

# 100 MOMENTS

## RAMBLINGS OF AN OLD AGENT

By JD Smith (1968-1990, 1996-2003)



BCI/DCI AGENT JOHN "JD" SMITH (1973)

### Getting to BCI

I grew up in Des Moines during the '50s. My path to the BCI was less direct than for others. After I graduated from Des Moines Tech High School, I worked various jobs before moving to Cedar Rapids where I got married and worked as a welder by days and at Henry's Hamburgers by nights. Later I worked nights at the county Jail while my wife attended college (she had the scholarships). After she graduated and started teaching, I started classes at the University of Iowa and working nights as a dispatcher. There I would read the weekly crime summary put out by the BCI. One had a job application for employment as an agent with the BCI. I knew little about the BCI, so I asked the captain

about it and he told me they had an agent in Oelwein, Iowa who stopped in every so often and helped smaller departments with investigations.

When I was about to graduate from the University of Iowa in 1968, I had a job offer at Oakdale and was accepted for grad school. But I decided, what the heck, I was tired of working nights and going to school, so I applied to the BCI thinking I would try it for a year or two.

To my surprise, I was asked to come to Des Moines for a test, along with about 30 other applicants. It was a really high-tech Army aptitude test where you used a pin to punch holes in the answer sheet. A few days later I was called for a polygraph test, along with 3 other remaining candidates. I didn't know anything about a polygraph, but it seems the operator had an obsession with catching people lying about apples and oranges in a bowl. The oral interview was a few days later and it seemed like the whole office was on the panel. (I found out later the panel was an ad hoc panel selected from whoever was in the office about 10 minutes before the interview began. I'm not sure all the panel knew why they were called into the room.) The interview didn't last long, probably because I didn't have a law enforcement background which made my answers short.

## The First Day at Work

I remember it so well.

First, I went to the Public Commissioner's office and was sworn in. Next, I was given a badge (one of the original badges), but no badge case, and a handgun, but no holster. Thanks to Wayne Sheston for the badge case and Dan Mayer for the holster. Now on to get a car issued from the vehicle dispatcher's office. There I was about to get a new, fully loaded, 68 Plymouth. But no, wait, there's a last-minute change! Leonard Murray who was in charge of records wanted that car, so instead, I got his old car, a 67 Ford with no AC nor AM radio and the car had never been out of Des Moines. (That's probably why the engine blew the first time I took it out on the road.)

Next, I needed to qualify for the gun permit. The supervisor drove me out to a farm field near Ankeny and hung a small target on the fencepost. Then we walked back about ten steps and he handed me ten bullets. When I opened the cylinder on the handgun, it fell off and onto the ground. We put it back together and I shot ten rounds, which he said was good. Off to a great start!

Equipment shortages continued for my first couple of years and agents cobbled together crime scene kits, flashlights, red lights, etc. When Beek became the BCI Director it was like Christmas with all the needed equipment obtained for the agents.

I can't say enough about the improvements he made for the BCI.

### Rookie Agent – the Beginning Years

I worked out of Des Moines, remaining on travel status, for the first eighteen months since I had not been assigned an area. Did I mention the travel allowance was a whopping \$13 per

day to cover food and lodging? The motel cost \$10 a day, leaving \$3 for food, which consisted of a lot of 15 cent burgers at McDonald's.

When I exceeded the daily limit a few times, the Director took me over to the State Auditor's office for a lesson on why we should not eat steak every night on the state's tab. Lucky for me the gentleman there said the \$13 limit was ridiculously inadequate (saved by the bell of reality). During this time in Des Moines, my investigative partner was often counseled about his long sideburns. When he reminded the supervisor that mine were long too, the supervisor just told him to tell me to get mine cut too. Terry always seemed to get the brunt of the harassment about sideburns. Every time he did, we would go over to Andy Newquist, who was a barber earlier in his life, after work and get a haircut. The price was right.

I was then stationed in Red Oak to replace Pat Tighe. In my area, there were three counties wide from the Missouri border to Monona county just south of Sioux City. Living in a small town for the first time presented a unique experience. The people were great and very supportive. Though agents worked out of their homes, I often went to one of the sheriffs' offices in my area to do reports because I had young kids at home. This gave me an opportunity to develop a good working relationship with these sheriffs. It paid off.

