

## A Very 'Civil' Deputy Retires

### After 19 Years, Liston Hawes Settles Into A New Way Of Life

BY ERIC CARLSON

They don't make TV shows about men like Liston Hawes and the job he did for most of his 19 years at the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department. He didn't flash his gun around or make undercover drug buys or fly up the road with his siren wailing and his blue light flashing. Still, Hawes had one of the most psychologically demanding and potentially dangerous jobs in law enforcement.

Imagine knocking on a door and telling a mother that you've come to take her child away.

Think about ordering someone to pack his belongings, to leave his home and to stay away.

Picture yourself calling a tow truck to haul away a car owned by a man who looks you right in the eye and says he'll shoot you before letting it go.

Hawes had to handle all of those sticky situations and many more as the sheriff's top civil officer. But while everyone thinks they know about criminal law enforcement, they tend to think of Hawes' office as the lighter side of police work.

Sitting around his kitchen table drinking coffee last week, Hawes was enjoying his first full day as a "retired" deputy lieutenant. As he told stories about his long career, you could see he didn't much care about being underestimated. It's something he's put up with all his life.

A native of Columbus County, Hawes said he "was born to a wonderful woman in this great country of ours in 1936." It wasn't long after his birth that the family realized Liston had a problem. But nobody could figure out what it was.

As a young boy, Hawes always seemed to have trouble getting around. It wasn't until age six that he began to walk, and then only with great difficulty.

"Every two or three steps I would fall down," he remembered. "I couldn't stay upright to open a door. I would have to wait for someone else to go through it and follow them. When I started school, they weren't equipped to deal with that type person. So they sent me home."

Things weren't much better the next year, but he started school anyway. The doctors couldn't tell him what was wrong. But since there wasn't much he could do about his condition, he just had to cope with it.

"I learned to get around," he said. "I could plow a mule. I could farm. But I always had to be careful with every step I took. If my knee didn't lock just right, I'd go down like I was shot with a gun."

When he was 21 and "trying to court a woman," Hawes said he got into a wrestling match with a rival boyfriend and ended up with a broken arm. When it



RELAXING on the porch of their home in Ash, Liston and Ruby Hawes are getting used to a new life, now that he has retired after 19 years with the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department.

STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

didn't seem to heal correctly, he went to a bone specialist in Charlotte. The doctor noticed Hawes limping down the hallway and asked him what was wrong.

"I said, 'I don't know,' and he gave me a physical. Then he sat me down and told me that I had had polio all my life," Hawes said. "That was his specialty. He took me to a floor of the hospital where they had room after room of patients laying in beds or sitting in wheelchairs with polio."

"This is your condition," the doctor told him. "You were never supposed to walk. And by the time you're 40, you will be an invalid."

Now 57 years old, Hawes has never let that diagnosis slow him down. He's held a number of responsible positions, been happily married to his wife Ruby for 32 years and raised a family of "three fine children." But it hasn't been easy.

"I've never had a problem working, except having to prove myself to employers," he said. "When I applied for a job, it wasn't enough to be better qualified than the other applicants. I'd have to be a lot better. I've always had to work twice as hard to be treated as equal."

Sheriff Herman Strong offered Hawes a job at the sheriff's department in April 1975, while he was working as a purchasing agent for the company that built the Brunswick Nuclear Plant. When construction on the plant began to wind down, Hawes was laid off one morning and started a new job that night as a jailer in Shallotte.

After proving himself as a guard and later as a dispatcher, Hawes was put in charge of the department's civil division, a position he has held ever since. At first he handled the job by himself, delivering subpoenas, foreclosure notices, divorce decrees, child custody and support papers, lock-up orders and other civil court actions throughout the county. By the time he retired,

Hawes was supervising a staff of four officers and a secretary in an office that processed nearly 10,000 civil instruments a year.

Civil officers don't arrest criminals. But because they enforce child custody rulings, domestic violence orders and court-ordered marital separations, they spend much of their time handling the most dreaded and dangerous calls in law enforcement—the domestic dispute.

Hawes remembered one case where a battered wife got a court order to have her husband removed from the home. The man complied peacefully and left. Then a few days later, she called police to say that he was back in the house and refused to leave. She also said he had a gun.

Hawes and several criminal officers went in through a back door and began searching from room to room. They eventually found a locked door upstairs and broke in to find the man passed out on the bed. One officer jumped the man while another grabbed the loaded shotgun that was lying just inches from his hand.

Another time Hawes went to a home in Leland owned by a woman who had refused to make her payments on a used car. The dealer obtained a court order to have it picked up. Hawes knew the woman and expected trouble, so he arranged for back-up in the form of a very large deputy.

When they got to the house, the woman politely invited him inside. She said her husband was out of town and she didn't have the money to pay him. It was the same story Hawes had heard on two previous visits. This time he had to get the money or the car.

"She was just as sweet as she could be until I broke the bad news," Hawes said. "Then she told me, 'If you call that wrecker, you might as well call the rescue squad, because I'm going to kill you.'"

Back outside, Hawes called for the wrecker and another deputy. The woman sent her son inside to get a gun.

"I told her if that boy comes out with a gun, I'm going to have to shoot him," Hawes said. "All of a sudden (her husband) came from behind the house with a wad of money and asked how much she owed. He started peeling off \$100 bills like a crooked politician on election day."

Hawes said he truly enjoyed his years with the sheriff's department, but he admits that it takes a certain type of person to be happy in law enforcement.

"You've got to have a code of ethics and live by it," he said. "It's not the badge or the gun or the fact that you get to drive fast and run your siren. Your first duty is to help, not to take. Your first duty is to the people you serve."

And there's one other thing you need to keep yourself on a level track in such a demanding job, Hawes said: A companion like his wife Ruby.

"One of the most important things in being a good law enforcement officer is your mate," he said. "Whether you're a man or a woman, your mate has to be a very special breed. If you've got problems at home, you're going to carry them to work. That was never a problem for me."

Although he's not sure how he'll spend his retirement ("I've never done this before!" he said), Hawes has already lined up a part-time job. And the two of them are planning a trip he has always dreamed of—north to Maine and Nova Scotia and across Canada to Alaska. For now they're just getting used to having each other around.

"In a couple of years, me and my little wife are going to be the most beat-uppest people you have ever seen...or the loveliest," he said with a glance toward Ruby.

Her silent reply leaves little doubt about which way things will go.

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