

HISTORY OF THE IDAHO STATE POLICE

Number 227

Administrative reorganization of Idaho's executive branch of government in 1919 provided for a Department of Law Enforcement. Shortly after the new department commenced to function, a Bureau of Constabulary was organized on May 8, 1919.

Statutory duties assigned to the new agency included general state law enforcement. In addition to "detecting and investigating crime," the new constabulary was to "order abatement of public nuisances and to enforce such orders" by appropriate court action, "to suppress riots, to prevent affrays," and to prevent "wrongs to children and dumb animals" that were inhibited by law. The state constabulary also was charged with the proper organization of various state, county, and municipal peace officers.

Two special problems in law enforcement--prohibition and automobile licensing--provided most of the offenses for which the state constabulary made arrests. Enforcement of temperance and moral legislation, in fact, was one of the special statutory charges of the new state police force.

An even more serious problem than prohibition, though, was enforcement of the 1917 syndicalism law, passed during the war and strengthened in 1919. Idaho had led the nation in adopting such legislation. The syndicalism statute had been directed primarily against the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW) which had become a strong labor organization in the North Idaho lumber camps just before the war. By 1919 the superintendent of the Bureau of Constabulary regarded the IWW menace as the "most serious problem facing the peace officers of the state." More than half the staff of the force was stationed in North Idaho in an effort to drive out members of the IWW, and to procure evidence by which such members might be prosecuted under the syndicalism law. That task was a difficult one, since the IWW had pointedly avoided advocating sabotage once such advocacy was outlawed by the syndicalism act. Much effort went into compilation of a roster of IWW members in Idaho and the Northwest, and a number of members were arrested for possessing membership cards before news of the drive got out and the members began to tear up their cards. But by 1920 the constabulary had the IWW situation "well in hand," so that most of their syndicalism arrests resulted in conviction.

Aside from these major classes of activity, the constabulary caught some robbers, arrested a kidnapper and recovered a stolen car, protected an animal from cruelty, and searched for a lost hunter in the winter. More important was a state convention of peace officers, February 6, 1920, sponsored by the new state agency. The convention recommended that the state constabulary be authorized to establish a fingerprint record of criminals, and the next legislature complied, enacting a law enabling the listing (with fingerprints and photographs) of all "well known" criminals in the United States--whether their offenses were state or federal. More than that, \$9,580 was appropriated for this purpose, as well as for all the other expenses of the constabulary, except salaries. In a staff reorganization, the permanent force was reduced to four; a state sheriff (\$3,000 a year) assisted by a deputy in charge of the monumental criminal identification file, another deputy for North Idaho (to watch the IWW), and a stenographer. In the event of "any extraordinary disorder, uprising or emergency" certified by the governor, though, \$15,000 more was available to the state sheriff, who might employ deputies. Any state

official or employee might also be deputized, and any county, or local police officer might be called "into the service of the state."

Labor troubles in 1922 brought the state constabulary some serious new problems. A national railway shopmen's strike, July 1, affected several important Idaho transportation centers. Assigned to protect Union Pacific shops, the constabulary met with serious protests from the unions involved, and there was considerable excitement when a shooting episode broke out in Pocatello, July 22. Finally, the Pocatello switchmen went on a temporary protest strike, August 10, against the use of the state constabulary as plant guards. Governor D. W. Davis made some concessions to the strikers, but declined to remove the deputies while the strike went on, even though the national unions threatened to shut down service through Pocatello altogether. Before the strike had ended, both the Republican and the Democratic state conventions resolved that the state constabulary ought to be abolished, August 22--although the Republican platform advocated such a course as an economy move (times were very hard just then) on the theory that the constabulary had achieved its original object of holding down the IWW and no longer was necessary. The next legislature complied quickly by adopting the suggestion to abolish the state constabulary February 8, 1923. Later in the session, though, a new statute restored to the Department of Law Enforcement the powers which had been vested in the state constabulary, although the constabulary itself was left abolished.

Highway improvement to the point that automobiles could begin to operate at something like high speed led to a decidedly increased accident rate by 1928, and one of the results of the coming of hard-surfaced roads was the organization of the state traffic patrol. Funds were secured by a special legislative appropriation, March 13, 1929, that made the new patrol possible; the actual authority for establishing the state police force went back to the state constabulary law that had been left in effect but dormant. Members of the traffic patrol actually were commissioned as special deputies under the old statute.

By 1930, a fifteen man force had plenty to do: they collected auto license fees, set up light and brake testing stations, enforced spring highway load restrictions, suppressed gasoline bootleggers, kept irrigation water from eroding away the highways, and enforced all aircraft regulations as well! But their main task was to reduce the accident rate by patrolling the highways. At the end of 1930, they were warning more than 2,000 motorists each month, and were going so far as to arrest the most flagrant violators. This new force was the actual inception of the Idaho State Police, which finally was set up in law as a regular state agency, March 13, 1939.