

Thiede went from garbageman to police chief

Retired lawman reflects on almost 30 years as Grafton chief

By Steve Schuster
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Village of Grafton's former Chief of Police Howard Thiede started his law enforcement career in a rather unusual way: on the back of a garbage truck.

"I was making my collection rounds and the chief of police, at the time, stopped by and said he heard I was a Marine. He asked if I'd be interested working in law enforcement," he said.

Thiede, who at the time was in his early 20s, had just come back from serv-



Thiede

ing in Korea. He jumped at the opportunity to become a patrol officer, and after several years, worked his way up the ranks where he eventually became chief of police. He served as chief for nearly 30 years (beginning March 1, 1972) until he retired in 2001, serving 43 years on the force.



News Graphic file photo

Then-Grafton police chief, Howard Thiede is seen in front of the police station in 1997.

On Aug. 15, 1960, when Thiede transitioned his career into law enforcement, there were no exams or initial training. The entire village of Grafton's police department consisted of three men. In 2012, the department has 21 sworn officers and seven support staff.

When it came to pay, Thiede said he earned \$166 every two weeks. Things have certainly changed. Starting pay for patrol officers in 2012 is \$1,981.50 every two weeks (\$51,519/annually).

And as for the village's police station, back then "it was in the chief's house, in the basement. His wife manned the radio," Thiede said.

The current police station was built in 1981 and later underwent a massive renovation project, which was completed in 2007.

Thiede said he'll never forget giving out his first citation for speeding.

"It turns out he was a minister," he said.

As a rookie on the force for only a short time, Thiede didn't know what to think after he gave out the ticket.

"It upset me to some point. I didn't know if I did right or wrong," he said.

But as a veteran, he said his perspective shifted. In time, he said he learned, holding all citizens accountable to the same standard.

"I don't care who you are, where you work, or where you came from," he said.

Early in his career, some of Thiede's calls for service sounded almost like a script from a Hollywood television series. In the heat of one summer night, he received a call that residents were skinny dipping in the community pool. He responded to the call with a lieutenant, who instructed him to go around the back, with the lieutenant coming in around the front.

Thiede said it was dark and the next thing he knew, the lieutenant was soaking wet because he didn't realize he was walking into the wading pool.

The lieutenant shouted at Thiede, "Look here rookie, don't go shooting your mouth that you saw me in the water."

But not all days ended up with a laugh, he said. In

his career he had to draw his gun a few times, like on the day he had arranged a meeting with the Milwaukee Outlaw biker gang at the edge of town, near 5 Corners.

When he arrived on the scene, he was completely surrounded by a large gang of angry bikers.

"I got out of the squad car with my shotgun, and put one in the chamber. I said to them, "You ain't going to come into my town," Thiede said.

According to Thiede, the gang listened, but instead went into Cedarburg, where they allegedly stole gas.

By and large he said the community still respects him and there have even been a handful of times post-retirement when he walked into a Grafton bar or restaurant and saw someone he had once arrested and received a warm reception.

"A couple of the guys have even thanked me for setting their lives straight," Thiede said.

Throughout his career, Thiede said he worked hard to forge long-lasting relationships with the community and other law enforcement agencies, opening lines of communication long before 9/11. Back in the 1980s, he said he became friends with Milwaukee Police Chief Harold Brier. He said they would frequently have lunch, would share information and even arranged to have drugs burned in Grafton that were seized in Milwaukee.

"We burned all of Milwaukee's (seized) dope," he said.

Thiede, who just turned 80 on Dec. 7, now lives in Washington County with his wife of 58 years, Marilyn. They have three grown children. His daugh-

Awards earned

As Grafton police chief, Howard Thiede received the following honors:

■ Award from Grafton Volunteer Fire Department in appreciation for many years of cooperation and dedication. June 2002

■ Recognition from the Grafton Rotary Club for dedicated service to the Grafton community. April 9, 2002

■ The Milwaukee Police Association named him Citizen of the Year in recognition for outstanding community efforts on behalf of all citizens. Oct. 23, 1993

■ Governor's award from the state for 43 years of law enforcement service the with Grafton Police Department. June 5, 2002

ter, Rhonda Klug, said she's learned a great deal from her father. "He gave us a good work ethic. He's very hard working," she said.

In his retirement, Thiede said he enjoys spending time with his family and his dog, Booker, and watching the Green Bay Packers and the Milwaukee Brewers.

In 2003, the village hired a new police chief, Charles Wenten, who continues to serve as the village's top law enforcement officer.

"I think it's a terrific community. The professionals I work with are top notch, and I think we provide quality service and will continue doing so," Wenten said.

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