

A Brief History of the Police Department

The Missoula City Police Department was formed on April 23, 1883 when the City Council hired William Keyes and Will P. Nugent. The pay was \$60 per month.

Keyes, Nugent and the other early officers bore little outward resemblance to the lone frontier lawmen of Hollywood lore. If anything, the Council intentionally shied away from that sort of dime novel image. In 1887 it was "resolved that all policemen, when on duty, shall wear a badge in a conspicuous place on the outside of the coat' also a uniform hat with a badge..... also each policeman shall wear a blue uniform suit."

A group photo from 1912 shows six uniformed officers, all in long tunics, round caps with a bill, and no weapons showing. If the look has anything to do with Hollywood, it's closer to Keystone than Hickok.

But don't misunderstand -- we're not dealing with angels here. Not five months after they hired Nugent, the Council reprimanded him for gambling on duty. It's hard to blame Nugent, though, since in 1914 the Council made a startling discovery. While trying to discipline another officer for being "off his beat" ... and in an "alleged compromising position", the Councilmen learned that Missoula didn't have any rules governing police conduct. None. They solved the problem by adopting Spokane's.

Other things have changed, too. In 1926 the City set a minimum physical standards for prospective officers, including this one; "waist measurement in excess of chest measurement constitutes cause for rejection in all cases."

A retired officer who was hired in 1931 recalls that applicants then received written and physical exams, a detailed interview, and a test of physical agility. The process is even more extensive today with the addition of psychological and background checks.

In the 1930's we had "the car", which was used by one officer between 4:00 p.m. and midnight. Everybody else walked. All the time. Well, there were motorcycles, but George Meltzer remembers the early 1950's when he and his partner, Russ Pulliam, Sr., rode the three-wheelers at -20°. That's not much of an improvement on walking.

Training, once a matter of chance, is now a mainstay. In 1960 Missoula Police Officers began a project that eventually resulted in the Garden City Police Academy, where training was offered to Missoula officers, along with members of other law enforcement agencies in Western Montana. Now officers attend schools at the Montana Law Enforcement Academy, the F.B.I. National Academy in Quantico, Virginia and other institutions.

And we've grown. The department that once employed only Keyes and Nugent now has more than 100 officers, three Civilian Traffic Specialists, a Civilian Evidence Technician, five full-time and four Call-In Desk Persons, and a nine member clerical staff.

"The car" has been replaced by a transportation fleet of 21 marked and 17 unmarked police vehicles, six motorcycles, two accident investigation vans and a Special Response vehicle, three School Resource Officers vehicles, two K9 SUVs, and most recent addition is a Yamaha Rhino UTV used for park and trail patrols and at special events.

We're still not angels, although sometimes we hear the angels sing. That's what Officer Jack Rice said one night in 1914, after taking a drunk lumberjack to jail. The lumberjack pulled a .38 revolver from his coat and fired a shot over his shoulder and past Rice's ear. Things like that still go on -- that's why there'll always be a job for police officers.

But the job isn't always that intense. Sometimes it's boring, so boring you call somebody on the radio just to be sure it still works. Or Funny. What do you do with a skunk that parks himself just outside the door of a busy restaurant and refuses to leave? Sometimes it can tear you apart. Or put you back together, like the afternoon Officer Steve LePiane ventured out into the flooding Rattlesnake Creek and retrieved a boy who was barely hanging on to a rock.

So, in a way, the job really hasn't changed at all during our first century. Scratch through all the improvements and you're left with two basics; people still cause trouble and people still need help. It's not an easy job to do and it's not an easy job to get out of your system. Ask a certain officer who worked the night shift for nearly twenty years. He's been retired longer than that. He still has trouble sleeping at night.

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