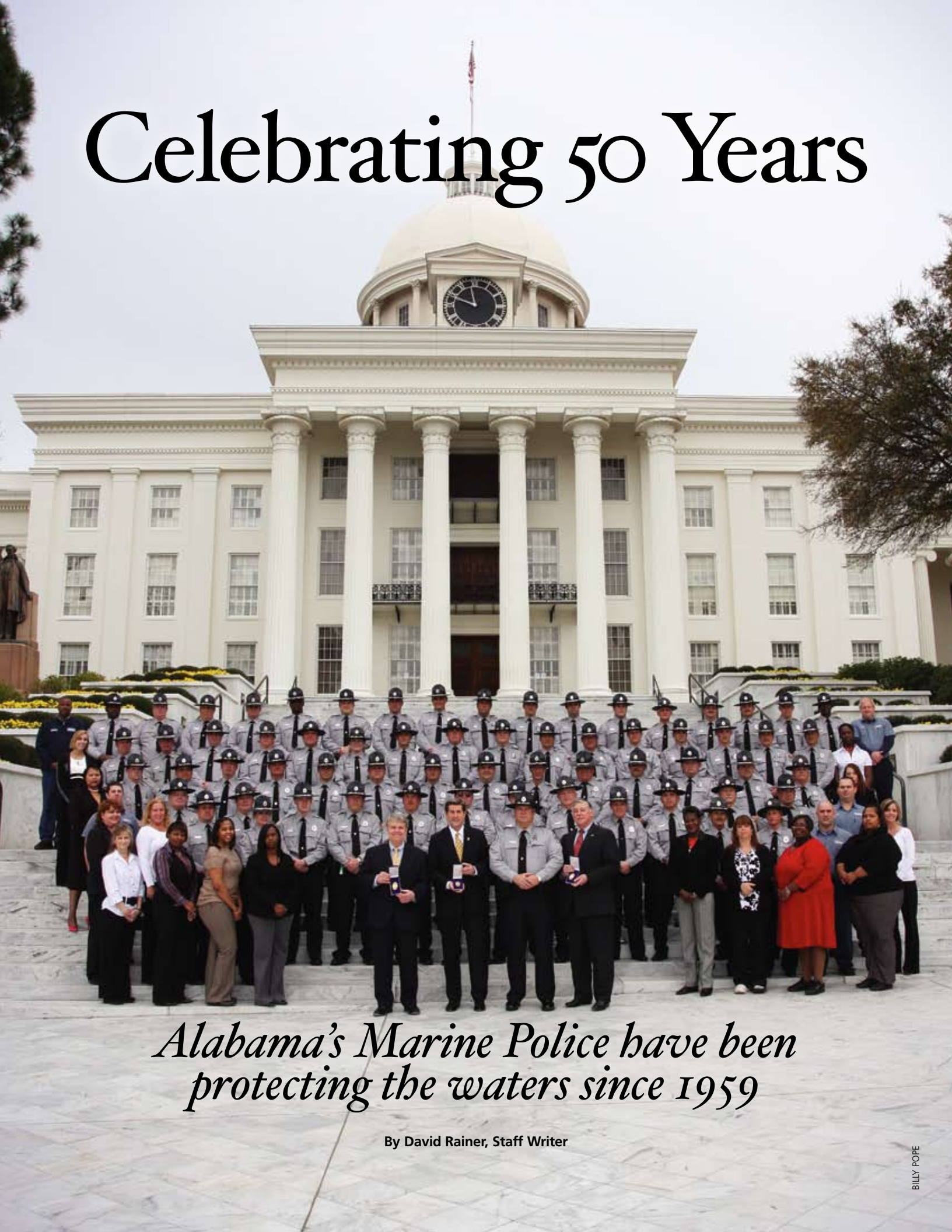


# Celebrating 50 Years



*Alabama's Marine Police have been protecting the waters since 1959*

By David Rainer, Staff Writer

# From humble beginnings with a staff of two in 1959, the Alabama Marine Police Division has steadily moved to the forefront of the nation's effort to make waterways safer places to enjoy the wonders of Alabama's vast aquatic resources.

