

Wallet check: Is your cash for real?

By Laura Bond

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Ruston resident Jeanette Matlock said she had never been so humiliated as when she discovered the \$10 bill she handed a restaurant owner was a counterfeit.

"It was the most horrible experience," said Matlock of the moment the cashier noted it was not real money. "I was almost in tears."

Matlock said she returned the bill to her bank, where she believes she might have picked it up, and a real bill was given to her in its place. She said she is now concerned that others are unaware that counterfeit money does surface in this area.

"I just want others — especially businesses — to be aware of what's going on," she said.

Danielle Curry, manager of Hot Rod Bar-B-Que, said she has turned in at least six counterfeit bills in the last two years. Most times, her employees do not catch them, she said, and they are not discovered until she looks at the bills later that night or the bank employees see them. As a result, Curry said the restaurant loses money.

"If they paid with a \$100 bill and we gave them back \$80 change, we've lost that money too," she said.

Curry said there are several methods the restaurant's employees utilize to identify counterfeit money, such as using a bill marker for bills bigger than \$20, holding them up to the light to look for identifying features and examining their texture.

See POLICE, page 2

Police: Counterfeit money not uncommon in Ruston

Continued from page 1

"The counterfeit money feels like laser print paper or wrapping paper," Curry said. "It has a smooth, silky feel whereas real money has more of a rough, linen feel."

According to the U.S. Department of Treasury Web site, people who suspect they have received a counterfeit bill should write down identifying information about the person who gave it to them and contact the local police department or local U.S. Secret Service Office.

Ruston Police Lt. Eric Hanna, financial crimes detective, said it's not uncommon to have a couple of counterfeit bills turned in each week by banks or local merchants. With enhanced technology, Hanna said more counterfeit bills are popping up.

"It's been (common) since the high-quality printers became so cheap 4-5 years ago," Hanna said. "All you need is a good high-quality laser printer and a high-resolution scanner (to make counterfeit bills). You

don't see the counterfeit money made with an offset presser or engraved plates that were around 10 years ago."

In the last 20 years, there have been several people caught in Ruston with counterfeit money, Hanna said, and they are generally charged under the Louisiana forgery statute, which has penalties of 10 years at hard labor and a \$5,000 fine per violation. Those in possession of large amounts of counterfeit money could face federal charges.