



NUTLEY POLICE DEPARTMENT

SGT. WILFORD STAGER

NUTLEY's Police Department is going to observe its 50th anniversary this year but the town was not always the well-behaved, law-abiding community it is today. Why, once the town's Republicans even stole the Post Office from the Democrats, lock, stock and barrel, using a beer delivery wagon in the process.

Those were the days, before Nutley had a paid police force, when the streets were patrolled by a constable or chanceman. It was only when robbers raided Nutley and broke into 16 homes in one night that the town shouldered the cost of a regular police department.

"We started out with only five men in 1910 when the Nutley Police Department was organized," Sgt. Wilford Stager, the last member of the original quintet still alive, reminisced. Stager, now 80, and long-since retired, lives at 7 Willow Place. Fifty years later the Nutley Police Department now numbers 46 paid police.

"Back in 1910 we were paid \$50 a month with one day off every two weeks. Although we didn't go on active duty until December, we were appointed to serve on the new force in October 1910.

"Wright Sutcliffe was appointed Nutley's first police chief. John Jameson started as a sergeant and later on was promoted to chief. Dan Ford, George Malizia and I rounded out the small squad," Stager continued.

Until the time a regular paid force was put into operation, Nutley residents had only chancemen and constables to protect the town.

In the early days of the department the small group of men covered the entire day as they split up in two shifts. The officers then carried .32 revolvers. Today a .38 is standard equipment.

The headquarters were then in the Town Hall where the town's first jail, a steel cage, was located.

"A series of robberies actually led to the formation of the Police Department," Stager recalls. "A short period before the squad was formed, 16 homes were looted in one night and as a result the citizens were up in arms. That had a lot

to do with organizing the force. The five men were the entire Nutley Police Department. They owned no equipment.

“Each of us walked a beat and we covered the whole town. An average of 12 miles was walked by each of us every day.

“For the first year we were in bad shape when we needed a patrol wagon. Since there wasn’t any equipment we did the next best thing, we borrowed what we needed. If a call came in and we were in a hurry the first car that passed was flagged down and pressed into use. There was one trouble though. In 1910 the traffic was nothing like what it is today. We never knew how long it would take before a car would come along.

“Sometimes the streets would be so deserted you could fire a shot up Franklin Avenue and not even have to worry about hitting a thing. When that stage was reached we used to have the citizen who made the call come down to the station and pick one of us up.

“Traffic violations in 1910 were few, mostly for horse-drawn carriages driving along at night without a light.”

A year after the Police Department was formed, Nutley got its first vehicle, a combination ambulance and patrol pulled by a team of horses.

Slowly the department began to grow and chancemen were hired to aid the regulars. They filled in on busy evenings or in case of sickness or vacations.

Following Sutcliffe as chief, William Brown took over in 1925, with the late John Jameson, succeeding him in 1943 and Chief Charles Rummel, Nutley’s present police head, assuming command in 1944.

While horse thievery was always a problem, fights outside of taverns also posed a serious problem to the department. With no squad car available, “Buster” Stager, as he is usually called by most people in town, remembers, as if it were only yesterday, when patrolmen would race to some bar with a wheelbarrow.

“Some of the old timers really liked their liquor,” Stager said. “When they got going, look out. With the wheelbarrow we used to carry them right out of the tavern, wheel them back to the station and let them sleep it off in jail overnight.”

The heaviest catch of speeders is made along Washington Avenue in this fast age of horsepower, but there was another era not too long ago, when Washington Avenue was a race-track, a mile straight-away, where, every Sunday and on holidays, gentlemen drivers used to come from miles around to race their trotters on the famed course.

To Stager, who retired in 1944, those trotting races are among his favorite memories. To him, Nutley was a gay town in the early 1900’s and it was the horses which brought that gaiety.

The races also attracted some famous personalities, among them Annie Oakley and her husband, Frank Butler, and then of course, Mark Twain came often to Nutley to spend weekends as a guest of the editor of Puck, Henry Cuyler Bunner, and the two of them always took in the Sunday afternoon trotting races. Stager knew them all.

Some of the crimes Stager remembers during the early days of the Police Department are the theft of \$175,000 worth of bolted silk from the Paterson mills, later recovered by Chief Jameson. There was also the robbery of the Yountakah Country Club in which John Ward stole every piece of silver and every cup in the place and hid in North Woods.

There was also the matter of Nutley's "Lover's Lane," Highfield Lane between Washington Avenue and River Road, which was lined with woods on both sides. Some unscrupulous men used to run both blackmail and badger games there on loving couples who drove up in surreys with fringe on top from Hillside amusement park, down at "Big Tree," which was quite an attraction in those days.

"Those races were run on the macadam of Washington Avenue under the trees over what was known as the mile stretch," Stager said. "There were almost no houses along Washington Avenue in those days and no traffic problem like today. There were no blue laws in Nutley either, so every Sunday the avenue was turned over to the trotters.

"The start was out in front of the Feuerbach Hotel. The finish was out in front of the tavern run by Michael Gorman at Grant Avenue, now the Chatterbox.

"It was quite a sight to see the trotters come down the avenue four or five abreast, pulling the high-wheeled sulkies. The drivers were mostly the owners of the horses. There were no purses, and the whole thing was impromptu, but to make things interesting, there was always a prize of some sort, usually a whip or a blanket or even a new sulky or a sack of oats.

"Everybody in town used to come down to watch the races, and others came from miles around. The fields on both sides of Washington Avenue were filled from noon Sunday with carriages and the sulkies of the trotters.

"There were no blue laws because the wealthy gentlemen who owned the horses struck a bargain with the clergy. There would be no horse racing during the church hours, but after church the clergy would not object to trotting races or baseball.

"The trotting races lasted for years, but they finally were given up when the automobile came along. Those chauffeurs in dusters who used to drive their families out on Sundays insisted on going up Washington Avenue, and you couldn't have automobiles going up and trotters coming down at the same time."

Speaking with Chief Rummel, he told us that the jail cells located in the Public

Safety Building opened in 1930 are hardly used as much in the Summer as during the Winter months.

“Why during the colder part of the year the seven cells are frequently in use, but not always by criminals. You see, with the Erie Railroad going through Nutley the town is a stop-off for a great many hoboes. They don't have any bad intentions, they just like to wander.

“When it becomes too cold for the hoboes to sleep outdoors, the first place they come for a night's lodging is police-headquarters. All they want is a place to sleep and the next morning they're on their way. They want no food, only a roof over their heads. It's much better than having them roam the streets at night.”

Chief Rummel became active with the Police Department in 1917 as a chanceman. At the time there were only six paid members on the force and only one squad car in operation. Today there are 46 members, five patrol cars and two motorcycles.

Rummel remembers the \$60,000 rug robbery that was pulled in 1928. The rug plant was in Kingsland Road just over the Nutley-Clifton boundary line. It was owned by Adrian Avedisian, who lived in Nutley.

“Three thugs tied up a watchman, shot a dog, then loaded up a truck with imported rugs later valued at \$60,000. The watchman gave us the clue which later led to their arrest in Jersey City three days later. He gave a description of the truck and noticed that it scraped the side of a fence.

“Serving as a detective at the time, I went to Jersey City with Captain Jameson on a lead and found the truck but it was empty. The rugs were later recovered and then turned over to the Clifton authorities.”

From five men in 1910 to 46 in 1960, from a wheelbarrow to squad cars, Nutley's Police Department has done an excellent job as they keep the town free of vice and crime in this fast age of today.

Tags

- [Stager](#)
- [Rummel](#)