whole cigarette just sit there burning down. Yeah, I was not in the right mind, looking back at it now. •

He knows some people will never understand why he admitted to a crime he didn't commit. •They say, •Why confess if you didn't do it?' But they don't have the whole understanding of what I was going through at the time. It's like, yeah•I wanted to get it over with, get home, and get some sleep. •

He laughs softly. •Eighteen years and nine months later, I finally get to go home.•