

The O.J. Simpson Case: The Sock Evidence Reconstructed

In the case of *People v. Simpson* in 1994, O.J. Simpson was charged with the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend, Ronald Goldman. The pair of socks allegedly found in the O.J. Simpson bedroom was an important piece of evidence in this case. When defense lawyers studied the two sets of images (video and photographic) made by the Los Angeles Police Department, they noted that in the video set (taken to protect the LAPD against damaged property claims), there were no socks to be seen at the foot of the defendant's bed. Yet, in the photographic set (taken to record the crime scene), a pair of socks appears.

The defense made further inquiry, studying the documentary evidence specifically with regard to time; that is, when did the criminalist examine the socks in the bedroom, and when was the video made? Their conclusion was that the video was taken before the criminalist examined the socks. The fact that they were not to be seen in the video was significant: it allowed the defense to assert that they were planted, and supported the theory that their defendant was being framed. Thus, for crime scene reconstruction purposes, pinpointing the exact time of certain actions or events can be crucial.

In the Simpson case the criminalist's chronological notes indicated that the stains in the downstairs foyer were tested for blood at 4:30 p.m., the second-floor bedroom's socks were tested at a time not specified, and the second-floor bathroom was tested at 4:50 p.m. The criminalists testified that they did not go upstairs until after testing the stains in the foyer;

the socks, therefore, were examined in those intervening 20 minutes. The video camera's clock timer indicated that the bedroom pictures were made at 3:15 P.M.; the prosecution, however, introduced evidence that the actual time was 4:15 P.M., the clock not having been adjusted for Daylight Saving Time. If the jury accepted this explanation, it still means that for at least 15 minutes before the criminalist got to the bedroom, no socks were present at the foot of the bed. One can only wonder how much this weighed in the verdict.

Upon being examined for blood a month or so later, one of the socks was found by prosecution experts to contain blood from the victim, Nicole Brown Simpson. Subsequently, it was examined by defense bloodstain expert Professor Herbert L. MacDonell. Color Figures A–D (see color photos) and the paragraphs following will explicate some of the details in his testimony. If we think of the human foot as two-sided (its ankle bone having a left and a right side), we can refer to one side of a sock on its wearer's foot as the left (ankle) panel and the other side, the right (ankle) panel. Each panel can have an inside and an outside surface (see Color Figure B).

When MacDonell and Dr. Henry C. Lee examined the sock from which a piece of the stained area was missing (Color Figure A), using a stereo microscope, they noted the presence of blood on the surface of some fibers surrounding the hole (side 1 in Color Figure B). By no means were all of these fibers covered with blood (Color Figure C). On the inside of the right panel (opposite the site of the cut-out portion in Color Figure A, and represented as side 3 in Color Figure B) they observed about 12 microscopically small "balls" or solidified drops of a reddish-colored substance, each having hardened around a strand of fiber (see Color Figure D, a photograph of one of the red "balls" magnified about 150x). This indicates that the substance had to have been in a liquid state when it came in contact with the fiber, thus allowing it to flow around the fiber and then solidify. Clearly, this could not happen while the sock was on the suspect's foot.

