

## History of the Pittsburg, Kansas Police Department

The Pittsburg Police Department has a rich history and has played a major role in the city's progress. The brave and loyal men and women of the police department have suffered, bled and even died for this community. This history is dedicated to all who have served honorably in the uniform of the Pittsburg, Kansas Police Department, throughout the years, each generation giving their best to their nation, state, and city.



Fifteen years after Kansas became a state, "New Pittsburgh" was founded in 1876 from what was then the settlement of Hopefield. During 1880, "Pittsburgh" was incorporated as a third class city under the leadership of Mayor M. M. Snow. City marshals, who were appointed for the period of one year, were: Fred B. Southerland, 1880-1881; Alfred Shirley, 1881-1882; and Michael Dryden, 1882-1883. It was not until March, 1894, that the city's name was changed from "Pittsburgh" to today's name, Pittsburg.

In the late 1800's when an alarm (call for police service) was sounded at police headquarters, marshals would find their way to the alarm by any means possible, often commandeering a horse and buggy or a trolley car. Early Pittsburg was rowdy, in part due to the railroads bringing prosperity and problems to the region. Early in Pittsburg's history, an ordinance for "persons disturbing the quiet" was enacted. Liquor and drunks were also a problem, so the city began licensing and regulating the sale of "spirituous and malt" liquors. On "payroll" days, when coal miners with pockets full of money came to Pittsburg, horse-drawn hacks (cabs

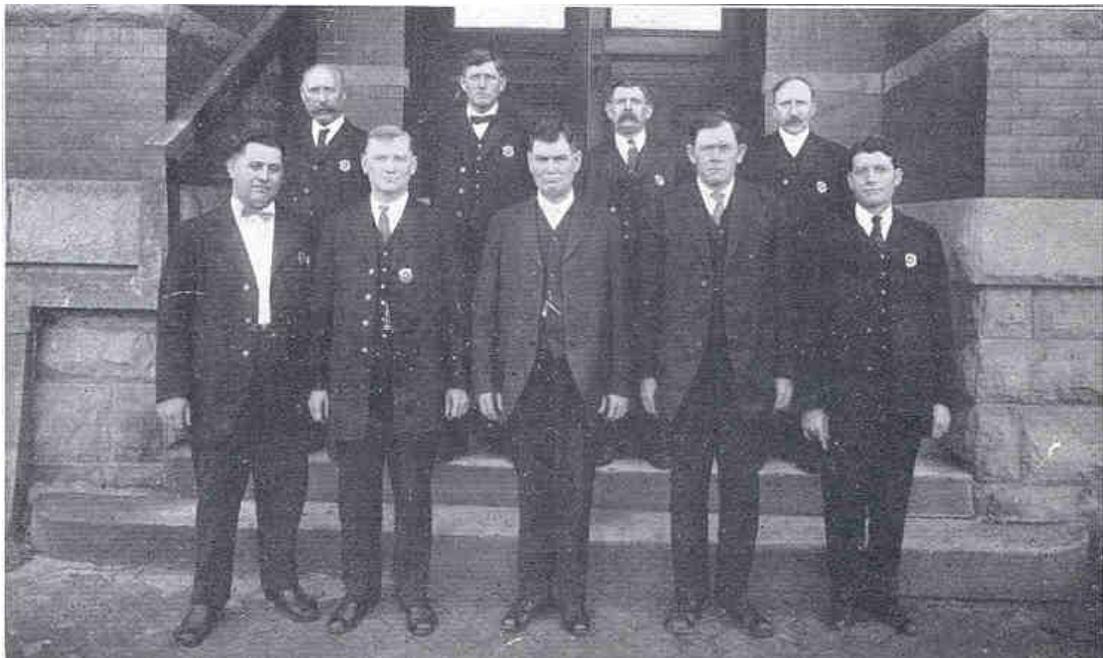
today) were very aggressive in their pursuit of business and often marshals had to mediate disputes and quell fights among the hack drivers and drunks alike. Most arrests during those days were for being drunk and fighting.

Between 1897 and 1901, the position of city marshal was elected, no longer appointed as were their predecessors. Hank Holmes, Clint Webb and Tom Howe were all marshals during that time. In the “dry” state of Kansas, it was illegal to operate a saloon or a gambling hall. Monthly, the saloon and gambling hall owners went to court and paid their fines, just to reopen for business as usual. Twenty-five saloons were listed in Pittsburg’s city directory in 1905. All Kansas drinking establishments were closed in 1910 with the enactment of prohibition.

In an era of tough coal miners, during the period 1901-1913, about one-third of the murders went unsolved. “It was nothing for miners, going to work, to stumble over a body in the darkness of pre-dawn.” “It was said, there were at least 21 unsolved murders near West Chicopee for which no arrests were ever made, according to the county attorney.”

During 1913, Chief Charles Ritter’s police officers fought prostitution, and made 57 prostitution arrests that year. Most paid their fines and went back to work the following day. Because of pressure from the wives of Pittsburg businessmen, the “bawdy houses” were confined to an area circling East Third Street. Chief Ritter was progressive and proposed the purchase on an automobile patrol wagon and better lighting in the alleys.

