

# ROJAS MURDER CASE

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Mr. Deva Nandan Joshy

Rojas Murder Case known by the name of the culprit “Francisca Rojas” is believed to be the first criminal found guilty through fingerprint evidence in the world.



Fig.1: Francisca Rojas (to the left)

On 29 June 1892, 27-year-old Rojas murdered her two children in Necochea, Buenos Aires Province, Argentina. Her six-year-old son, Ponciano Carballo Rojas, and his four-year-old sister Feliza were found brutally murdered in their home.

Before diving deep into the case study , we will look forward to the science behind fingerprints which played a

## WHAT IS A FINGERPRINT?

A fingerprint is an impression left by the friction ridges of a human finger. Human fingerprints are detailed, nearly unique, difficult to alter, and durable over the life of an individual, making them suitable as long-term markers of human identity. They may be employed by police or other authorities to identify individuals who wish to conceal their identity or to identify people who are incapacitated or deceased and thus unable to identify themselves,

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as in the aftermath of a natural disaster.

The scientific study of fingerprint and palm patterning is referred to as “dermatoglyphics,” a term that was invented in the 1920s.

There have been many classifications that were put forward by scientists on fingerprints. But in this case study it was Juan Vucetich and his famous Argentine classification which played a crucial role.

## **JUAN VUCETICH AND THE ARGENTINE SYSTEM**

Juan Vucetich was born in Croatia and immigrated to Argentina in 1882. Within four years, he was working at the Buenos Aires Police Department, collecting arrest and crime statistics. Within a few more years, Vucetich became head of the Office of Identification.

Concern regarding the mobility of criminals in and out of Argentina prompted him to search for a more effective method of identification. His search ended when he read the French journal *Revue Scientifique* (1891) detailing Galton’s research into the scientific use of fingerprints as a means of individualization. After reading this article, he began his campaign to incorporate the use of fingerprinting into the criminal justice system of Argentina. His campaign paid off, and that same year (1891), fingerprints replaced Bertillonage at the Office of Identification. This was the first occurrence of fingerprint individualization officially usurping anthropometry.

Working from Galton’s overly general three-pattern classification system, he quickly created a classification.

The classification consisted of four single letters, representing the pattern on the thumb, and four single numbers, representing the patterns on the remaining fingers. Vucetich’s system started with the right-hand thumb and ended with the left little finger.

**Vucetich's secondary classification.**

Pattern	Superscript	Description
Arch	5	Vaulted/Normal
	6	Left-inclined
	7	Right-inclined
	8	Tent-shaped
	9	All others
Internal loop	5	Normal flow
	6	Invaded
	7	Interrogatory
	8	Hooked
	9	All others
External loop	Designation same as Internal loop	
Whorl	5	Normal
	6	Sinuous
	7	Ovoid
	8	Hooked
	9	All others

Fig.2: Vucetich's secondary classification

The Vucetich classification system consisted of a basic classification (called the primary) and a more descriptive secondary classification using extensions. The primary classification was divided into two groups: the numerator and the denominator. The numerator was termed the series and represented the right hand. The denominator was termed the section and represented the left hand. The right thumb (called the fundamental) and the remaining right-hand fingers (called the division) represented the series. The

left thumb (called the subclassification) and the remaining left-hand fingers (called the subdivision) represented the section.

The secondary classification further subdivided the fingerprints into five subtypes: 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. Each number represented a further description of the pattern, applied to either hand, and was placed as a superscript in parentheses. When the pattern type was a normal loop variety, the superscript defaulted to ridge count values.

The first case in the world in which fingerprints were used to identify a murderer occurred in the coastal town of Necochea in Argentina on 29 June 1892. It was actually a double murder, of the two young children of Francisca Rojas who had been found killed in their beds. Unfortunately, when you research this case online, there are numerous versions of the story with often conflicting details and very little primary

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evidence available.

The two children (either two boys, or a boy and a girl, named Ponciano and Feliza aged 6 and 4) were killed in their home, possibly by blunt force trauma or having their throats cut.

It was said that Rojas was either unmarried or separated from her husband whose surname may have been de Caraballo, as she is sometimes called Francisca Rojas de Caraballo. She either found the children, or was found with them with a superficial cut to her own neck and she quickly blamed a local man, Pedro Velasquez, who she said had killed her offspring either because she rejected his advances, or because she prevented him from taking the children to give to their father.

He was arrested and interrogated and some secondary sources even claim he was locked in a room overnight with the children's bodies to try to force a confession, but he refused to budge. Furthermore, it soon emerged that he had an alibi. Progress was only made in the case when an outside detective was brought in.

This was either a Croatian immigrant named Juan Vucetich, who was then pioneering the use of fingerprints for identification, or one of his associates named Edward Alvarez. When the new detective went to look at the murder scene, despite it being several days old, he noticed a bloody fingerprint on the doorway of the room in which the children had been found. This double child murder now took a shocking twist. He had the piece of wood cut out and the fingerprint examined and when it was compared to the prints of the children's mother (who said that she had not touched the bodies and so couldn't have had their blood on her), it was a match.

When confronted with the evidence, Francisca broke down and admitted that she had killed her own children and faked her injuries because her lover did not want to marry a woman who already had children (this is another reason I think she was unmarried, or separated, despite what some of the secondary sources claim).



Fig.3: Fingerprints collected of Francisa Rojas

An image of her original fingerprint card can be found in the US (United States) National Library of Medicine and is seen here.

Rojas was convicted in 1894 and sentenced to a lengthy stay in prison. The Rojas case had opened the door (albeit slowly) for other murder cases around the world to be solved using the perpetrators' fingerprints and in 1905, the United Kingdom used this new technique in a case known as the Mask Murders.

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