

10-1-2016

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### Recommended Citation

McCormick, Arley (2016) "Huntsville, Alabama 1963, "The Year of the Dog", *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 41: No. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol41/iss2/4>

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# Huntsville, Alabama

## 1963

### "The Year of the Dog"

*By*  
*Arley McCormick*

Nineteen-Sixty-three was the year but it was not the beginning. With the adoption of King, a not so typical backyard pet given up by its owners, the Huntsville Police Department K-9 Unit became a fixture in the department's arsenal against crime.



**King, the first  
Police Dog in  
Huntsville.**

Dogs have a long history of contributing to the protection of property and supporting law enforcement. As early as 270 BC, recorded history described integrating dogs into service by the ancient Greeks and then the Romans, but their use throughout history has been intermittent because training techniques did not always guarantee the 750 foot pounds per square inch bit would not break bones and rip the flesh like a wild predator. Leaders with a sympathetic ear to an angry population often suspended the use of dogs.

In 1895 Ghent, Belgium became the first to advertise a program for police working dog training. The population of the city had grown rapidly during the latter portion of the century and the crowding population of 175,000 challenged the law-abiding citizens and by 1902, the city responded by having 50 to 60 dogs on patrol. It was possible because sophisticated dog training techniques were being employed and recognized by other countries

such as Germany, Austria, Italy, and England. By 1910, each country had integrated dogs into both military and police work.

The evolution of training techniques steadily improved until the world conflict in 1939, and by that time almost all modern military organizations employed dogs in some fashion.

In the United States, military working dogs were common and used on and off the battlefields of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The New York City Police department integrated pet dogs onto their patrols in 1910 but the practice was abandoned in 1951 because of funding, inconsistent standards, and intermittent training that resulted in a public affairs nightmare. Unfortunately, following WWII and the Korean War, the urbanization of America resulted in a bi-product – increased crime. In 1957, Baltimore, Maryland organized a K-9 Unit that became a blueprint for other cities to emulate, and soon, cities such as St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Miami employed a K-9 Unit.

Huntsville was beginning to suffer the pains of urbanization as well. In 1940, the population of Huntsville was 13,150, but the introduction of munitions manufacturing during the war years and rocketry during the 1950s influenced a growth to 72,000 by 1960. Unfortunately, not all those citizens could find success in the space and other government supported industry. Some turned to crime.

Electronics had not become a significant commercial by-product of space engineering and surveillance cameras were expensive to install, maintain, and use. Off duty police officers rarely found employment as security guards for businesses or corporate facilities. Wayne Hickland, a member of the police department, had an idea. Business break-ins were more frequent and sending a police officer into a potentially life threatening situation was a greater risk. He solicited the support of the Police Chief who endorsed the concept and proposed it to the mayor. With their

approval, Officer Hickland and King went to Baltimore for training. When they returned several weeks later, the Huntsville Police Department possessed a state-of-the-art K-9 Team.

Huntsville's K-9 Team was hardly a unit. But, as patrol officers began to accept the reality of placing King at risk rather than themselves, King became the pride of the force and the demand for his support grew. But there were not enough Kings to satisfy the demand. Other dogs, handlers, a structure, and all the ancillary equipment necessary to house, train, and control new recruits were needed.

Initially, all potential police dogs were donated by residents who had a pet too wild or aggressive to control but pets seldom worked out for their intended use by the police. Yet the unique anatomical characteristics of dogs' sense of hearing, movement detection, smell, and speed are all the skills needed for the ultimate "super cop." Their ears, being more sensitive to high pitched sounds, can hear the heartbeat of an evasive suspect. Where humans have five million olfactory cells in their nose, a dog has 220 million. They detect movement better than humans, particularly with their superior night vision and dogs can run, on average, nine miles an hour faster than a human. But their anatomical edge over humans in itself does not guarantee that just any dog is suitable for police work.

The most common species that have proven capable of police work are German Shepherds, Labrador Retrievers, Belgian Malinos, and Dutch Shepherd Giant Schnauzers. And yet, not all dogs of these breeds are born with the most suitable qualities. What distinguishes the best from the others is their olfactory capability, their adaptability to training, and temperament.

During the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, many police departments finally abandoned the use of police dogs. They

attacked rioters, leaving many with bites and public complaints were too numerous. Protests are seldom limited to shouting or editorials. When the legal system is engaged, it becomes outrageously expensive.

Over the years, every K-9 Unit around the country has tracked the result of all court cases to date. The most significant are *United States v Ramirez*, *United States v Jackson*, *Illinois v Caballes*, and *United States v. Sanchez*. These cases resulted in support for the use of dogs to search and justify the probable cause doctrine.

During all the national bad publicity, the Huntsville Police Department persevered and the demands upon the department grew as the war on narcotics and explosives grew as well. The justification for using police dogs was overwhelming.

Effective education of handlers and training of police dogs is improving continuously. During the 1970s, once again, police departments were again looking at using police dogs. By 1980, cities on the East Coast were seeing a large volume of drugs appear on the streets, particularly in Miami. When Huntsville's new police chief, Salvatore Vizzini was hired, he took a special interest in the K-9 Unit. The new police chief was determined to instill a professional standard in the unit.

