



ELYSE BRIGHTMAN/FOR THE PLAIN TALK
Members of the VFW Honor Guard serve at this year's memorial service.

VFW Has Seen Many Ups And Downs Since 1934

BY ELYSE BRIGHTMAN
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The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) is a name everyone is familiar with.

Almost every town throughout the country has a branch of the organization, and Vermillion is no different. It is home to VFW Post 3061, which was once a thriving institute, but recently has seen its numbers dwindle from almost 200 members only 20 years ago, to just 83 today.

"It's gone down over the years because we are losing World War II vets, which is the largest group of veterans in the VFW," said Post 3061 quartermaster and Beirut veteran, Andy Howe. "These days, most of them are Vietnam and Korean Vets."

The VFW of the United States began in 1899 following the Spanish American War and Philippine Insurrection when wounded veterans were arriving home from overseas and not receiving the proper medical care. It allowed veterans to advocate for rights and benefits following service and by 1936, membership reached almost 2,000.

Today, the VFW still gives veterans a voice on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC.

"Generally speaking, it's VA (veteran's affairs) issues like making sure there are adequate services at hospitals and medical care for veterans and PTSD counseling," Howe said. "That's really the bigger issues, and just making sure the veterans are being cared for when they come back."

Vermillion's Post 3061 was established July 3, 1934, but there is no record of how many members there were at the time.

The members meet once a month to discuss the upcoming events at the post. Besides lobbying on Capitol Hill, VFW members play a huge role at funeral services where they stand as the honor guard for fellow veterans.

"One of the biggest things we do as an organization is honor guard for funerals," Howe said. "We do a lot of that for any veteran, not just VFW members."

Vermillion's post also puts on a Memorial Day ceremony every May, donates to the public library's summer reading program, and even sponsors summer baseball in the community.

"We sponsor two baseball teams, teener," Howe said. "In Vermillion there's different levels of baseball and we support the 13-16 year olds and then they move on to Legion sponsored baseball, so we fill that little niche."

For a number of years, Vermillion had its own VFW lodge on Market Street, but it closed its doors on June 27, 2005 due to low usage. The lodge had a bar and a kitchen that gave its members a place to play cards, have drinks and eat supper, but over time people lost interest in going to lodges.

"Eventually, we just sold the building because it was just costing us more than it was making," Howe said.

The building started being used only for the monthly meetings, but otherwise was empty, so the VFW sold it and started using rental spaces around Vermillion to hold meetings. Currently, the members meet in the public meeting rooms in City Hall.

"That's been a pretty big change for us," Howe said. "I don't know if we will find our way going back to owning a building again or not. It's working pretty well just to rent space. Since we really only use the space for meetings there's no reason to own a building."

Recently, the meetings are attracting only about 10 members per month, but the most important thing veterans can do is become a member, even if they do not attend meetings.

"Now, the VFW is more of a service organization and a lobbying organization," Howe said. "The VFW is pretty powerful on Capitol Hill lobbying for veterans issues. Membership is important for that reason."

"I don't have a lot of hard feelings for the 70 members that don't show up at meeting because at least they are there. They pay their dues and they make the organization stronger."

If membership gets too low, the post would shut down and combine with another post in a nearby town or city.

Current members hope to see new veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars begin to join, but with changing times it is hard to draw their interest.

"We know that we're not exactly what they're looking for," Howe said. "Social media has changed everything and people that are in their 20's don't get as much out of going to a meeting once a month and talking about putting on a program or something as (they do) working it out on social media, so we're kind of changing."

Howe has set up a Facebook group for members to keep informed about what is happening at the post, even if they don't attend meetings.

World War II veteran Jim Kronaizl joined the VFW in 1945 and is Post 3061's longest active member.

"Those were some good times," he said. "We used to travel all over visiting other posts."

As for encouraging young veterans to join, Kronaizl said it's their own choice.

"It's their own free will," he said.

But, Howe sees it a little differently.

"We want to try to remind the younger veterans that it isn't a matter of what's in it for them," Howe said. "It's what they can do in the sense that, if we don't have active membership with dues paying members then we lose our voice on Capitol Hill. If nobody is fighting for VA funding then you can see it diminish, so without the VFW and American Legion at a national level being strong and powerful, then you're going to see Veterans funding diminish. So, we want to get them to at least join."

