

HIGHWAY HOMICIDE

An Oration

by
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Frank E. Denholm
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The author with this oration won South Dakota State Collegiate Contest, 1955. Permission granted by the Interstate Oratorical Association to the WETMORE DECLAMATION BUREAU, Sioux City, Iowa.

Four years and seventy-one days ago I began the duties of Sheriff of Day County, in and for the State of South Dakota. I had been elected by the people to an office that carries more responsibility than any other in the courthouse family.... I was sworn to uphold and enforce all the laws of the State. And I knew that traffic laws were no exception. In fact, most of my contacts with the people grew out of traffic accidents or violations.

On the morning of the third day of my youthful official administration, I strolled down the cell corridor of our county jail. I chatted briefly with the tenants. Seven of the eleven occupied cells housed local men—the majority of the prisoners were serving time for our most popular crime, “driving and operating a motor vehicle on the public highway while under the influence of intoxicating liquor.”

During my administration, no other violation confined more men in the county jail than “driving while drunk.” The evening of that same day, I was to receive my inaugural initiation. About 5:45 P.M., the telephone on my desk jangled. “Hello, is this the Sheriff? Come to Waubay at once. Passenger train has just hit a car. Occupants killed.” Nine minutes later, the deputy sheriff and I were at the scene of the accident. An ambulance and doctors were on hand, too, because of the modern convenience, the two-way police radio system. Never have I seen an automobile more demolished. Parts were strewn three hundred and fifty feet along the railroad right-of-way.

The steam of the locomotive swept by the brisk northwest wind blurred from our view the mangled bodies of the victims. There wasn't much left of the first victim. My deputy picked up a hand and a portion of an arm. The face and head were nothing but a pulp-like material covered with globs of congealed blood. It didn't take an MD to conclude that little could be done for this person. As life was still present in the second body, we rolled it on to a blanket and carried it to the ambulance. For six weeks, this young man lay unconscious at the hospital—grasping for life. At the scene, we pieced together ragged evidence. Identification was almost impossible. Among a multitude of things found in the debris were several empties and three full cans of beer. The out-of-state license on the automobile was misleading. The fingerprints I had taken from the mangled hands at the morgue were not too clear. Yet, twenty-four hours later, identity had been established. The community was shocked to learn that the victims were two local boys returning home from a job near Sioux City, Iowa. The survivor later verified our piecemeal story with the comment, “We had been lunching and drinking on our way home. Stan saw the train but we thought we could beat it.”

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