

# Law enforcement does its part to fight crime on Interstate 70

By Jan Katz Ackerman  
Colby Free Press

Thomas and Logan County law enforcement officers are quick to say Interstate 70 has created work for them, but at the same time helped their departments.

"Prior to Interstate 70 we were kind of isolated," Thomas County Sheriff Mike Baughn said. "But I-70 came in and brought us a bigger and badder world."

Baughn said the late 1970s proved to be a particularly eventful time for law enforcement agencies in Thomas and Logan Counties.

"In August of 1979 there was a body found at Mingo Road off I-70," he said. "The individual was a Native American male between the ages of 29 and 33."

Baughn said the Kansas Bureau of Investigation was able to perform facial reconstruction and help develop the case as a homicide.

"It's still an open case," he said. "The body was found with a belt around his neck and we'll be looking at first degree murder when it's solved."

The 1980s were particularly traumatic for Thomas County residents and law enforcement officers due to crimes which originated along the super highway.

"In 1986 we had the baby case," he said. "There was a badly decomposed body of an infant found in a storm drain at the I-70 and Levant interchange. The remains were decomposed, but there was an attempt to get DNA and the Kansas Bureau of Investigation and our office worked it."

Baughn said his office and the KBI followed leads which took them to Washington state, Arizona and California.

"We have a suspect, but haven't developed enough probable cause necessary to put the case together and close it," Baughn said.

On June 1, 1987, Baughn came upon a homicide victim at the I-70 rest area west of Colby.

"I checked out a Navajo Truck Line truck and found the body of Patrick Mitchell of Commerce City, Colorado," Baughn said.

Mitchell had been shot and killed by Willie Most, who was convicted and is currently in Norton State Correctional Facility at Norton.

Baughn said a gun found in a ditch about one mile to the east of where the murder took place linked Most to the murder. The first time Most will come up for parole will be in October 2007, and Baughn plans to protest his release.

Times changed drastically for Thomas County on Feb. 13, 1985, when a multi-state crime spree which started in Florida later engulfed Thomas County leaving four people dead in its wake.

"That's the day of Remeta," Baughn said.

After a shooting in Florida and murder in Arkansas, Daniel Remeta, Lisa Dunn, James Hunter and Mark Walters crossed Kansas on I-70. They killed Larry McFarland at the Stucky's convenience store at Grainfield, before leaving I-70 at Colby.

The four made their way to the northwest part of Thomas County, where they killed Levant elevator operators Glenn Moore and John R. Schroeder. The violence came to an end in a gun battle with police near an unoccupied farm house in Rawlins County. Wounded in the incident was then Thomas County Undersheriff Ben Albright and elevator manager Maurice Christie.

Walters was killed in the gunfight, Hunter died of a heart attack shortly after being released from prison when his conviction was overturned and Dunn was granted a second trial and cleared of all charges after being diagnosed as having battered woman's syndrome.

Remeta pleaded guilty and given four life sentences and extradited back to Florida where he was executed March 31, 1998. Baughn, along with a Kansas Bureau of Investigation agent, witnessed the execution.

Another case which rocked Colby and Thomas County was State of Kansas vs. John Doe.

When arrested for the 2003 murder and decapitation of 43-year-old Lucille Gallegos in Wichita, McPherson truck driver Douglas

Belt, also known as the I-70 rapist, was connected to decade old rapes in Thomas, Saline and McPherson counties.

Thomas County's connection to Belt stemmed from the March 1993 rape of a 20-year-old woman at the Sunflower apartment complex on South Franklin Avenue.

Law enforcement determined Belt was "John Doe" through DNA samples taken at the time of several sexual assaults which took place between 1989 and 1994 along I-70. DNA sample matches led to Belt's conviction in the Gallegos case. Now on death row, Belt went untried for the rapes either because the status of the "John Doe" case was challenged in court or a victim decided not to proceed with her case against him.

Baughn said cases like Remeta's and Belt's changed Thomas County's relationship to I-70.