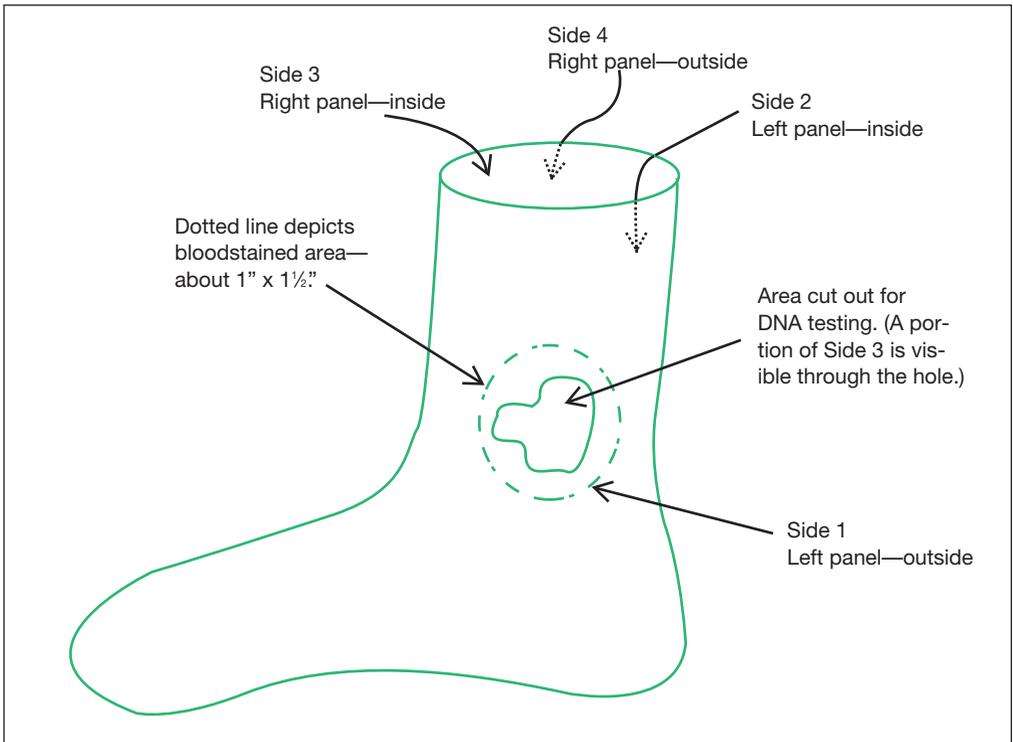
Blood dries quickly, especially the small quantity present here. Accordingly, the transfer to side 3 could not have occurred after the sock was worn for more than a few minutes, since travel time from the homicide scene to Simpson's home was sufficient for the crime scene blood to dry. The shiny red balls (Color Figure D), coupled with the partial transfer of blood (limited to the top surface of the woven fibers—see Color Figure C), allowed MacDonell to testify that the sock was lying on a flat surface when the reddish liquid was applied by means of a swiping, lateral motion. Some liquid penetrated the outside of the left panel (side 1 of Color Figure B) to the inside surface of the left panel (side 2 of Color Figure B), with some liquid passing through to the inside of the right panel (side 3 of Color Figure B). A portion of the left panel was cut out subsequently for DNA testing: no blood was present on the outside of the right panel (side 4 of Color Figure B).



Professor Herbert L. MacDonell and Dr. Henry C. Lee.

Color Figure A

The outside of left (ankle) panel of one of the woven socks found in O.J. Simpson's bedroom. A portion was cut out for DNA testing. The part visible through the cut-out area is the inside of the right ankle panel (side 3 in Color Figure B).