"For 50 years, the Alabama Marine Police have protected citizens on our lakes, rivers and along the Alabama Gulf Coast," said Alabama Gov. Bob Riley. "When you consider the sheer vastness of their jurisdiction, it truly is a massive undertaking. Our Marine Police serve as a model for other states because of their hard work, innovation and commitment to keeping Alabamians safe on the water."



## A Leader in Safety

The Marine Police Division was honored earlier this year in a Joint Resolution of the Alabama Legislature, recognizing its 50th anniversary and its commitment to safety on Alabama's waters, which encompasses 1.2 million acres of surface area.

"Fifty years is a big milestone for any agency that serves the public," said John T. Jenkins, Director of Marine Police. "During those 50 years, Alabama has been one of the leaders in water safety across the nation. We were the first, in 1978, to require an emergency cutoff (kill) switch.

"We actually passed one of the most comprehensive boating safety regulations in the nation when the Legislature passed the Boaters Safety Reform Act (aka Roberson-Archer Act) in 1994. That made Alabama the first state in the nation to require an operator's license. We were the first state in the nation to make boater education mandatory in the public school system. In 2001, the act was updated to establish blood alcohol levels for boating under the influence enforcement, and it enhanced our boating regulations overall."

With 38 years of service in Marine Police, Major Bob Huffaker has personally witnessed a great deal of the progress from the effort to increase boating safety education and enforcement.

"The number of fatalities when I started in 1971 through the 1980s up until the Boating Safety Reform Act remained consistently high," Huffaker said. "One year we had 52 boating-related fatalities. We've seen a dramatic reduction in fatalities since the Boating Safety Reform Act. The year after we implemented the vessel operator's license, we saw a 47-percent reduction in fatalities to 17. Fatalities have been averaging in the teens since 1998."

Huffaker said he has seen

the number of Marine Police personnel fluctuate over the years, from a low of 28 to the current 64, which includes officers and supervisors. Those officers must patrol all 67 counties and multiple river systems – Tennessee, Coosa, Tallapoosa, Warrior, Alabama, Tombigbee, Chattahoochee and Mobile rivers, as well as the Mobile Delta, Mobile Bay and coastal waters from Orange Beach to Grand Bay.

"The main thing I've seen is the mass reduction in fatalities on Alabama's waterways," Huffaker said. "We have a better educated and more knowledgeable boating community than we had in the earlier days. Educated boaters are safer boaters."

## Education Equals Lower Fatalities

Lt. Erica Shipman, who is in charge of education and the boat operator licenses, thinks the portion of the Boating Safety Reform Act that required education through boating safety classes as a part of the license process is a key factor in the increase in safety on Alabama's waters.



## Marine Police Timeline

**November 19, 1959** – Gov. John Patterson signed into law Legislative Act 576 creating the Water Safety Division.

**November 25, 1959** – The Alabama Department of Conservation activated the Water Safety Division and designated General Jack Parsons, State Parks Division Chief, as Acting Division Chief over the newly formed Division. \$30,000 was appropriated to implement the legislation. The Division consisted of the acting chief and one secretary.

**January 10, 1960** – Tom G. Shackelford was appointed chief of the Water Safety Division and by June 1960, there were enough funds from registration fees to employ 10 patrol officers, two supervisors, and to purchase 10 patrol boats. Each patrol officer was assigned to patrol one of 10 districts, with each district comprised of 8-10 counties. (66,000 boats were registered that first year as compared to 273,406 boats registered this past fiscal year.)

**1962** – Due to the needs of the boating public, the Water Safety Division assumed responsibility for marking hazardous areas and establishing restricted areas in the name of public safety. From the meager beginning of 100 homemade buoys, the Division now

oversees and maintains over 1640 buoys, signs and markers statewide.

**1971** - The Legislature approved legislation to rename the Water Safety Division as the Marine Police Division. This legislation also gave full police powers to the officers of the Marine Police Division as well as to the other law enforcement officers of the Department.

