

Walter H. Wohlfahrt

This week we are happy to name Walter H. Wohlfahrt as the 111th inductee in Marshfield's 150: Heroes and Leaders, Past and Present register. Walter H. Wohlfahrt was nominated by Michael D. Meyers.

Walter H. Wohlfahrt played a significant part in the history of Marshfield while serving as chief of the Marshfield Police Department for 25 years. Under his direction, the department became more efficient and modernized, and was dedicated to better serving and educating the citizens of Marshfield.

Walter Herman Wohlfahrt was born in Wausau on February 16, 1909 to William and Olga Wohlfahrt. He married Mildred Mess on May 7, 1930, in Mosinee. They had one son, William.



The Marshfield Police & Fire Commission announced their unanimous vote at a special meeting on December 20, 1947 that they had hired Walter H. "Sam" Wohlfahrt, an officer with the Wausau Police Department and 1945 graduate of the FBI's National Police Academy in Washington DC, as chief of the Marshfield Police Department to replace William Paape, who had served as chief for 21-and-a-half years. Wohlfahrt officially took office on January 1, 1948 with a salary of \$4,000 annually.

Under Wohlfahrt supervision, the department grew from a seven-man force to forty-seven officers and staff in 1973. Among the first of his many accomplishments was installing radio equipment in the department. Prior to radios, patrolmen would be signaled by a red-light bulb hanging over Central Avenue to go to the police station or a nearby telephone.

in 1956, to curb vehicular speed violations for safety's sake, the department introduced the public to the first moving speed detector. In 1968, a teletype terminal was installed at the police department enabling them to send and receive messages from law enforcement agencies throughout the state.

Chief Wohlfahrt often called upon the FBI to help with training programs. He was proud of the training and schools the department provided not only for the members of his own department, but to departments throughout northern Wisconsin. He helped develop a network of FBI agents and outstanding chiefs of police as instructors. Classes included training in fingerprinting, arrest procedures, weapons, and safety. He said, "We had the opportunity to make our department something we can be rightfully proud of, and one the people in the surrounding area look up to."

Wohlfahrt worked closely with local officials to address safety concerns and other issues throughout the city, including traffic controls, vehicle speed, bicycle safety and parking. He worked closely with the American Automobile Association (AAA) for school crossing safety and driver education programs. During his 25-year leadership, the city was cited sixteen consecutive years for pedestrian safety by the State of Wisconsin and Triple A.

Throughout the early 1960's, communities like Marshfield were introduced to the "Cold War" and the danger of a possible nuclear attack. Chief Wohlfahrt and others in the community worked to place Civil Defense Shelters strategically throughout the community. These shelters were stocked with supplies needed to survive such an attack. The community also established a grid of civil defense warning sirens near schools and in high populated areas which could warn residents of nuclear attack or dangerous weather events. The largest siren was placed in the bell tower of city hall on East Second Street.

In 1960, Wohlfahrt was elected president of the National Police Academy Associates. He also served as president of the Wisconsin Chiefs of Police in 1964-65, and again in 1969. He was the first president of the Wisconsin Crime Control Council, an eight-county-wide north central Wisconsin organization established in 1969. Then in 1973, he helped organize the North Central Chiefs of Police Association to exchange ideas and encourage regional cooperation.

Locally, Wohlfahrt was active in various community organizations. As a member of the Wood County Selective Service Board beginning in 1965, he met monthly as a group to classify selective service registrants eligible to serve in the armed forces and designating any "hardship" cases according to federal guidelines in place during the Vietnam Conflict.

Wohlfahrt also served as project chairman for several Marshfield Chamber of Commerce events, including the annual Industry and Business Appreciation Banquet and Firm of the Year recognition. He was a popular master of ceremonies for various events and played an active part in the annual Downtown Christmas Decorations committee.

Once he announced his eventual retirement from public service, he was recognized by many local organizations, including a citation and plaque from the VFW organization commemorating his 25 years of service as chief. At that banquet, former Marathon County Sheriff Louis Gianoli who trained under Wohlfahrt at the Wausau Police Department right after World War II, said, "Sam was a shrewd cop. One of the things he said then has stuck with me even now. It's amazing how accurate his predictions of the role of policemen were."

The Marshfield Jaycees and Marshfield Mayor Raymond Tippelt recognized Wohlfahrt with the presentation of their Distinguished Service Award on January 10, 1973. The mayor characterized the recipient as "a good, honest and solid citizen" who is very deserving of recognition."

Reflecting on his time in law enforcement, Walter Wohlfahrt said the most rewarding part of his job was seeing young people he helped through the years grow up to be responsible

people. "I'd taken the attitude that it isn't how many people you can put in jail, but how many you can help from winding up there. Of course. You can't win on everyone," he said.

Wohlfahrt was proud that the department was able to change with the times, and as Marshfield grew, the department grew with it. As chief, he had a sincere concern for his fellow police officers, professionalism and training.

An appreciation banquet with family, friends and law enforcement representatives from throughout the state was held to recognize his many accomplishments and to offer congratulations for all he had done in his career.

Chief Walter H. Wohlfahrt retired from the Marshfield Police Department on May 31, 1973

Walter H. Wohlfahrt was 92 years old when he died on February 17, 2001, at Wausau Manor in Wausau. He was laid to rest in Pine Grove Cemetery in Wausau.