Veterans can join Post 3061 by contacting Howe, or post commander Leo Powell, through the Vermillion Chamber and Development Company or by going to VFW.org.

"If veterans aren't advocating for (other veterans)," Howe said. "Who's going to?"

Local Law Enforcement Changing With The Times

BY ANDY HOWE, CLAY COUNTY SHERIFF
For The Plain Talk

Over the past few decades and considering the changes in equipment and use of technology in law enforcement in Clay County, it would be simplistic to assume we can predict how the officers of the next generation will be protecting our community.

The advances we have seen have progressed at a pace that accelerates with each decade. Very few officers currently serving in Clay County have experienced working without even the advantage of a cell phone. "The Old Days" is a relative term depending on who is doing the reminiscing but it should seem fair to say that in law enforcement in Vermillion/Clay County, in particular when considering equipment, the "old days" ended around 1990.

Prior to 1990, there were few changes that would impress younger officers today and those changes spanned decades. Radios in Vermillion Police cars came about in the 1940's. Telephones came into use by police along with the rest of the public who could afford them but the notion of having someone assigned to answer it came along later. Early police officers in Vermillion from the 1930's until the 1960's would go out and walk their beat or patrol in their cars while watching for a light above the police station to turn on when the phone would ring. Then the officer would run to the station to answer the phone. It wasn't until the 1960's that dispatchers were hired. Retired Vermillion Police Detective Larry Gray recalls Police Chief Merle Offerdahl telling him of the days when, while on patrol, the officers were required to regularly drive by the bank at Center and Main, look to see if the red light was lit and call the telephone operator to get their messages. Offerdahl also talked of officers leaving their windows down so they could hear shouts for help in the days long before cell phones.

Other than these advances, it seemed that things stayed the same for many years. Retired Clay County Sheriff Dusty Passick recalls providing his own patrol car until sometime in the 1970's. He says the county gave him a police radio and a detachable red light for the top of the car. It was his own car at a time when families rarely owned more than one so, much like on the Andy Griffith Show, Dusty would drive his family around in a car with a long whip antennae attached to the rear fender. When Sheriff Passick began his career as a Clay County Deputy Sheriff, the county had two or three revolvers but they didn't work well so he bought his own pistol for use on duty. This was the extent of the police equipment provided but was standard in relation to the profession at the time. Detective Larry Gray recalls the rooftop red light on the patrol car was activated using a simple toggle switch mounted right next to another that activated the car heater so they often turned on one meaning to turn on the other.

Simple, modern conveniences would have been life changing even in relatively recent times. Throughout most of Retired Sheriff Passick's career until the late 1990's, due to a very small staff, many hours were spent "on call". While off duty, a deputy must be available which meant staying by a phone and updating dispatch of his whereabouts. Often this made seeing a movie, going shopping, fishing, or most other activities impossible. Now a deputy can simply set a cell phone to vibrate and go on with his activities while still being available to respond when necessary although increased staffing has allowed for more hours each day to be covered with a deputy on duty.

Sheriff Passick recalls the addition in the 1970's of a 35 mm camera as a major



SHAUNA MARLETTE/ FOR THE PLAIN TALK
Clay County Sheriff Andy Howe shows off a badge from the 1970's that represented the department. In the background are current and former badges from law enforcement of the area.

advancement in equipment and he once used this camera to capture a clear photo of a bloody fingerprint that was of sufficient clarity for a forensic comparison to be made. He says this was a first time in South Dakota where a photo of a fingerprint was used instead of using powder.

Rural patrol is still a situation where officers patrol with little access to backup but until the late 1990's; the deputies had limited means of even informing dispatch of their location and status. Many areas of Clay County had no radio signal leaving deputies to resolve situations such as domestic assaults and bar fights completely alone with no phones or radio contact to verify status. It was very common to conduct a traffic stop with no one else aware of it and then report it in later when making it to a hilltop or other area the radio could reach. Improvements to the newer digital radio network have significantly minimized this problem.

