

Be on the lookout for amazing true-crime tales

Exploits of local police get 3rd degree at new 'Beneath the Badge' exhibit.

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Charlotte's "Crime of the Century" - the 20th century, that is - unfolded the morning of Nov. 15, 1933, when four outlaws with machine guns brazenly robbed a mail truck carrying \$120,000 destined for the Federal Reserve branch.

It was a slick, precision operation lasting about two minutes and gave Charlotte its first taste of Chicago-style gangsters.

In charge of the investigation was Frank Littlejohn, then chief of detectives for Charlotte Police. A torn-up laundry receipt and fingerprints on beer bottles in an apartment rented by the robbers led him to the notorious Chicago-based "Touhy Gang" and later the arrest of ringleader Basil "The Owl" Banghart.

Littlejohn's sleuthing and other sensational Charlotte crimes, including the arrest of former Panther Rae Carruth, are part of a new exhibit, "Beneath the Badge," at the Charlotte Museum of History, on Shamrock Drive.

It traces the origins of law enforcement in Mecklenburg County from the antebellum days of the town guard, who would cry out the hour at night and announce "all is well," to the first professionalized force organized in 1866 (payroll records show the city's eight officers each earned \$50 a month).

While the exhibit examines some of the internal friction in the department - including racial integration and the slow acceptance of women into the ranks in the late 1960s - the real stars are the official artifacts.

From the 1960s is a two-pound Motorola walkie-talkie that officers nicknamed "the brick." There's an 85-pound bomb-squad suit from the 1970s that protected everything but the hands. And there are vests and "calling cards" from raids conducted on the Outlaws and other motorcycle gangs in the 1990s.

Some artifacts have a more solemn impact.

County Officer John Fesperman's Rural Police badge is on display, discolored by his own blood. He was shot to death in a raid on moonshiners in 1924. And Officer J.C. Stanton's belt is there too, with a bullet hole in it. He was shot five times investigating a domestic dispute on June 5, 1973 and survived.

Among the weapons on display, none is odder than a pistol that misfired during a dispute over a game of chance, the bullet somehow detouring into the muzzle, where it is still firmly lodged. Retired Officer Frank Coley recounted the story: "The cheater got a fresh pair of underpants and religion. The shooter got his dice, money back and his tail out of town."

Some of the items came from the archives and storerooms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, including the old Mecklenburg County Police, which merged with Charlotte Police in 1993. Others were provided by retired officers or family members.

"Beneath the Badge" is an unusual exhibit because it was created for the Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department, which will put it on permanent display, possibly at its uptown headquarters, after its one-year show, said Mary Davis Smart, president of the Charlotte Museum of History. "We created it for here, to go there," she said.