

30 years and he never pulled the trigger

Detective Keith Robertson says goodbye to the force

By BEN DUMMETT
Herald Staff

Yes, the cliché is true. Most of what the general public learns about police work from American police television programs is an exaggeration, Staff Detective Keith Robertson of Halton Regional Police's 11 Division in Georgetown says.

"It (police work) is about 75 per cent paper work." But when asked about what police do during the other 25 per cent of their time, the normally calm and always cryptic detective shows some of his excitement for the job saying it is "usually out of the ordinary."

It's these types of incidents Det. Robertson enjoys most about the job.

"The work itself is a little different, there is nothing, humdrum about it. I could never imagine working in a factory."

The 60-year-old detective is retiring from the force today (Wednesday), after 30 years as a police officer. Although he is retiring today, his retirement won't be official until the end of this year.

The public might be surprised to learn these times of action Det. Robertson relishes have never required that he pull the trigger of his 38 Special Smith and Wesson. "I've never fired my gun and I've only had to pull it out a few times, when checking out some break and entering incidents late at night."

"Some of the more nerve wracking times occurred when I would be checking doors at three or four in the morning and a cat would jump out in front of you; that would make your blood pressure rise," he said.

Two of the most memorable incidents for the detective involve the tragic and bizarre.

Det. Robertson recalled the sad case in which a young boy and his grandmother were burned to death by the mother. That incident occurred at a farm just south of Acton during the late 1970s. The detective was working out of Georgetown when one night the Acton woman drove to Acton, filled a gas container, then returned to the

farm and doused her family's home with gasoline. She then lit a match and it was only minutes before the fire engulfed the house in flames. The boy's and grandmother's charred bodies was all that was left, he said.

The incident was even stranger, he said, because the woman set the fire while standing in the house's doorway. She received severe burns to her face, Det. Robertson said. During the investigation police had intercepted letters the woman wrote to relatives warning them of the deed that was to unfold.



Det. Robertson said the woman told police her husband hadn't been paying enough attention to her. The woman was committed to an institution.

While as a constable in Milton in the early '60s, one of Det. Robertson's first cases involved high profile community members receiving regular letters from throughout southern Ontario complaining about the morals of a Milton man.

Although Det. Robertson couldn't recall specifics, he said

the investigation went on for months because the harrassed Milton man couldn't think of who would want to damage his reputation, and the letters were always post marked from a different city. Police, however, were able to learn from the letters that the sender was "the jealous type." Police investigated all of the man's previous relationships over the years, and it wasn't until he told them about a girlfriend from years ago that police were able to track down the letter writing culprit. It turned out the ex-girlfriend's hus-



band had quizzed the woman about her previous relationships and then went about defaming this one. One of the strangest things about the case was neither man had known each other, he said. Not only that but the harrassed man had had no connection with the woman for years. He could barely remember the woman's name, Det. Robertson said.

But Det. Robertson said the largest investigation he has been involved in resulted from the fire at the Dominion Hotel in Acton

during the late '70s. It led to several people being charged with murder and arson, he said.

Halton Hills is a relatively safe place, Det. Robertson said. "We rarely see homicides in the area."

Break and enters, and thefts from cars make up the area's major crimes, he added.

Detective Robertson said unlike Toronto he doesn't believe there is a big drug problem in the north. "But if you ask someone else they might say there is."

When asked why he joined the police force Det. Robertson says laughingly, "I often wonder why," and then after a pause adds, "I think it has something to do with my father. He always said if he wasn't a farmer he would have liked to have been a police officer."

Det. Robertson was brought up on a farm in rural Milton. During his late teens and 20s he worked in Sudbury for International Nickel, served a year in Korea during 1950-51 and worked as a jail guard at Milton County Jail for six years.

Since joining the force at age 30 he has worked out of Milton, Oakville and Georgetown. He started out as a constable and over the years was promoted to his current rank of Det. Sergeant. He is responsible for the detectives assigned to 11 Division in Georgetown.

Through the years, policing has become more sophisticated, says Det. Robertson and he is proud of his contribution.

One of his career highlights was as a member of the committee that introduced and implemented the "Heart Computer System."

The system has vastly improved access to the force's records, he explained. Det. Robertson went on to say the computer system is just one example of how the police force has become more specializ-

ed. "When I started out the police officer did everything, whether it be breaking up barroom fights or investigating domestic assaults. But now we have specialized units to handle the different types of cases. There is more manpower available, communication and emergency responses are quicker and police have more expertise in identification."

But Det. Robertson is thankful the past has not all been forgotten. The force's push of crime prevention has meant more officers are "walking the beat" instead of working out of cruisers as they did in the '70s, he said. Officers were losing touch with the public, something Det. Robertson said the force cannot afford to do.

But the difficulty these days is that there are so many more people on the streets that police officers no longer know who people are or where they come from, he said.

If Det. Robertson has one complaint about the force it is the report-writing skills of its officers. As a Det. Sergeant, officers submit written reports of the complaints they have investigated. He then will assign the case to the appropriate crime unit, so a follow-up can be carried out. But too many times the officer's reports leave out necessary information, he said. "It's so bad sometimes that you might as well have done it yourself."

Det. Sergeant Mike Eacrett will be taking over Det. Robertson's duties and of the challenge ahead he says, "I'll be happy if I can do as good a job as Keith."

"In all his years as a police officer he (Det. Robertson) has never become cynical, he has always kept things in perspective and had a sense of humor."

Drivers needed for Children's Aid

Volunteer drivers are needed to transport children for the Halton Children's Aid Society.

The drivers would take the children to and from medical appointments, foster homes and family visits.

Drive Co-ordinator Gerry Budnark was driving as a volunteer for four years and said drivers are an important part of the agency.

"By using volunteer drivers, we allow the social workers to spend more time actually working with the children and with families," Mr. Budnark said.

Because the drivers will be working with children they must submit two personal references and have a police check. Once the application is accepted, drivers are asked to sign a confidentiality oath and will receive an identification card.

A mileage rate is paid to the drivers and if they need to wait at a child's appointment the CAS will pay for snacks.

"The driver is donating his or her time," Mr. Budnark said. "We don't want this to cost them anything."

The average drive takes two hours including waiting time.

Even volunteers who can only do one drive a week are wanted.

Although help is needed throughout Halton, the trouble spots are Oakville and Milton during the day.

Interested volunteers should

call Mr. Budnark or Volunteer Supervisor Corrie Galloway at 844-8211.

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Immunization clinic Newcomers meet

Halton Region is holding an immunization clinic the second Tuesday of each month. The clinics alternate between the Georgetown office at 93 Main Street South and the Milton office at 251 Main Street.

For an appointment call the health department office at 877-2238.

The Georgetown Newcomer's Club will hold its next meeting at St. Andrew's United Church, 89 Mountainview Road S. at 7:30 p.m. on Oct. 18.

For more information contact Etta at 877-7816 or Lori at 877-4996.

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