

Our role in the community — City Police

By Ben Wilcox



Roger Jensen

This is a story about the Steamboat Springs Police Department and how two police officers do their jobs. Within the Steamboat Springs Police Department, I interviewed Roger Jensen, Chief of Police and Ross Kelly, a member of the Detective Division. I started the interview with Chief Jensen by asking him how he got started in police work.

Chief Jensen began his law enforcement career for the Trinidad State College Campus Police while attending college. While serving with the campus police, he reached the rank of lieutenant.

Upon graduating from college, he was employed with the Englewood Police Department. He worked with the Englewood Police Department until he was drafted into the United States Army where he was a Military Police Officer and assigned to the 472 M.P. Company in Fort Wayneright, Alaska. Completing his Army service, he was employed with the City of Glendale, Colorado. Chief Jensen was with the City of Glendale for approximately five years and Chief of Police for two of those years. Chief Jensen applied to the City of Steamboat Springs in 1975. As of this year, he will be starting his eleventh year with the City Police Department. In October 1985 he was Chief of Police for four years.

I asked Chief Jensen if there are differences between military police and civilian police. Chief Jensen responded, "In the military, they teach you how to be a soldier and a military police employee. There are many differences in the military. It was an eye-opening experience, because in civilian government there are things you have to be careful with, i.e. civil rights violations. You also have to be careful in how you operate and how you talk to people and how you stop them. In the military, if the law is broken it's broken. We didn't worry about civil rights. The violator went to jail and had a military court martial. There were few questions asked. Whether the military personnel are on the post or downtown, they're under military rules and regulations. It was pretty slanted, because there was no sympathy towards a military employee whatsoever. Although all the training was similar to civilian police training, you learned to be a soldier first and a police officer second.

"The schooling is very different for military school. Civilian training includes 14 weeks of certification from the State of Colorado. Certification is signed by the Director of the Colorado Law Enforcement Academy and the Governor of the State of Colorado. Certification is a total of more than 400 hours of classroom and practical training. Military school includes 8 weeks of training."

While Chief Jensen was stationed at the military base in Fort Wayneright, Alaska, they had a large military police company with close to 200 M.P.'s. They patrolled the residential district, answering domestic calls and patrolled several establishments on the base like the Officers club, NCO club, which is the Non-commissioned officers club for sergeants and above, and the enlisted men's club, which included privates and specialists. There was no rank in the enlisted men's club and there were many bar fights. Patrol continued over a twenty-four hour period. They had downtown patrol where they dressed in their class A dress uniform with hats and white gloves. They worked very closely with the city police department. In Alaska at that time there was a lot of trouble twenty-four hours a day.

"The training I received and the experiences that I had from the military police and the civilian police had some similarities as well. We never asked for cover that we didn't get real

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quick. If you got into a situation where something didn't look or appear on the surface to be 100 percent safe, you could call a backup. I was a patrol supervisor in the military and on each shift there were about ten men, which included the Military Post and the Patrol Officers. There were some scary things that happened to me, but I was never concerned because you realize that it is a dangerous job and one that you accepted and that there are people assisting. Very rarely have we ever had a situation to use all the police equipment that we have on the street, but what we do use is good common sense and training."

I then asked Chief Jensen about his pressures on the job here in Steamboat. "Police work involves emotional stress. It is one of the many problems that the police officer will have to face during his career. There are tough and trying times in police work. There's a lot of comraderie in police work and you lean upon one another when you do get into a situation. For example you get involved in a shooting, and you know that it is the last thing that you ever wanted to do is to take somebody's life. It is really hard for an officer to handle. We work things out by talking it over. Policemen can tell another police officer their problems better than they can a city official, because other officers have dealt with similar problems. Police professionals also depend heavily upon the mental health people in Steamboat. Psychologists in Craig and Steamboat help officers during trying times. The

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Police Department is not afraid to tell people that some of their officers have been to psychologists. We don't want officers out on the street taking their problems out on other people. We talk about our problems openly and we don't go blabbing to other people saying, 'Hey, Officer X is having family problems.' It is just not done."

