

Securing Our Peace

While Winnetka today is known as a peaceful village, at the end of the 19th century its nickname was “Murder Town.” A series of grizzly murder stories had made Winnetka notorious: the drama of young Winnetka men ready to impose mob justice on a suspected murderer; the grizzly tales of young boys coming upon the headless corpse and missing head of a mysterious man; and most shocking of all – the horrific slaughter of two of the village’s most beloved founders in their home.

By 1900, Winnetka was ready to step out of the spotlight of notoriety and into the shade of peaceful security.

A Dedicated Force

Winnetka’s all-volunteer police force got its first paid policeman when Fred Schwall donned his uniform and pinned on his police badge No. 1 in 1909. There was little to do but note which streetlights were out and handle youth misconduct.

But as roads were paved in Winnetka, new challenges arose. A local camp for construction crews brought a tougher element into town. And traffic control duties tripled. It was time to bring in leadership.

Chief Peterson

Waino M. Peterson began his police career in Michigan, but was fired months later when an alderman discovered that he was below the required age – and incidentally young Peterson had given the same alderman’s son a kick in the pants for drunken, disorderly conduct. Peterson fared better in Illinois at a job in Lake Bluff before being appointed Winnetka’s first Chief of Police in 1913.

When he first took command Peterson had a force of three policemen. Over his thirty-one years that force would grow to seventeen officers including Gertrude M. Thurston who served for twenty-three years with duties on parole and juvenile cases.

Chief Peterson’s department had small quarters and a “calaboose” – jail – in the old Village Hall on Ridge. In his signature Stetson, the Chief cut a striking figure and was highly respected both locally and throughout the state.

Although Winnetka was already a “dry” village, Prohibition Laws added a colorful dimension in the 1920s. Clearly not all Winnetkans shunned the “vivous” beverages. Some homes had hidden rooms where one could partake away from prying neighbors. And there is a bit of lore about a speakeasy in the basement of a building on Elm Street.

But it would be traffic regulation that would instigate a new level of professionalism for Winnetka’s police force.

Scandal and Shake-Up

In 1925, several motorists filed complaints against a Winnetka officer and Police Magistrate. They claimed they had been tricked into speeding during the early hours while driving through Winnetka. An unmarked vehicle with a man in plain clothes would chase the motorist to excessive speeds. Some claimed they had been fired upon by their unknown pursuer. The motorist would then be hauled off to Magistrate Sinsheimer at all hours of the night to have their case heard. While the north shore already had a reputation for creative speed traps, this was a new low.

A board of inquiry was appointed by the Council and uncovered some less-than-professional behavior. While the investigation report was never released, there was a quiet shake-up and, in January 1926, the Winnetka Police Department announced plans to make some changes.

A New Day

A fresh way of conducting police work was instituted by taking steps clearly intended to raise the level of officer professionalism. New officers replaced those found culpable in the speed trap investigation and the force was expanded and better equipped. Then new policies and procedures of professional conduct were instituted based on rules and regulations used by the Chicago Police Department.

By instituting clear standards of conduct and approved procedures for handling arrests, combined with a system for tracking compliance, Winnetka's Police Department declared a new day. How fitting that it did so at the same time that it moved into its new headquarters in the brand new Village Hall.



Police Chief W. M Peterson, 1913-1945.