

History Comes Alive!



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Tales From the City Archives



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Images courtesy the L.A. Archives

The roll call at the beginning of a police officer's day in 1922 was critical. It was the time to find out what he had missed from the previous day and what he needed to know while walking his beat on the streets of Los Angeles. One of the tools that kept those important details literally within reach was the handout the officer received when he got to work.

The City Archives has almost all of these bulletins from 1907 through 1949. Almost every day of the year, LAPD would compile a single sheet of paper that represented many individual reports about all manner of crimes. There would be useful information about education opportunities that an officer could take advantage of between shifts. There were also not-so-subtle reminders of how an officer should conduct himself from the Chief of Police himself. News of heroic deeds or tributes to a fallen officer was also present in these documents.

The fact they survive at all is amazing in itself. Meant for only a day's use, the paper used to print the bulletins was very close to newspaper stock of the time. Our collection is bound into volumes that have allowed some of them to last more than a century.

There is not a lot of information about the actual bulletins themselves. The only details were found in the 1912 Police Department annual report describing the "paper policeman" as follows: "645 copies issued each day for a total of 235,425 placed in daily circulation...1,986 descriptions of persons, bicycles, automobiles, horse drawn vehicle, watches..." Copies were also mailed to the mayor, City Auditor, Health Department and all the police commissioners.

Outside agencies throughout the country – police chiefs and sheriffs – received sets every four days. These numbers come from 1912, a full decade before our sample year of 1922, certain to have greater numbers in every category. They were filled with the language of the day and illustrate what details were important to know if a stolen car was to be recovered. While he had access to call boxes to request back-up, the cop on the street had to know his territory and the people in his neighborhood.

So how would the bulletin assist the street cop? Let's consider how a stolen car would have appeared. A list of stolen vehicles – a typical list included a dozen – would describe the car as a "Ford Touring, 1921 model, license No. 399-709, motor No. 4557-877, Goodrich tires, black body, gear and wheels." Sometimes the brand of battery was listed or the manufacturer of the speedometer was named. Although cars had many fewer parts and simpler systems in those days, the use of serial numbers and brands was directly connected to the use of vehicle identification numbers (VIN), tire brands with distinctive treads and the endless variety of parts known by barcodes, which still play a role in auto-related crime investigation today.

The cop on the beat was supposed to be well informed about the businesses in his area. There were regular bulletin items listing pawnshops and second-hand dealers all over town up for license renewals that were issued by the Police Commission. The cop was asked, "Do you know of any reason why a permit should not be issued to any of them?" by the sheet of paper in his hand.

News about his brother officers was a common feature. One example is a tribute to a 27-year veteran who died off-duty, included this item: "His kindly nature made him beloved...by the newsboys amongst whom he worked for many years..." Newsboys knew their neighbors and could cooperate with the local cop as their eyes and ears.

Police officers were expected to be the professionals in

the 1920s as they are today as it related to personal conduct. Bulletins would carry items of officers being removed, as in the March 9, 1922 edition:

"Removal of [officer name] for the following cause: Conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman; in living in a state of adultery with Mrs. [X], within the last twelve months" and "Removal of Emergency Policeman [name], for the following cause: Intoxicated and in such a condition as to

The Daily Bulletin For the Beat Cop

LAPD daily bulletins from the early parts of the last century are a treasure trove of details on the daily life of the police officer.



A daily bulletin from February 7, 1922.

necessitate being locked up in the City jail on March 5, 1922 at 8 a.m."

Likewise, the bulletin of Feb. 11 carried this memo from the Chief's office:

"Smoking while in uniform, entering pool halls in uniform when not on duty, remaining seated in street cars when pay passengers are standing, are things that bring discredit to the uniform."

This attention to detail has not changed over the decades.

Besides the descriptions of stolen property, the bulletins usually

carried a person missing or being sought. Runaway boys and girls were common events, with many photos included. The majority of persons being sought were criminals of every type and description, including kidnapers, robbers and murderers. Petty criminals were also highlighted, including bank swindlers and embezzlers. Many felons were wanted by other agencies in other cities throughout the country. The chronological nature of the volumes allows one to follow the progress of the notice to a capture or a last stand that ends the pursuit of a wanted man. Some missing persons had several postings and perhaps never were found. There are a lot of interesting questions raised by the bulletins. Some of those answers could be uncomfortable.

A notice to all officers appeared in the April 28 bulletin that read, "If you belong to any organization, society or lodge...political, organized or unorganized, the teaching of which conflict[s] with your oath of office or your duties as a police officer...you will immediately sever your connections...or in justice to all at once resign from the police department." What triggered this memo from the Chief? The May 1 bulletin offers some clues: The Ku Klux Klan had



A daily bulletin from February 11, 1922.

created a violent disturbance in Inglewood some months earlier. The inquest revealed the fact that some civil servants had taken part in the lawlessness.

The City Council passed a resolution on April 28 – the same day as the Chief's memo – that ordered every City Employee who belonged to a similar organization to either resign from that group or leave their City job. Given the problems of police corruption at the time – this was during Prohibition – we'll probably never know how well the rule was ever enforced.

The bulletins reflected the ideal of what a police officer should be on the beat and elsewhere. What they can't reveal is more of the common reality everywhere in America in 1922. Prohibition, as one example, thrived because a great deal of law enforcement looked the other way or were actively involved in the liquor trade. Racism and sexism is hard to squeeze out of a bulletin with its generic descriptive language, but it wasn't hard to find ill treatment of women and minorities everywhere else in daily life at that time, and it persists in some circumstances in our time as well.

But the humble daily bulletin served a noble purpose in a profession that still is one of the most dangerous and has gotten only more specialized over time. Perhaps a future column will show up about some of the other elements unique to the LAPD. I'm open to suggestions for topics and areas that you would like to have brought to this page. Please let me know!



A daily bulletin from April 28, 1922.