The day to day decision making is the hardest pressure of Chief Jensen's because each decision made not only affects him but it affects everyone in the community. Without good direction and good decisions, there are problems that are hard to imagine. For example, someone may become hurt because of miscommunication resulting in civil litigation. The day to day decision making is so stressful because Chief Jensen gives everyone orders in the Police Department. If he tells a Police Officer to enforce traffic laws, miscommunication may result between the Chief and the Officer. The Police Officer may miscommunicate the enforcement and all involved individuals will be in an uproar just because of poor communication at the police station. The whole decision making process rests on the Chief's shoulders. If he makes the wrong decision, people can become irritated and Chief Jensen could be held responsible in a court of law.

Some of the political problems as a Police Chief are that sometimes people don't understand what law enforcement's role in the community is. "We try to be as good as the community wants us to be; however, citizens resist arrest by trying to use their influence with



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the City Council or in the community to have the charges dropped, etc. I don't become involved in fixing tickets or any similar behavior because the police department does not operate this way.

"The City gives us a budget to work around and it has to accommodate everything we need. At times it is difficult to project these costs given the uncertain crimes that can occur."

Even though Steamboat Springs is a small community, it does have its share of crimes. Chief Jensen then addressed the topic of crimes that are hardest to handle. "Part I crimes are hardest to deal with, i.e., assault, robbery, murder, child abuse and theft. Burglaries are hard to prove in Steamboat. We do have a good success rate in clearing them up, but it's still hard to prove them. The hardest problem to deal with in the area of burglaries is the transient population, because by the time of investigation, the individuals may have left town. For example, someone may lose their skis. When we are trying to track down the information, the individual who has lost the skis has left Steamboat."

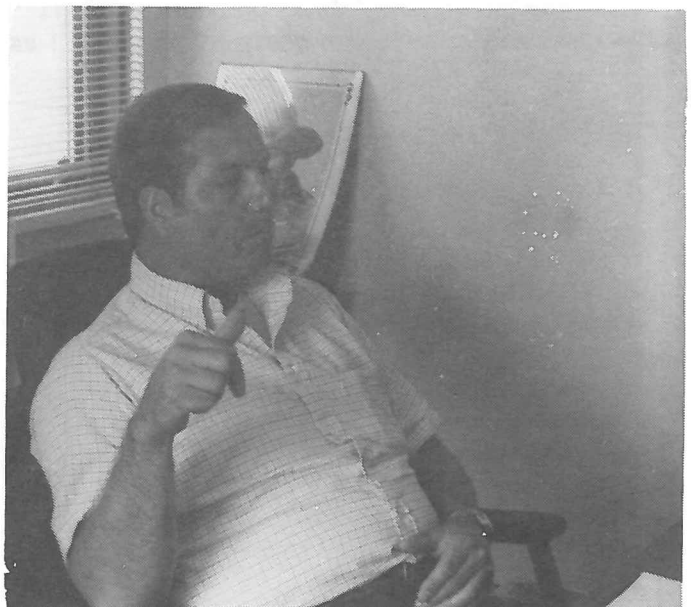
Crimes involving drugs or alcohol are also hard to deal with according to Chief Jensen. It is interesting though when citizens are arrested for a violation of the Municipal Code which involves about 75-80 percent of the cases, there is some kind of involvement with alcohol and or drugs. In other words, when the police have the citizen in jail they can smell the alcoholic beverage on their breath or by looking at them and their actions it may appear that they are on some type of narcotic, or they find narcotics hidden on them.

Drinking and driving has become a problem throughout the country, and as a result the laws on driving drunk have become even more stiff. I

asked Roger what the consequences are for people who drive drunk. "If you are arrested here in Steamboat Springs or in the state of Colorado for a DUI and you are taken to jail and you have to take either a blood sample or a breath sample to determine the blood alcohol content within your body and if it reads over .150 we take your driver's license away from you and surrender it to the State of Colorado Department of Motor Vehicles for one year. If you have to go to trial and are convicted it's an additional twelve point violation and you may lose your license for another year. That hurts a lot of people and I've seen a lot of sadness in the home as a result."

