

The History Rat

by **R.T. Johnson**

The Illinois State Police: A Tumultuous Birth

Today, the Illinois State Police are everywhere. You can see them on the interstates, tollways, and highways of Illinois. Their unmistakable brown and tan uniforms combined with the white car with the yellow stripe make them easy to identify. However, the organization did not even exist 100 years ago. In 1922, the Illinois State Police came into being. Even then, it was not an organization welcome in many parts of the state. It was the people who demanded its existence, and it was the people who made sure in the 1920s that the Illinois State Police would stay.



When people think of the 1910s and 1920s historically, one usually thinks of the time period as not that much different from today. The basic tenets of modern living were there in automobiles, appliances, and machines, although in rudimentary form. In reality, America, and Illinois, were not far removed from the Gilded Age, corruption, and graft. The Wild West of Cowboys and criminals had been replaced by automobiles. If one was to travel the state of Illinois by road, it was not much different from traveling by horse in the 1800s. There was no speed limit in the state yet motorists were often pulled over in local communities and taken for every dime and crime the Judge could find.

Out of this milieu came a cry for a state police force to protect motorists from the graft and crime of speed traps, corruption, and criminal behavior along the highway. Originally, the Chicago Motor Club was the leading proponent in calling for a statewide force. In addition, 30 percent of all bank robberies in the country took place in Illinois. A lot of that had to do with the confluence of urban banks and rural settings sitting side by side. Bank robbers could often rob in one setting and hide in the other. Add in the mix of prohibition, running alcohol, and moonshining, and a third need for a state police force was born.

However, the majority of counties in Illinois were against it. There was money to be made on the graft by fleecing travelers coming through the small towns. This was all fine and dandy until prohibition brought death to their system of corruption. Even though the clocks said 1920s, Illinois governed itself as if it still was the 1870s.

When banks started being robbed at an alarming rate, banker associations joined the call for a statewide force. The Illinois Chamber of Commerce soon joined the call along with the Illinois Agricultural Association. However, despite its passing, the newly minted Illinois State Police met a lot of resistance its first ten years.

Much Loot in Country.
"Roads and rapid transit extend the operations of the criminal who harbors in the jungles of the cities. The banks and business houses of the towns and cities yield him tribute annually many times greater than the cost of an efficient state police system.
"The country people, the farmers who work their farms, the workers and property owners who live with their wives and children in the open spaces have begun to realize the need of better police protection. The arrival of the automobile and the approach of the improved highways has made it easier for the small postoffice thief, the bank safe robber, the automobile thief, and the pickpockets to reach the small towns quickly and escape before the local peace officers can stop them. Women and children are all the time more or less exposed to crimes of violence."
This last paragraph has the indorsement of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology.

**COUNTRY COPS
HAVE NO LOVE
FOR STATE POLICE**

**Regard Rivals as Too
Military.**



At the time, Illinois only had 1388 miles of paved roads. There were more roads that were made of dirt than not. The nearby states of Kentucky and Wisconsin had less than 700 miles of paved road each. To patrol these roads was going to require money and equipment which the state would have to purchase. Many lawmakers did not want to fund these purchases. As the decade went on, the new force met resistance on all sides including local cops. As soon as prohibition gangsters and crime began

to spread across the state, downstate governments did not turn to the new police force. Rather, locals in Southern Illinois often turned to the Ku Klux Klan to put down the bootleggers. That did not go well either.

From its inception in 1921 to 1923, the criminals always had the upper hand. Just as Robin Hood had the assistance of locals, so did criminals in the 1920s. In addition, the criminals had the best guns, the best cars, and the best strategies. It would take 10 years for the force to become equipped well enough to deal with the criminal element. Early police were either in cars or motorcycles. A key aspect of policing came when all vehicles were equipped with radios.



As the 20s yielded to the 30s, prohibition came to end. And with its end came the end of most resistance to the Illinois State Police. The Dunlap Bill, which established the force, was fought at every turn to protect systems of graft and corruption throughout the state. However, it was the spread of bank robbing and prohibition, and all their elements, which solidified the need for a state police force. At the beginning of the 20s, only a handful of states had state police forces. By the end of the decade over 20 states succumbed to the need. At the forefront of this need was that the automobile replaced the horse as the transportation device for criminals. The car's ability to travel long distances quickly created the need for an Illinois State Police force as criminals could pass from one jurisdiction to another without resistance.

