

When it comes to catching crooks, it's all in the name

By Catherine E. Shoichet, CNN
July 15, 2010 9:08 a.m. EDT

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Experts say nicknames are part of a proven strategy for catching criminals
- Early criminal monikers include "Jack the Ripper" and "Pretty Boy Floyd"
- Names are created based on what suspects do and how they look
- Marketing professor says it "brands the bandit"

(CNN) -- The so-called Barefoot Bandit's quirky nickname has grabbed as much attention as his alleged exploits.

But crime-fighting experts say such names are more than just a catchy way to remember suspects. They're part of a proven strategy to help nab them.

"It's an investigative tool," says Bill Rehder, a retired FBI special agent and author of "Where the Money Is: True Tales from the Bank Robbery Capital of the World." During his 31-year career investigating bank robberies for the FBI's field office in Los Angeles, California, Rehder says he often relied on nicknames to help keep suspects straight and generate publicity.

Under his watch, any robber who struck more than once got a name.

Rehder dubbed a particularly clean-cut culprit the Boy-Next-Door Bandit. A man who robbed banks with one glove became the Michael Jackson Bandit. And a thief with acne-covered skin earned the nickname Clearasil Bandit.

"You knew if you had a good picture and a good nickname that you were going to solve your case," he says.

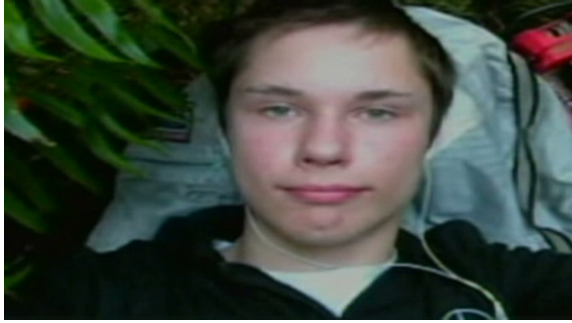
Colton Harris-Moore was originally called the Barefoot Burglar because he was shoeless when he allegedly broke into homes while his victims were out.

But as media coverage of his alleged crimes continued, his nickname changed to "bandit."

His alleged crime spree spanned several states and ended on Sunday after a high-speed boat chase in the Bahamas.



Video: Who is the 'Barefoot Bandit' suspect?



Video: 'Barefoot Bandit' caught in the Bahamas



Video: 'Barefoot bandit' sets foot in Miami



Video: Mother of 'Barefoot Bandit' speaks

Investigators have used the technique of giving nicknames for years, dating back to the 19th century serial killer Jack the Ripper and the Depression-era days of Pretty Boy Floyd.

"It really depends on their M.O., what they do, how they're dressed," says Special Agent Ross Rice, who comes up with nicknames at the FBI's field office in Chicago, Illinois.

In a metropolitan area that has averaged more than 200 bank robberies per year the last five years, Rice says it isn't easy to find unique names.

"It's probably the toughest part of my job, to come up with names in a timely manner that aren't repetitive, that aren't offensive and that are somewhat catchy," says Rice.

Recently, authorities apprehended a suspect Rice had named the Double Dip Bandit because he allegedly always robbed the same bank twice.

The nicknames investigators create for crime suspects have a lot in common with modern-day ad campaigns, says Ira Kalb, assistant professor of clinical marketing at the University of Southern California.

"It kind of brands the bandit," he says.

Just as the GEICO gecko helps customers remember the company's name when shopping for car insurance, a good bandit name helps the public remember the characteristics of a suspect on the loose, Kalb says.

"When you give something a name, it gives it more identity," he says.

In Seattle, Washington, investigators dubbed an alleged bank robber Attila the Hun for the messy way she fixed her hair.

Outside Atlanta, Georgia, the Dork Bandit earned his nickname for his passive demeanor and thick prescription glasses.

In Massachusetts, federal agents are looking for the Burly Bandit, a portly fellow suspected of holding up 10 banks in New England since April.

[Read more about the Burly Bandit](#)

In New Jersey, the Mad Hatter made headlines when he wore different hats during heists.

More recently, authorities in California apprehended the Grim Sleeper, a serial killer suspected in 10 slayings who allegedly took long breaks between attacks.

They've also been on the lookout for the Geezer Bandit, a man in his 60s or 70s who is suspected of robbing at least 10 banks.

Sometimes, Rehder says, the names are so catchy that culprits cling to them even after they're caught.

When researching his book, Rehder learned some of the bank robbers he helped arrest still used the names to refer to each other in prison.

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--Bill Rehder, retired FBI agent

But the approach isn't always popular. Rehder says that after authorities arrested the Clearasil Bandit, the suspect threatened to sue the FBI, claiming prison guards and fellow inmates were mocking him. He hasn't been the only critic.

Some say that nicknames can send the wrong message by turning criminals into celebrities.

Harris-Moore, for example, has more than 80,000 supporters on an unofficial Facebook fan page. The studio 21st Century Fox has purchased the rights to a movie about his alleged exploits.

But Rehder says that nicknames are nothing more than a tool for investigators to catch criminals.

"It doesn't make a hero out of them. It helps bring somebody to justice quicker," he says.

If it weren't for his memorable nickname, the Barefoot Bandit could still be on the loose, Rehder says.

"If the nickname helped catch him and get a little interest, so much the better," he says. "Someone could have gotten hurt down the line."