

Jim Heath and the NYS Troopers

The New York State Police has been in the news lately with accounts of tragic deaths of some of its Troopers in the line of duty. The job of a Trooper is demanding and dangerous. Some will remember the 1945 killing of Ken Knapp who lived and worked in Greene but was sent to the town of Colchester, Delaware County, where he was shot during a domestic dispute.

There has been a presence of the State Police in Greene for years. One of Greene's own, **James L. Heath**, became a State Trooper in 1927 and was in the force for 32 years. This article is a testimony to his faithful service and also a short history of the New York State Police and how it began.

In 1913 there was a murder in Westchester County of a foreman, Sam Howell, during a payroll robbery. Westchester County was very rural in those days and there was no police department. The murderers escaped and were never caught even though the dying man identified them. Mr. Howell's employer, Moyca Newell, and her friend, Katherine Mayo, were outraged and began an initiative to have a mounted State Police department to patrol rural areas. As a result, the State Legislature established the New York State Police in 1917. The basic law is essentially unchanged to this day:

"It shall be the duty of the State Police to prevent and detect crime and apprehend criminals. They shall also be subject to the call of the Governor and empowered to cooperate with any other department of the State or with local authorities."

The first Superintendent, George Fletcher Chandler, a surgeon and soldier, had great influence on the New York State Police. He wrote the screening and selection methods, designed the uniforms, bought horses and coined the name New York State Troopers. He also decided to have all his men wear their pistol on a belt outside of their uniforms, a decision so radical at the time that no other policemen were doing this. Now it's a uniform practice.

The Troopers' first assignment was policing the New York State Fair in Syracuse in 1917. At that time there were four Troops in New York State. From there, substations, generally rooming houses or hotels, were located in a town in each county. Now there are eleven Troops with Troop T policing the New York State Thruway.

In 1921, Superintendent Chandler announced there would be a new Troop in Sidney, Troop C, under the command of Captain Daniel E. Fox. Troop C was charged with the responsibility of policing 10 counties. 50 western saddle horses arrived for mounted police duty and Troop C became famous for their horsemanship.

Troops D and C had teams called the Rough Riders. They did daring feats and stunts on horseback with accomplished skill. They competed with other teams and appeared at fairs in Central New York State. At the State Fair in 1922, Troop C won the Chandler cup for best horsemanship with their pintos, the "spotted horse troop".

Now enters James L. Heath. Jim was born in Lestershire, NY, now known as Johnson City, in 1903. Carlotta Allen of Lilly, PA, and Jim were both working at the State Hospital in Binghamton when they met. He was a delivery man and she was in nurses' training. They married in 1926 and Jim decided to become a State Trooper. They lived in Sidney while he was in training. During his training Trooper Heath became a member of the Rough Riders and performed with one of the two teams. His singular riding trick was to stand on his head with one foot in the saddle with the horse at full gallop and then the horse would jump through a hoop. He performed all over central New York and even traveled to Toronto and Chicago. It is reputed that in Canada, the Rough Riders won the trick-riding competition against a team of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Is that why the Rough Riders were never invited back? At the Cobleskill Fair, Jim's horse decided not to jump through the hoop and Jim did. That was the last of his trick riding as he broke his ankle in five places.

After his training, Trooper Heath was stationed in Sherburne. He was patrolling on horseback all over Chenango County. One of his pleasant side duties was to be sent to Lake Placid to police the Winter Olympic Games where Sonja Henie won the gold medal in figure skating.

In 1933, Jim moved to Greene. He and **George Braisted**, also stationed in Greene, patrolled on horseback going so far afield in the county at times that they had to stable their horses in other towns for a night. Jim kept his horse here in Harold Elliot's barn. It wasn't too long before horses were out and motorcycles were in. Then the Fords came. Jim was in the detail that brought the first cars to Troop C in 1936.

Also in 1936, **Jospeh J. Benenati** joined the State Police and came to Greene to board with the Heaths and train with Trooper Heath as many others did. The photo with this article was taken at the Chenango County Fair in 1937. The breeches and puttees have been replaced nowadays but the Stetsons are still worn and don't Troopers Benenati and Heath look marvelous. What image could be better to portray the New York State Police. Retired State Police Sergeant Benenati is the oldest living Troop C member. He's also a former Chenango County Sheriff.

Greene became a substation for Troop C around 1940 (in the former Lawton house) and Trooper Heath was the head of the station until he retired in 1958. His daughter, Beverly Deabler, said it wasn't always easy growing up with a State Trooper as a father for her or her older sister, Delores. He didn't earn much salary in the early days. He made \$830 a year with no time off from Memorial Day to Labor Day and he worked 6 and a half days a week. She remembers phone calls in the middle of the night with her father rushing off and she not knowing if she would see him again. She would hear the siren fearing for her father's safety. She would wake up in the middle of the night, look down the stairs and see a prisoner handcuffed, waiting for someone to take him to jail. She told the story of the hatchet murderer in Ithaca who had escaped into the woods and her father volunteered to go after him and brought him out. She told of one Christmas morning when her father got a call that there had been a terrible automobile accident on Route 12 with a family on its way to a Christmas get-together and the car was filled with presents. Her father went to the accident and then with a sad heart came home to celebrate with his family. Another remembrance was of three escaped prisoners Trooper Heath was chasing when they flipped their car on the north end of Route 12 in the village. He shot one of them and knew he had wounded him because later a first aid kit was stolen from Coach Blakeslee's car on North Chenango Street. Then a frantic call came from Frances Brown who said that she had been chased from the barn to her house by a man with a pitchfork. Trooper Heath went to the barn and shot this escapee in the hand. By the end of the melee, all three men were in custody.

James L. Heath died on Father's Day, June 21, 1970. He knew everyone and was respected by all. 44 was his telephone number, his house number and his license plate number. He WAS the law. You didn't mess with Trooper Heath. He was everything good about a policeman: fair, just and a protector. His big, strong presence exuded confidence. He was there to help when there was trouble. He not only chased criminals but also championed good over evil. Trooper Heath made Greene a better and safer place, and we look back in gratitude for that.

Credits: town of Greene NY http://www.nygreene.com/a_jimhealth.htm