

The Traffic Division



The Traditional winged-wheel patch worn by Cranston traffic officers since the 1920's.

Most people tend to think of speeding traffic and car accidents as a modern day phenomenon, but in reality, these problems have been around since the invention of the wheel.

In the late 1800's, when the world generally passed by at no more than ten miles per hour, Cranston residents complained of speeding bicycles and fast horses. The bicycle problem was solved when Chief John Bigbee assigned an officer to patrol Edgewood with a bicycle and fine any violators. The fast horse situation was another matter. One popular "drag strip" was the section of Reservoir Avenue from the Providence city line to Park Avenue, where spectators would place bets to see who had the faster animal.

These situations and others prompted Chief Bigbee to set speed limits for city roadways. According to a newspaper article that appeared in the Cranston Times in 1900, the chief even designed the first diamond shaped speed limit signs.

Twenty-five years later the problems had only increased. A Cranston police arrest report dated 1925 shows a man was arrested for "passing a trolley" on Park Avenue.

On June 26, 1926, the front page headlines of the now defunct Cranston News declared, "Police Wage War On Auto Law Breakers!" The relentless battle continues to this day.

Before the days of electric traffic lights, traffic control at major intersections was left to the footman on the beat. If a particular intersection was busy at certain times of the day the beat man was expected to be there. His primary tools were a pair of white gloves and a whistle.

Up to the 1950's, it was possible for a foot patrolman to stop a traffic violator simply by blowing his whistle. Once the motorist stopped, and they usually did, the officer would ask for a license and registration. If the paperwork was not in order, the officer

would instruct the motorist to take him to the nearest call box so headquarters could be called. (Portable police radios didn't come into use until the late 1960's.)

If the officer had to call headquarters, the desk officer had to call the Registry of Motor Vehicles, and someone at the registry would have to look the information up by hand and then call back.. In the meantime, the officer stood by the call box with the motorist. This could take up to an hour.

There was a time in Rhode Island when all motor vehicle violations carried criminal penalties. If an officer decided to arrest a motorist, he could instruct the motorist to slide over to the passenger side of the car and the officer would then drive the car to headquarters. (Try doing this today and see what happens!)

As the city grew, traffic increased. During World War II, it was said in Chief Miller's 1943 annual report that there was an increase in traffic accidents due to the mandatory wartime blackouts.

Early traffic officers in Cranston rode motorcycles and wore the traditional winged-wheel patch on the left arm of their uniforms. The origins of this patch are unknown, but this continues to be the standard insignia for traffic cops all across the country.



Cranston traffic officers, 1929
(Note cross-draw holsters and wheel insignia.)

In 1927 it was reported that Chief Cuff added another officer to the “motorcycle squad”. This was most likely due to the 1926 headline pertaining to the war on traffic. By 1929, the squad consisted of six men who wore the typical boots and breeches of the era.

By 1957, the traffic division had grown to 11 officers that included a lieutenant, two sergeants, and eight patrolmen.



Cranston traffic officers circa 1955

In July of 1959, Cranston became the second department in Rhode Island to use radar in police cars to catch speeders. This was considered “cutting edge technology” for the day. Signs which read, “Speed Checked By Radar” became a common sight in the city as a deterrent.

The chief’s annual crime report for 1963 stated that the traffic division had investigated 1,089 accidents. It went on to state that the department had charged and prosecuted 1,643 persons for criminal offenses, of whom, 1,044 were for traffic offenses.

During the 1960’s, a management study was done by a Chicago firm that concluded that Cranston didn’t need such a large traffic division and recommended reducing its size. The chief followed this recommendation and reduced the division to two or three officers. The job of writing tickets and investigating accidents fell to the regular patrolmen.

Working in the traffic division was considered a preferred assignment since it generally meant that an officer got to ride instead of walk, and was permitted to travel throughout the city instead of being confined to a beat.



Cranston traffic division 1957



A Cranston police traffic officer's motorcycle on Dyer Avenue, 1962

In 1993, courses in accident reconstruction began to be offered in Rhode Island. Accident reconstruction is a higher level of training in accident investigation where officers use mathematical formulas to determine exactly what happened in an accident. These formulas can determine things such as vehicle speed, time and distance, and energy forces involved in the crash. This training is six weeks long and today's Cranston traffic officers are all trained as accident reconstructionists.

In the early 1990's, the traffic division consisted of two officers. Later in the decade a third officer was added to work nights. In 2001 a sergeant was added.



Cranston Traffic Division car, 1997