

Things I Did as a Cop in a Shockingly-Corrupt Small Town

Because we're finally realizing that a Dukes of Hazzard situation isn't just going to happen to us unless we start taking steps to make it happen, we started looking into rural law enforcement. We talked to an ex-deputy from the Scott County Sheriff's Department in northern Tennessee, a region so rural that it used to have a road called "N***** Bend" (and no, the "N" did not stand for "Nacho"). Here are some of the other hilarious things learned about down-home crime fighting:

Literally Anyone Can Become a Deputy in a Couple of Minutes

Back during the days of the American frontier, becoming a deputy was as simple as showing up semi-sober to the sheriff's office with your own gun and mustache (loaner mustaches would be applied if needed). Interestingly enough, that's basically how I got my start in law enforcement, too: I filled out an application and talked to the sheriff for a total of three minutes (two of which we spent exchanging barbecue tips because, you know, Tennessee). And with that, I was in. Just one of the many ways in which Scott County keeps the spirit of the Wild West alive!

After the interview, it was time for the training, which consisted mainly of the sheriff telling me to stop wasting his time and to get to work.

That was it. No guidance, no real instructions -- only a "You're hired. Try not to shoot anyone," which was super easy, since I wasn't even issued a gun or any other sort of gear. The only thing I got from the county besides the uniform was a beat-up patrol car with 250,000 miles on the odometer. Everything else -- my weapon, ammo, boots, handcuffs, a portable radio -- had to come out of my own pocket. That's the literal price I had to pay to become a part of the thin blue (well, technically brown) line.

In a Small Town, You'll Mostly Arrest Friends and Family Members

One time, another deputy and I were called to a bar for a disturbance, and upon arrival learned that my own grandmother got into a drunken altercation with another intoxicated senior citizen before throwing a bar stool through the front window. Resisting the urge to high-five her on the spot, we instead took both parties in for public intoxication, disorderly conduct, and vandalism.

I let my partner do the actual arresting, because I didn't want to get uninvited from Thanksgiving dinner on account of booking the cook. Don't get me wrong: If it'd been just me on the scene, I'd have slammed the cuffs on Nana hard enough to tweak her \$5-birthday-check-writing wrists. The law is the law, after all.

That's a phrase I got used to saying a lot, especially while explaining to ex-classmates that no, I could not let them off with a warning for doing 60 in a 25 because "we went to school together!" Well, yeah. It's a small town. Everybody went to school together -- there's only one bloody school. That familiarity came up a lot. I became a deputy when I was 19, so when I showed up to a party with my school chums, everybody hid in the bushes and waited for the cops to leave. Now, I won't say that I didn't enjoy handing tickets to some of these people ...

... but there are some serious downsides to being a cop and knowing everybody in town. The worst was probably when I pulled the dead body of a former classmate out of the river after he drowned. His mom, who was at the scene, screamed and cried the entire time. I will never forget that night for as long as I live.

That doesn't exactly make for a great episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*.

In Trouble With the Law? Call the Sheriff and Ask Nicely -- He'll Let You Off

Imagine you're a deputy patrolling a stretch of road. You've just pulled someone over for speeding, but before you can even get to their car, the sheriff radios you up and says: "Why are you bothering Mrs. Henderson? She was only speeding because she needs to get her husband his medication. You know he had a stroke last year."

Related note: Did you know sheriffs are publically elected?

In small counties, you never stop campaigning for re-election, which is why my boss wasn't so much a lawman as he was a politician. People would constantly call him up at his private number asking for all sorts of favors, and any deputy who wanted to remain employed suddenly found themselves more or less on his campaign staff. Someone once called the office to complain that I didn't wave at them, and I actually got reprimanded for that.

You might think that this is all charmingly quaint, but it's indicative of a much more serious problem, one well-known by many rural deputies. Namely ...

You'll Witness a Whole New Level of Corruption

During my time as a deputy, 90 percent of the people in the department were related to the sheriff. Chief deputy? His cousin. Assistant chief? Another cousin. Drug agent and two other deputies? His sons. He even hired his daughters-in-law as dispatchers, despite them being unqualified to dispatch a spider.

In 2004, one of the sheriff's kids was arrested for breaking into his ex-girlfriend's apartment, holding a gun to her head, and threatening to kill her, all while drunk. In the end, he ended up getting no jail time and was even put on paid leave during the investigation. Sadly, the only thing that surprised me about the incident was that the victim wasn't later charged for violently attacking the poor guy with her tears.

Then there's the sheriff's other son, Scott County's drug agent. In 2003, he was in a raid on a meth lab when his partner was killed. He initially claimed that the drug dealers shot his partner, but when tests showed that the man was shot by a department gun, he changed his story, claiming that he shot his partner by accident. Soon, witnesses (who admittedly were hanging out at a meth lab and therefore not exactly upstanding citizens) came out, claiming that the sheriff's kid was planning to murder his partner all along because he was close to discovering the deputy's involvement in drug trafficking.

Guess what? The deputy was never criminally charged with anything! Shocker! Well, he later went to prison for a DUI, but that was after leaving the force.

Upon hearing of this injustice, the people rioted in the streets, overturned cars, or ... kind of shrugged and went about their days. In fact, after the shooting, the sheriff's son was promoted to chief deputy before eventually leaving the force in 2006, around the time his dad lost the election. I'd say that was suspicious timing, but that's like the least suspicious law enforcement thing that happened in the entire county.

In Rural, Impoverished Areas, Crime Is Depressingly Predictable

Big city police departments might have PhDs and computer models that can predict all sorts of crime patterns, but down in Scott County, we had our own system: looking at the calendar.

Unemployment in Scott County has always been rampant, meaning that many of the residents there were on some kind of government assistance. So every first and third week of the month, when the welfare checks come in: Happy Domestic Disturbance Day! Families would get into fistfights because dad went out and spent most of the money on heroin and was now refusing to share it (and what example is that for the kids?). The ends of each month were even more brutal. That's when all the money and drugs ran out.

One time, during an end-of-month domestic call, I tried to place the husband under arrest for beating the crap out of his wife, only to have to fight off the wife, the kids, and like half a family reunion. Our department knew perfectly well that end-of-month calls were the most dangerous, but there were only three deputies -- when we got three calls in one night, we sent one deputy to each and prayed that at least his uniform survived. Those things are really expensive.

Sometimes It Was Like Living in a Wacky Cop Comedy

Don't go thinking it's all depressing and gritty, though. Some nights were pretty funny. One time, the siren box fell off my piece-of-crap squad car, so -- no kidding -- I had to make siren noises over the PA system. I just yelled, "Wee-oo, wee-oo, wee-oo," into the handset. Laugh all you want, but it worked. All the cars moved out of my way, though that might have been because everyone thought that I was a maniac who had stolen a police car and couldn't figure out the switches.

I once arrested a guy for drunken horse riding. Oh sorry, let me clarify: The *guy* was drunk, but he was riding a sober horse. I suppose that's only technically half a DUI.

Also, to further help you leave this piece less than completely depressed, it does have a happy ending. As soon as the old sheriff was voted out, the department improved almost overnight. They now have new equipment, real training, and dedicated officers who don't abduct and/or murder people. Now they can deal with all those horse DUI calls with the quick and somber professionalism that they deserve.