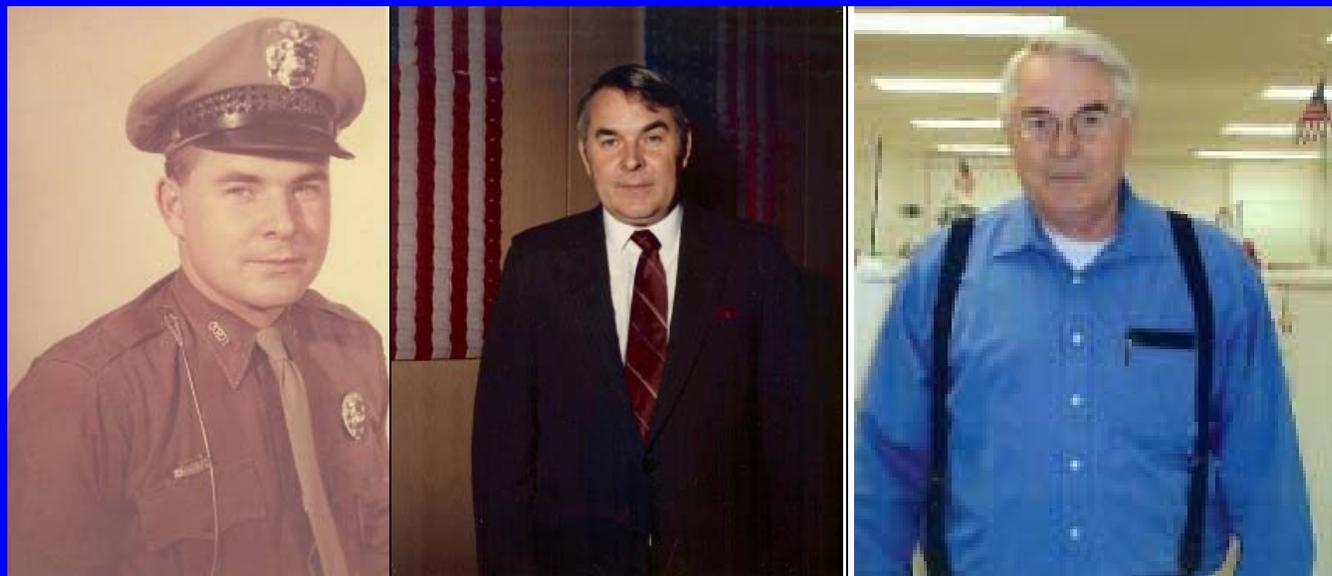


A Tribute to Lawrence Eugene “Gene” Sheffer

By Neil McDonald, OPD/Retired



On Saturday, May 12, 2007, family members, friends and professional colleagues came to honor the memory of Lawrence Eugene Sheffer. Bob Hamilton, retired Orlando City Attorney, and Paul Shirley, MPO retired, eulogized Gene Sheffer and shared their fond personal memories of Gene as a professional law enforcement officer, and as an exemplary human being who was also their personal friend.

It is now the appropriate time for me to share some very fond memories of my late friend and professional colleague, Lawrence Eugene Sheffer.

I can't recall exactly when or how Gene Sheffer and I first met but know it was during that early 1970's era when Federal educational loan and grant monies turned many Orlando cops into nighttime Rollins college students.

Gene was a high achiever, in everything he endeavored to do. As a college educated professional law enforcement officer, a progression of past Orlando Police Chiefs relied upon Gene's sound fiscal planning and administrative management skills. During Gene's watch, Orlando Police Department progressed to levels of professionalism that still help to define it well after he retired.

But, remembering when or how Gene and I met isn't as important as realizing that in a symbolic sense, I had always known "who Gene was"! I was raised to appreciate honesty, dignity, pride, respectfulness, kindness, creativity, integrity and those many other virtues that also defined the man I knew as Gene Sheffer.

CHRISTMAS NATIVITY

One of Gene's greatest gifts was a "dry" sense of humor. His exposure to anything humorous frequently triggered his unique "chuckle-like" laugh. Whenever I'd remind Gene and Shirley about this little Christmas story anecdote it would evoke their laughter and trigger Gene's chuckle every time.

One Christmas season about twenty-three years ago, when my now grown daughters were just toddlers they loved to visit with Shirley and Gene Sheffer—who they of course knew as Mr. and Mrs Sheffer.

It was also during this time that they were especially fascinated by all the colorful figures in our family Christmas nativity scene display and we'd try to teach them the names of each figure. Eventually, it became like a quiz game when the girls would point to a figure and ask: "who's that daddy?" or, "who's that Mommy?" And, we'd reply, "that's the baby Jesus", or "that's Mary, or Joseph, or whoever", etc.

