

A pioneer in the field

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In this day and age of DNA testing, sophisticated fibre testing and satellite monitoring, crime solving often seems an awesome scientific or technological process. It wasn't always so. In fact, less than 50 years ago, the gathering of evidence for criminal prosecutions was in its infancy in Ontario.

Retired Ontario Provincial Police Corporal Bill Baluk was only the third forensic constable in Ontario. From his Cramahe Township home, using his 32 years of work diaries for reference, he talked of the challenges, memories good and bad, of his work.

Were crimes of 50 years ago less heinous than the crimes of today?

"Oh no," Bill Baluk of Cramahe Township replies with assurance. "There were murders, robberies and all types of crimes you read about today."

He should know. He was one of the first three forensic constables for the Ontario Provincial Police. For 32 years, he worked with 15 municipal and 12 OPP detachments collecting and preserving evidence to solve crimes.

"In the beginning, it was all new," Mr. Baluk says of his evolution as a forensic specialist.

"There were no regulations, no real procedures."

BY MANDY MARTIN

Bill Baluk's police career evolved from his life, rather than his life evolving from his career.

Born in Oshawa, he attended Richmond Road elementary school and then Oshawa Vocational Collegiate Institute.

"I kept trying to join the RCAF," he recalls of 1942. "They took other people before they were 18, but they wouldn't take me, even when I went in a couple of months before I turned 18. I joined September of 1942 when I turned 18. I was sent overseas June 1944 for training at St. Athens, Wales, and then to Dishforth for the heavy conversion unit."

In September 1945, he was discharged back in Canada.

"I worked at the Motors from 1947 to 1948 on the line. I couldn't stand all the noise from the (air) guns, so I applied to the OPP."

He'll never forget the day the telegram of acceptance came from the OPP - May 17, 1948.

"My wife and I were walking over a bridge in Oshawa and we saw two young boys on bicycles get hit. They both died. I can still see it in my mind. I had to appear in court for that case two years later."

Bill reported to 18 Surrey Place in Toronto for work.

"There was supposed to be six weeks training, but because they were so short of people, after four weeks I was assigned top Cobourg OPP detachment in July 1948. I was 24 years old, and did highway patrol mostly with some criminal investigation."

It was self-learning in the first years on the job.

"In the beginning, I learned myself," Bill recalls of forensics. "I learned a lot from the former Chief of Police of Port Hope, William Carson. He had been a policeman in the U.K. and knew about fingerprinting. He taught me a lot."

Bill was fascinated by photography. He could see photographs could be a valuable tool for recording traffic accident details. Of his own accord, at his own expense and to support his own investigations he decided to buy a camera.

"Cameras were as scare as hen's teeth in those days," he recalls. But he had a contact, Murray Smith, a Globe and Mail reporter who sold him a Speedgraphic camera. The heavy, bulky, square contraption took