Once after a period of three months without any contact with the Des Moines office, my supervisor made an unannounced visit to check on me. Talk about cover, every sheriff's office he went to look for me he was told, "Well he was just here a bit ago working on reports." Since I worked very closely with the sheriffs in my area, they were very protective of me.

Remember, this was before agents had phones and pagers. The car radio was our means of contact.

## **My First Homicide as the Case Agent**

A pipeline worker was killed in Onawa, Iowa 1969. It was solved by outstanding work from Chuck Wood in developing suspects; a trip to Gillette Wyoming looking for a bullet in a fence post, and later draining a lake in Fremont Nebraska where we found the bullet. During my career, I had too many death cases to mention and during that time I met many dedicated law enforcement individuals with whom I was privileged to work.

## **The Rest of the Story**

After five years in Red Oak, and much begging, I was transferred to Cedar Rapids. This move was at my expense as was my move to Red Oak. I was happy to be back in the city. I attended the 3-month long FBI National Academy in 1974 and when I returned from that I was advised I had to attend the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy two-week course (a short course for those who hired on before the academy started up). I had just started working on a death case with a Sheriff who was adamant about me staying to work on the case. It turns out he was on the state academy board and felt the FBI National Academy was more than equivalent training, so he got the board to vote me through. I may be the only person voted through the state academy.

During the 1980's I started night school and earned my master's degree in Public Administration in 1989. Over a cup of coffee with my cronies that year, after working a sting operation, I decided to run for Safety Commissioner in Cedar Rapids. These supportive cronies advised me that the only people who knew me were felons who couldn't vote. Somehow, I won and spent six years as the Safety Commissioner, taking a six-year leave for service in public office. As Safety Commissioner I was responsible for the Cedar

Rapids Police, fire, health, building, housing departments. It was a great time and a fun job. In 1995 I ran for Mayor and got whomped, so I returned to the DCI to the intelligence section. Due to my wife's illness, over the next years, it became too hard to keep working and tend to her medical needs. So, I retired in 2003 and became her Nurse Cratchit. She passed away in 2007 after a long battle with myasthenia gravis.

Working for BCI/DCI was a great privilege and honor and would not have traded it for any other career. I worked on numerous investigations with outstanding law enforcement officers, county attorneys, and judges. The support staff at DCI was outstanding and I would never have made it without them.



LEIN: A 1980S LEIN CONFERENCE WITH THE LINN COUNTY SHERIFF

## **Retired**

After my wife passed away, I started volunteering at church. One of my volunteer projects was taking people to medical appointments. One person who needed a ride was a retired Army Major. She also happened to be one of the first 100 women to complete Army aviation training after it was opened to women and served as an Aeromedical Evacuation Pilot. Later she trained in and flew

the Army's Blackhawk. She took early retirement after 19 years' service, completed her bachelor's degree in nursing, and is currently a nurse in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the University of Iowa. We hit it off and married in 2009. Now we enjoy riding our motorcycles around the country. After years of flying there was no way she would sit behind me on a motorcycle with no controls. She has her own motorcycle.

Once a cop always a cop! In 2011 the Cedar Rapids Chief of Police contacted me asking if I would be interested in volunteering to work on cold cases. I accepted and enjoyed working when I wanted on cold cases. In 2014, I was teamed up with investigator Matt Denlinger. We work for a couple of years on the Michelle Martinko case a forty-year-old homicide. By using DNA and forensic genealogy we pulled the case together and arrested Jerry Burns. This combination of DNA and genealogy was a whole new way of doing homicide investigations. Who would ever have thought looking up tombstones and obituaries would be a way of solving homicides? Shout out to the DCI lab for some outstanding DNA testing and court testimony. Jerry Burns was convicted of first-degree murder in February of 2020.

Would the DCI consider reaching out to retired officers who might volunteer to review or work on cold cases?

I'm proud to have worked for the BCI/DCI and happy to be retired!

JD SMITH  
RETIRED

JD SMITH – 2021

Short of giving out his mailing address, I am not sure there is much else I can tell you about JD Smith. Thanks for sharing,  
JD.