I asked Chief Jensen how effective the 911 emergency number is. "It's probably one of the best things that has happened in our community. Our response to those kind of calls is immediate. I think it is cutting down response time and it is easier now to have police, ambulance and fire service on one number. It's an immediate response, it only takes the action of dialing 911 and you have a direct phone line to emergency service. It takes us about 10 seconds to be on the phone with you. The 911 number is a great asset and probably one of the most advanced improvements of police communication in this community in a long time."

In concluding my interview with Chief Roger Jensen, I asked him what changes in the department he has seen through the years. "The best changes are an awareness by the City Council and the administration of the department in the last four to five years. We have worked very closely with the Council and we have been given a good budget in which to train police officers, update equipment and radio



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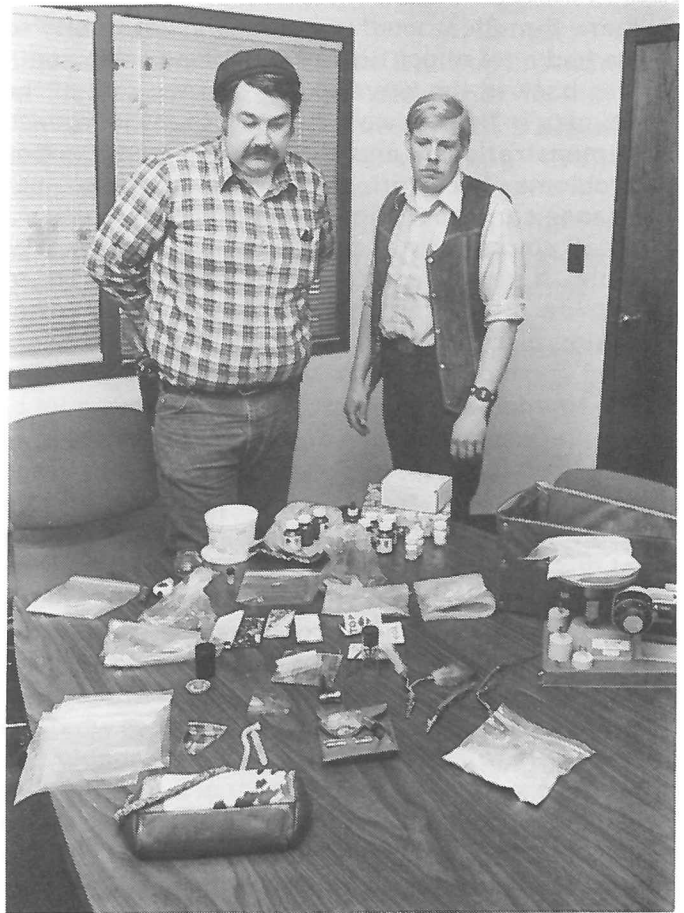
systems and our patrol vehicles. In the last couple of years I've seen some good cooperation between the Routt County Sheriff's Department and the Steamboat Springs Police Department. The only bad thing is to have to work 365 days a year, sometimes you are home with your family and sometimes you're not, we have to work Christmas Day. There are also a lot of distasteful things in police work. You see death, and you see traffic accidents, and you see people's lives destroyed over the use of drugs and alcohol. I think that it is the people hurting one another that I don't like, but it's part of my job and something I have to live with.

"I think communication could help my job out a lot in the future. I want to improve in communications and in how the community perceives its police department. I also want a reputation in Steamboat of being fair and firm. If the City grows, I would like to see a little larger department and better community involvement with the police department."

