

In 1974 after graduating from high school, I attended the University of Northern Colorado and decided to obtain a degree in history. I have always been fascinated with history, so this seemed like a natural fit. Two years later, I changed my degree to sociology to pursue a career in law enforcement.

Today, I still love history and think about how it applies to modern times. I believe that if one wants to know where they are headed, they need to look to their past.

The office of sheriff is full of time-honored traditions and responsibilities dating back more than 1,300 years. A few of these traditions include: the sheriff being elected by the people, running a county jail, serving the courts, providing law enforcement and keeping the peace.

One of the traditions is the word "sheriff" itself. Around 700 A.D., groups of Anglo-Saxons lived in England in small communities called "tithings." The tithings consisted of 100 families who would elect a chief, which was called a "reeve." In time, when communities grew to several hundred families, a new unit of government called a "shire" was formed. The shire is the forerunner of our modern day county. The members of a shire also elected a reeve to be their leader. To distinguish the leader of a shire from the leaders of the smaller tithings the more powerful leader became known as a "shire-reeve." In time, the word "shire-reeve" was shortened to the modern day English word that we now know as "sheriff."

The sheriff became responsible for law enforcement duties around 871 A.D. when King Alfred the Great assumed the throne of England.

Then, just like today, the sheriff depended upon the residents of the community to assist him when needed. For example, in the event of a breach of the peace, it was the duty of every citizen to assist the sheriff when called upon. If the sheriff was looking for a suspect, he would give the alarm known then as the "hue and cry." Anyone in the community who heard this was obligated to assist the sheriff in locating the suspect. This concept still exists today and is known as the posse comitatus. To me, this conjures up images of the old-time western sheriff rounding up the posse to help find and arrest a bank robber, murderer or horse thief. The Weld County Sheriff's Office has an active posse, which is called upon when needed to help with crowd control, search and rescue and crime scene security, among other duties.

In 1215, rebellious noblemen became fed up with the oppressive rule of kings and forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. Many consider the Magna Carta the forerunner of the U.S. Constitution. The role of the sheriff is mentioned nine times in this very important document.

Around the time of the Magna Carta, most punishments for crimes included the death penalty, floggings and other forms of physical mutilations. Leaders at that time began looking for more humane ways of punishing criminals, which led to incarcerating them in county jails under control of the sheriff. Another new type of punishment was the

workhouse, which was the forerunner of our modern-day work-release program. Weld County runs both a secure jail and a successful work-release facility.

The role of sheriff in America came with the English settlers when they first arrived in the new country. The first counties were established in Virginia in 1634, and they elected their first sheriff 17 years later in 1651.

The sheriff continued his presence by moving with the pioneers throughout the Wild West, keeping the peace and bringing justice to the new frontier.

Old-time sheriffs of England also had other responsibilities and duties. For example, if someone did not pay his full taxes or fines, the sheriff was personally responsible for the difference. The sheriff also was expected to serve as host for dignitaries and provide them with entertainment at his own expense.

Personally, I am happy some traditions did not make it to the new world.

John Cooke is the sheriff of Weld County.

(Source provided by Sheriff Cooke: Some information obtained from writings of the National Sheriff's Association)

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