

The Way We Were

By Quartermaster Todd Allen
SHERIFF'S HISTORIAN

THE RELUCTANT HERO

On a dreary October afternoon recently, I arrived at the home of Mr. and Mrs. George H. Cooper and sitting at the kitchen table, I had the honor of interviewing a true trailblazer and an important part of our agency history. You see, George Cooper, 81 is the first African-American hired as a Deputy Sheriff in the Monroe County Sheriff's Office in 1951.

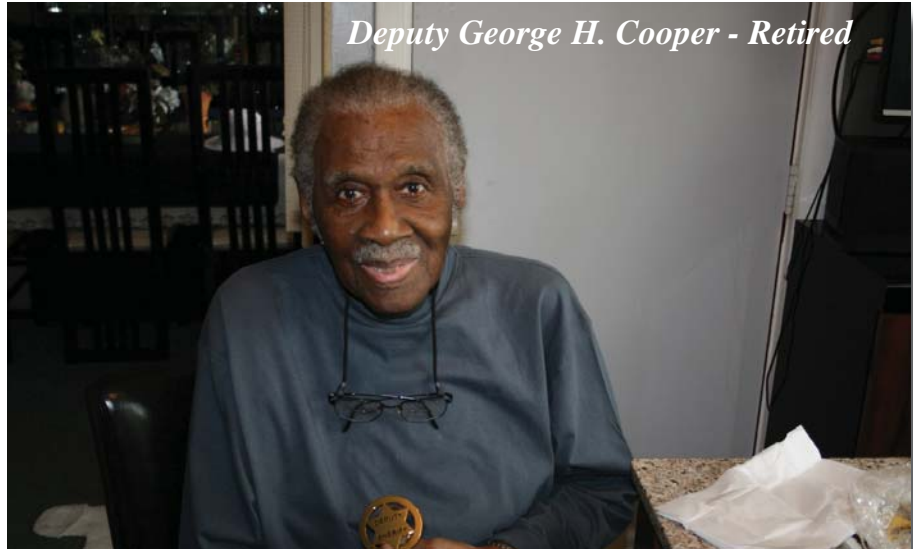
After serving in the military, George was happy to be working at Stromberg-Carlson yet his father had other plans for his twenty-four year old son. The elder Mr. Cooper was a prominent barber in Rochester and was very involved in local politics.

President Harry Truman had ordered the desegregation of the military, and other government agencies were doing the same, and more and more African-Americans were getting opportunities they had been previously denied. In Rochester, there was one black officer serving with the RPD and no black deputies in the Sheriff's Office and the Sheriff's Office was looking for black candidates.

In those days, government jobs were given to the political party faithful. These men and women (but mostly men) would be beholden to the party for their very livelihood. Those looking for employment would meet with their local representative such as a Ward Leader and after a series of phone calls, the candidate would be employed. This "it's who you knew" employment process was the prevalent method of employment in the county and city. George's dad made the call.

"Law enforcement was no thought of mine whatsoever, but they were looking for a candidate to put in the Sheriff's Office and they wanted a black candidate at that time and my father was connected with politics and said I would be a good one". And George's name was "placed in the hopper".

George was selected. One evening after business hours, George, his father the Ward Leader, and Sheriff Al Skinner met in an office in the Exchange Street Jail and George was sworn in. He was given a badge and a gun and told when to report.



Deputy George H. Cooper - Retired

The Jail on the midnight shift would be where he was to start.

I asked George about his training. He said "There was no training". George continued; "It's crazy (referring to his first night on duty), 'cause you don't know what's going on, and not being in law enforcement and not knowing what jail work consisted of, I saw all these drunks and guys that were older than me and it was bedlam to me, and I knew then and there it wasn't for me".

When asked about how George was received by the other deputies, George said he thought he was received "all right" but the inmates were another story entirely. George was seen as the "enemy" and had things thrown at him and was the target of the worst racial slurs. He would later be detailed to the Vice Unit and was involved in raids on house parties where illegal card games and liquor was being sold. On one such raid, George was identified as a deputy sheriff after some patrons had noticed two Sheriff's cars parked in the woods near the house. George said he knew nothing about the Sheriff's cars when confronted by the party goers as he was there to have a good time. George convinced the crowd and quietly made his way to the door. Clearly, this wasn't for him and after speaking with his dad, George went to the Sheriff and asked for another assignment. The Sheriff said he had a position that needed filling and George was assigned

to the County Clerks Office and later the DMV providing security. George enjoyed working in the Sheriff's Office and when asked, he said his fondest memory was "helping people". In the years posted at the DVM (located in the basement of the COB), George became a true fixture and would roll up his sleeves and pitch in when needed.

But in 1956, George grew tired of the politics and the beholden to the party. "It was politics, and I was no politician. They would come to you and you were supposed to pay so much a year to the party. It wasn't a known thing, but you know they come to you and say you have to contribute at the end of the year". So about that time, there was an ad in the paper announcing an exam for the Rochester Police Department. George thought that he had enough and if he passed the test, he wouldn't be beholden to anyone, anymore. So, George H. Cooper took that test and was appointed to the RPD as a Patrolman. Officer Cooper would serve the people of the City of Rochester for 35 years rising to the rank of Grade B Detective, retiring in 1991. During his career with the RPD, George would receive many commendations to include one from the FBI for the capture of an armed bank robbery suspect. George was unarmed,

continued on page 6

***The Way We Were
continued from page 8***

as he rushed from the office to the scene. He spotted the robber and ordered him to surrender stating he was armed. The robber said he was too and he would have shot George if he was a white officer.

I asked George what was different in regards to being a police officer now as compared to the 1950's and 1960's. His initial answer was simply one word, "Respect". He continued, "Today there is no respect for law enforcement. There were the same problems, but back then there was respect for law enforcement.

Back then, police officers intermingled with the community. Today the officers do not even speak to people. They don't have what I call a "one on one". The only thing I see is that the officers don't talk to the public. A department is only as good as your information".

With the interview almost over and I thanked Mrs. Cooper for allowing me to come into her home. I promised them a copy of this article and I took some photos. I left Mr. Cooper with a few tokens of appreciation, a belt buckle

and challenge coin and thanked him very much for not only his time but his service. Meeting Mr. Cooper reinforced the fact that honor and integrity has no color. I am proud to have met George Cooper, this reluctant hero who had served for over 40 years in law enforcement. I am proud that he is part of our history and I hope you are as well.

