

“Difficult to Let Go of” The Precarious Origins of the Michigan State Police

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Today, not many can remember when the Michigan State Police was known as the “constabulary” – a semi-military, mounted police. Organized seventy-five years ago to guard the home front when the national guard left for World War I service, the state police evolved into a modern, highly respected law enforcement agency.

But the early state police was also a controversial experiment which was almost abolished several times. From its very inception in 1917, and until reorganized on a secure basis in 1935, the department struggled for political and public support.

The controversy in Michigan was imported from Pennsylvania, where, since 1905, the nation’s first “modern” state police had replaced the militia in quelling violent coal-mine strikes. Labor leaders scornfully branded Pennsylvania’s black-uniformed, mounted constabulary as strikebreaking “Cossacks” – an image which haunted the national state police movement for years. To avoid the same bad publicity, New York coined the more favorable title of “State Troopers” for its own rural constabulary in 1917.

Proposals for a Michigan constabulary first surfaced after the Upper Peninsula’s bloody 1913-14 Copper Strike. A combined force of state militia and local authorities eventually restored order, but mobilizing the entire national guard had been very expensive and unpopular. Even the state’s adjutant general, Major Roy C. Vandercook, admitted his citizen soldiers were neither trained nor inclined to police striking workers.

A Spanish-American War veteran with many years of militia experience and a professional career as a newspaper journalist, Vandercook concluded that a Pennsylvania-style constabulary could better handle future disorders. Lacking political support at that time, his idea lay dormant until President Woodrow Wilson asked the Congress to declare war against Germany on April 2, 1917.

Having already pledged Michigan’s patriotic support in the event of war, Governor Albert E. Sleeper met with Attorney General Alex J. Goesbeck and Adjutant General John S. Bersey. Their plans to mobilize the state’s manpower and vast industrial resources for the war effort were influenced by the anti-German, anti-radical, activist hysteria which gripped the nation.

Disloyalty was the enemy. Michigan’s leaders suddenly feared that the state’s large German community would sprout spies and saboteurs. Worse, the radical IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) union threatened to disrupt was

production through violent strikes. There would be no protection from such dangers (both real and imagined) once the national guard left for federal service.

Attorney General Groesbeck therefore drafted emergency legislation directing the Governor, as chairman of a War Preparedness Board of top state officials, to borrow \$5 million and to organize replacement units of Michigan State troops for home defense. A compliant legislature authorized the Governor to proceed at once.

At the war board's preliminary meeting on April 10, 1917, Governor Sleeper appointed Major Vandercook as secretary to the board with the new rank of Colonel. The board then passed a resolution directing Vandercook to organize and command a force of Michigan State troops. Colonel Vandercook waited for the enabling legislation (Acts 53 and 97) to take effect on April 17, and subsequently issued General Order #1 on April 19, 1917 – officially organizing the Michigan State Troops Permanent Force. This state police birth certificate provided for a semi-military force of 250-300 men:

The Permanent Force will consist of mounted organizations, which shall be designated serially beginning with "First Troop, Permanent Force, Michigan State Troops," and of dismounted organizations, which shall also be designated serially beginning with "Third Motor Company, Permanent Force, Michigan State Troops."

Despite its legal title, the Michigan State Troops Permanent Force soon became more commonly known as the State Constabulary or State Police. Some even called it the Michigan Cavalry.

General Order #1 named Captain Robert E. marsh and Lieutenant Adelbert D. Vandervoort (both national guard veterans) to lead the First Troop (Troop A). They began recruiting other military veterans who would be ready for immediate service. Their first job was rather inglorious, however; they had to build a headquarters.

Michigan Agricultural College (now MSU) loaned them a 90-acre tract (a poultry research station) along the Red Cedar River near East Lansing. While Vandercook scoured the state for uniforms, horses, and equipment, the new men began assembling pre-fabricated wooden barracks and stables. Controversy erupted before the fledgling constabulary even had a roof over its head.

Early Opposition

As early as April 20, 1917, the Detroit Federation of Labor's Detroit *Labor News* warned workers that a Pennsylvania-style "Black Cavalry" was quietly being

formed in Michigan. The *Labor News* scoffed that state troopers would remain safe at home to serve wealthy industrialists while “real patriots” fought in Europe’s trenches. State labor chief Perry F. Ward, however, denied having any objections to the constabulary – at that time.

