



Steve Schrader receives his sergeant insignia pins while a fellow officer looks on.

Reflections

ON A CONSERVATION CAREER

By Sergeant Steve Schrader

With the end of my career as a Conservation Enforcement Officer rapidly approaching, I thought it appropriate to put down on paper what it means to be a “game warden.” I am amazed that so many people don’t really know who we are or what we do. We are mistaken for everything from security guards to park rangers.

Many Things to Many People

What a Conservation Officer really does depends a little on who you are. If you are a landowner, we are the barrier between you and people who would poach on the land you own or lease. If you are a citizen who has found an injured animal, we are probably the first person you call. If you are a legal, ethical hunter, we are your friend and a source of information. We answer questions about laws and regulations, and even information on how to manage the wildlife you love to pursue. We are the only line of defense between landowners, sportsmen, the general public and those who abuse our resources. If you are a poacher, an abuser of resources belonging to the people of this state, we are a significant deterrent.

In the Beginning

I began my career at the young age of 22. My first partner was older than my own father, and so was my first supervisor. They were like big brothers and fathers rolled into one. They were also teachers and role models. Back then, we worked from “can until can’t.” And the older guys hung in there pretty well. They only needed an occasional power nap under a tree or in the passenger seat while I drove.

I learned something from every officer I ever worked with. Most of it was good. A good partner makes the job fun. A poor one makes it miserable. I had some of both. The good ones are still around—just moved around. The others no longer work for the state.

24-Hour Job

Being a Conservation Officer requires a special kind of person. This is not a job that allows you to punch a clock and go home and forget about it until tomorrow. After people get to know you, they will call at all hours of the day and night. Questions. Complaints. You rarely eat a meal, alone or out with your family without having to answer a question. You lay awake at night trying to figure out the best way to sneak up on that baited spot in the woods, or how to catch that habitual violator, or wondering what you did to deserve the cursing from the person you arrested for a minor violation.

It's a job you find yourself doing every waking hour. I made arrests over the years while off duty, traveling to see relatives or even when I was hunting or fishing while off duty. Being a Conservation Officer is more "who" you are than "what" you are.

The work is rewarding. There is not as much pleasure anymore in catching someone fishing without a license. But I still get out there and check the fishermen. The public has to see you are out there, still working, still being strict, but above all, being fair. I have caught hundreds of people who, to my amazement, risked paying a fine and court costs over the few dollars that a license costs.

A great satisfaction comes when you catch one of those people who is a known violator. It is catching the real criminal that makes an officer's reputation. An early catch of some notorious night hunters, complete with a wild car chase, let the public know that I was serious about doing the work. They became eager to clue me in on things I needed to know to be effective. It does take help from all the eyes and ears of the public. I may have seemed annoyed by getting complaints, but only because at times the complaints outnumbered the hours in a day to give them proper attention.

Diverse Responsibilities

Of course, most of the work is done outdoors. I can't recall the number of times I stopped to thank God as I watched a spectacular sunrise or sunset, listened to a turkey gobble in the bloom-

ing springtime woods, watched a flock of ducks or geese. He had blessed me by placing me in this job.

My three children got to see a lot of our native wildlife up close. I brought home all kinds of hawks, owls, opossums, raccoons, rabbits and deer that had been injured or picked up by well-meaning people, or that I had taken from someone. We released many of those outdoors around our home.

My first state boat was a 1959 model 14-foot Alumacraft boat with an 18-horsepower Johnson motor. I would put in on the Tennessee River in Scottsboro and work all the way to the state line and back. It took all day to make that trip. Back then I couldn't believe that someone was paying me to do it. That was 1980. Now I have a larger, faster boat, but it still takes most all day, and after spending it in the heat, sun and wind, I feel like I've earned my pay.

The great part about this job—well, one of the great parts—is that you never get tired of doing the same thing. Seasons change. Focus changes. Deer season, turkey season, fishing season, dove season, commercial fishing, musseling, trapping, teaching hunter safety, weekly and monthly paperwork, various types of training, and public speaking engagements for different groups all make this job diverse.

Fellow Officers Like Family

Through it all, it has been the fellow officers who have made this job great and memorable. You spend hours and hours with your fellow officers, more time than with your wife or family. You talked about everything, and you figured out ways to catch the "bad guys." Sure, pranks were pulled, jokes abounded, nicknames were earned, and even feelings got hurt a little once in a while. But when the chips were down, I never let another officer down. We had more fun in "the old days." Never was there a more dedicated group of men.

Back then, the districts were smaller and the opportunities to work with everyone in the district were greater. Now the districts are so big, it would take most of the day just to drive from one end to

the other and back. There used to be less demand to do more on tighter budgets, and do it in a 40-hour week. We really were like family back then. We're still close; it just doesn't seem the same. There used to be a couple of months each year that things were slow, but now there is something to do all year.

I'm one of the "old heads" at district meetings now. I wonder as I look at the young, fresh faces around me if they think of me as a dinosaur. I hope not. I'm still out there beating the bushes and chasing bad guys. We could probably learn from each other if we had time to work together. But soon I plan to pursue other passions and leave it up to the younger people to be the "thin, green line."

The Measure of Success

Rarely does anyone from the public thank me for the job I do. That's okay. I do it for my self-respect, my satisfaction and for the resources. Have I been a success? I see more deer and turkey than I did 20 years ago. Most of the people around here seem to respect me. I think everyone knows me to be strict, but fair. I didn't get rich, but I made a living. I got my children raised and thanks to some hard work on their part and a little scholarship money from Auburn, got my sons through college.

If there are sufficient resources so that my grandson has a place to hunt and fish with me in a few more years, then I was a success. If his son has a place to hunt and fish, and if the resources are there for their trip afield to be as enjoyable as they were for my son and me, then yes, I have been a success. If thousands of Alabamians and the people who visit this state can enjoy our resources, then yes, I have had a successful career. I would do it all over again, and I wouldn't change a thing.

The job has changed dramatically in the last 24 years. The face of hunting and fishing has changed. People have changed. It's time to move on. Thank you, hunters and anglers of Alabama for trusting me to keep watch over our resources. I hope I didn't let you down. **GA**