

Historian seeks input

Sheriff department history full of color

by Tony Kneidek
staff reporter

Anybody remember the hey-day of the Multnomah County Sheriff's Department, when it had a stunt team of motorcycle cops who toured the West Coast and thrilled the fans with Evel Knievel type tricks?

Or the days of Sheriff Martin Pratt, who ruled the county from 1931 to 1948, personally implementing innovative ideas and coaxing the department through a period of growth and change?

Jim Tannehill, sheriff's department historian, is currently compiling records, photos and other artifacts from the department's past.

"The stunt team was a special team of mostly reserve officers and some regulars who put on shows throughout the West Coast during the 1940's and 1950's," Tannehill said.

"It was almost like a circus. They went out and

performed like a traveling show. It was unique."

Tannehill said he is uncertain why the stunt team was disbanded, but added it "probably was lack of interest."

Tidbits about the stunt team and other glimpses of the department's past are beginning to filter in to Tannehill, 22, who has worked with the sheriff's department for six years.

His interest in compiling the history began after viewing a 1948 color film about the department. The film, Tannehill said, is reminiscent of the Keystone Cops episodes.

"It's like a comedy, but at the time it was a serious film. It's just a kick. That was when I first heard or saw anything about the history of the sheriff's office."

The department was founded in 1854 and there have been 30 sheriffs since then. Tannehill said he has been finding artifacts "all over the place

"The oldest badge I've found was in a car parts store on display. It dates to 1910."

However, problems arise in compiling the history. "One thing I'm finding out is that it's difficult to trace the history of the Multnomah County Sheriff Department," Tannehill said. "We're talking about 20 to 25 officers (in the beginning) and it's difficult to trace that small a number."

Most of the artifacts he has found date to the 1930s and 1940s, reflecting growth in the department under the leadership of former Sheriff Martin-Pratt.

"He was essentially king of the county," Tannehill said. "It was the type of situation where the sheriff called the commissioners and they came to see him. He had a lot of power."

Under Pratt, the department developed its own radio dispatch system, purchased a fleet of new cars and made other changes that indicate that the sheriff did, indeed,

have clout.

When Pratt found himself at odds with county commissioners, he would simply fund what he believed to be a good idea out of his own pocket.

In 1917, then chief deputy Pratt and a fellow officer discussed an innovative idea for highway safety.

They would paint white lines on the road for increased visibility during poor weather.

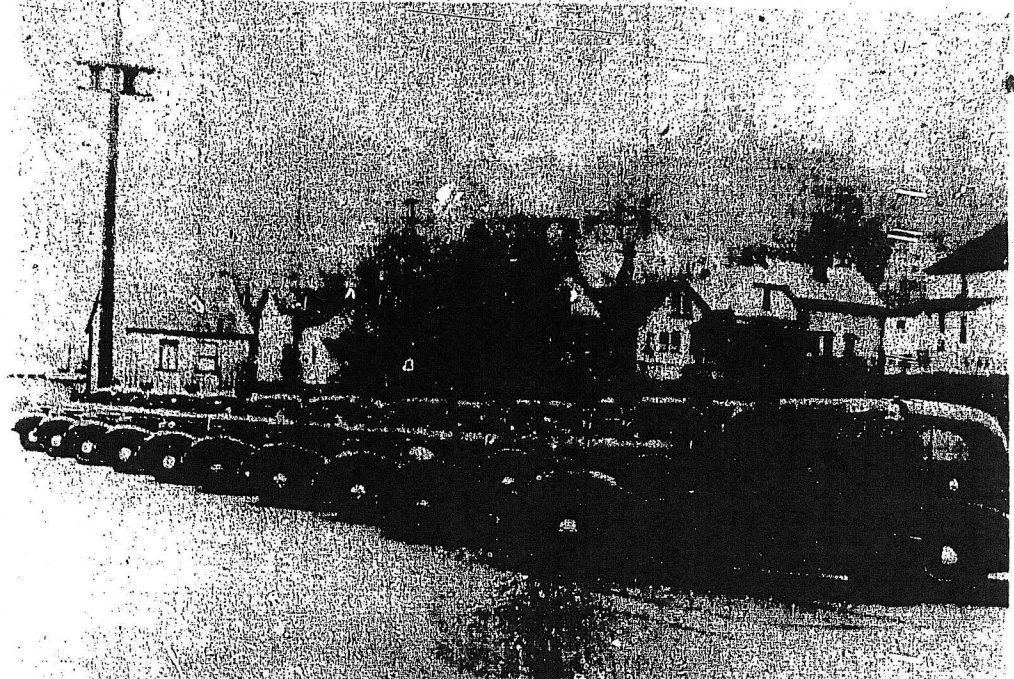
County officials would not fund the project or provide labor to do the work, so Pratt bought some white paint, rolled up his sleeves and headed up the Columbia Gorge.

East of Corbett, he laid brush to road and painted what is touted as the first striped highway in the country. He repeated the chore in 1919 and the county and state finally picked up on it in 1926, nine years after Pratt had first recommended it.

"Pratt is the sheriff who stands out above the others," Tannehill said. "If he wanted something, he went out and got it. The county had the money at that time and he got it."

Tannehill will display his historical montage of the department in the Hansen Building lobby, 122nd Avenue and Glisan Street, when the department has completed moving its operation there.

He urges persons with artifacts, photos and other information about the department to contact him at 248-3257.



FORMER SHERIFF Martin T. Pratt posed with county deputies and automobile industry represen-

tatives with a new fleet of 1934 patrol cars. Pratt was sheriff from 1931 to 1948.

