
VSPA Turns 30

Looking Back at the Past Three Decades

By Tammy Poole

Thirty years ago, a group of frustrated Virginia State Troopers held a series of meetings that culminated in Charlottesville and formed the Virginia State Police Association. It was Dec. 9, 1974.

The troopers wanted better pay, better retirement, better equipment and improved working conditions. They wanted the administration to listen to their concerns.

ical purposes, but we were simply fighting to survive,” Huggins said.

And survive they did. As VSPA celebrates turning 30, Huggins recalled those early days when



M. Wayne Huggins was the first VSPA president.

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It was not to be. Time after time, their concerns were ignored.

M. Wayne Huggins, the first president of the association, said those were turbulent times.

“We were investigated and interrogated back then,” he said. “On one occasion, the interrogation lasted 12 hours.”

Reports of co-workers spying on other co-workers surfaced. Troopers were pitted against troopers as they sought to have their demands for long-overdue improvements met.

“I wish that we had kept better notes and taken photos back then for histor-

not only was the future of the Association in doubt, so was the job security for the members of the controversial group.

“We were viewed as rebels who wanted to form a labor union. This is a right-to-work state. At no time did we ever say that that was what we wanted ... We challenged their authority. However, never once did we want to form a union.”

They were told that the administration was willing to meet with them individually, but not as an association.

A senate hearing was the final act

that brought the situation to a head. When Huggins, as VSPA president, was asked for a list of the names of nearly 400 members of the association, he refused. He told then-Senator Douglas Wilder that the troopers did not consent to having their names revealed when they joined the association.

After a stalemate, Huggins agreed to reveal the names if the state police administration would give up something of theirs. An agreement could not be reached.

“I was 25 at the time. I stood in front of the committee and testified – and thought my career with the Department was over.”

Shortly thereafter, the superintendent retired and a new superintendent was appointed.

That man was Col. Denny Slane. When Colonel Slane became the new superintendent, the mood changed, as did the relationship between the Department and the association. The Association was welcomed openly and invited to meet with the new superintendent. Huggins ➤



Col. Denny Slane.

said Col. Slane was – and is— highly respected and admired by the members of the Department.

“Our destiny was no longer in question.”

Still, Huggins is grateful for the controversial beginning. Had it not been for controversy, the Virginia State Police Association probably would not be in existence today. “We were tired of having our requests ignored. But if the administration had met with us and given just a little, the members probably would have felt there was no need for an association, and it would have died.”

In the past 30 years, the membership has grown as has the association, which has increased from 400 troopers pitching in a few dollars after each meeting to a multi-million dollar non-profit organization with nearly 2000 members across the state.

The association is no stranger to controversy. There have been lawsuits over the advertising in the association’s magazine and the telemarketing methods that were once used.

Board members have quit or lost reelection bids.

Each president has had his own particular style of leading. Some believed in distributing to the members generous gifts of sunglasses, gun accessories, etc. Others were more interested in the growth of the association itself, wanting to reinvest the profits in the company thereby decreasing its dependence on telemarketing.

Different methods of fund-raising have existed including “Your Virginia State Trooper” magazine, telemarketing through Civic Development Group and, most recently, the direct mail campaign through LEAD Marketing. These fundraisers are vital to the association’s existence. The \$120 annual dues per member would not allow for much flexibility or growth without the additional money provided from fund-raising.

As the association’s management has been continually upgraded and improved over the years, so have the services to the members. In the early days, due to a lack of financial resources,

Legislators have been extremely vital to the continued existence of the association. Without the help of people like Delegate Shad Solomon, the beginning would have been even rockier than it was, Huggins said.

few services were available. Today, the association offers a variety of services to its members, including life insurance, an annual conference, legal advice, a scholarship fund for members’ children, the emergency relief fund and donations to numerous worthwhile charities including Easter Seals, the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, area hospices, Meals on Wheels, Make-A-Wish, and the Department of Education’s Operation Prom to name a few.

Legislators have been extremely vital to the continued existence of the association. Without the help of people like Delegate Shad Solomon, the beginning would have been even rockier than it was, Huggins said.

“Shad took

us under his wing. He helped pass legislation, including the Police Officer’s Bill of Rights, which I consider the most important piece of legislation the association has ever passed. Today legislators like Senator John Chichester, Senator Ken Stolle, Senator William Wampler, and Delegate Bill Carrico continue to advance the interests of the troopers.”

Though the beginning was some “interesting tumultuous times,” Huggins said he’s not sure it was quite as bad as the legends discussed today.

From his perspective, Huggins said he recalls a morning in 1975 when “I learned that four members of our executive committee had resigned. What was significant was not that they resigned, but that people were willing to step in and fill the void. I got on the phone that morning and started calling people that I knew who were particularly committed to the VSPA. I thought it was very important that the association leadership come from around the state and that the association not be seen as a phenomenon of Area 9.”

