

## The American Legion and Highway Safety

The 1930's were a very active time in the history of the Ames American Legion Post. The opening years of the decade were occupied with the development and operation of the airport as was discussed in last month's article. Beginning in 1931, the attention of the Post and Legionnaires began to turn toward personal transportation by automobile and the safety of the motoring public.

Early in the decade of the 1930's, highway safety was becoming an issue of real concern as the number of motorcars on the road climbed each year. It is estimated that in 1930, one in every five Americans owned a car for an estimated total of 24.5 million cars. New car sales in 1930 alone were estimated at 2.5 million. Top speed for a new car that year was 60mph.

With that growth in the number of cars came an equally large and alarming growth in the number of deaths from car accidents. The November 24, 1931 issue of the Ames Daily Tribune-Times reported on the American Legion meeting where George A. Voth of the Iowa American Legion Highway Safety committee spoke. He told the Legionnaires attending the meeting that each year, automobile accidents were claiming the lives of a number of Americans equal to the number of American troops killed in WW I.

The Ames Post undertook two projects to assist in the highway safety program. First they partnered with Psychology Professor A. R. Lauer of Iowa State University on the use of a test to promote knowledge of the Iowa Motor Code. The February 9, 1932 Daily Tribune-Times reported that 32 Legionnaires had taken the test at a Post meeting. The test was 10 minutes in length. Individual's scores were not kept but the group received their total score, an alarmingly low 47 percent correct. The result of the test was that many of those present became much more interested in knowing and understanding the Iowa Motor Code.

The test was offered to any other organization in Ames that wished to give the test to their members. The test was offered at no cost but the Post wished to know how many took the test each time and what the group score was. The Junior Chamber of Commerce would be the next to take the test.

The driver's license law in Iowa was passed in 1931 and the driver's license test was first administered in 1932. It is up to the reader to decide if there is a connection between the test given by the Ames Post and the first driver's license test.

The Ames Post also has a strong connection with the initial installation of emergency lighting on police cars. Phil Damon, a member of the Post Highway Safety committee, spent a week in the summer of 1931 with the Michigan state police observing their use of lights on their police cars to assist in stopping motorists and for safety reasons. The Post adopted his suggestion that such lights be created for use on Ames police cars as a test.

Until that point, police cars carried no official lighting. Particularly at night, motorists were very reluctant to obey a signal to stop from another vehicle since there was no way of knowing if the person signaling was truly a police officer. More often the driver of a car being signaled to stop was suspicious that an attempted robbery was about to occur.

The March 4, 1932 issue of the Ames Daily Tribune-Times shows a picture of the first test of such a light on an Ames Police car. The picture shows Police Chief W. J. Cure pointing to the first light installed on a car with Patrolmen Owen Cox and John Goosman observing. The tests were very successful with a speeding car and a car with a burnt out tail light successfully stopped. Until then the driver being pursued had no way to know if the police were following or another driver with less than honorable intentions.

The Legion committee successfully promoted these lights as a state American Legion highway safety project to posts and police and sheriff departments across Iowa.

In the future, whenever you enter the driver's license station or see the flashing lights of a police car on the road, remember that the Ames Post had a strong hand in creation of both, another lasting influence of the Ames American Legion.

Next month's article will focus on the Christmas gifts prepared and given to Ames children during one of the toughest Christmases of the Great Depression.

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