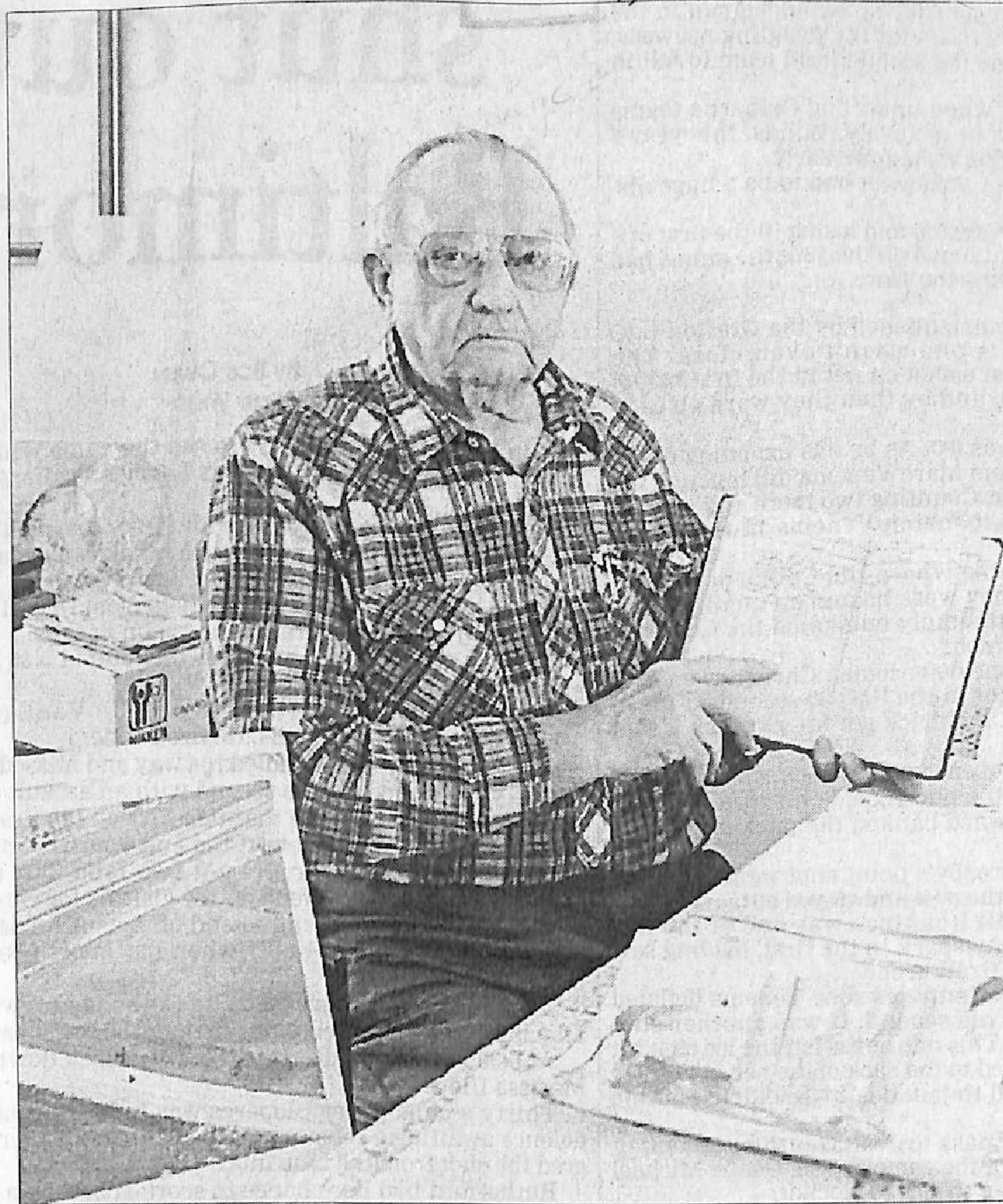


PHOTO BY MANDY MARTIN

Revisiting work diaries from 40 years ago, Bill Baluk recalls his work as one of the first forensics constables for the Ontario Provincial Police.

three-and-a-quarter by four-and-a-quarter-inch film. But, oh, it had a lens that captured detail magnificently.

"I started taking photos of accidents for myself and then other OPP. I used to develop the film in

my bathroom, praying a neighbour wouldn't turn on a light (shining through a window)," he recalls with laughter. "I used my bathtub."

In the early days, there was no compensation for his service -

either in material costs, wages, or for the hours and hours of extra time he put in for others. Only later did Bill charge levy a fee, but only to cover the actual costs of his photographic supplies.

As Bill's prowess and skill became known, he was called on more and more by the 15 municipal police forces and 12 OPP detachments throughout Ontario.

"Most of my work was for an area from Trenton (in the east) north as far as Algonquin park and east to Oshawa. It was a big area."

"I was the third identification officer in Ontario. The first was George Long in Toronto, the second James Driscoll with Belleville District head quarters of the OPP. I was unusual because I wasn't assigned to provincial or district headquarters."

"We would preserve physical evidence for criminal charges to be presented in court, inquests or anything that was needed. What I did

was the fingerprints and photographs and neutralizing safes. I had to neutralize between 20 and 30 safes which had been loaded but weren't blown in my career."

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