"Prior to the Remeta case people were more relaxed and not as conscious about things," Baughn said. "When they fled off the interstate and went into the county, people became more aware of things. People used to not call us, but now when they see a suspicious vehicle they do call."

But Baughn also said those same incidents helped law enforcement agencies.

"We used to be old west type sheriff's offices carrying revolvers, but now we have semi-automatic weapons and bullet proof vests," he said. "Times have changed."

Colby Police Chief Randy Jones believes a variety of reasons have changed the crime climate in Colby.

"Instant communications, by the way of cell phone, has caused a dramatic increase of crimes able to be reported, such as erratic and drunk drivers, other criminal activity, etcetera," Jones said.

He said the Colby is one of only a few stops for the Greyhound bus line and fuel costs continue to climb crime and gas thefts continue to increase.

But Jones also said increased sales tax revenue from Colby's growing business community has allowed for new equipment purchases. But he said as technology changes, his department must have more tactical equipment to keep up with ammunition and weapons which could be used against offic-

ers. "I am extremely grateful that some of the city fathers, years ago, had the insight to encourage the powers that be to bring I-70 through the southern city limits of Colby," Jones said. "I can't imagine what our community would be like if we did not have it. The good far, far, outweighs the bad, as far as I'm concerned."

Logan County Sheriff Pat Parsons and Oakley Police Chief Danny Shanks agree.

"Logan County has approximately seven miles of interstate, but as a law enforcement officer, I believe it has an impact on my job," Parsons said. "Negatively it has brought more high impact crimes to Oakley and Logan County, including being shot at. On the positive side of things, it also brings good people to our community, as well as income to the area."

Shanks said as police chief he can honestly say Oakley's "had its share" of crime coming off I-70.

"Before the interstate, crime was more locally based," Shanks said. "I can't give you any number of crimes because it varies from year to year."

Shanks said while I-70 makes Oakley a crossroad for the interstate, U.S. Highway 40 and U.S. Highway 83, he specifically remembers a few of the crimes he's investigated.

"In 1985, I was the first responding official to Grainfield in the Remeta case," he said.

Shanks said on Dec. 7, 1988, Oakley resident and motel clerk Alice Pepperl was murdered by Dennis D. Perkins, 31-year-old San Jose, Calif., man hired as a laborer at the former County Club Motel. Perkins was convicted and sentenced to El Dorado Correctional Facility in El Dorado, and his first chance at being parole is Dec. 4, 2019.

"And in 1989, a local lady was abducted from the veteran's club

where she was a bartender," Shanks said. "She was held against her will for several hours and raped."

Bobby G. Layman of Alabama was convicted and served time at Norton Correctional Facility in Norton and was released in 2004.

The most recent high profile case took place in 2003. Law enforcement from Thomas, Logan and Gove Counties, along with troopers from the Kansas Highway Patrol, had a 30-minute high speed chase and shootout with two Inyokern, Calif., men. The chase began on I-70 about 10 miles east of Colby and ended near Oakley.

During a routine traffic stop, Gerald N. Bryant II, 32, and a passenger, Brian E. Berry, 32, fled the scene. A chase ensued on old U.S. Highway 40, onto country roads and criss-crossed I-70. When Bryant suddenly stopped the car, Berry bailed out and was captured. One of the troopers shot and wounded Bryant, whose car crashed in the center of the west-bound lane of I-70 east of Oakley closing both lanes for several hours.

Shanks transported Berry to Oakley to jail, and Bryant was transported to the hospital in Oakley and later transferred to Wichita. Both Bryant and Berry were convicted in a federal court in

Wichita on numerous drug charges, interstate and foreign travel in aid of racketeering enterprises, conspiracy to carry a firearm during and in relation to a drug trafficking crime and using and carrying a firearm during and in relation to a drug trafficking crime.

Shanks said Oakley's proximity to Interstate 70 gives the town a "little bit of everything."

"We've had at least one major incident a year here, from helping find escapees, stolen cars and wanted people."



Baughn

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