

## History of the Otter Tail County Sheriff's Department

The site of the Otter Tail County seat has been changed twice in the history of the County. The original site was established on February 28, 1870, at the village of Tordenskjold, but the new jail and courthouse, ordered to be built by the County Commissioners, was never built. It was to be constructed of logs, the size to be 12 feet by 18 feet for the sum of \$1,000. However, no provision had been made for submitting the law establishing this site to a vote of the electors, and subsequently, the site was re-established on February 18, 1871, at Ottertail City. The second jail, which was planned and ordered built by a resolution of the County Commissioners, did materialize and was built according to the following specifications: 20 feet long inside and 16 feet wide and 8 feet deep between the floor and ceiling. The specifications called for either oak or pine logs with walls hewed on four sides and floor logs hewed on three sides. The inside of the jail was to have two cells, each 6 feet by 12 feet and one other room 8 feet by 16 feet. There were five windows in the jail covered with three-quarter inch iron bars. The doors were three inches thick and lined with heavy sheet iron. The number of window panes of glass was also specified. At the Commissioners' meeting in September 1871, they found the solid oak bastille completed and instructed the auditor to issue an order or \$400.00 for the cost.

This location was jeopardized when a landowner of Ottertail City refused to grant the Northern Pacific Railway a right-of-way on his property and the railroad was routed through Fergus Falls. This change in the route of the railroad was mainly responsible for the change in the law, which re-established the County seat at Fergus Falls on February 28, 1872. On January 7, 1873, the County Commissioners ordered the County jail taken down and hauled log by log to Fergus Falls. On January 10, 1879, a resolution was passed to proceed with plans for a new jail in the basement of the courthouse. This jail was later condemned because of the sanitation and health conditions. In 1885, another jail was built, combining all the latest and most improved ideas in jail construction at that time.



The cyclone of 1919 destroyed the County courthouse and jail. This resulted in the building of the present structure in 1920. The sheriff's office was located on the third floor of this new building and the jail, combined with the sheriff's residence, was located adjacent to it, with a driveway between the buildings. The sheriff's office was later moved to the first floor of the courthouse. This office consisted of two small rooms and a vault. The vault was used to store all office supplies, records, books and evidence in criminal cases.

July 1, 1959, the entire staff consisted of Sheriff Russell Brooberg, two deputies, an office secretary and three jailers. Several special deputies were used in emergencies and for the water patrol and spring road weight restriction patrol.

In October, 1959, the first radio system was installed to replace the old mobile telephones for communications. A few years later, a sheriff's teletype was installed which further crowded the small office. The teletype was later moved into the jail office for 24-hour monitoring.

By 1967, when Carlton Mortensen took over the office of sheriff, this office space was adequate, but crowded for the two deputies and one secretary who were his entire office personnel at that time. By the spring of 1967, the department expanded to five deputies. All of the records were kept in this office also. The jail office was manned 24 hours a day, with four jailers and the radio and teletype communications system filling the small jail office, along with several files for jail records and jail supplies.

Otter Tail County purchased its first vehicles in 1967, with 60% of the cars fully marked for patrol purposes. Patrol deputies have found the alco-sensor units very useful additions to their equipment. These units give a pre-arrest alcohol test. Investigators' vehicles were unmarked and are equipped with fingerprinting and investigation equipment, Nikormat cameras and a tape recorder. Investigation reports are placed on tape to be transcribed later.

By 1972, the sheriff's department had increased its personnel to ten deputies who were assigned to civil process, criminal investigations, drugs, juveniles and road patrol, plus four jailer/dispatchers and water patrol deputies for summer lake patrolling. Also, there were three office secretaries who were kept busy with records, correspondence and other clerical work. The limited space of this one office was so inadequate that Sheriff Mortensen decided to meet with the City and County fathers to recommend an enlarged facility which would provide more efficient law enforcement by combining City and County criminal records, radio systems and teletype communications, and thus avoid the duplication of these services in the two departments.

Office space in the courthouse was at a premium, and since the inception of County Court seemed imminent at this time, space would also be needed for this purpose.

