

Westford Recollections

by June W. Kennedy

Keepin' law and order

By JUNE W. KENNEDY

The position of constable, or police, in Westford is as old as the town itself. When the first town meeting was called after the incorporation of Westford in 1729, the warrant was headed as follows:

"Middlesex: George the Second by the Grace of God of Great Britton, France and Irland, Kind Defender of the faith, and so forth...To the Constable of the Town of Westford - The warrant was signed on the back: By vertu of the wish in retten warrent i have warned the free holders and the other inhabatance to appear at time and plase.

Joseph Fletcher, Const."

At this first town meeting on the first Monday of March, 1730, two constables were elected; Aaron Parker and Aquilla Underwood, thus starting a precedence that has carried on for 250 years. At this same meeting five selectmen and other town officers were also elected. Among them were two Hogg Reeves: William Butterfield and Ebenezer Hildreth. Guardians of the swine, or hogs, were needed, as they had voted to allow swine to go at large in town. (A Reeve is an overseer or supervisor.)

For more than the first hundred years, the town constables, as well as other town officers, were servants of the town, giving freely of their time with no reward except satisfaction of living in an orderly and friendly community. It was not until 1870 that Constable Isaac Day was paid \$14 for his services of posting the town warrants for the years 1867, 1868 and 1869. In 1870, Constable Edward Prescott journeyed to East Cambridge to appear before the County Commissioners in the case of the Abbot Worsted Company; he received \$5.00 for his expenses. The number of constables increased to four by 1871: Isaac E. Day, Edward Prescott, Samuel Wiley and Farnsworth Shattuck. Edward Prescott was the only one to receive pay: \$7.50 in regard to dog license and \$1.50 for posting the town warrant. The number was increased to twelve in 1872. Only two received pay; the others probably served for protection in their neighborhoods. By 1875 and 1876 the constables had been reduced to six, only one of whom received a total of \$68.75 for attending twenty-three funerals with town hearse, and for the posting of town warrants. It was in 1879, for the first time, that the term "Police Officers" was used. Constables were always elected along with other town officials at the regular annual town meeting. In 1893 the police officers were chosen by hand ballot, and that year five were elected, along with two constables. For example, in 1894 Constables Isaac Day and Walter C. Wright were elected along with Police Officers Eugene De Rochn, Joseph H. Wilson and Samuel H. Balch. But the pay of any was very small, as in 1897 with two constables and five police officers, the total expense for the year was \$25.40.

In the early 1900's expenses began to climb: \$112 one year, another year, \$72.50. Expenses in 1908 were high due to an epidemic of stealing horses, with payments of \$41.57 or \$42.84 for some officers. Handcuffs for the Poor Farm (an overnight jail was housed there), the cost of police badges, and expenses to the First District Court in Ayer brought additional expense for law enforcement.

As late as 1915, Frank L. Healy and Charles T. Brook, were elected at town meeting along with twelve police officers. Stephen Gardel, William Wall and Charles S. Ripley, Keeper at the Town Farm, served as constables during this period.

In 1920 the name "Police Department" appears for the first time and in 1921 the force really gets started. For that year, Harry E. Whiting signed the report as "Chief of Police." Part of his report is worth repeating--

"To the Board of Selectmen: I herewith submit my first report of the Police Department. On March 1, 1921 I received my duties which were to act as a police officer and to have charge of the police work of the town.

"I have been handicapped in several ways, a few of which I will enumerate: First, the means of transportation furnished, namely a defective motorcycle which took a large part of my appropriation to keep in repair, and to hire transportation for myself when it was out of repair or the weather was such that the use of a motor-

cycle was out of the question. Secondly, the large amount of territory to be covered. Thirdly, the smallness of the appropriation when one considers the many different expenses to come out of the same, and the fact that the money collected from fines does not revert back for use in the Police Department, but goes into the town treasury.

"The liquor situation in Westford is a serious one which the police department is unable to cope with, owing to the inadequate appropriation. At present I have on hand seventeen liquor search warrants to serve. It is only through the aid of Federal authorities that I am able to serve them, they are furnishing most of the men to serve in the raids, thus saving quite an expense to the town. But when the cases are tried in the Ayer Court any fines from convictions will revert to the town treasury.

"My report would be incomplete without a work of appreciation for Special Officer Sutherland, who has proven himself an efficient officer and dependable at all times and to Constable William Watt and Special Officers Ripley and Robinson for any and all work which they have done to make the Police Department a success."



In 1938 Chief of Police, John F. Sullivan, moved to 11 Boston Road where he located his office in the front room. It was around the clock duty for the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

In 1921 the total budget for the Police Department was \$2000. Expenses were: Salaries \$1250; Special Officers, \$218.82; Constables, \$86.00; Court Expenses (1920), \$47.28; Other Expenses (1921), \$112.45; Gas and Oil, \$58.58; Other Motorcycle Expenses, \$270.70; Telephone \$83.14; Printing, \$4.00; Total, \$2080.67.