One of those people Huggins called was Jim Onley, a trooper in Dinwiddie County. Onley is a “wonderful, wonderful human being” whom he asked to become a member of the executive committee. Onley jumped at the opportunity. He became the second president of the Association and just retired on Dec. 31.

The second person he called that day was Jerry Hines. “Jerry said yes, he would like to serve. Jerry resided in Rockbridge County He became the third



Left to right: Jim Onley, Jerry Hines, and Clarence Plymale were called on by Wayne Huggins to help lead VSPA during the early years. They became the second, third and fourth VSPA presidents, respectively.

president of the association.”

Hines was president of the association when he was murdered during a traffic stop near the intersection of Interstate 81 and Interstate 64.

Huggins said one of the people that they needed to enlist was a treasurer. Back in those days, the treasury was maintained in a little steel box. “And it was all cash money. I don’t think there was anything in there bigger than maybe a \$20,” Huggins said. “But we maintained it, literally, in a little steel box and the man that stepped forward to become our treasurer was Trooper Conway Granger.

He passed away some years ago.”

The last person that Huggins got involved back then was Trooper Clarence Plymale, who was stationed in Pittsylvania County. He went on to become the fourth president of the Association. Plymale passed away a number of years ago.

These troopers in those early days were willing to risk their careers to form an association despite attempts to intimidate them.

“There were rough days and some rough times back then. But then there were good things that happened along the way ... One of the significant events that occurred was on Dec. 10, the morning after the association was official. Then-Governor Godwin announced for the first time ever that the troopers in Fairfax, Arlington, and Alexandria would receive a 4 percent cost of living differential. The very morning after the Association was formed that announcement was made. Nobody could ever say for sure what was done in Charlottesville the night before had any bearing on what was done in Richmond the next morning, but I will always believe that it did.”

Huggins said the most important



Virginia Governor John Dalton signs the Policeman’s Bill of Rights into law in the spring of 1978, ending a three-year struggle for passage.

Huggins said the most important accomplishment of the Association to date is the passage of the Policeman’s Bill of Rights.

accomplishment of the Association to date is the passage of the Policeman’s Bill of Rights. This bill was set up and introduced by Del. Shad Solomon for one reason -- to guarantee due process to police officers throughout the state, Huggins said. The law applies to all police officers, not just state troopers. Opponents said it was geared to promote unionism and collective bargaining and that’s not true at all, Huggins said. The bill was geared to the individual. Nowhere in the bill did it ever

mention handling police officers in group situations or as associations. All it does is require certain procedures be followed when dealing with individual officers involved in disciplinary actions against them.

The bill gave law enforcement officers the right to be represented by a person of their own choosing in disciplinary proceedings. Before this bill was passed, an accused officer could have someone present at a hearing, but the person could not verbally (or in any other way) participate at the hearing. Only after an officer was found guilty and lost his job could he be actively defended by legal counsel.

In addition to Huggins, there have been nine other VSPA presidents. Some of them shared their thoughts about their presidency with us.

“Wayne Huggins set the course for the VSPA,” said Jim Onley, VSPA president from 1977 until 1978. “I joined the Department Dec. 16, 1969, and recently retired Jan. 1, 2004, as First Sergeant for Area Seven, Petersburg. I reside in Sutherland (Dinwiddie County).”

Onley said he served as Huggins’ First Vice President and then later ➤

as President. "I believed in what he was trying to accomplish for all of our personnel, and made the decision to do everything possible to bring about some much needed change.

"There were three basic issues at hand: Salary, benefits, and equipment. In the mid-seventies, the Virginia State Police was rated in the mid-40s among the 50 states in salary. There was no compensatory or overtime pay, and our equipment was outdated. There was no car-to-car communication capability, which I considered to be a major safety issue.

"The loss of my shift partner, Trooper G. W. Fisher, was a major factor in my decision to run for president of the VSPA. (Trooper Fisher was shot and killed Nov. 15, 1976, near Durham, NC. He had been abducted the day before his death.) I wonder to this day if car-to-car communication could have made a difference in the outcome of that trag-

ic event. I was upset in the loss of a friend and was outraged that the lead police department within the Commonwealth did not even have car-to-car communication.

"It was through the efforts of all, not necessarily the President, that many accomplishments were made. Our salary and benefits did rise, and equipment issues were addressed. However, today salary and benefits continue to be major issues, especially within the past few years.

"In looking back at the history of the VSPA, the membership has been careful in the election process of its presidents. All did their very best in aggressively pursuing the goals of the membership, but yet remained diplomatic and professional. I am very proud to be a part of the history of the VSPA."

Dallas Church, VSPA president from 1992 to 1996, also was a charter member of the association.

