

AFFECTIONATE SALUTE TO PAST ERA'S OF POLICING

SOME CONSTABLES WERE APPOINTED WITHOUT SALARY, SAYS MUSKOKA IN PERSPECTIVE COLUMNIST



J. PATRICK BOYER
Columnist

If you were lucky enough to grow up in small-town Ontario after the Second World War, you'll have colourful memories about the local "constables on patrol," or COPS.

A Bracebridge boy I know was a front-row witness, living over the newspaper office, beside the town hall housing the community's three-man force (Chief Harrington, with constables Colin Cowan and Rod White).

Behind was the town's squat stone jail. Three doors along, he played at the OPP detachment with Sgt. Jarvis's kids, who lived there with their very own lock-up. Next door, Muskoka District Court House, holding cells in its basement, staged dramas he witnessed from his tricycle.

The lad carried messages from men in the jail to the chief: It was mealtime; it was time to be released. He'd watch the chief fire his revolver in front of the town hall, felling pigeons from their bomb-bay hideaways under the eaves above.

Once he even rode in the cruiser (a 1951 Chev), as the chief drove him, bloody-headed, five blocks to the

hospital for stitches to close the gash where a playmate had landed a brick perfectly. When roughneck Texans building the pipeline west of town came in for entertainment, the chief warned families to lock up their daughters then took his entire force east of town for a lengthy investigation of some kid's reported missing bicycle.

If you weren't so lucky, you're still in luck. Jim Wouters has published A Brief History of the Gravenhurst Police Department.

It's the finest account yet of a Muskoka police department. Being a seasoned detective (among Wouter's many policing roles over the decades) clearly helped this heritage sleuth track down clues and piece together evidence of what "community policing" entailed in Muskoka's senior municipality from the 1880s to "end of watch" when the OPP took over entirely on May 8, 1970. He offers a revealing portrait of officers serving their community - despite egregiously unsupportive municipal councils and "official town history books mute on policing and historical records destroyed or lost over time."

One document he did find indicates that by 1880 Gravenhurst's 1,500 residents were served by constables Richardson, Perkins, and Brock, whose hands were "full most of the time because of the whiskey trade." The earliest bylaw unearthed, from 1886, appointed Joseph Duncan the village's chief constable, with added duties as health inspector, inspector of nuisances, and sidewalk repairman.

The longest-serving po-

lice chief was Archy Sloan. His family restaurant anchored the main street, for generations drawing customers to unrivalled blueberry pie with ice cream, but Sloan is equally legendary as Gravenhurst's devoted police chief for a quarter century from 1888 to the Great War. His "police" duties included: Inspector engineer of the fire engine, caretaker of the fire hall and lock-up, assessor, collector of poll taxes, collector of dog taxes, and town bell ringer. Sloan received all licence fees, recorded all fines levied by justices of the peace, and collected all taxes, including overdue and outstanding ones. He was, to boot, sanitary inspector, inspector of sidewalks and shade trees, and had "generally to look after and guard the interest of the town." Who needed municipal staff, if you had a police chief?

Some constables were appointed without salary, and some for specific purposes. In July 1891 James Scott was appointed "to arrest any persons who bathe within the Corporation in Gull Lake without a bathing suit on."

Tracking evolution of town policing through the 20th century, Jim Wouters' rightly highlights many serious issues I'll return to in another column. For the full scoop, read his valuable book. Psst! He's still looking for more clues: gravenhurstpolicehistory@gmail.com.

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