

# WEST COUNTY TIMES

Monday, March 7, 2005

ContraCostaTimes.com

Edition of the Contra Costa Times  
Volume 93, Number 280

23 cents plus tax

Posted on Mon, Mar. 07, 2005

## Privacy predicaments catch gumshoe's eye

By Dan Laidman  
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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As a veteran private investigator, she has had some cloak-and-dagger adventures, but she saves those stories for late-night bull sessions with fellow PIs. On her trio of blogs, Thompson chronicles the intricate methodology of the investigator and what she sees as the threats to the field in an increasingly paranoid society.

### MONDAY PROFILE



INVESTIGATOR TAMARA THOMPSON decided last fall to create a clearinghouse for information in the trendy format of the Web log. Her blogs are a mix of seasoned detective and modern technology. DAN ROSENSTRAUCH/TIMES

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TIMES STAFF WRITER

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Privacy has been a contentious national issue in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and resulting legislation like the Patriot Act. Thompson's writing brings to light another important question that has received less attention: as the government gathers more information, has it also gone too far in restricting such access for private citizens?

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■ **NAME:** Tamara Thompson  
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 ■ **OCCUPATION:** Private investigator  
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 ■ **CLAIM TO FAME:** Proprietor of various blogs, including: [youarenews.blogspot.com/](http://youarenews.blogspot.com/) and [tamaraforpisoninvestigations.blogspot.com/](http://tamaraforpisoninvestigations.blogspot.com/)

#### ONLINE

■ Read excerpts from Thompson's blog at [ContraCostaTimes.com](http://ContraCostaTimes.com)

lectual dilemmas is only half the reason the Oakland resident became an investigator. She entered the field after doing academic and nonprofit research, but while she wanted to use her analytical abilities she hoped to avoid the isolation of the Ivory Tower. Thompson's routine mixes records research and phone work

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Wrestling with such intellectual dilemmas is only half the reason the Oakland resident became an investigator. She entered the field after doing academic and nonprofit research, but while she wanted to use her analytical abilities she hoped to avoid the isolation of the Ivory Tower.

Thompson's routine mixes records research and phone work with face-to-face interviews and, occasionally, confrontations. She has spent months researching genealogical records and data on plastic pipes, but she has also been chased, pushed and threatened.

Once Thompson talked to a witness in a criminal case in the exact spot where the person was later gunned down.

"Three times in 15 years," she said, shrugging off the dangerous incidents. "You get more than that when you're a kid on a playground."

Thompson's mix of an old-school shoe leather PI background and her technological savvy is what makes her blog influential, said Jan Tucker, the chairman of the California Association of Licensed Investigators.

"You've got some of the younger PIs coming out and some of them, not all, all they've ever done is sit in front of a frickin' computer," he said. "She can get the message out there that this is the way we used to do it, compared to what you're doing now, and maybe you can learn something."

Ann Murphy, a Hayward personal injury and workers' compensation attorney, said Thompson's reputation is equally strong among attorneys. She often hires her to gather information on salvaged cars, businesses and people.

"If an attorney ever asked me for the name of somebody," Murphy said, "she would be the one."

A "know-it-all" by nature, Thompson saw the same questions being asked multiple times on an online discussion group for investigators. She decided last fall to create a clearinghouse for information in the trendy format of the Web log with daily updates.

Thompson does more than just link news stories about public records and information access. She analyzes the implications for her audience of legal professionals. The goal is partly to establish herself as an expert to get more work from the attorneys who read the site but also to promote activism.

"I definitely encourage people to take action to protect their access to information," she said.

A key theme of the blogs is that privacy concerns should not lead to the across-the-board restriction of information. Thompson says there is a distinction between a licensed investigator's work and that of a firm like ChoicePoint, the data-gathering company currently embroiled in scandal because it apparently sold personal information -- including data on some 30,000 Californians -- to criminals posing as legitimate businesses.

Thompson notes that when she tracks someone down at another's request, such as a birth parent or former romantic partner, she gives the client's contact information to the person she finds and not the other way around.

"If people want to make a bridge," she said, "we act as intermediaries."

Jennette Gayer, a consumer advocate for the California Public Interest Research Group, a nonprofit group that has advocated for more government-enforced privacy protections, acknowledged that "it's a hard line to draw," and that laws need some flexibility.

However, Gayer said that even the ChoicePoints of the world can put a socially conscious spin on their work, pointing to clients who use their data for employee background checks.

"It's so much easier now than ever before to find information on the Internet," she said. "But also to collect this information and crunch it and spin it into a product that marketers and others want."

Thompson cites limits on access to "credit headers," or identifying information at the top of consumer credit reports, as an example of restrictions that go too far by excluding licensed private investigators.

"I've had cases where people were owed money and I had to track them down and let them know," she said. "I couldn't have done that without a Social Security number."

Such cases are Thompson's favorite part of the job because they combine the intellectual challenge of locating someone with an emotional payoff. Another time she tracked a homeless woman to a meeting with her drug dealer to let her know she was entitled to a share of a settlement from a discrimination case against a former employer.

Thompson's work is as likely to bring her into corporate suites as homeless shelters. She traces her easy ability to relate to all kinds of people to her upbringing in a military family. She traveled constantly as a child and learned to make fast friends.

After graduating from San Francisco State, Thompson worked a variety of research jobs. A stint with the anti-nuclear Livermore Action Group in the mid-1980s introduced her to a private investigator in need of an assistant.

Her first job involved interviewing a bank security guard in connection with a criminal defense case. They chatted furtively in Thompson's car, but soon he opened up.

"I was able to win his trust very quickly, and it was very powerful," she said.

Thompson did investigative work for labor unions for several years before tiring of the politics. She became licensed in 1989 and opened her own firm in Oakland. While the state does not keep such statistics, Tucker of the California Association of Licensed Investigators said that at that time there were very few female private investigators. Today, about 12 percent of association members are female.

At one point Thompson started a group for female PIs called Sisters in Crime. While the "old boy network" mentality of some peers who came from law enforcement could be isolating, Thompson said, she has always believed that her gender helps get people to open up.

Sometimes that makes the job resemble therapy. Recently she took a call from a man with a "long rap" about how his girlfriend was absent at odd hours. She said it sounded like his girlfriend was moonlighting as a prostitute.

"He said 'yes,'" she said. "I think he just wanted someone to say it to him up front."

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## PROFILE

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