"Being a charter member of the Asso-

ciation and serving 10 years on the Board of Directors prior to being elected President, I saw first hand the difficult times in the early days of the association and had a vision of how the organization could evolve in the future. I decided to run for President to be apart of defining the future for the VSPA.

"I was very fortunate to have on the Board of Directors for my two terms an outstanding team that included many charter members, close friends and individuals who had previously served on the Board who shared common ideas for future growth of the Association.

"As a Team, we identified these areas to concentrate our efforts on enhancing:

- Better legal representation and advice for the association and its members
- Professional management of the Association's funds
- Improved lobbying efforts in the General Assembly

From the VSPA Scrapbook



- Increasing the membership in the Association

“As a team, we discussed with the Executive Director Bill Elwood our desires to hire legal representation from the Richmond Area. He recommended we invite Bill Etherington from Beale, Balfour and Davidson to meet with us to discuss our needs. We were very impressed with his opinions and answers to our questions, and he offered his services at an extremely reasonable rate. We made the decision to hire him in 1993. He proceeded to review the Association Charter and other official documents to ensure we were in compliance with required regulations. He also developed a program for representing members charged with group offenses by the Department and traveled throughout the state to represent them in the panel hearings. As time went on, he was able to establish a good working relationship with the Department’s Senior Manage-

ment and this seemed to reduce the number of group violations that went to hearing. He also provides legal representation for Association members in job-related legal issues.

“To ensure the best long-term financial stability for the Association, we decided it was time to turn the management of the Association’s revenues over to professional financial planners.”

“The Association had previously employed a lobbyist that represented other clients and our organization was a minor client in his portfolio. After a reorganization of the VSPA office, Bill Elwood resigned the position of Executive Director to become a full-time lobbyist, with VSPA being his major client. This was the first time that the Association had been positioned to have the major portion of the lobbyist time devoted to our organization. This worked much better than the previous lobbyist arrangement. We also asked mem-

bers of the Association to identify members of the General Assembly that they knew, and we established a Key Contact lobbying effort, utilizing membership resources. This worked extremely well and the Early Out Program for State Employees was extended to members of the Virginia State Police for the first time.

“I feel that the Key Contact lobbying effort was a major factor in this accomplishment. Approximately 400 members of the Department took advantage of this program. This not only benefited those of us who gained additional years of service and chose to retire, but also opened up promotional opportunities for the younger members of the Department.

“To increase Association membership, we sent an Executive Board Member to all of the Academy classes, describing the benefits of belonging to the Association and encouraging them to ➤



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become members. We also conducted two major surveys of the membership to determine how we could better serve the needs of the membership with a goal of retaining current memberships and attracting new members.

“Being the president was one of the most satisfying experiences of my 14-year tenure on the Board of Directors of the Virginia State Police Association. The friendships I made as a result of my involvement with the Association will last a lifetime. I would like to encourage the membership of the Association, especially the young members, to get involved and take the challenge to make the Association even better than it is today.”

First Sergeant Mike Berry, VSPA president from 1998-2002, said his most memorable times were when the association helped a trooper’s son on the Eastern Shore with much-needed medical treatment and when VSPA helped a trooper whose house burned down

just before Christmas. “We bought them all new clothes and Christmas gifts for them and their children. These are some of my favorite memories.”

In an article in a 1981 issue of “Your Virginia State Trooper” magazine, Clarence Plymale, VSPA President, wrote a letter to the citizens of the Commonwealth: We in the Virginia State Police Association are most mindful of right-to-work principles. Indeed, the very creation and functioning of our association serves these purposes very well by providing a forum for discussion of our problems, reasoned recommendations for change and improvement of the professional and personal lives of troopers and, through the Department of State Police, the citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia and many of its citizens. We have been and are continuing to be heard on issues of important mutual concern.

A 1981 editorial by Jerry Hines in “Your Virginia State Trooper” magazine.

Hines was murdered during a traffic stop not long after this was written:

“If troopers were different just for the sake of being different, I could accept this view. We are, in fact, as different in nature as a hawk from a hummingbird. Every agency in the state has its path to travel. But not one has the difficult task of serving the Commonwealth at instant risk of life and limb with all its associated on-the-job stress. Find, if you will, any other state employee who has to console his crying children because other children call their dad a “pig.” Find another state agency which shows such sensitivity (and rightly so) to public complaints. Show me an agency other than the Department of State Police that has a museum with a collection of portraits of its officers killed in the line of duty. And last, but not least, show me any other state employee who feels it is in his best interest to wear a bulletproof vest to work!

