



AG Crime Unit Working to Protect You

by Todd Terrell

I've got an interesting job. Each month I get to meet new people and learn a little bit about their jobs and sometimes by extension, their lives. Sometimes I feel as though I am intruding, interrupting someone's busy schedule. I always promise to not "take up too much time" when I arrange an interview. The truth is, everyone I have interviewed has been extremely gracious and accommodating, even though they were just as busy as I had imagined. So this month when my editor sent me the assignment to speak with the Agriculture Crimes division of the Polk County Sheriff's Office, I again hoped to not take up too much time. I failed.

I should explain. I knew that people in this line of work had to be extremely busy. I was thrilled to get the assignment and was grateful that the unit was willing to take the time to speak with me. I planned to run in with my list of questions, snap a few pictures and then get out of their way. Ag Crimes had other plans. I was greeted by Deputy Paul Wright, a dayshift detective with the unit. He immediately asked me how much time I had free today. I was more than a little stunned. My questions went right out the window. In a few minutes I was loaded up into Deputy

Wright's truck and my own episode of COPS began.

I'm getting a bit ahead of myself. The Agriculture Crimes unit, a group of eight officers is actually one piece of a larger force known as the Special Operations Division. Within that Division is the Support Section, which along with Ag Crimes includes Aviation, Marine and an Environmental Unit. Ag Crimes covers the sort of issues most of us probably have already imagined. In the early days of the department the unit was referred to as the Cattle and Citrus Unit. That still describes a large portion of the job; returning strayed cattle after a fence is downed or recovering stolen livestock. They investigate thefts of produce, inspect vehicles for proper licensing, and respond to calls of trespassing. I have no law enforcement background, but as soon as I heard of the Agriculture Crimes unit, this was the sort of work I envisioned. What I hadn't anticipated was the new issues the unit is dealing with. Deputy Wright told me that "ladder season" was just beginning. Apparently the tall aluminum ladders favored by citrus crews are a hot item for theft. Before you scoff, consider that one of these ladders can run about \$200. There will be a couple of hundred

cases of ladder theft this season. That adds up to significant money. Where are all of the ladders going? Some go to other picking crews, but a number end up at scrap yards for their aluminum value. That brings up one of the most prevalent crimes the Ag unit has to deal with. With the recent boom in the value of copper and aluminum, theft of items made of these materials has reached an epidemic state. I got to ride along with Deputy Wright as he responded to a local citrus grower that had the radiator of his pump engine stolen. Radiators are a common target of scrap thieves, constructed of either aluminum or copper; they yield a lot of salvageable metal for not much effort on the part of the thieves. To appreciate the scope of this sort of crime, Deputy Wright and I visited a local scrap yard in hopes of possibly identifying the grower's stolen radiator. There was a mountain of radiators at least 20 feet high and covering what seemed to be an acre of ground. Every one looked exactly the same to me. Wright glanced at the pile and quickly concluded that the item wasn't there. He told me that the radiators on pump engines have a distinctive appearance and there weren't any of the sort we were looking for in the pile.



Kenny DeVane and Sheriff Grady Judd



Of course this was one of several scrap yards in the county. And thieves could always take their metal to neighboring counties. Another item being stolen alongside metals is diesel. As fuel prices skyrocket, enterprising crooks have been robbing growers of diesel in unprecedented numbers. One vehicle recently seized by the unit had a 150-gallon tank and four 55-gallon drums; the thief had managed to fill up about half way when he was caught in an orange grove in the middle of the night. Alongside theft, the Agriculture Crimes unit responds to large animal cruelty

calls. Horses seem to make up an unfortunate majority of these cases. Underfed, contained in too small a space, insufficient watering and a general air of neglect are the heartbreaking terms that often describe these animals. The Ag unit starts with a warning and monitors the animal and owners to make sure they remain in compliance. This usually remedies the situation, but in some cases the animals are removed to an impound lot, cared for, and sometimes come up for adoption. The idea of an animal impound lot intrigued me, so we made a stop by during my ride along.

A fine looking young bull and a skittish cow looking to give someone the business end of a sharp pair of horns were the only residents that day, but horses aren't unusual and chickens seized from illegal cock fights sometimes occupy a nearby coop.

To be fair, the Agriculture Unit cannot be discussed without mentioning their fellow units because of the fluid nature of their interactions. The Aviation unit is often called on to assist with Ag Crimes cases. An officer on foot or in a ground-based vehicle has very limited sight in an environment like an orange grove, but a hovering helicopter is difficult to hide from. When the Marine unit has been spread too thin across the over 500 plus lakes of Polk County, it is members of the Ag Crimes unit that help bolster their numbers. And finally, I can't write about this specialized unit without mentioning their toys. Arriving at their office was like driving up to Disneyworld for outdoors people. Fishing boats, pontoon boats, airboats, fourwheelers, I had expected these kind of things. But because they are part of the Special Operations group, Ag Crimes also gets to maintain some special equipment. Mobile command centers, generators galore, a field kitchen, even semi-trailer sized sleeping quarters for disaster relief. But then there is the really cool stuff. Remember they share space with Aviation, so they have 3 helicopters sitting outside the back door. They also have a Humvee. And they have two tanks. Because one tank might break down. Officially they aren't tanks because they don't have a main gun, but if it showed up in your front yard you'd call it a tank, too. I had a great time spending the day with some of the members of the Polk County Sheriff's Office Agriculture Crimes Unit and I'm already trying to convince my editor we need to do a follow-up story. I mean they have a helicopter, after all...

I thought that was the end of my story. But the Polk County Sheriff's office had one more surprise for me. The day after my ride along I received a call from Sheriff Grady Judd, himself. He had heard that I had spent the day with some of his officers and he just wondered if there were any questions he could answer for me. To put it mildly, I was stunned. To have a person as busy as the Sheriff take time out of their day to give me a call and offer to field questions completely shocked me...until I thought about it. It was just this sort of customer service that I had witnessed all day with the Ag Crimes unit. The agriculture community plays a vital role in the commerce of Polk County and in turn the Sheriff's Department goes the extra mile to protect the growers and ranchers in their jurisdiction. "Other business can lock their doors at night, but the grower's and rancher's businesses are right alongside our roads. Our Department is their security" Sheriff Judd explained. In turn the agriculture community has embraced this department that serves them, most growers and ranchers know at least one officer in the Ag Crimes unit by name and will usually call an officer directly by cell phone rather than dialing the Sheriff's office dispatch. That sort of community access is rare, but as I learned, the Ag Crimes Unit, the Polk County Sheriff's office, even Sheriff Grady Judd himself, have truly devoted themselves to customer service. •