As the next months passed uneventfully, the lull caused some war board members to reconsider the constabulary’s hasty formation. Even one of its founding fathers, Attorney General Groesbeck, proposed to disband the force temporarily as a cost-saving measure. The Detroit *Free Press* added on June 24: “For weeks there has been a growing sentiment that the constabulary was entirely too costly without some actual need of it in sight.”

A rival home defense force smelled blood. Organized at about the same time as the permanent force, the Michigan State Troops Home Guard Division was a separate organization of part-time, volunteer militia companies. Jealous of the equipment being lavished on the tiny constabulary, a Detroit home guard officer testified in Lansing: “The state constabulary is considered as a joke in Detroit as a state protective force. What would a few men do with a general uprising in all of Detroit’s factories?”

To avoid further unwanted attention, Colonel Vandercook ordered his men not to appear in uniform on public streets. But Governor Sleeper adamantly supported the constabulary as the “best kind of an insurance policy that the state of Michigan can buy.” His only compromise was to delay recruiting more than one troop of 50 men until such time as more were needed.

Events in late July seemed to vindicate Sleeper’s uncharacteristic resolve. Following reports of an IWW-led general strike in the UP’s vital Gogebic Iron Range, Sleeper made a personal inspection tour by train. At every stop, mine owners and citizens pleaded for state protection. A telegram from US Labor Secretary William Wilson warned that IWW unrest in northern Michigan was part of a national plot to disrupt war production, and the *Free Press* editorialized that “few can doubt the connection between the IWW and German agitators ... the strongest measures are necessary.” Sleeper wired Colonel Vandercook to bring the constabulary.

Headed for Ironwood by express train, the First Troop was sidetracked to Bessemer to help Gogebic County Sheriff William Kellett. The mounted troopers charged and dispersed an angry mob of striking miners, then proceeded to break up further IWW assemblies near Palmer and Ironwood. Order was restored without any fatalities, serious injuries, or mass arrests. The strike ended a few days later, and IWW influence in the Gogebic Range was effectively crushed for the duration of the war.

A deluge of laudatory letters and newspaper articles convinced Governor Sleeper to keep the First Troop in permanent headquarters at Negaunee. Boasting that

“the mounted police are the greatest things for riots and strikes that could be,” Sleeper ordered Colonel Vandercook to recruit additional troops for service in Detroit and other vital areas. Labor leaders failed to share his enthusiasm.

IWW leaders in Detroit impotently threatened a retaliatory general strike and demanded a federal investigation. In a cautious show of solidarity with the unpatriotic IWW, the *Labor News* protested that Governor Sleeper’s pre-emptive use of mounted troopers against striking miners before actual violence had erupted “has the unhappy tendency to render employers of labor more obstinate and obdurate in their dealing and negotiations with workers.”

When it came to protecting vital war industries, however, Vandercook warned the IWW that “as far as the state troopers were concerned there would be no dilly-dallying... Agitators will be arrested and force will be used the moment it becomes necessary.”

Reports of sabotage and labor unrest at munitions plants brought constabulary detachments to Flint and Muskegon. Company owners provided them with food and quarters, but Vandercook ordered his men to remain neutral and aloof in labor disputes. Believing that familiarity breeds contempt, he forbade fraternization with union pickets or local citizens: “Better to remain a mystery.” Pickets at Muskegon’s Linderman plant (which produced gun turrets) initially jeered the troopers as “Sleeper’s Cossacks,” but later praised their peacekeeping role. Unpersuaded, the powerful Detroit Federation of Labor forced the state federation to adopt anti-constabulary resolutions at annual conventions from 1917 to 1919.

At all events, the constabulary’s wartime strength eventually approached 300 men. Operating from troop headquarters in East Lansing, Negaunee, Detroit, Port Huron, and Grand Rapids, mounted and infantry detachments guarded factories, mines, power plants, warehouses, railroad tunnels, and shipping docks around the state. Troopers also rounded up draft-dodgers during “slacker” raids, and investigated suspected German sympathizers. But the advent of state liquor prohibition on May 1, 1918 presented a new law enforcement challenge that would carry the constabulary into the postwar period – and further controversy.

