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Former Milton Chief Recalls 20 years Duty

Milton-Freewater - Chasing speeders in a 1916 vintage Model T. . .ram-rodding a crew of ditch-diggers. . .disposing of stray dogs. . .these were some of the highlights recalled during 20 years as chief of police of the city of Milton by Clarence Walter, here on a vacation visit with old friends.

Born in a Kansas prairie sod house in 1877, Walter accompanied his parents west in a covered wagon 5 years later, led a life of varied interests and occupations but the years from 1922 to 1942 were of most interest.

Admittedly, he didn't catch many speeders in a 1916 Ford truck but then there weren't very many speeders in those days, either. Later on, the city fathers purchased a lighter truck, but this one wasn't up to the job of catching speeders either.

"Unless you got a running start on them," he said, "you might just as well not start chasing at all."

Those years were trying years for the city fathers, Walter recalled. Lean, pre-depression and depression years saw the city council members scanning all budgetary shortcuts possible and spending long hours at the council table to stretch the tax monies that were available, he said.

When he started his job as police chief (and he was the sole man on the job for many years) the chief before him had lost the only gun the "force" boasted.

Gun posed problem

"The council's biggest problem, it seemed, for some time," Walter said with a chuckle, "was pondering long hours over whether it was my responsibility or the city's to purchase another gun.

"The city was pretty hard up in those days and they didn't want to lay out the money hit free, was any other way to get around the problem. As near as I remember, I finally paid for the gun out of my own pocket.."

For 17 years after his first appointment, Walter had duties of heading the water and streets departments of the city as well as being police chief. As such, he had to manage the laying of mains and repairing streets "running herd" on a crew of men for the purpose.

"A lot of people seemed to think I should spend all day on the job of digging ditches and so forth, then be on call for middle of the night police work," Walter said.

Touchy Incident

While he made light of it in recalling the incident, Walter not over average sized, must have had some large amounts of intestinal fortitude in his makeup ("...some would call it cussedness," he said) when he arrested a huge Indian who bulked twice Walter's size.

"The big buy had been raising a ruckus over in the Miller's woods area and a call came for me to pick him up...I found him and with some coaxing, got him over to the jail and locked up for the night."

While it turned out all right, that type of detail could well have turned out far differently,. Walter admitted. All he had was his authority when he arrived at the park because he'd left his gun at the office!

"Under the circumstances," he admitted, a "man is either awful brave or not very smart."

Walter termed his job as one of "sunshine and shadows."

"Rounding up stray dogs and disposing of them was sure a job of the shadows," he opined. A keen lover of dogs, this phase of his job gave him much anguish as he had to send hundreds of canines to death in a gas "chamber." he concluded to do the work.

:I devised a special box to chloroform them in . . . couldn't bear to shoot them . . .the dog would look at me all the time I was taking aim, giving me a wide eyed, appealing look all the while."

"I got so I couldn't look a dog in the eye, when I'd pass one on the street," he admitted.

Duties Shorn

Five years before he severed relations with the city, the council decided the city should have a full time streets and water department manager, so those duties were shorn from Walter. Then, a year before he terminated, a new chief of police was sworn in and he was relegated to patrolman.

"They got ambitious and wanted a motorcycle-riding chief," Walter explained, "and I wouldn't ride one of the fool things. So, they got a young squirt for chief and he rode the cycle."

Walter stayed on for another year, then left to take a job at the Ordnance Depot near Hermiston. He worked there as a guard for two years, then returned to Milton as parcel post delivery man for the post office for two years.

In 1946 Walter sold his interest here and moved to Huntington Beach, Calif., where he now makes his home.

Married in Walla Walla

The former chief of police was married to Myrtle George in Walla Walla May 10, 1898. The couple had two sons, Glen died during WWI and Max makes his home in Las Vegas. Mrs. Walter died in November, 1959.

A big highlight of his visit here with old friends and new was the day the current chief of police, Burt Lindsay, pinned a five-pointed star on his shirt front and made him an honorary chief of the city. A card went with the title too, certifying that he holds the title.

It is fully expected that this card will come forth from the Walter wallet on many occasions when he returns to Huntington Beach, to regale his California friends with his visit to Milton-Freewater.