

History of the Office of Sheriff Oregon State Sheriff's Association

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When people hear the word sheriff some may think of Sheriff Andy Taylor of Mayberry, he was the model of community policing before the term was invented, or the Sheriff of Nottingham from the days of Robin Hood, or perhaps Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Arizona. What is your image of a sheriff? I certainly hope it is a positive image. As a member of a Sheriff's office you know what a sheriff is, but where did the title come from, what makes the Office of Sheriff unique in law enforcement, why should it be called the Sheriff's Office not a Sheriff's Department, and why is it important to preserve its direct accountability to the citizens via the election process? It is my goal during this presentation to provide you with answers to all of these questions.

The first of two important characteristics that distinguish the Office of Sheriff from other law enforcement units is its historical roots. In England, the sheriff came into existence around the 9th century. This makes the sheriff the oldest continuing, non-military, law enforcement entity in history.

IN THE BEGINNING

In early England the land was divided into geographic areas between a few individual kings — these geographic areas were called shires. Within each shire, there was an individual called a reeve, which meant guardian.

This individual was originally selected by the serfs (serfs worked the land of the kings or lords) to be their informal social and governmental leader. The kings observed how influential this individual was within the serf community and soon incorporated that position into the governmental structure.

The reeve soon became the Kings appointed representative to protect the King's interest and act as mediator with people of his particular shire. Through time and usage, the words shire and reeve came together to be shire-reeve, guardian of the shire and eventually the word sheriff, as we know it today.

The Office of Sheriff grew in importance with increasing responsibilities up to and through the Norman invasion of England in 1066. The duties of the sheriff included keeping the peace, collecting taxes, maintaining jails, arresting fugitives, maintaining a list of wanted criminals, and serving orders and writs for the kings Court.

The early American Sheriff was important to the security of the people and was granted much power. Along the early frontier, sheriff's administered punishment. Sheriff John Nixon was the first person to publicly read the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia.

At the time, Thomas Jefferson in his work titled “The Values of Constitution” stated “the Sheriff is the most important of all executive officers in the county. The sheriff’s power and authority are from the people who elect him. The citizens should control the office of Sheriff.”

The Office of Sheriff is certainly significant and was, in fact, the first county office established in the United States.

Joseph Lafayette Meeks was Oregon’s first elected sheriff. He was born in Washington County Virginia February 7, 1810, he came to Oregon in 1840 and was elected Sheriff in 1843. He was reelected in 1845.

Meek enforced liquor laws and he was the first Tax Collector. Failure to pay at that had a penalty of Loss of voting rights, and others could jump your property claim.

In 1847, a massacre (Known as the Whitman Massacre) of settlers occurred in Walla Walla, and one of Meeks daughters was killed.

This seemed to be the tipping point and the Oregon Country became a formal territory of the United States. Meeks was then elected to the Oregon legislature in 1846 and 1847.

Meek died in 1875 and is buried in Washington County. During this time, the Oregon territory encompassed most of what we know today as the Pacific Northwest and Western Canada. Russia and Mexico and the Continental Divide were our boundaries.

Clearly the office of Sheriff is not simply another department of county government. The internal operations are the sole responsibility of the Sheriff.

County department heads are subordinate to a county administrator or manager because they are truly only a division of county government, and they work for the manager or board of commissioners.

The office of Sheriff is a constitutional office in 35 of the 50 states, having exclusive powers and authority. These powers are not subject to the dictates of a county manager or the whims of the board of commissioners. These powers have been exercised for over a millennium.

The Sheriff is the “Chief Executive Officer” and “Conservator of the Peace” in the county. In the execution of the Office of Sheriff, there are many mandates and duties. Overall in Oregon, there are 68 statutes with subsections which mandate by law what the duties of a Sheriff are.

All Oregon cities lie within one or more counties. The duty of the Sheriff as “Conservator of the Peace of the County” and to defend the county, therefore, extends into the territories of the city within the sheriff’s county. Every city in Oregon has the power to provide general police protection. However, the Sheriff’s duty to provide law enforcement within the city limits is not

relieved by the city's providing its own law enforcement. The kicker is this: Beyond the sheriff's discretion stands

The kicker is this: Beyond the sheriff's discretion stands the discretion of the county governing body to appropriate funds to enable the Sheriff to perform law enforcement duties. Although the Sheriff's duties are mandated by state law, the decision over the amount of funding available for the performance of these duties is to the county's governing body.

The Sheriff's Office is different than other law enforcement agencies, it is directly accountable to the citizens through the election of the Sheriff. The Sheriff's Office is an independent office through which the Sheriff exercises the powers of the public trusts.

Sheriffs are directly accountable to their constituents, their state laws, their state's constitution, and the United States Constitution. The Sheriff must work with all segments of government to serve and protect the citizens of their counties.

Oregon has a rich tradition of County Sheriff's. Each County has an interesting history of its own. Each Sheriff elected is unique and is among the elite.

Romans 13:4 "For they are God's servants, working for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for it is not without reason that they bear the sword. Indeed, they are God's servants to administer punishment to anyone who does wrong".

It should be considered an HONOR to serve as an Oregon Sheriff.

In 1845, the first four districts were formed and Sheriff's were elected: Clackamas with Sheriff William Holmes, Champooick with William Morrison, Twality with Sheriff Thomas Smith, and Yam Hill with Sheriff A.J. Hembree.

All of Oregon counties started from these four areas. In 1844 Counties started to be formed:

June 22, 1844 – Clatsop County is formed from a portion of Tuality
December 22, 1845 – Polk is formed from a portion of Yamhill
December 23, 1847- Benton is formed from a portion of Polk
December 28, 1847 – Linn is formed from a portion of Champoeg
August 14, 1848 – Oregon Territory is created by Congress
September 3, 1849 – Tuality's name is changed to Washington County
September 3, 1849 - Champoeg's name is changed to Marion County
January 28, 1851- Lane is formed from parts of Benton and Linn
January 28, 1851 – Umpqua is formed from Yamhill
January 7, 1852 – Douglas is formed from Umpqua
January 12, 1852 – Jackson is formed from Lane

1853 Congress makes border between Washington and Oregon at the Columbia River
December 15, 1853- Tillamook is formed from Clatsop
December 22, 1853 – Coos is formed from Umpqua and Jackson
January 11, 1854 – Wasco is formed from Clackamas, Marion, Linn, and Lane. (It becomes the largest county ever created in the US)
January 16, 1854- Columbia County formed from Washington
December 22, 1854- Multnomah is formed from Washington and Clackamas
December 18, 1855 – Curry is formed from Coos
January 22, 1856- Josephine is formed from Jackson
September 22, 1862 – Baker is formed from Wasco
September 27, 1862- Umatilla is formed from Wasco
October 14, 1864 – Grant is formed from Umatilla and Wasco
October 14, 1864- Union is formed from Baker
October 24, 1874 – Lake is formed from Wasco
October 17, 1882- Klamath is formed from Lake
October 24, 1882 – Crook is formed from Wasco
February 16, 1885- Morrow is formed from Umatilla
February 25, 1885 – Gilliam is formed from Wasco
February 11, 1887- Wallowa is formed Union
February 17, 1887- Malheur is formed from Baker
February 25, 1889- Harney is formed from Grant
February 20, 1893 – Lincoln is formed from Benton and Polk
February 17, 1899- Wheeler is formed from Crook, Grant, and Gilliam
June 23, 1908- Hood River is formed from Wasco
December 12, 1914 – Jefferson is formed from Crook
December 13, 1917- Deschutes is formed from Crook