The initial dependence upon using donated dogs for the K-9 Unit was not totally abandoned, but it was reduced. Donated dogs proved costly in terms of time and energy if they didn't work out satisfactorily. The Baltimore police department was a leader in employing training techniques illustrated in various books written by professional dog handlers and other civilian professionals. In Huntsville, there was limited interest or emphasis on testing and certification on an annual basis. Once trained, the K-9 team qualifications were accepted for years and negative reinforcement was the key to training. In 1971, the two largest associations

dedicated to improving police K-9 Units merged the marketing for routine professional certification, and proper training gained momentum.

Florida had a respected K-9 association and was one of the two that consolidated into what is referred to now as the United States Canine Association, Inc. The Huntsville K-9 Unit joined the Association in 1980 and totally adopted their standard for K-9 training and certification. While negative reinforcement remains a method other training techniques have evolved implementing positive reinforcement for some tasks. Electronic collars were recently integrated into training. A handler can initiate a silent mild shock to improve and sustain the dog's response to their handler demands.

The certification tests include obedience, agility, searching, criminal apprehension and recall. To judge certification trials requires years of experience in the K-9 police environment and continuing education. All of these tasks translate into dogs actively patrolling for bombs, drugs, cadaver and suspect detection, pursuit, and holding with competence.

Adopting higher standards focused attention on the acquisition of trainable dogs. The K-9 Unit's policy of almost exclusive dependence on donated dogs changed and today the place to go for a trainable dog is Europe. Europeans have a long history of integrating dogs into police work and an entire industry supports breeding and training dogs for the police. The K-9 Unit's acquisition of dogs from Europe includes a guarantee that a dog referred to as "green trained" is suitable to the task of training for any purpose related to police work or the dog and investment is returned. And, since a "green trained" dog can cost as much as \$7 to \$10,000, a guarantee is essential.

Matching a handler to a particular dog may be a challenge too. An acceptable handler is nearly as rare a commodity as an acceptable dog. At one time an opening for a handler in the Huntsville K-9 Unit attracted 25 applicants and while there are various methods of selecting a handler, three very key prerequisites stand out; a handler cannot be afraid of getting bit; a handler must demonstrate they are in charge of the dog and not vice versa. After passing those two tests, a potential dog handler has to be strong enough to wear a 65 pound safety suit and recover from a 90 pound dog hitting them in the chest at full speed during training exercises. The handler must then be able to pass a series of field tests, the scrutiny of fellow handlers, and satisfy the sergeant in charge. The ultimate decision rests with the unit supervisor, who is an experienced dog handler. Whatever the method, being a dog handler is not for sissies.

Once the K-9 Unit has a match between handler and dog the union becomes as solid a bond as marriage. The handler and dog are within a few steps of each other 24/7. The team is either on patrol or training. They are constantly training on the multiple missions a dog can be called into action to support. Obedience under all circumstance is priority and rehearsed as much as 40 hours a week if not on patrol. And, when not training or on patrol they may be at the officer's home playing fetch. If a handler is prone to talking in his sleep, he better hope the only name he shouts is either his wife's or his dog's or there could be real trouble in the house.

With all the sophisticated improvement to training, equipment, and handler and dog selection, there is still room in the K-9 Unit for that special pet. In 1997 a local resident wanted to give up their Labrador, Brandy, to the K-9 Unit. Sergeant Billy Moore gave the dog a short series of backyard tests and invited the couple to bring

Brandy to the facility. After more extensive testing, Brandy joined the K-9 Unit and the dog handler assigned was Mark McMurray. The team twice became National Champions. Brandy had an exceptional nose for detecting explosives as small as a firecracker.



Every organization has challenges and the K-9 unit in Huntsville is no exception. The 1989 tornado that ravaged a portion of Huntsville destroyed the K-9 unit training and kennel area. With a combination of city financing and the dog handler's construction skills, the K-9 base was quickly restored. But other trouble was on the horizon. As patrol officers began to depend upon support from

the K-9 Unit, its respect grew and to a casual observer, it appeared to be easy to lead and manage the complexity inherent to integrating dogs with handlers for the good of the community. The police leadership quickly learned that the K-9 Unit needed a leader that wanted to be in the unit and that all potential handlers are not cut out to handle a police dog. Hand-me-down equipment, homemade training aids, facility limitations, and turnover in leadership and dog handlers, eventually led to an erosion of the standards and affected the confidence of patrol officers. Those shortfalls were all resolved.

The K-9 Unit's effectiveness in providing the evidence that secures the conviction of drug dealers results in the confiscation of their property and that property is subsequently sold at auction with the proceeds turned over to the department to acquire new dogs when it is necessary.

Today, after 53 years, what began with a donated dog and an enthusiastic handler has matured into one of the most respected and effective K-9 Units in the Southeast and the third longest



consistently active K-9 Unit in the United States. Federal, State, and Regional agencies call upon the Huntsville K-9 Unit for support, either in the field or for training. And, it is consistently a contender at national competitions. Huntsville Police Chief Mark McMurray came up through the ranks and at one time was a dog handler in the K-9 Unit. His remarks from February 2, 2016, sum up the importance of the K-9 Unit:



Huntsville Police Chief Mark  
McMurray

*“The K-9 Unit is a very effective team of professionals that add a dimension to law enforcement that is indispensable in the modern age of providing a safe environment for our city and they pay their own way.”*

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**About the Author:** Arley McCormick is originally from North Missouri. He has a Master's Degree from George Washington University, Washington D.C. in Public Administration and he is a former soldier and consultant and a community supporter

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