The animals were easy and eventually they could name the major players—but, the lesser known "cast" members gave them a lot of trouble, and they couldn't seem to remember them. We'd patiently tell the girls who they were, again and again, "that's the shepherd . . . those are the wise men, etc." But they kept forgetting what to call the shepherd and the wise men—until one, long awaited day arrived!

I pointed to the robed figure cradling a lamb in his arms, holding a shepherd's hook: "Okay girls" I asked, "who is this guy?"

The JEOPARDY TV quiz show wouldn't have accepted the answer, but their Dad was impressed with how close they came as they excitedly jumped up and down, then screamed out as only little girls can do: "That's Mr. Sheffer!"

GENE'S OUTLET

It's well known that many cops must work off-duty details to help support their families. Gene's normal daily routine as an admin officer caused him to be "office-bound" much of the time. He needed an outlet.

But, just as king salmon return to home streams, the "home streams" for most seasoned cops is back patrolling the city streets in uniform. For Gene Sheffer and many more of us, the Factory Outlet Mall provided a suitable substitute where we logged hundreds of hours over the years and worked off-duty among Orlando's visiting tourists.

Most tourists don't even notice the rank insignia that cops wear on their uniforms. But, it used to evoke Gene's "chuckle" to learn how tourists who did know the difference reacted when they noticed the rank insignia on Gene's uniform. Sometimes they'd do a double-take. But at other times their curiosity (frequently from NYPD or New Jersey cops) compelled them to stop one of us patrol ranked officers and share their thoughts. Conversations usually starting something like this:

"Excuse me officer, I'm a cop up north and was just wondering. . ."

At about this point, you'd see the flash of a "shield" to establish his law enforcement "pedigree" followed by his precinct number and number of years "on the job" . . . and then, came the burning question:

"Why's a Captain walking a beat? . . . 'You'd never see that up my way!"

I even remember one NYPD cop surmising that Gene's "bosses" must have ordered him there to "work off a beef" (a northern police slang term for internal discipline).

You could see concern or disbelief on their faces morph into relief to learn "Captain Sheffer" volunteered to walk that beat! It was far from punishment—as a mall "beat cop" we'd get free coffee and bagels with eggs or cream cheese at one booth, reduced price hot dogs, baked potatoes, sodas and ice cream at another, discounts at numerous stores—and (except for the junk foods), it was one great big health walk that someone was paying you to do.

And then, occasionally, a few miscreants would actually commit enough crime to insure our continued presence was required. Gene and I made a rather rare arrest one Saturday at the Mall. A very observant store clerk alerted us to a price-tag switching scam. We later determined it was perpetrated by a pair of migratory criminals--gypsies from Lithuania and Poland. Their husbands loitered in the store as lookouts who could only watch in stunned disbelief and protested our walking their wives through the mall in handcuffs. Recalling how we out conned these "cons" and arrested Lottie Deltuva and her partner would evoke the Gene Sheffer chuckle.

Gene always enjoyed a good chuckle to be reminded about the day Michael Jackson came through the mall wearing a rubber old man's mask. Michael told me and Larry Jones it was worn to keep from attracting a crowd of fans. But a skinny guy wearing a bald headed rubber old man's mask, leading an entourage and a nine year old blond haired male child through Factory Outlet Mall, looked about as natural as socks on a rooster (as retired MPO Mike Wenger likes to say)! We used to get paid for "having fun".

CAMARADERIE

Every rookie cop has heard the "old timers" reminisce about how much fun policing used to be—and how it isn't as much fun anymore! And, now I sometimes say the same thing. But actually it has more to do with a level of camaraderie that no longer seems to exist as others in "our era" knew it.

Recently, I spent a cherished evening with Gene and Shirley recalling several humorous episodes that we shared, and recalled pranks and practical jokes that our fellow cops and colleagues have perpetrated against each other in the name of camaraderie.

This next section is going to refer to Gene and another departed colleague, Charlie Petno who was one of those larger than life men who many of us were privileged to have known and respected. Although he is not mentioned by name again later, I wanted to note that another dearly departed comrade, John Morman was also along on this trip. The story that follows is told with the utmost respect but must be told in exactly this way—because it exemplifies the truest meaning of camaraderie at its humorous best.

Camaraderie is the esprit-de-corps that exists within any group of individuals who are bound by a higher calling and a common purpose. Being one of the "comrades" implies that you, may be "elected" to be the brunt of a prank or practical joke—and you are safe in the knowledge that there is no malicious intent! You automatically know this because you realize that those jokesters would lay down their lives for each other without hesitation in any deadly police encounter!

Once upon a time, fifteen OPD cops organized a two-day camping and canoe trip into Georgia's Okeefanokee Swamp with the US Parks Service.. Our entire group had to camp overnight in a designated staging area and it was raining for most of the night.

