

# A Challenging, Fun Ride – WRPD's 50 Years

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**By Mike McKibbin**

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In half a century, the Wheat Ridge Police Department has gone from hiring off-duty Jefferson County Sheriff's deputies to one with more than 80 trained officers and a solid reputation.

The department was formed after voters approved incorporation on June 24, 1969. Today, it has 82 officers and 56 vehicles to serve a 9.5-square-mile community of 31,000 people.

Several former chiefs and officers told stories at a Jan. 9 panel discussion to kick off the city's 50th anniversary year.

Howard Jaquay joined the department in May 1970 and served as a sergeant and lieutenant. He was the city's second police chief from 1982-89.

Three weeks after graduation from the county sheriff department recruit class, Jaquay was hired by Wheat Ridge.

"It was a fairly casual field officer training program at the time," he recalled. "I spent a few weeks with senior officer Fred Girk. Our shift started at 6 a.m., but one day no one else showed up. So I got in a car and told dispatch I was in service. Nothing terrible happened, though."

Kent Higgins, who trained to become a reserve officer in 1970, said in an interview that before incorporation and the police department, the area had a volunteer Merchant's Patrol that checked the doors of businesses to help deter break-ins.

Then-sheriff Harold Bray held one of the state's first law enforcement training academies and Higgins was one of around eight participants.

"When Wheat Ridge and Lakewood both incorporated, the county was going to lose about two-thirds of its tax base," Higgins stated. "(Bray) realized the deputies he was training were going to work for those departments and not his department."

Joe Cassa started at the department in December 1972 as a dispatcher, then moved up to officer, sergeant, lieutenant, commander and division chief. He also served four, one-year stints as interim police chief and retired in 2015 after 43 years, the longest-tenured department member.

"I was lucky enough to get to do every kind of assignment a department handles, except animal control," Cassa said in an interview. "And I supervised that, too."

Cassa said when he joined the department, "They had a very slim patrol force and (emergency) dispatching group. It was really more of a call-to-call department. There were times when we had an east car and a west car and a supervisor and that was it."

In 1970, 13 officers, a paid chief, administrative employees and one vehicle was in place, thanks to a one percent sales tax. Higgins recalled more officers were needed, so a reserve officer program was started.

"We rode with officers on night shifts, helped on special events, football games, Carnation Festivals to provide protection without harming regular patrols," Higgins said.

Higgins also developed officer job descriptions, based on those of surrounding police departments.

Current chief Dan Brennan, the fourth person to hold the position by 2005, said after he applied for the job, his background as a commander with the rival Lakewood Police Department was brought home.

"At an open house with all five finalists, two city employees asked me if I got the job, 'you're not going to Lakewood-ize us, are you?'," he recalled. "I had never heard Lakewood used as a verb and I said 'I don't think I will, but I will certainly bring what I think worked there to this organization'."

### **Appearance important**

Those who served under the first chief, Ed Pinson, called him a stickler for details and following regulations.

Cassa recalled making a traffic stop and was puzzled when the driver laughed at his appearance.

"Just then, Chief Pinson and the city manager drove by on their way to lunch. They slowed down and kept looking at me," Cassa said. "I asked the lady what she was laughing at and she said 'your hat's on backward.' I told her 'well, I can't give you a ticket now.' Thirty seconds after I cleared the call, I had a message to see Chief Pinson."

When Cassa arrived, Pinson explained the proper way to wear a hat.

"I said something like 'if we didn't have to wear these silly hats, we wouldn't have this problem.'," Cassa said. "He dismissed me from his office and said 'we don't need to be doing that anymore'."

Higgins recalled a day he carried a box of cameras as evidence while wearing bell-bottom jeans.

"I got read the riot act," Higgins said.

Pinson also required officers to wear black polished Wellington boots. Higgins was finishing his master's thesis at the county's youth detention center.

"Stupid me showed up one time to do interviews wearing those black boots," Higgins recalled. "Everybody clammed up, they shut up when they heard me walking down the corridor because they realized he isn't who he says he is. He's a cop."

Jaquay recalled a dispatch center had no air conditioning and strangers would often show up, leading to security and safety concerns. Overnight dispatchers were allowed to bring a gun to work and Jaquay said he nearly shot an undercover agent through a window.

The first patrol cars lacked standard equipment, too.

“We asked if we could all buy those AM transistor radios” since none of the cars had radios, Cassa recalled. “We had to make sure they had straps so we could attach them to the spotlight control lever or they’d slide off the dashboard.”

The cars also lacked plexiglass shields between the front and back seats.

“So we either put someone in the front passenger seat or the right side back seat,” Cassa said. “One officer put an arrestee in the back seat and he managed to get his feet up and kicked the officer in the back of his head. The officer lost consciousness but woke up in time to keep the car on the road. So we certainly had our safety issues.”

Cassa said he was fortunate to have patrolled in unit 1, the department’s first patrol car. The ‘69 Ford was purchased locally. The department has kept it and started refurbishing it last March. It is planned to be “parade-worthy” in time for this year’s Carnation Festival and other events.

### **Deserving community**

If a community gets the level of law enforcement it deserves, Wheat Ridge must be a very deserving community, Jaquay said. After leaving the department, Jaquay worked with a multi-jurisdictional agency of federal, state, county and municipal officers.

“The level of acknowledgment this agency always got was a very heartening thing to me,” he said. “There’s a great deal of pride over having been associated with it.”

“I really loved Wheat Ridge as a family-type of department,” Cassa added. “It was — and still is — a small- to a medium-sized department and we always knew everyone in the department by their first names. We learned how to communicate and solve problems on our own.” During Brennan’s tenure, the size of the department went up and down based on the local economy and city budget ebbs and flows.

“It’s been a challenging, fun ride,” Brennan said. “Today, I think Wheat Ridge is recognized as a premier law enforcement agency. We’ve come a long way in that 50 years ... .”