

As State Patrol turns 75, founding member recalls early days

By Meg Jones
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
July 16, 2014

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Iron River — Squad cars didn't have radios back when Howard Fuhrmann joined the Wisconsin State Patrol.

The agency didn't even provide police cruisers or firearms. Fuhrmann drove his own Ford while chasing after drunks and speeders in northern Wisconsin. Given Badge No. 8, Fuhrmann is the only officer still alive from the first group hired after the Wisconsin State Patrol was formed on Sept. 1, 1939.

Fuhrmann, who turned 100 in February, was working as a Bayfield County sheriff's deputy when he volunteered for the new State Patrol. He admitted it could be lonely and sometimes he felt vulnerable with backup far away in case he found trouble.

"I just liked that kind of work," Fuhrmann said in his room filled with photos and mementos of his career including an autographed photo of President Dwight Eisenhower.

"Reckless driving? Oh yeah. These youngsters liked to pound the wheel."

With traffic fatalities skyrocketing and roads damaged by overweight trucks, the State Patrol was formed to enforce motor carrier and traffic laws throughout Wisconsin.

In the face of opposition from county sheriffs and local law enforcement agencies, it took several years before the state Legislature passed the law creating the Motor Vehicle Department that consisted of three divisions: registration and licensing, highway safety promotion, and inspection and enforcement. The latter would eventually become what's now known as the Wisconsin State Patrol.

To celebrate the agency's 75th anniversary, State Patrol vehicles are sporting special decals and license plates this year. Next month a banquet is scheduled in Wisconsin Dells for current and former State Patrol employees.

The agency has changed quite a bit since officers like Fuhrmann patrolled roads and highways with first aid kits they brought from home while staying in touch with dispatchers via telephone.

Only men at least 6 feet tall were hired to become troopers. There was no official training program. And they couldn't arrest anyone, only hand out citations.

But the mission hasn't changed — keeping motorists safe, enforcing the state's traffic laws and inspecting trucks.

"Back in those days we had no criminal authority whatsoever. We couldn't make an arrest unless a felony was committed in our presence," said Bruce Bishop, 89, who joined the State Patrol in 1949.

In the beginning officers bought their own patrol cars, receiving \$30 per month for their vehicles plus gas, oil and grease. They were given a siren, flashing red light and police license plates while on duty.

When they used their cars while off-duty they had to switch to personal license plates. A large part of their time was spent weighing and inspecting trucks, giving driver license tests, taking registration applications and collecting fees.



Retired Wisconsin State Patrol Capt. Howard J. Fuhrmann is shown in uniform in 1939.

When Bishop joined the agency he drove his 1948 Dodge, earning seven cents a mile, outfitted with a huge siren/flashing red light gizmo on the front bumper. Radios were available by then — two large boxes for the transmitter and receiver.

"We called them turkey roasters. They took up the whole trunk space," recalled Bishop, who lives in Tomahawk. "We didn't even have first aid kits issued to us. We had to cobble together what we thought we'd need in an emergency."

0 to 60 in — 2 minutes

Because his 1948 Dodge didn't have much power — "it took about two minutes to get up to 60"— he upgraded to a brand new Oldsmobile 88 in 1950.

Two years later the State Patrol finally began issuing squad cars to troopers, though they were stripped down vehicles with only one armrest and one sun visor, basic four-cylinder models with a maximum speed of 65 or 70 mph.

"It was damn lonely. The holidays were bad. Just a simple routine stop could turn into almost anything," Bishop said. "The violator doesn't know you don't have full (arrest) authority. If you got someone wanted on a felony charge you could have serious problems especially since you had one officer for two or three counties and no communication with local departments."

There were no seat belts, no restraints, no cages separating the front and back seats. Violators were placed in the front seat, rarely were they handcuffed.

"In comparison to what a cruiser looks like today, it was the difference between a jet airliner and a World War I bi-plane," Bishop said.

Today's State Patrol troopers — who no longer must be male and 6 feet tall — drive Harley-Davidson motorcycles, Dodge Chargers, Ford Explorer SUVs and Ford Police Interceptors. They also pilot three leased airplanes used for aerial enforcement and search and rescue operations.

Their vehicles are rolling dispatch centers outfitted with the latest technology. That means computers to access drivers' records and criminal information, radios, video cameras recording each stop, sophisticated GPS mapping that allows them to alert other law enforcement of the location of disabled vehicles and technology that lets dispatchers know their location so the closest squads can be sent to accidents, said Lt. Col. Brian Rahn, director of the State Patrol Bureau of Field Services.

Instead of the six-round pistols used by Fuhrmann and Bishop, troopers carry a lot more firepower — 15-round Glocks with two additional ammunition magazines plus Tasers, shotguns and rifles as well as body armor. Five Wisconsin troopers have been killed in the line of duty since 1972, four in traffic accidents and one murdered by a motorist cited for speeding.

The State Patrol has 400 troopers spaced geographically around the state, particularly near high traffic corridors such as the interstate system. Interstates did not exist when Fuhrmann and Bishop were hired. An additional 112 inspectors handle motor carrier enforcement. And because the State Patrol has a team of 14 accident reconstruction experts, the agency is frequently requested by local law agencies to handle reconstruction of large or complex accident scenes.

"You look at the evolution that's occurred in our agency, what really makes the agency what it is — it's the organizational culture and ethos that Bruce Bishop and Howard Fuhrmann started," said Capt. Tim Carnahan, commander of the State Patrol's southeast region post in Waukesha. "Even though the technology and the mission can change, we're proud of what they started."



Retired Wisconsin State Patrol Capt. Howard J. Fuhrmann, 100, graduated from the first State Patrol recruit class in 1939. He holds his early badge, which says Special Highway patrolman.