The fight to keep the Constabulary

Colonel Vandercook had planned to make the constabulary a permanent state police from the very beginning. As early as May 23, 1917, the *Free Press* noted perceptively that:

This constabulary according to the original plan was to be used for strike duty or for other similar troubles in which the power of the state was required for the purpose of maintaining order... Apparently, the

original plans of the board were to make the state constabulary a permanent body – not merely a wartime emergency organization.

After Groesbeck issued an Attorney General's opinion in November 1917 confirming the constabulary's role as a state police separate from the militia, Vandercook and other war board members visited Pennsylvania and New York to study state police operations. Vandercook followed up with an intensive lobbying effort in the legislature, the capitol press corps, and the business community to keep the constabulary whenever the war should end.

Just as Vandercook had anticipated, the Armistice of November 11, 1918 prompted many to argue that the constabulary should be disbanded once the national guard was reorganized. It was also argued that enactment of national prohibition would shift that law enforcement headache from the state to the federal government.

But Governor Sleeper also expected problems with labor unrest, rural crime, and traffic control during the period of postwar reconstruction. Inaugurated for a second term in January 1919, Sleeper addressed the legislature: "An efficient State Police is positive insurance against lawlessness and disorder. I recommend the State Police force be placed on a permanent basis."

As battle lines formed in the legislature, Vandercook's friends published *A History of the Michigan State Constabulary* (favorable reviewed by MHM) just in time to sway the debate. The book praised the constabulary's wartime service and urged Michigan to join the national state police movement. Representative Charles Weissert obligingly introduced the so-called State Police Bill (House Bill No 70) on January 21 to transform the wartime constabulary into the peacetime state police.

Labor representatives quickly countered with a Senate joint resolution to disband the constabulary forever as of July 1, 1919, but the resolution died in committee. They next tried to sabotage Weissert's bill with amendments restricting state police enlistments to returning war veterans (thus ousting most constabulary troopers), and requiring a referendum on the November 1920 ballot in hopes the voters would abolish the state police after a two-year trial. Both amendments failed. While waiting next to defeat House Bill No. 70 on the Senate floor, state police enemies received an unexpected boost from the state Supreme Court.

In the Marxhausen case, the high court nullified that section of the state prohibition law enforced by the constabulary. The court further criticized the constabulary's use of warrantless searches and firearms at state-line roadblocks designed to halt the illegal booze trade from the "wet" border state of Ohio.

The constabulary's Monroe County detachment reluctantly curtailed operations, and the "great booze rush" opened between Toledo and Monroe. Governor Sleeper and Colonel Vandercook frantically threatened to declare "limited martial law" in southern Monroe County, which prompted a group of attorneys to object that the constabulary was a standing state army in direct violation of the US constitution. Sleeper relented, and the legal tangle eventually unraveled.

On March 20, 1919, House Bill No. 70 was rushed through general orders and passed in the state senate in less than two hours with only four dissenting votes. Outmaneuvered, Senators Herbert F. Baker and Vincent M. Brennan vented their frustrations for the legislative record. They criticized the state police as costly, unnecessary, and inappropriate for federal prohibition enforcement. Warning that the state police would repress organized labor, Baker concluded: "I fear that in this measure we have taken hold of something which we shall find very difficult to let go of."

Signed by Governor Sleeper on March 27, 1919, Public Act 26 replaced the former constabulary with the new department of Michigan State Police; however, the old constabulary title remained popular so long as the state police rode horses. Vandercook continued as commanding officer, but reverted to his pre-war rank of major.

Not ready to admit defeat, Senator Brennan announced plans to revive the proposed referendum for the 1920 ballot by direct petition. At the same time, a *Detroit News* war correspondent reported that many Michigan soldiers still in Europe resented constabulary troopers – who had remained safe stateside – getting first crack at lucrative state police jobs. In the event, many constabulary members resigned after the war, and returning veterans filled their ranks in the new 250-man outfit. Both the recruiting controversy and Brennan's referendum fizzled away, and the bruised opposition set its sights on the 1921 legislative session.

Act 26 directed state troopers to "cooperate with other State authorities and with local authorities in detecting crime, apprehending criminals, and preserving law and order throughout the State." From troop barracks in East Lansing, Negaunee, Traverse City, Flint, and Grand Rapids, two-man mounted detachments visited farms and villages. The luckier patrols stayed in small hotels or farmhouses; others camped for days in the open, or slept in barns. Whatever the accommodations, care of the horses always came first.