Apparently, Gene and I received the Parks Service brochure that was intended for juveniles—because ours said "no alcoholic beverages". And, some of the guys must have been given a different brochure that said: bring your own booze!

Somebody brought a deck of cards and before long; a roaring poker game erupted under the shelter of a nearby covered pavilion. When the rain slacked up, Gene and I decided it was a good time to pitch our tent and then fixed ourselves something to eat as we stayed inside our dry tent. This camping area was miles from civilization and we discussed how nice it would have been if we had brought some kind of adult beverage to sip on.

As the poker game and convivial imbibing continued into the dark rainy night, sounds of bantering and laughter became more slurred and became progressively louder as a few toasted cops played their poker hands late into the night.

As the rain would slack off, Gene and I would step out of the tent to check things out . . . a couple of the scrawny deer came into the camp . . . and then, Gene noticed something had been left unattended .

There on the tailgate of Charlie Petno's pick-up truck stood a sealed bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label that hadn't made it to the poker game. Before long, Gene and I concurred that it tasted pretty good when sipped from a tin enameled coffee cup. We learned that a few "slugs" of Johnny Walker will greatly enhance anyone's camping experience in a dry Georgia county!

We, of course, did the "right thing" and screwed the cap on real tight before returning the undisturbed 75% or so to the tailgate to "share" with Charlie. This was not theft—this was camaraderie! Gene and I slept well that night.

But somewhere around 1:00 AM, loud voices, boisterous laughter and lights flashing around--woke us up. We poked our heads outside. What looked like WWII air raid search light beams was coming from flashlights, held by tipsy poker players stumbling around in the rainy darkness for that "special place" to pitch a tent at 1:00AM. Boy, did they have fun!

All of us had to break camp, eat breakfast and meet at the swamp staging area with canoes and gear loaded, at 06:30AM for sign-in with the ranger. Then, we were on the trai... only, four hours of paddling past scores of alligators until we reached our promised land called Billy's Island!

Gene was adventurous; he researched the history of the area and even purchased his own Grumman aluminum canoe for the trip. But he didn't feel confident steering it—so he sat up front. Gene only outweighed me by about 50 pounds. Normally you want the heaviest guy in the rear to elevate the bow. I had never steered a canoe that tipped downward in the nose before. We looked like the Manx cat of canoe crews—low in front, high in the rear. Most of the paddling was fairly straight—until we reached a tight stand of cypress trees and lost sight of the canoe crews just ahead.

But from the terse orders being shouted: "keep to the left!, lean over, paddle harder, Go! Go! Go! It sounded like we were getting near an exciting ride at Disney World. When we rounded that bend, what greeted us was worse than Mr. Toad's Wild Ride!

We were staring into a 6 foot female gator's hissing wide gaping mouth full of teeth protecting a bunch of black-and-orange striped baby gators in the water around her and on her back. Instinctively, when Gene leaned backward to gain a little more distance from the "mom of the swamp", our bow "miraculously" rose up and we power paddled within about 3 or 4 feet to make it past her. We almost threw a "rooster tail" behind that canoe!

We were relieved to reach Billy's Island though. Gene took a break and I teamed up with Paul Huffman to fish for a while. I landed a 3 inch long pickerel. As I attempted to toss it overboard, Paul pleaded for me to let him have it.

"Paul, nobody eats pickerels—especially one this little—it's full of bones", I said. Paul said, "I just want it". So I gave Paul the only thing we caught in that entire swamp...one 3 inch fish!

Paul was getting pretty tired— he said hadn't slept well, and mentioned how he was rudely awakened around 1:00AM by Charlie Petno and some unidentified poker players who cut one of his jungle hammock ropes and dumped the hammock and him into a deep puddle. What he was wearing got soggy, but he managed to change into some dryer clothes.

Most folks who aren't cops would think that wasn't a nice thing to do to Paul. Paul Huffman took it all in stride realizing that someday he'd think it was funny too! That's what camaraderie is—boys out having a little harmless fun. Paul understood the principle, just a forgivable act meant to evoke "laughter in the night"—all in the name of camaraderie!

On Billy's Island everyone pitched their tents and went to bed much earlier that night. But the next morning Charlie Petno was up earlier than the rest of us. He hadn't slept very much and blamed it all on three or four raccoons that kept sneaking inside his tent and waking him up. He said they climbed all over him and his sleeping bag—with him inside it! Charlie would run them out, then he'd doze off only to have them come back and climb all over him again.

But Paul and all the rest of us slept much better that night. At the time, only Paul Huffman and the raccoons knew that Charlie Petno was the only camper there on Billy's Island who had a 3" long pickerel stuffed underneath his sleeping bag. There is no finer example of camaraderie than that!

FAREWELL TO GENE