Ross Kelly



On my second interview I interviewed Ross Kelly who started on the Steamboat Springs Police Department in 1974 and became a detective in 1976. Ross has been on the force for a number of twelve years. I asked Ross how he became interested in law enforcement. "That happened while I was attending the University of Wyoming. I took some law enforcement classes as part of a curriculum. I was involved in wildlife management and I decided that that wasn't really the direction that I wanted to go. I started aiming more at prelaw degree and to finance the last two years of college I went to work for the Sheriff's department in Laramie and became very interested in pursuing a career in law en-



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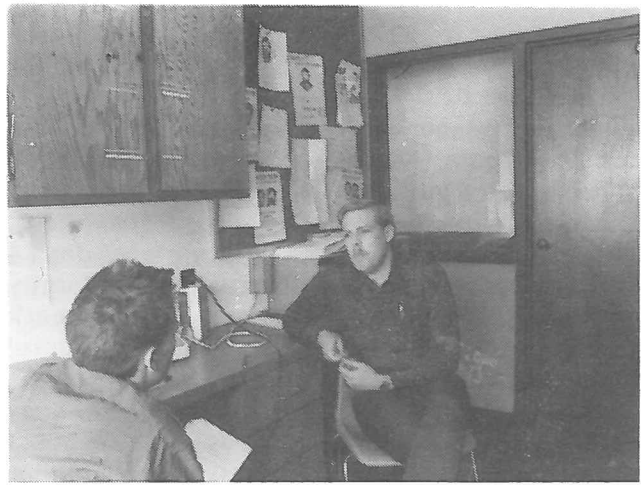
forcement administration. I was especially interested in becoming a detective.

"We are required to complete not only the training that a patrolman receives but our department requires at least two years of law enforcement experience before you can apply for the position of detective. There are three detectives and on the first of February we are going to go back to a staff of two; one of our detectives is going to go back to patrol as a sergeant."

Growing up in Steamboat, Ross Kelly has seen a substantial change in the department. I asked Ross what law enforcement was like when he was growing up. "It was very community oriented; the attitude of the public and the size of the town had a lot to do with it. In the pre-ski-hill era everyone knew almost everyone here and it was more of a caretaker type of law enforcement, and it was very acceptable for that size of community. There was a time period where we had a very small police force along with a very small Sheriff's office and the attitude of the people was like much of the rest of the nation. A very positive attitude. Yet there were a lot of budget issues and a lot of individual problems. In those days it was a major confrontation problem over the enforcement of traffic regulations and things like that because people were very self-sufficient and they did

know that Steamboat was a small community so we had a lot of political problems and this again was back in the '50s and '60s and the rest of the country in the '60s was changing in attitude, with demonstrations and other problems. Our problems here affected were growing, but change came to Steamboat later since we were a small community and away from a big city. Yet being a resort area tourists brought a lot of outside influences and it created a somewhat major disruption for a period of time. When I first started working here we were still building the Hayden Power Plant, and there were a lot of people brought into the area at that point in time. Construction people from the east and from other parts of the country. This was in the beginning of the '70s. Attitudes toward the police at that time changed considerably and the police were really in a catch-up phase in trying to learn to cope with real city problems and people who brought real city problems here to Steamboat."

Like any other job, being a detective requires a lot of hard work and time. I asked Ross what the main pressures of the job are. "Probably the main pressure is to try to reach solutions to people's problems, not all of these are criminal problems. A lot of the questions we get involve people trying to settle issues, whether they're civil issues or issues between landlords and tenants. Oftentimes those pressures are concerns of trying to come up with an equitable solution without being able to use the criminal law. These are a lot of the pressures. Others are trying to come up with answers to particular



serious crimes. Although I enjoy seeing things work out in the end for people, whether that be for a person who is a victim of a crime or a defendant. I like to see a person that you end up convicting actually be able to turn around his life and do something positive."

Throughout the time I've spent on this story I've learned an impressive amount on how the department operates. I've also gotten to know more about what a policeman does and his role in society. I asked Ross to give me a future outlook on the department and society. "I feel that if the projects our council is working on bear fruit, particularly plans to make Steamboat a year-round resort, we are going to see some changes within the department, one in size and two maybe in focus. We will be looking toward a larger department with more specialized services in order to protect the community.