A small highway patrol began with four war-surplus motorcycles. Their mission was to "conduct a campaign of education rather than to make as many arrests as possible." In 1919, Captain Ira H. Marmom inaugurated the bureau of investigation and identification from a shoebox full of fingerprint records. With the help of ballistics comparison, Marmon solved the first murder case ever investigated by the state police – the murder of Stanley Brown of Mt. Clemens.

But state police activities during the turbulent postwar years of 1919-1921 often sparked controversy. State troopers helped federal agents in Detroit and Flint stage the notorious Palmer Raids during the anti-communist hysteria known as the "Great Red Scare," and suffered from subsequent public backlash. Some local officials protested state police intervention at Sault Ste. Marie tannery strike and a Muskegon streetcar riot as provocative violations of traditional home rule. State police raids on booze and gambling joints (including gambling raids at Mackinaw Island's posh Grand Hotel) also drew resentment in some circles.

Stung by the bad press, Major Vandercook revived his public relations campaign. He collaborated with a Detroit firm to publish the *State Trooper* – a monthly magazine "devoted to the interests of State Police organizations and to the maintenance of American ideals and institutions."

Vandercook resigned in May 1920 to rejoin the Capitol Press Corps. Robert E. Marsh, having recently recovered after being shot in the neck by a UP rumrunner the summer before, succeeded him as commanding officer. Described by old troopers as "Tough – but fair!" Marsh weeded out men he deemed unfit, but he also lost many good men who sought more lucrative private careers. Despite the high turnover in personnel and a burgeoning workload, Major Marsh bragged in the department's first annual report (1919-1920):

There were numerous incidents throughout the year where individuals of the force displayed a high devotion to duty and the principles of the force. There has never been displayed any disposition to hesitate at long hours, long rides, or hardships. These men are actuated by a strong loyalty to the State, strong pride in their organization, and an eager desire to uphold the laws fairly, unbiased by any influence except justice and the welfare of the people of Michigan.

His recommendations for more manpower and higher salaries, however, were ignored in this election year.

State Reorganization Threatens the State Police

Dedicated to centralized, efficient and economical state government, Alex J. Groesbeck succeeded Sleeper as Governor in January 1921. Groesbeck proposed to consolidate many state agencies under the central control of a State Administrative Board, and to merge several state law enforcement agencies – including the state police – into one Department of Public Safety. His plans exposed the department to yet another political crisis.

Labor and “wet” representatives perceived a new opportunity for mischief. To avoid challenging Groesbeck directly, they introduced legislation to repeal Act 26 of 1919; Groesbeck could have his Department of Public Safety – minus the hated state police. At the grass-roots level, they convinced county boards and farm groups that the state police usurped local government and caused higher taxes. Anti-state police petitions flooded the legislature.

The young Michigan Farm Bureau commissioned its own fact-finding study, and concluded that state police enemies were either misinformed or soft on crime. The State Grange and the Anti-Saloon League joined the Farm Bureau in publicly endorsing the state police, turning the tide of petitions in their favor.

Act 123 created the Michigan Department of Public Safety effective May 5, 1921, and technically disbanded the state police as of June 1. fooled by this language, several newspapers printed obituaries for the controversial constabulary. But Groesbeck had won. Resurrected as the Department of Public Safety’s uniformed division, the state police actually expanded its authority and responsibilities. Most, but not all, opposition faded away.

Uniformed troopers continued mounted and motorized patrols, while Marmon’s detectives investigated major cases. In addition, the department was now also responsible for the enforcement and inspection duties previously performed by the State Fire Marshal, the State Oil Inspector, the prohibition section of the Food and Drug Department, and later, the State Boxing Commissioner. Some inspectors from these former agencies also transferred into the Department of Public Safety to provide expertise.

Roy Vandercook returned with the new title of commissioner, and Major Marsh stayed on as his deputy. Their administrative offices moved to Lansing’s new state office building (Lewis Case Building), but the state police division remained at the East Lansing Headquarters post. Ordered to “do more with less,” Commissioner Vandercook pared personnel through attrition. One year later, only 125 Department of Public Safety officers served the entire state.

