

Police Transportation History

1800's

Originally police officers patrolled on foot or on horseback. No other means of transportation was available. This means of transportation was considered to be effective and efficient in those early days. By the late 1800's, in addition to foot patrol and horseback, law enforcement officers used horse drawn wagons. This mode of travel afforded the law enforcement officer the luxury of being able to carry more equipment and also made for safer, more secure way to transport prisoners. Finally, near the turn of the century, bicycles were sometimes used. The first known police vehicle was actually a wagon run by electricity in Akron, OH in 1899.

1900's

In 1904 the first motorized patrol wagons could be found in larger cities and began to replace the horse drawn vehicles. Then motorcycles were put into use about 1911 continued to be a popular mode of law enforcement transportation throughout the 1930's. In 1912 the first motorized patrol cars (make ???) replaced horses. Much safer, and easier to handle in inclement weather, cars became the primary mode of transportation for law enforcement officers while motorcycles continued to be used however, were less relied upon as a primary means of transportation.

As the 1930's came to an end and the new decade began, use of cars for police transportation all but overshadowed the motorcycle. During WWII, automobile manufacturing began to decline as American industry concentrated on the war effort. Law enforcement agencies used a variety of makes and models for transportation and patrol.

After WWII industry there was a significant increase in traffic on America's roadways. As the soldiers and sailors returned from the war and the auto industry began to boom, speeds on the nation's highways began to increase and there was a greater need for more powerful, dependable automobile for the police officer.

In the 1950's police departments were buying large cars with four barrel carburetors, six and eight cylinder engines, heavy duty shocks and brakes along with larger tires making the police car more reliable and faster. In the mid 1950's automatic transmissions were becoming a popular option on police vehicles. And in the 1960's power steering and power brakes became a must on police cars.

Throughout the 1950's, 60's and up into the 70's most police vehicles were equipped with the largest engines, four barrel carburetors, and the entire "police package" including the interceptor engine to give the police the best chance at catching the young kids in their "muscle cars."

Throughout the earlier years in motorized transportation police agencies purchased a variety of makes and models of vehicles. Later, around the 1960's, many agencies like the Indiana State Police adopted purchase policies that required the agency to release a set of specifications (specs) describing the type of vehicle, engine size, and other options they wanted in a patrol vehicle and released the specs for bid each year. The company meeting the specs with the lowest price got the bid for that particular model year. Consequently, many police agencies began to purchase only one make and model of vehicle per year. This was much more economical because it caused competition among vehicle manufacturers and allowed police agencies to purchase the lowest priced vehicles. Additionally, agencies found it less expensive to stock parts for only one make of vehicle than a variety of makes.

Despite the energy crisis of the 1970's and the popularity of smaller cars for the public, law enforcement continued to purchase the larger sedans with the powerful engines for standard patrol. Some agencies however, purchased smaller, more fuel efficient vehicle for investigators or officers whose duties were primarily administrative.

Over the last 15-20 years Ford Motor Company has dominated the market with police vehicles with the Crown Victoria. Most recently, the Dodge Charger and Chevrolet Caprice are being utilized by many departments. A variety of SUV's and pickup trucks are also seeing service with many police agencies requiring a more versatile police vehicle.

Motorcycles are once again becoming a very popular mode of police transportation and are primarily used in "fair" weather conditions. Bicycles are also becoming a more popular mode of transportation in some agencies as the concept of community policing is becoming a standard law enforcement tool in municipalities. Other vehicles such as vans, utility trucks, and "undercover" vehicles are utilized for various law enforcement functions by agencies all across the country today.

Aircraft

After WWII aircraft had proven itself to be a safe and speedy mode of transportation. Law enforcement agencies from around the country realized how valuable an aircraft could be for law enforcement functions. A few examples of aircraft use in law enforcement include air to ground surveillance, traffic control, air to ground searches, air rescues, and many other functions. Today many larger law enforcement agencies have fixed wing aircraft and helicopters in use daily.