The next police chief, Roll Rakestraw, 1913-1917, oversaw the beginnings of a more modern police department, referred to in the community as “the fearless nine.” During 1915 the police began keeping “prints of crooks’ fingers” to match against “tell-tale finger prints” found at crime scenes.



**The Pittsburg Police Force in 1915. The officers are Roll Rakestraw, Chief; Louis Moore, Assistant Chief; George Prell, Eli Corlott, Charles Kickel, D. Butler, A. Tennant and J. Farrimond (courtesy of Pittsburg State University, Special Collections)**

“In September 1915 an appropriation was made to order another auto, for the use of the police department.” During that time officers’ salaries were \$37.50 for two weeks. Some of the officers were: Louis Moore, George Prell, Charles Kickle, John Farrimond, Andrew Tennant, Dave Butler and Eli Coillot.

A great man in the police department’s history was Chief Ross Armstrong, who headed the department from August 1917 until March 8, 1940, “a period of 23 years, making a total of 25 years as a policeman.” “He retired in 1940 because of ill health, but was given the title of “Honorary Chief of Police.” Chief Armstrong died at age 66 of a heart attack.

Chief Tom Stowers headed the police department from 1940 through 1949, and trained for 15 years under Chief Armstrong. During 1940, the department hired Harry Gazman, the department’s first licensed radio operator and made him desk sergeant. “The department still used the old signal light system uptown, too. The lights were on Broadway street corners and on top of the Besse Hotel. This system was used for a good many years after the radio system was well established.” When the alarm light came on, the beat officer reported to a call box, called the station and was assigned the call by the desk sergeant. Chief Stowers was known as an “efficient, educated investigator who ushered in the age of police radios” and was a progressive police chief.



Don Hearn and John Chester served with Chief Beard in 1948. (courtesy of Pittsburg State University, Special Collections)

Chief Ralph Beard began his career with the Pittsburg Police Department as a desk sergeant in 1942, acting as a special investigator, when he was not on the

desk. Chief Beard was made the acting police chief, October 1949, and one month later he was appointed chief. Chief Beard served in the United States Navy, during WWII, and he graduated from the F.B.I. National Academy in 1950.

Chief Beard retired July 15, 1975, with 33 years on the force, and to honor his achievement, his badge number, 15, was forever retired. "He (Chief Beard) served as Pittsburg's chief law enforcement officer longer than any of its other police chiefs . . ." In fact, Chief Beard's tenure as police chief, at the time of his retirement, was longer than any other police chief in Kansas. That record stood for years until it was surpassed by Salina's Chief John Woody. Chief Beard died at Kansas City, Missouri, Sunday, May 21, 1995, at the age of 79.



**Pittsburg Police assist with a 1968 memorial march in downtown Pittsburg after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King. (courtesy of Pittsburg State University, Special Collections)**

On July 15, 1975, Jack L. Spencer, age 32, Chief Beard's assistant chief of police since July 1, 1973, was named police chief by City Manager Marty Stricklan. Former police captain Ralph Shanks was appointed assistant chief. Chief Spencer stayed with the police department until October 20, 1978, when he took a position with the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, as chief law enforcement officer for six Indian reservations in eastern Nevada. Chief Spencer died tragically, at age 55, in an automobile accident, while on duty, September 15, 1998. Chief Spencer's life was lived in service to his nation and his fellow man. He was an 18-year police veteran.

Following Chief Spencer was Ralph W. Shanks, Jr., Chief Spencer's assistant chief. Assistant Chief Shanks was named acting chief of police October 21, 1978, and days later, November 6, 1978, he was appointed chief of police.

Chief Shanks commanded the police department for 17 years, and was a graduate of the F.B.I. National Academy. During his career, Chief Shanks worked his way up through the ranks, beginning as a police officer, January 1, 1967, and ending his career with his retirement as chief, April 1, 1995.

During Chief Shanks' tour of duty, policing changed more than at any other time in its history. His administration oversaw the day-to-day use of facsimile machines, computers, breathalyzers, and DNA technology. Chief Shanks' leadership modernized the police department and at the time of his retirement, the Pittsburg Police Department was the largest, most modern law enforcement agency in southeast Kansas. Chief Shanks, who died in 2016, was loved and appreciated by his officers.

A sad period in the police department's history was the death of Officer Milton Hinkle, who was killed in the line of duty, with his own firearm, Friday, December 26, 1902. Officer Hinkle's death came when he tried to quell a Christmas day disturbance. He died of his wounds at 2:00 a.m. the following morning.

One of the men in the group took Officer Hinkle's sidearm and shot him from behind. The suspect, Montgomery Godley, was taken into custody and placed in the city jail. As word spread throughout the town, an angry mob of citizens stormed the jail and hanged Mr. Godley. However, it was later determined that they hanged the wrong brother, and the likely killer was Joe Godley, who was wounded during the altercation by a gunshot to the neck.

The information for this history was gleaned from "A Century's Progress of Law Enforcement in Pittsburg," by Evelyn M. Thomas, October 1, 1975, *The Morning Sun*, and *The San Francisco Call* newspaper's accounts and oral histories from present day Pittsburg police officers. We are most grateful for the work of Evelyn M. Thomas, whose research has helped to preserve the department's rich history.