In the 1990's, changes came in many ways and as time passed over the next two decades the pace of change increased. Detective Larry Gray recalls that in 1975, the Vermillion Police Department had two large but portable, hand held radios that they only carried when they were patrolling on foot. Limited range in rural Clay County made portable radios useless for the Sheriff's Office. Pagers came into use to help solve the on call limitations but served no function on duty for two way communication. In the mid 1990's, due to the ability to put radio repeaters out in the county, the Sheriff's Office was also able to use portable radios. Soon after, cell phones became available and promptly became a necessity.

Retired Sheriff Passick recalls a time when a portable radio would have been valuable to him. He had approached a Vermillion residence to take a man into custody for a mental health committal. Deputy Les Kephart stayed out of sight to avoid antagonizing the man. Sheriff Passick

soon found himself in a standoff with his foot holding the door open and the other man trying to close it. Deputy Kephart was out of sight and hearing so the two men each held their ground until Deputy Kephart came to find out what was taking the sheriff so long. Today, in a situation like that, not only would a portable radio be used to call for assistance but dispatch routinely calls to check the status of officers to make sure help is sent if needed.

In recent years, to keep pace with the profession, the Vermillion Police and Clay County Sheriff have implemented improvements in older equipment such as emergency lighting and sirens, prisoner partitions, flashlights, RADAR units, and weapons. By the end of the 1990's, revolvers had been traded in for semi-automatic pistols. Over the next 10 to 15 years, 12 gauge shotguns were phased out in favor of more functional and reliable patrol rifles. When the Public Safety Center was built in 1989, some desks had typewriters on them but no computers. Ten years later, a desk without a computer was useless. The access to data proved its value to the point that by 2005, all of the Sheriff and Police cars were equipped with a mobile data terminal. Over the next ten years, advances in data transmission using cell towers instead of radios greatly improved the value and functionality of the mobile computers.

Our local law enforcement officers today are equipped with cameras in their patrol cars, as well as mounted on their uniforms, capturing most of what is seen and heard for use in court if necessary. Electronic "Tasers" are issued to help minimize the risk of injury to officers and combative offenders during arrests. Long gone are the days of a lead "sap" used to subdue an unruly drunk, replaced by well trained and properly equipped police officers. Officers also respond to medical calls with a portable defibrillator. These have been used in Vermillion to save lives that would have been lost in the

recent past.

In 2003, the Sheriff's Office had one minimally used email address. Since that time, individual email has become a standard and indispensable method of communication. The red light on top of the bank has long since been replaced by a constantly improving Public Safety Dispatch center with up to date technological equipment and a staff trained to keep pace with the changes. Our citizens expect and deserve no less in times of crisis.

The Clay County Jail has changed very little since the courthouse was built in 1912 except for the addition of three cells and a common day room in 1989. Still, it is not the jail of the past when many hours of the day were spent with no jailer on duty. Twenty-four hour per day staff coverage was not provided until 1988. After that, until 2015, only one jailer was on duty at a time, an unacceptable risk to staff and inmates and a problem solved by the county commission this year. Jailers now receive more training and also are aided by a computer system and audio-visual equipment to monitor the facility and document the events taking place. Work release or house arrest inmates are monitored by GPS bracelets and many court ordered participants are monitored daily by a computer system and audio-visual equipment to monitor the facility and document the events taking place. Work release or house arrest inmates are monitored by GPS bracelets and many court ordered participants are monitored daily by a computer system and audio-visual equipment to monitor the facility and document the events taking place.

Today, a Vermillion Police Officer and a Clay County Deputy Sheriff serve in all of the schools of Clay County. This is a perceived necessity in the world today but is not new in this community. The SRO program and DARE have been in the schools here for many years. The goal of Community Oriented Policing is a nationwide trend that mirrors the small town, neighborly approach to public service that Vermillion's law enforcement officers have striven to provide for decades.

In the future, law enforcement in Vermillion and rural Clay County might be using other technology already in use elsewhere. Examples of capabilities we haven't yet employed are GPS tracking of patrol cars for more effective dispatch, vehicle license plate scanner systems, and electronic traffic citations. It is safe to say that some of these advances are just around the corner. Plans are underway, statewide, to implement the next generation of 911 dispatching allowing reporting by text messaging and live streaming video of events from the public directly into our dispatch center. It is reasonable to consider that in 10 to 20 years, the equipment we are so proud of now will be looked upon with the same sort of nostalgia that we now feel when thinking of the once innovative police telephone light.

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