In 1924 Selectman Frank L. Furbush was Chief of Police with eleven Special Police Officers, along with five Special Police Officers for the H.E. Fletcher Co. Among the Special Police Officers was the name of John F. Sullivan for the first time, being Constable the year before. \$2300 was voted for the Police Department, but only \$250 was listed in the expenses under Salary, which means that Chief Furbush only served part-time. That year the Police report stated that two men were appointed special officers whose services were to be available at any time. "The work is more than one man alone can handle. However, the one high grade man should be regularly employed, capable of carrying cases to the Superior Court and directing the work of others." \$3000 was recommended for the year 1926; Chief Furbush worked with Police Officer John F. Sullivan. There were 19 Special Police Officers.

The first report by John F. Sullivan was given for the period from March 15, 1926 to January 1, 1927. The Board of Selectmen in this report stated, "John F. Sullivan was appointed as a full-time officer at a salary of \$1800 per year including transportation. We believe that this plan has worked out very satisfactorily. The following is a report by the officer--

"Gentlemen, - I herewith submit my report for the work of the Police Department from March 15, 1926 to Jan. 1, 1927." He said in part: "The liquor situation is much improved but I have been handicapped in my work against auto violations without a motorcycle. Approximately



June Kennedy, local historian, looks over material from her forthcoming book titled WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS 1729-1779. This limited hard cover edition which features highlights from her weekly news column is being printed and bound by the Murray Printing Company of Westford and will be available in early September. Register now at the "Booktique", 6 Carlisle Place in Westford, to reserve a copy.

money for mileage. I remember that for a while Dad rode a motorcycle in order to save money. The uniform he wore consisted of navy blue leggings and jacket, cap, badge and knee-length black leather boots.

"In 1938 we moved to 11 Boston Road. The office was located in the front room and it was around the clock duty; the calls came to the house. When Dad was out, Mother covered the phone. Actually, she took the brunt of the complaints. When a call came, she forwarded it to Lowell; they, in turn, signaled Dad's car. While there was a car radio, the transmitter was based in Lowell. Every night until 2 a.m. Father made the rounds about town. While it sounds funny, he had the town mapped out by way of the bars - Caliente Re. 40, the Idle Hour in Graniteville, Wyman's Lunch, Forge Village and the Elms which was near the Old Oaken Bucket Restaurant. All messages were forwarded to him at these locations. In reality, most of the problems concerned themselves with liquor and licenses. Dad would often tell stories about how he'd hide behind the trees to catch the moonshiners down in Forge.

"Ambulance service was from the house - but there was no ambulance. The police car was rigged up so that the whole front seat could be removed and a single seat put in place. A stretcher on wheels that folded up was laid in the car from front to back. Just as soon as an emergency call came, we boys (I was only fifteen or sixteen at the time), quickly helped Dad remove the seat. At two or three in the morning there was no one else to assist. Then it was off to the patient's home and on to Lowell. Believe me, sometimes it was pretty scary! (Not like the later ambulance service in town with thanks to Bob Spinner, and the Fire Department, John Sanders and the 4-H Citizenship Club.)"

"Credit to Allister F. MacDougall for portions of this article.

This is article No. 34 in the continuing Westford Recollections - 250th Anniversary Series.

1500 cases have been investigated and taken care of, \$680 in fines have been assessed at the Ayer Court, \$155.90 have been collected for extra services, \$185 was collected as dog taxes, and \$68 was collected for licenses."

Respectfully submitted,
John F. Sullivan

It was in 1936 that the town voted to accept the provisions of Sec. 97 of Chapt. 41 of the General Laws, relating to the appointment of a Chief of Police of the Town of Westford under the jurisdiction of the Civil Service Law, and the establishment of a Police Department by the Board of Selectmen. That year John F. Sullivan was elected Constable and as Chief of Police (under Civil Service the position became permanent unless charges were brought against the person, until this time the appointment could change from year to year). John L. Connell became the Regular Police Officer. Also, in 1936, there were twenty-nine Special Police Officers and one Police Woman, C. Veronica Meagher. By 1938 the budget was \$5490 with \$100 for Safety Signs. Thirty-six Special Police Officers were appointed. Westford was just beginning its journey in the field of law and order.

JOHN F. SULLIVAN, JR.

"My Father, John F. Sullivan, was a part-time police officer in Westford from 1923 until 1926 at which time he became Chief of Police. He held that position until his retirement in 1962. During the '20's and '30's only one or two permanent Officers were needed to cover this rural community. There were, of course, many Special Officers.

"When he began his police work in town, Father lived on Hildreth Street at Dunbell Farm (Charles Hildreth place), across the street from Prospect Hill. He had his own car, but was given

Note: These 2 columns are reversed