The most feasible plan to acquire additional office space appeared to make use of the lawn and driveway between the courthouse and the jail, and join the two buildings. After various meetings with the Otter Tail County Board of Commissioners and the Fergus Falls Council, a contract was drawn up between the City and the County, whereby the County would construct the building and the City would rent office space for the police department. Plans were drawn up and construction started on the new addition in the spring of 1972.

The Sheriff's Department moved into the new quarters in August, 1973, before the completion of the building. The Fergus Falls Police Department, County Court, Juvenile and Probate Court, the Minnesota Highway Patrol, and the Minnesota Crime Bureau Agent moved into their offices early in 1974, thereby bringing the majority of the law enforcement in the County under one roof. This combined Law Enforcement Center of Otter Tail County was intended to give efficient and effective service to the residents of the County and the City of Fergus Falls, and this system is working out very well.

The jail was not completely remodeled, but the interior was sandblasted and repainted, new lighting was installed, the windows were replaced, a new key system was installed and security doors were electrically locked and controlled by the dispatcher from the communications control room.

The sheriff's residence was remodeled into office space, but the kitchen remained as it was and the meals were still prepared and served to the prisoners as before. The sheriff's office is the former living room of the residence and, therefore, he can probably claim the distinction of being the only sheriff in the state to have a fireplace in his office, flanked by bookcases with oak doors containing leaded glass windows. The original oak mantel was also preserved.

As you enter the ground floor from the main entrance, bullet-proof glass windows allowed a receptionist to communicate with the public before they could enter the general office through electrically controlled doors. Approximately one-half of the new addition on the ground level was rented to the police department.

The Sheriff's Department on this level consisted of a reception area and business office, the records bureau, a conference room (this room was also used as a line-up room which could be viewed through a one-way mirrored glass window), offices for the deputies, a breathalyzer room and the control center which is the nerve nucleus of the entire building.

The control center was enclosed in bullet-proof glass, allowing the operator to view all persons entering through the reception area. A public address system allowed him to monitor all hallways and entrances,

the jail office and to communicate with anyone outside of the control room. He operated the electric locks on all doors leading into the building, to the jail and in the basement level. The operator of the control center is the dispatcher who answers all incoming telephone calls and operates the teletype. The communications system console which was installed has capabilities of two operators working at peak periods. An additional feature in this isolated room is a recorder which was installed to tape all telephone calls and radio messages that can be played back to ascertain correct data and details in case of confusion on emergency calls, etc.

TV monitors were installed at the south entrance to the Law Enforcement Center, security garage entrance, and at the reception window.

The records bureau was adjacent to the control center so any information would be immediately available to the operator at all times. The records system was financed through a Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) grant in 1973.

The large conference room was used as a training room as well as for meetings of law enforcement. This room was especially useful in connection with video training courses.

The ground floor of the former residence of the sheriff was remodeled into offices for the sheriff, three deputies and the sheriff's secretary. The second floor of the residence provided offices for the Minnesota State Troopers, one BCA agent, as well as matron's room and women's lounge and toilet facilities.

In 1974, the Sheriff's Office began equipping and developing a mobile investigation and emergency unit. The van is manned by trained personnel and used at major crime scenes for the collection and preservation of evidence, and as a command post with radio communications. It is equipped with a generator and flood light system, and facilities to video tape all major crime and accident scenes so this information will be available at a later date. This van has proven to be very useful at the scene of drownings as a command post, a shelter when the weather drives searchers off the lake or a comfortable heated place for scuba divers to change when suiting up to dive under the ice in winter drowning accidents. Funds for this project were provided by the County Board.

In June, 1982, the Minnesota Department of Corrections served notice on Otter Tail County that their 62-year old jail no longer met the requirements of a one-year holding facility and advised that unless the County took immediate steps to begin planning for a new jail, they would begin to restrict the number and length of time prisoners could be held. A jail study committee was appointed consisting of one County Commissioner, the County Attorney, County Sheriff and one staff person, plus three citizens. Many meetings were held, an architect was engaged by the County and the National Institute of Corrections at Boulder, Colorado, put on two training sessions which committee members attended.