Following this low ebb, the Department of Public Safety – still widely known as the state police or constabulary – began to expand. Both Vandercook and Marsh resigned in 1923 to pursue new careers, and Governor Groesbeck appointed former Detroit Police Inspector Harry Jackson as the new commissioner.

Intent on modernization, Commissioner Jackson weaned the state police from its constabulary traditions. Out went khaki military uniforms, campaign hats, and horse patrols in 1924; in came black police uniforms, and a fleet of Indian and Harley-Davidson motorcycles for highway patrol. Some old cavalry-minded troopers quit in disgust rather than mount these motorized steeds.

With the help of boat racer Gar Wood, Jackson established a speedboat patrol to intercept bootleggers on Detroit's riverfront. Troopers also assumed duties as pardon and parole officers, transferred inmates between prisons, and supervised convict-labor road camps. After visiting state police schools in Massachusetts and New York, Jackson initiated the modern recruit school system of professional police training at East Lansing headquarters under Captain Caesar J. Scavarda.

Federal agent Alan G. Straight succeeded Jackson for a brief term as commissioner. Then came the long reign of Oscar G. Olander. The department was about to embark on a period of remarkable progress and growth – but not without on last fight to win its spurs.

A Final Struggle for Security

Having enlisted as a trooper in 1919, Oscar G. Olander became deputy commissioner in 1923, and commissioner in 1926 – at the age of 27. Under Olander, the department inaugurated a state police radio system (station WRDS), a statewide blockade system, new headquarters buildings, a state crime lab, and a system of eight administrative districts. Olander also toughened recruit selection standards: Recruits had to pass a background check, possess a high school diploma, be at least 5' 10" tall, remain single for two years and then ask the commissioner's permission to marry or incur debt.

Olander worked tirelessly to promote the department's prestige and capabilities without antagonizing local police. Nevertheless, several county sheriffs succumbed to rumors that the state police intended to replace local law enforcement. The sheriffs found support in the Democratic Party's long-standing platform which promised to abolish the state police.

In 1932, the Democrats' perennial gubernatorial candidate, William A. Comstock, upset incumbent Wilbur M. Brucker. Among his first official acts, Comstock refused to reappoint Department of Public Safety deputy commissioner Fred G. Armstrong, who had run (unsuccessfully) as a Republican candidate for Berrien County Sheriff. The Democrats also seized control of the legislature, and there was new talk of legislation to abolish or reduce the state police. Facing an uncertain future, the department won a new lease on life from a tragedy, and from the repeal of prohibition.

On January 5, 1933, four hoodlums robbed the State Bank in the tiny Manistee County village of Kaleva and shot to death bank cashier Ellsworth Billman. From station WRDS in East Lansing, state police dispatcher Alex Scribner coordinated a thrilling, four-day, statewide manhunt. Immediately after the suspects were captured, Governor Comstock publicly congratulated the state police and told the press he would support the department – his apparent change of heart boosted

by the realization that he would need the state police for liquor law enforcement when prohibition ended.

Despite this reprieve, the worsening Great Depression forced Comstock to close several state police posts and lay off several dozen troopers as part of his economic austerity program. A new state liquor tax reversed these cuts in 1934.

Public Act 59 of 1935 finally placed the state police on a secure basis. This State Police Act reorganized the Department of Public Safety again as the independent Department of Michigan State Police. Act 59 did not provide for a deputy commissioner, but the commissioner gained protection from political pressures; appointed by the Governor, he could only be removed for cause by the state supreme court. Troopers also came under the protection of state civil service and a pension for the first time.

Michigan writer Karl Detzer dramatized actual state police cases in the *Saturday Evening Post*. His stories became a Hollywood movie: "Car 99" starred Fred MacMurray and William Frawley as Michigan State Troopers.

By 1937, the Depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA) was building the now familiar brick state police posts around the state. Ford Motor Company produced the public relations film "Your State Police," and the department even won grudging praise from some labor unions for its professional restraint during the auto industry's sit-down strikes. The department's heyday had begun.

When Captain Ira Marmon became the first state police officer to retire with 25 years' service in 1942, old Colonel Vandercook reflected in a letter that "your service was very valuable in the early days of the organization when only good men saved it from disintegration."

Despite early misgivings and misunderstandings, Michigan's leaders and citizens had finally decided that their Michigan State Police was indeed "very difficult to let go of."

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