

Police Services Study Fact Sheet No. 6

THE STATE POLICE OF CRAWFORD AND ERIE COUNTIES

by

Nancy Malecek Neubert
Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis
Indiana University

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WORKSHOP

in
Political Theory and Policy Analysis

Department of Political Science
Indiana University
Morgan Hall 121
Bloomington, Indiana 47401

35910
0465C

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Because different metropolitan areas are not the same, do not have the same state law as a framework, do not have the same history, and do not have the same types of economic activity, the volunteer or auxiliary police organizations -- if present -- will also be different.

In the Erie, PA, metropolitan area, an organization of nearly one thousand members, sworn officers with the power of arrest and the right to carry weapons, provides assistance to a two-county area. This organization is the State Police of Crawford and Erie Counties, created from the Court of Crawford County since 1877.

In 1872, the only police force in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was the Philadelphia Police Department, whose officers had statewide powers. But Philadelphia is far from the two northwestern-most Pennsylvania counties of Crawford and Erie, which extend to the shore of Lake Erie, separating the states of Ohio and New York. At the time, a good deal of interstate livestock rustling was taking place across the "isthmus" of Pennsylvania. Residents did not feel they were being provided adequate law enforcement and petitioned the state legislature for the incorporation of the state police of the two counties.

The Act itself refers to "the persons who have associated, or hereafter associate themselves into a company for the recovery of stolen horses and other property, and for the detection of thieves" The organization was made a public corporation, with the power to hold property of no more than \$10,000, make contracts, sue and be sued, and to choose officers and governing rules.

Reading Thomas Jefferson's discussion of the Citizen's Militia in his Notes on Virginia reveals a similarity between that earlier organization and the State Police of Crawford and Erie Counties. Each was organized along the lines of civil divisions and was composed of companies.

The organization today consists of 29 companies in the two-county area. Companies are organized along borough and township lines, and are commanded by captains. Each company also has four other officers: First and Second Lieutenants, Sergeant, and Paymaster. The Chief Company is headed by the Chief of Police (currently Vernon Preston), along with Division Captain, Chief First Lieutenant, Chief Second Lieutenant, Chief Sergeant, and Chief Paymaster. Chief Company officers are elected to one-year terms.

Although Paymaster is a rank, by the organization's by-laws, no member may accept pay for his participation. The organization is wholly voluntary and has no full-time members. It is supported by donations and does not directly receive any public tax monies nor does it charge any fees. A principal source of donations for some companies is the local school district -- traffic patrol at school events and ball games is a frequent function of some companies.

Detailed annual reports to the Chief Company describing the extent of the previous year's activity by each company are required. For the year October 1, 1973, to October 1, 1974, approximately 14,000 hours were reported by subordinate companies. Seventeen of the 29 companies are located within Erie County, the Census Bureau's definition of the Erie Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, and accounted for approximately 9,000 hours of volunteer police work by 595 members.

Companies provide service on a wide variety of occasions, but as an indication the following are illustrative: traffic direction and patrol as necessary at churches for Sunday services, community festivals and fairs, Memorial Day parades, Halloween night patrols, various organizations and firms' annual picnics and open houses, events at the Erie County fieldhouse and elsewhere, including schools, and riding with and otherwise assisting local borough police.

Presently, some ambiguity exists concerning the applicability of the state's mandatory training law for municipal police officers. The Act requires "all political subdivisions of the Commonwealth . . . to train all members of their police departments hired by them after the effective date of this act." Police department is to mean "any public agency of a political subdivision having general police powers and charged with making arrests in connection with the enforcement of the criminal and/or traffic laws." BUT, the act specifically excludes persons who "perform only administrative duties, auxiliary and fire police." The State Police of Crawford and Erie Counties is both "charged with making arrests" and a volunteer department, so that this issue remains to be resolved. This state-chartered organization of volunteers has been attempting to arrange with a nearby college to provide the course of instruction in courses, since members would be unable to attend the full-time training programs established for municipal officers.

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