

Ex-troopers raise funds for police museum

1940s barracks to be restored

By Donna Boynton TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
Old-timers tell great stories, and that is what needs to be preserved.

Ron Guilmette,
STATE POLICE MUSEUM COMMITTEE

GRAFTON— Three months after graduating from the State Police Academy in 1956, rookie trooper Dick Barry was dispatched from the Grafton barracks on Worcester Street to a house fire on North Street. As he arrived on the scene and raced to the front door, a young child, lungs full of smoke, was placed in his arms.

But months later, he would feel the opposite of the despair he felt holding that dying child: Rushing an expectant mother, in labor with her ninth child, to a Worcester hospital in the back of his cruiser.

"Within a year's time, I ran the gamut from having someone leave and having someone come in," recalled Mr. Barry last night, now president of the Former Massachusetts State Troopers Association.

It's those stories, and countless others of the services provided by the Massachusetts State Police, the oldest state police agency in the country, that Mr. Barry and others are trying to preserve among the vintage police cruisers, dress uniforms and other memorabilia at the Massachusetts State Police Museum and Learning Center.

The Massachusetts State Police Museum and Learning Center exists in concept and on paper, but its physical construction may not be far off.

An 8,500-square-foot building is planned for five acres at the site of the existing State Police Barracks at 44 Worcester St. During construction, the existing barracks will serve as a temporary museum, and will ultimately be part of the museum complex. The museum committee plans to restore the existing barracks, built in 1931, to its former 1940s appearance, as an example of how troopers lived and worked in the various substations throughout the state.

The idea for the museum and learning center was conceived in 1996, and six years later, former Gov. Jane M. Swift made provisions to have the Grafton State Police Barracks and its associated five acres turned over to the museum and learning center, once it is deemed surplus, after the new Millbury barracks opens later this year.

Meanwhile, the committee spearheading the effort to build the museum — comprised of retired state police and other supporters — is actively raising money among the cadre of troopers.

The goal is to build a privately funded museum, said William Gearin, co-chairman of the museum committee. To that end, the state Legislature has approved a bill allowing members of the Massachusetts State Police to contribute \$3 every pay period (twice a month) to the museum. There are 2,300 members of the state police, and Mr. Gearin said the goal is to enroll 1,000 of those members to raise a guaranteed \$6,000 per month. To date, the committee is halfway toward that goal, having signed up 500 members of the state police.

The committee also has a larger goal in mind.

Last night, Mr. Barry and Mr. Gearin were among the retired state police members of the museum committee who auditioned a presentation to the Grafton Historical Society. The committee hopes to take the presentation about the history of the state police and its efforts on the road to the likes of Ford Motor Co., SIG-Sauer, Hewlett-Packard and other large corporations that supply and outfit the Massachusetts State Police.

Yesterday, the museum received its first major donation — \$50,000 from the Major John F. Regan Memorial Trust, in honor of a state police major who died of cancer 20 years ago.

"We are really here to sell the idea and concept to the Town of Grafton, as an asset to your community," Mr. Gearin said. "We want to work with you and your regulatory agencies to make this happen."

Ron Guilmette, a retired state police colonel and co-chairman of the museum committee, said he and his colleagues are just beginning to gather the stories and memorabilia that illustrate the history of the Massachusetts State Police.

The agency was established May 16, 1865, as the State Constabulary, and renamed in 1875 as the State Detective Force. With the change in name also came a change in duty, and the members of the force, about 30 at that time, were assigned to assist the state attorney general and district attorneys, a role that continues today. In addition, the State Detective Force enforced child labor laws.

On April 30, 1879, the agency became known as the District Police. The District Police continued to enforce child labor laws, and were given badges and powers of arrest.

In 1919, the Department of Public Safety was created, born out of the infamous Boston Police Strike, Mr. Guilmette said. Two years later, in 1921, the Massachusetts State Police Patrol was formed, marking the first time uniformed troopers began to patrol roadways.

The first class to graduate from the State Police Academy did so in 1921, and consisted of 49 troopers, mostly World War I veterans, Mr. Guilmette said. The first uniforms were forest green; leftover military uniforms. The current electric and French blue uniforms were introduced in 1933.

The first major state police raid took place in Millville, when state police busted up a large cockfight, arresting 52 people and seizing 74 gamecocks. The promoter was fined \$50, and each participant was fined \$10. The court ordered all of the famed cocks to be killed, dressed and delivered to needy families of the Blackstone Valley.

Though the primary mode of transportation was horseback, the roads were patrolled by troopers on Indian motorcycles.

"They started on horseback, and patrols lasted between eight and 10 days in rural areas, where no one saw a uniformed police officer, let alone a state trooper," Mr. Guilmette said, adding that troopers often bedded down in barns, cashing in on the hospitality of those they were protecting.

And it was Trooper Richard Clemmons who posed for the famous Norman Rockwell painting, "The Runaway," printed in the Saturday Evening Post in 1958.

In 1992, the Department of State Police was formed.

While the vintage cruisers and uniforms are invaluable, the stories told by former troopers are just as significant to the museum's mission, Mr. Guilmette said.

"Old-timers tell great stories, and that is what needs to be preserved," Mr. Guilmette said.