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Retiring Trooper Logged Nearly 40 Years On Patrol

BY SUSAN USHER

After 39 years with the N.C. Highway Patrol, Trooper William H. Morgan turned in his uniform, badge and gun on Feb. 28.

"I didn't like doing it one bit," he recalled, sharing almost 40 years of memories over coffee at the dining room table of his year-old home in Brierwood Estates. It was a time for memories. Last Thursday, friends and fellow officers from across the state joined together for a day of golf and a retirement dinner in Morgan's honor. He was one of the best; a state trooper.

Road duty and its accompanying stress had been his life for almost 38 years. However, a year and a half of medical leave has made the transition to retirement a bit easier. He had suffered a heart attack, followed later by cardiac arrest; medication is now part of his daily routine.

These days Morgan plays a weekly round of friendly golf, watches "too much" TV, works in the yard and plans to restore a Corvair Spider. It's a car he has a particular liking for, though it was taken out of production in 1968 after consumer activists charged its rear motor was unsafe. "At one time I had four Corvairs. From those four, I kept two running," he said.

Shrugging, he added, "I thought it was as safe as any car on the road, but I might have been wrong."

The Corvair isn't the only car in his past.

The Bailey (Nash County) started his career in law enforcement sharing a 1947 Chevrolet two-door black sedan, a far cry from today's gray-and-black fleet.

He joined the patrol almost by happenstance, but stuck with it by choice.

It was just after World War II. Morgan was 21 years old, with two years of business courses at Campbell College under his belt and in need of a job when a license examiner friend suggested he apply.

"At the time they were trying to double the number of men they had on the road," he recalled. "They wanted to bring it up to 500." Leaving never seriously crossed his mind.

"After you stay on the highway patrol for two or three years, you're hooked," he said. "You don't know what else you'd do if you got out. It's in your blood."

"It's just like playing a ball game. The adrenalin gets rolling when something happens that's bad and you have to get involved. And it's not just once a week, but just about every day. . . . You stop a car you don't know and feel something is not just right."

Morgan trained for six weeks with a class of 115 officers at the Institute of Government in Chapel Hill. Then

it was a rough camp of three old U.S. Army buildings and two barracks.

His first assignment was in isolated Pamlico County. "I'd never heard of it," he said, smiling at the thought. But over the next several years, that changed. By the time he left the small, rural county, "I couldn't tell you their names," he said, "but I think I could tell you where just about all of them would park their cars at night."

All wasn't dull. It was in Pamlico where Morgan participated in his one and only liquor still raid. The county's entire law enforcement contingency worked it as a team: the sheriff, two highway patrolmen and a game warden.

"As each man came into the clearing, my job was to get their attention," recalled Morgan. "I told them if they moved I would kill them, and to make no noise and stay where they are." They followed his orders and the four officers captured three men.

A career with the patrol meant moving around quite a bit, in Morgan's case as far west as Gaston County "and as far east as you can go."

Thirteen of those years were spent uninterrupted in Richmond County, where the children, Wayne and Cynthia, finished school.

The bulk of the remainder were spent in three stations here in Brunswick County, home for his wife Lois Sellers Morgan, a native of Supply who teaches at Shallotte Middle School. The two had met in the dining hall of Campbell College, where they both worked, and now are grandparents of two.

With the times, both the speeds and the equipment used to detect and apprehend speeders have changed.

Used to, Morgan had to rely on his speedometer. He would pull into a side road and wait until a car that was "really moving" came along. Then he would pull out and pace it for three-quarters to a quarter of a mile. "I liked to get a good check on them."

These days, the equipment is fancier, but heavy traffic and high speeds add to the stress.

He said, "You've got to work the traffic; that's the main thing."

But if a driver whizzes by at 100 mph, he added, an officer has no option but pursuit. With today's higher speeds, he wonders at times if it wouldn't be more prudent to drop a high-speed chase through traffic. But, he said, "that's not the way we work."

As an example, he tells of chasing a driver who was darting crazily in and out of traffic at high speed when Morgan picked up his tail at Shallotte and radioed ahead for help. Officers met the driver when he pulled in to the county complex near Bolivia. "He was on his way to the



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

LONGTIME STATE TROOPER William H. Morgan of Shallotte spent much of the past 39 years on the road. Last Thursday, fellow officers and friends gathered in

his honor for a golf tournament and retirement dinner at Sunset Beach.

health department," said Morgan, shaking his head.

No two drivers were ever alike, either. "Some start talking before you get to them; some have nothing to say," said Morgan. "Of course, none of them want the ticket."

"But," he added, "when someone tried to talk me out of a ticket, the more determined I was to give it. Usually my mind was made up—to issue a ticket or a warning—before I stopped a vehicle unless it was very unusual circumstances."

While over 39 years he lost two or three patrol cars in chases, Morgan never had a gun pulled on him. But he had one close call.

It was his habit to keep a loaded automatic in the glove compartment as back-up just in case someone wrestled away his gun.

One day he stopped a drunk driver and sat him in the patrol car. Morgan had stepped away to check the other auto when he heard the "click" of the glove compartment door and hurried back, gun drawn. The drunk was casually examining the workings of the handgun.

"I put my gun to his head and told him to stay like he was," said Morgan, and then he took away the "spare" gun.

And, with a sigh of relief that seemed to echo over the years, he added, "I've never carried one since."

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