

Spotlight on Retired Troopers: Bud Vacura

By Sil Kit Wa Rivera

**Editors note: The following article was originally printed in the fall 1998 issue of Montana Highway Patrolman. It is being reprinted in honor of retired Captain Bud Vacura, a member of the Patrol's second recruit academy in 1937 and the first president of the Association of Montana Highway Patrolmen (now the Association of Montana Troopers), who recently passed away. For more information, please see Final Patrol.*



It's been sixty years since Bodley (Bud) B. Vacura began his association with the Montana Highway Patrol. Bud may be retired, but his can-do attitude isn't. From the time he was elected as the first president of the Association of Montana Highway Patrolmen back in 1940, to his current service on the Board of Directors representing retired members, Bud has served as a role model for all of us that wear the uniform.

Bud commenced service on April 1st, 1937, to attend the second Patrol Academy, which brought the total force of officers up to forty-one. As the first Columbus patrolman, Bud cruised into town in a 1936 Hudson Terraplane.

"The first thing I did when I pulled into town," recalls Bud, "was to go down and see the county sheriff. Frank Murphy was the Stillwater County Sheriff and Paul Rosine was the undersheriff. Frank became one of my closest friends."

This was fortunate, because there were about ten patrolmen in the Billings division back then; an area encompassing one fourth of the state.

In 1938, the Patrol purchased the first mobile receiving units. "As a matter of fact," Bud recalls, "because of the

power lines that ran along much of the highway, my receiver was pretty much useless; a noise box."

"Back then, we had check points. One was at the sheriff's office, and we had others at places outfitted with a telephone along the patrol route. Gas stations and such." Patrolmen would sign in at these check points. If there were any messages or calls, they were relayed through these sites. "We got two way radios after the war."

There were nine enforceable "highway menaces" that could result in a summons or arrest when the Patrol began taking enforcement action. Bud states, "We didn't have a lot of people wanting to go to trial. In my time, I don't believe that I had over a half dozen trials." Whether or not that was because people just knew they were guilty and took responsibility for what they had done, I can't say. It was different."

When asked about the most memorable events of his career, Bud shook his head. "That would probably be the Bear Creek mine disaster back in February of 1943. "I remember getting the message on Saturday morning to report to Bear Creek. Naturally, I expected to get back home that night. Well, when I got to Bear

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Creek, it was total confusion."

"There were seventy-eight miners trapped. Myself and the other patrolmen took care of getting the rescue workers and gear to and from red Lodge."

"I'll never forget the Thursday that they brought out the first load of miners, all dead. It was about 20 below zero with two feet of snow on the ground. I was down wind, and the odor was pretty bad. I had to destroy that uniform — I never could get the odor out."

"That night about ten o'clock, they brought out forty more dead. That's not something you forget. We served ten days in all."

From 1943 to 1945, Bud completed a tour of duty in the Army, 30th Division, and 119th regiment. During World War II, his tour included Belgium and Germany. In 1945, he returned to his Patrol career.

He has vivid memories of November, 1946. "(Patrolmen) Gordon McDermid, Robert Steele, and I had met in Laurel for a cup of coffee. After we finished, they headed back toward Billings, and I headed back to Columbus."

"I got a radio call that they had been in a shoot-out. Naturally, I headed back to see what I could do, but when I got there, it was all over."

Patrolman Steele was killed in the gun battle with one of the men who robbed the Olive Motel in Billings. Officer McDermid was wounded, but he had been able to shoot and kill one suspect and wound the other.

When asked about tough spots he had been in, Bud rubbed his chin. "Well, one night I stopped a fellow that was pretty important in his community — and he had been drinking quite a bit. I guess he knew that if he got a DUI, he could lose his position. Anyway, he grabbed a 30/30 rifle out of the back of his car. I was able to wrestle it away from him, but that was quite a fight. He ended up in jail, after all."

When asked about patrol cars, Bud noted that in the early days, the patrol got a new fleet every year. "Except for the war years. We mostly used 1941 Fords through the war to 1945. Everything was scarce then."

Every trooper has a favorite patrol car. Bud's was his 1951 Hudson Hornet. Groups of officers flew to Duluth to pick up the Hudsons, which were revered for their power.

Bud continued his career by bidding Anaconda, where he served until 1949. He was then promoted to Captain and Safety Director in Helena. After four years in that

position, he won the bid for Captain of the Great Falls division and stayed there for ten years. He retired in 1963 with twenty five years of distinguished service.

When a trooper serves, so do their families. About his wife, Bud says, "She was definitely a career patrolman's wife. There was never a conversation between us over whether she was worried, but, of course, she did. There were many times after midnight that I would call to say, 'Well, I'm here, and I don't expect to be back until...' That probably relieved a little tension, but there were trying times."