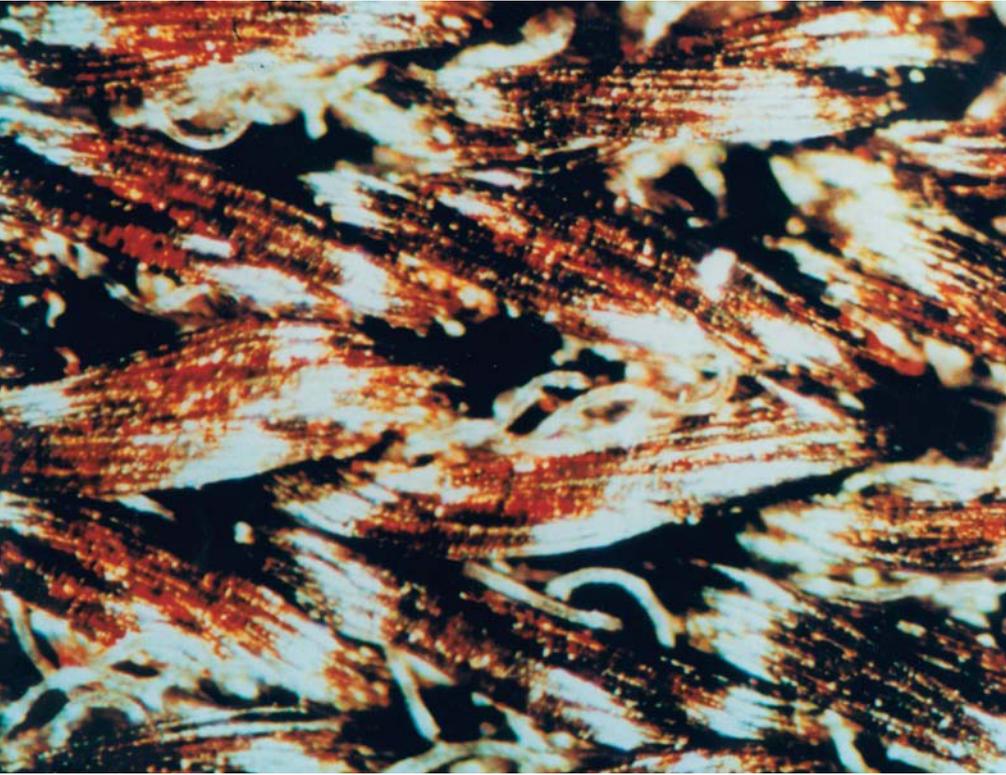


David Zemke.

Color Figure B

Schematic drawing of Color Figure A. The four sides of a sock are numbered to assist in understanding the significance of trial testimony. Dotted arrows point to invisible surfaces (sides 2 and 4).

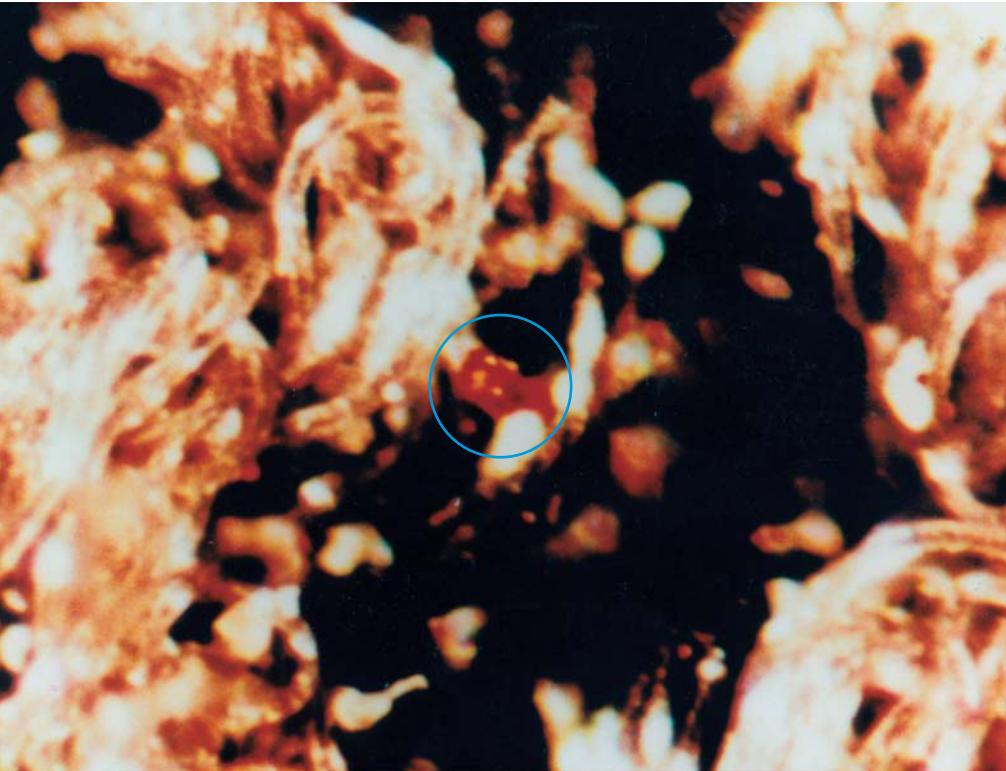
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Color Figure C

Photomicrograph (about 70x) taken of the fibers (around the cut-out hole) on the outside surface of the left (ankle) panel (see Color Figure A and side 1 in Color Figure B). Blood is visible, but only on the surface of some fibers.

Professor Herbert L. MacDonnell and Dr. Henry C. Lee.



Color Figure D

Photomicrograph (about 150x) taken of the inside of the right (ankle) panel (side 3 of Color Figure B and visible through the cut-out hole in Color Figure A). The circled shiny red ball-like object (one of several) must originally have been in the liquid state, thus permitting it to flow around the fiber and solidify.