After much debate and disagreement, the County Commissioners accepted a plan of construction and financing. In October, 1985, ground was broken and construction began on a new 56 bed jail, plus a fourth floor of court facilities which would provide for better court security and ease the crowding in the old courthouse. After construction had started, it was found that 56 beds would not be sufficient. Construction was put on hold for about a month while plan revisions were made and approved by the Minnesota Department of Corrections and the facility was expanded to 75 beds.



The new jail opened September 7, 1987, with a capacity of 75 prisoners. The design of the new jail is a departure from the traditional rows of cells, with steel bars and clanging steel doors.

New Generation jails place cells on outside walls, with a window for natural light, and one person to a

cell. Living units, usually called cell blocks, have a day room area with adequate space and seating for all prisoners. Ventilation, with climate control, provides a comfortable environment in all seasons. Recreational, exercise, educational and religious programs are provided for inmates.

A six-county Narcotics Task Force was formed in 1987 and is actively engaged in identifying, apprehending and prosecuting drug traffickers and seizing their money and property.

A bailiff pool consisting of retired law enforcement officers and civilian personnel was formed in 1987. Education provided by the Sheriff's Department insures that the bailiffs are taught the skills necessary to provide courtroom security.

The Sheriff's Department is continuously changing to meet the needs and demands of the citizens. The department's commitment to "Protect and Serve" the public plays a paramount role in making Otter Tail County a safe place to live, work and play.

The Sheriff's Department was again remodeled in the early 1990's. The control center was moved to the business office area and the old control center area and conference room were converted into offices. Other renovations were also made.

The county now has in operation a new emergency response communication system. All calls for emergencies received on the "911" phone system are answered and processed by the communications center personnel. Emergency service providers; police, fire department, and emergency medical responders are dispatched from this communications center. This system utilizes four radio broadcast stations, one placed in each quarter of the County. Emergency service providers are able to receive and broadcast messages from any location. This allows all who are involved in the emergency to communicate with each other, and the communications center personnel.

The 1990's also brought a greater demand for drug law enforcement. To meet this demand, the department increased its efforts in the area of intelligence gathering, cooperative enforcement with other agencies and additional man hours dedicated to the enforcement of those laws.

An officer from our department was selected to teach drug education to sixth graders in some of our County's schools through a program entitled D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education). D.A.R.E., a cooperative program between law enforcement and educators, is nationally known.

A Sentencing to Serve Program was initiated in 1991 and serves a number of purposes. It frees up jail cells which we rent out to other counties, providing a source of income to Otter Tail County. The inmates also benefit by developing good work habits and skills while working off jail time and fines.

A High Risk Entry Team has been initiated to be utilized in arresting dangerous criminals, raiding drug dealers, and dealing with barricaded armed subjects. The team includes trained negotiators, skilled and conditioned officers, as well as expert riflemen. The unit consists of five officers from the Otter Tail County Sheriff's Office, five officers from the Fergus Falls Police Department and five officers from police departments out in the County. It is primarily funded by money and property forfeited by criminals violating criminal and drug statutes.

With expansion in specialization, the Sheriff's Office has been grouped into two distinctive areas under Sheriff Gary A. Nelson. In 1995, the Law Enforcement Section consisted of 23 full time and two part-time licensed deputies, including a new public service officer hired under a Justice Administration grant. This area is supported with 9 full-time and 8 part-time personnel, whose responsibilities include water safety enforcement, communications, secretarial and records. The Detention Facility operates under an Administrator who is a license deputy sheriff, with 24 full-time and 15 part-time detention officers. There are also two Sentence to Serve crew leaders and one secretary.

We also have several sources of volunteer help which are invaluable to the Sheriff of the County. Members of the Sheriff's Posse, and the [underwater rescue team](#) have all given generously of their time and talents during the holidays, special events and more particularly, in search and rescue in times of disaster and other emergencies.

These are only a sampling of the areas to which the department has increased its commitment. The Sheriff and all of the department's personnel are proud to be part of a system of good County government, made better by good law enforcement.