It's been thirty four years since Bud Vacura retired from eth patrol, but he hasn't been idle. With a true entrepreneur's eye, he saw that Missoula had a market and need for automatic car washes. He partnered up with another fellow, then built and patented their own automatic car wash. They ended up selling them all over the United States, even shipping two to Puerto Rico.

After finally selling that patent and business, they saw a need for foreign car parts store in Missoula. This was about 1970, and at that time, everyone had to drive to Spokane for foreign car parts. Naturally, that business was a success as well, but the story doesn't end there.

Bud's son Tom was about to graduate from the university and hadn't decided on a particular career. Bud had just noticed that Missoula didn't have an ice company, so Bud and Tom set up a small ice plant in the garage. Tom sold \$5,000.00 worth of ice that summer. From there, they moved to a large building that Bud owned, and the ice empire of Missoula was born.

Through it all, Bud has remained active in the Association of Montana Highway patrolmen. Retired now for thirty four years, he's still emphatic about the need to work for the officers, both current and retired. "The Association does a lot of good. If greater numbers of officers would get their shoulder to the wheel, it could be even better."

When asked what advice he has for those of you on the road, he smiles infectiously. "The thing that stayed with me the most, the words that were drilled into me and that I thought about every time I made a stop, were 'firm, fair, and impartial'. Simple words, but if you follow them, you'll never go wrong."

Thanks, Bud. We're proud to follow in your tradition. □

25 Alive — Free Class Teaches Driving, Riding Safely

By Becky Shay — Of the Gazette Staff

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Peer pressure is tough on kids. Apply that pressure inside thousands of pounds of metal hurling along the roadway and it can be deadly.

That is why the driving course Alive at 25 gives young people the skills they need to be good drivers who control not only the vehicles they drive but the behavior of people in them. And, when they are passengers, the course encourages them to assert their right to control their own future by not getting into unsafe and potentially fatal situations.

People ages 15-24 are 83 percent more likely to be involved in a car crash, according to National Safety Council statistics.

"If we can get these kids to the age of 25, their chances improve," Montana Highway Patrol Trooper Brenda Timm said.

As a trooper, Timm knows the dangers faced by inexperienced drivers who are more likely than their older counterparts not only to crash a vehicle but die in that wreck. As an aunt, she knows the pain of losing a young loved one in a car crash. As a mom to two teenage boys, she knows the concerns of handing over the car keys to a young driver.

Timm was among 20 MHP troopers who were trained in January and are offering Alive at 25 around Montana. The program is sponsored by the National Safety Council and is offered free to people age 15 to 24.

About a dozen students from the Yellowstone Home-school Association attended Timm's class Wednesday at Montana State University Billings, which donates space for the course.

Student Isaac Scanson said he didn't realize the high fatality rate for young people until taking the class.

"It really shows you how many people die in car accidents," he said.

Timm arrives at class with a huge, pink tote bag full of information for herself and the students. Kids receive a booklet they follow through the four-hour program, which includes videos and ends with them role-playing scenarios to fight peer pressure in a vehicle. So far, the kids have been engaged in the course, Timm said, but she also brings a basket of candy and MHP giveaways in case they need a

25 ALIVE CLASS DESCRIPTIONS

Montana Highway Patrol Trooper Brenda Timm is offering Alive at 25 training for young drivers. The free course teaches young drivers defensive-driving and safe-driving skills. Part of the curriculum is the "RUA" philosophy, which teaches young drivers to:

- Recognize the hazard — which means scanning ahead, around and behind the vehicle; checking mirrors every three to five seconds and using the "what if ... " strategy to stay alert and spot hazards.
- Understand the defense — which means knowing what to do to avoid traffic hazards, the consequences of driving choices and basic defenses.
- Act correctly, in time — which means being alert and concentrating on the driving task; choosing the safest driving maneuver to avoid a crash and remembering that other drivers may act in time but they may act incorrectly.

little encouragement.

The course cannot be offered as part of driver's education curriculum but is a perfect complement to the class, Timm said. One of the students said he liked Alive at 25 because it was "a lot more involvement and less lecture."

Tylan Jones, 19, was the oldest student to attend Wednesday. He said the course helped refocus his driving skills and reminded him to try not to speed, to always use his seat belt and not to text while behind the wheel.

"It's something you really have to think of because you find yourself guilty of a lot of it," he said. "It's not something to be proud of, but it just happens."

The videos included testimonials by young drivers who had asserted their rights to drive and ride safety; one showed horseplay in a vehicle and its tragic consequences. Several said the videos, which are short and edgy, were among their favorite parts of the session. The kids could identify with most of the scenarios. "It makes it more personal," Micah Lynch said.

Timm has given the class twice each in Big Timber and Columbus. She has classes scheduled in Billings in July and August but wants to offer more. "I'd really love to be able to come to Billings once a month," she said. □



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