True, the professional policeman ►



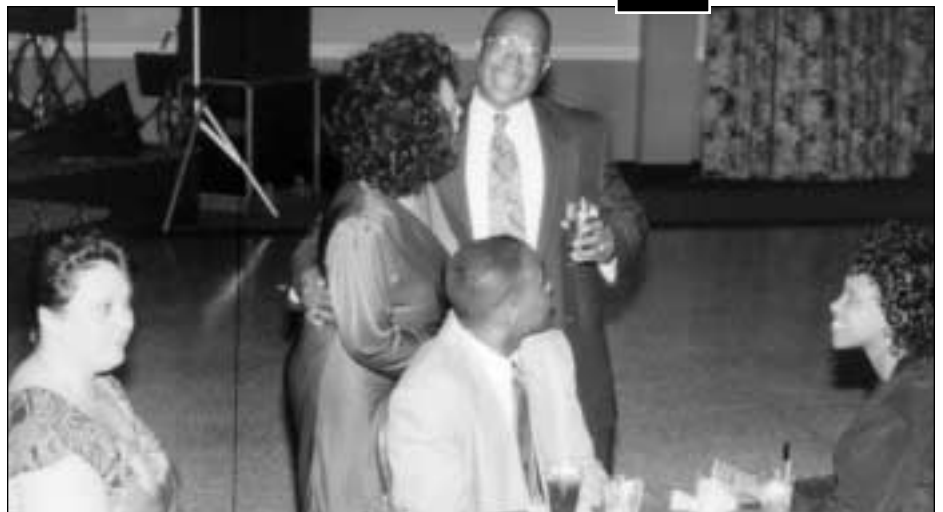
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more photos ►

is rewarded with both tangible assets and the intangible treasure of job satisfaction – the plain good feeling of being able to help someone. As long as the tangible and the intangible values are kept in balance, the professional policeman is at his best. Upset the balance and society loses.

Edward Haith Jr., VSPA president from 2002 to the present, said his time as president has been a real eye-opening experience. “I’ve been on the board since the mid-90s. As a board member,

you realize that the association is bigger than what you think. It’s bigger than one individual. I think every person that’s ever been on the board has contributed something to the membership, not just the presidents but all the past board members. It’s been a real honor to be able to serve the members.”

Though he has never served as president of the association, Col. Steve Flaherty has been a member for many years.

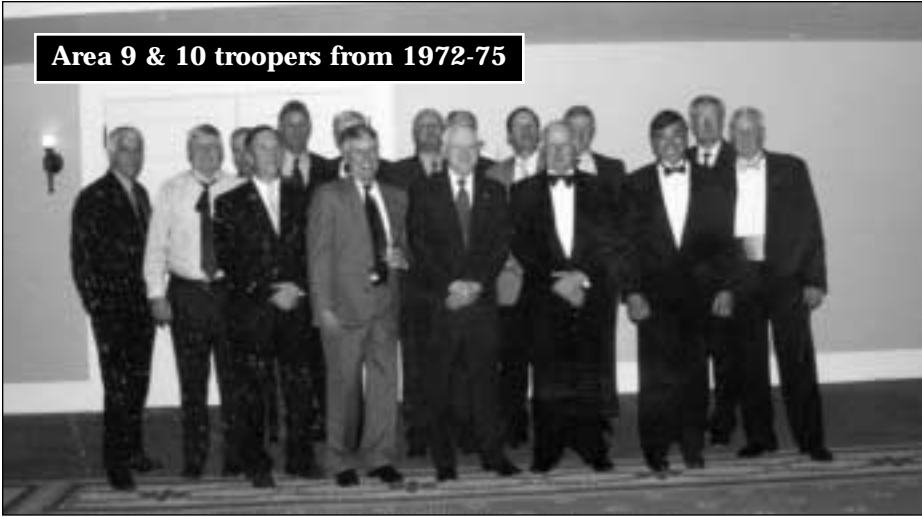
“Just three decades ago a group of troopers gathered together to create a

common voice to advocate on their behalf for better working conditions and benefits,” said Col. Steve Flaherty, Virginia State Police Superintendent. “Thanks to their vision, the association has become instrumental in promoting the Department, and developing relationships and providing support within the community.

“As a longtime member of the VSPA, I congratulate the organization and its new executive director and look forward to another 30 years!” □



Area 9 & 10 troopers from 1972-75



Edward Haith Jr.,
VSPA president from
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Members of the 2002 VSPA Board.

Virginia State Police Association

Past Presidents



M. Wayne Huggins

M. Wayne Huggins
1974-1977



M. James Onley

M. James Onley
1977-1978



Jerry L. Hines

Jerry L. Hines
1978-1980



Clarence E. Plymale

Clarence E. Plymale
1980-1982



Larry W. Burchett

Larry W. Burchett
1982-1986



Kyle L. Miller

Kyle L. Miller
1986-1992



Dallas Church

Dallas Church
1992-1996



Gerald F. Gregory

Gerald F. Gregory
1996-1998



Michael W. Berry

Michael W. Berry
1998-2002



Edward Haith, Jr.

Edward Haith, Jr.
Current