**1973** – The Director of Public Safety gave permission for the Marine Police Division to become part of the Public Safety radio network, greatly enhancing the Division's ability to respond to emergencies and communicate with other enforcement agencies.



“Because of that, we have seen dramatic decreases in fatalities and even our accidents on the water,” Shipman said. “Other states across the nation look to us to see what we’ve done to reduce our fatalities and our accident statistics. We’ve even had Australia and other countries call here to see what our program consists of because we have had such dramatic reductions.”

In Alabama, anyone who operates a boat has to have a boater (vessel) operator’s license. Anyone 12 years and older must possess the license, although operators who are less than 14 years old must have someone 21 years old or older on board, who also has a vessel operator’s license in possession, and is seated in a position to take immediate control of the vessel if necessary.

The vessel operator’s license can be acquired after successful completion of a boating safety class offered by Marine Police, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary or the U.S. Power Squadron. Online courses are available at BoaterExam.com and Boat-Ed.com. An alternative is to take a written examination at any Department of Public Safety Driver License Office in the state. Study materials are available at those offices. Boaters born before April 28, 1954 are exempt from the examination requirements.

“The class is an all-around boating course that is extremely comprehensive,” Shipman said. “It covers rules of the road, safety, aids to navigation, trailering and other issues that make boating safer and more enjoyable. In Alabama, we have licensed over 666,000 boaters to date.”

## Safety First

Jenkins said that more than 273,000 boats are registered in Alabama.

Even with the effort those numbers demand, the Marine Police Division is also wrestling with a cut in funding, which has affected every state agency.

“With the economic downturn, we have had to reevaluate where we have our people, how we patrol,” Jenkins said. “We’re trying to save money anyway possible, just like any other agency. We’re not filling some of our open positions. We’re looking for more fuel-efficient operation of our vehicles and vessels. We’re trying different patrol methods, targeting areas of higher activity. We’ve taken a little over a 10-percent cut in our spending authority for this year and next. We’re trying to work to make sure that doesn’t impact our service to the public.

“Our main role is, very simply, to make sure that our boaters are as safe as possible – to educate them and enforce the law.”

Barnett Lawley, Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said the recognition the Marine Police Division has received is well-deserved.

“Through the tireless efforts of our Marine Police Division, Alabama’s waters are safer for our boaters and those who enjoy our abundant rivers, lakes and coastal waters,” Lawley said. “Boating fatalities have dropped dramatically, and our Marine Police Division has become a pioneer in enforcement and safety techniques that are being implemented by agencies around the nation and world.” **GA**



**1977** – The Division’s boat registration records became available on the NCIC network nationwide. Alabama was the second state in the nation to do so.

**1978** – The first emergency shut-off switch (kill switch) regulation was promulgated, making Alabama the first state in the nation to implement a regulation requiring “kill switches.”

**1989** – Staggered boat registration was implemented, aligning boat registration renewals with automobile registrations.

**1994** – The most comprehensive boating safety legislation in Alabama’s history, the Boating Safety Reform Act (aka the Roberson-Archer Act) was passed by the Legislature. Alabama was the first state in the nation to require that all vessel operators obtain an operator’s license. Alabama was also the first state in the nation to require that boater education be mandatory in the public school system. This legislation also established blood alcohol levels for intoxication on the water and enhanced other boating safety laws that were already in place.

**2001** – The Boating Safety Enhancement Act further enhanced existing boating laws. This legislation lowered the blood alcohol levels for intoxication from .10 to .08 and aligned the BUI fines and penalties with the DUI fines and penalties. It also raised the legal age to operate a vessel alone from age 12 to age 14.

**2003** – In response to the public’s cry for clean water, the Legislature passed the Marine Sanitation Act. This act regulates sewage discharge from recreational and residence vessels, and requires all vessels with a marine sanitation device (MSD) be inspected each year for compliance with

the Act. Recently, the Department has started a Special Agent program, which allows agents usually affiliated with a marina and who are designated by the State, to do inspections on MSDs, making it a more efficient process for boat owners.