



SHERIFF'S HEADQUARTERS

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News Release

LASD Deputy James McDermott - End of Watch: Aug. 26, 1931, Unusual Accident : By John Stanley, Lieutenant

Recent historical research has resulted in the discovery of the story of the extraordinary career and unusual death of Deputy James McDermott

Deputy James Leo McDermott served as a deputy sheriff during the most deadly period in the history of American law enforcement. This makes his bizarre accidental death while servicing his car at a gas station just north of downtown Los Angeles a greater tragedy. More peace officers were murdered during the fifteen years Prohibition was the law of the land, 1918 to 1933, than during any comparable period in our nation's history. This was the era of the gangster where gun battles with bootleggers, robbers and extortionists were common. During Prohibition in Los Angeles County, eight members of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, County Constabulary and County Marshals were murdered. This is contrasted with the previous fifteen years when only one deputy constable was slain and the fifteen years immediately after when just two deputy marshals and one Sheriff's sergeant were murdered.

James McDermott was a World War I veteran. He joined the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department in April 1925. The 1920s were a period of tremendous department growth. In 1921, the Sheriff's Homicide Detail was established. This was followed in 1922 by the Auto, Liquor, Narcotic and Robbery Details. Additional specialized details were formed in subsequent years. In 1924, the Department's first substations opened in the unincorporated areas of Florence and East Los Angeles. A half a dozen others were added by 1927. Between July 1, 1926 and July 1, 1927 alone the number of sworn personnel in the Criminal Division of the Department (these were the deputies staffing the eight patrol stations and thirteen specialized details), increased from 201 to 303. Deputy James McDermott was a member of the Department's Robbery Detail from at least 1927.

The Robbery Detail was one of the Department's most coveted assignments. The photo of the Robbery Detail included was taken around the year after McDermott joined the unit. He stands behind Captain Clem Peoples who subsequently went on to become the Department's Head Jailer.

By all accounts Detective McDermott was more than a capable investigator. Some of the

operations that he participated in were described in the Los Angeles Times. On December 30th, 1927, McDermott was part of a crew of detectives who raided a ranch house at 8250 Lankershim Boulevard. This resulted in the arrest of a pair of safecrackers and the recovery of a quantity of bomb making material including nitroglycerine and dynamite. Less than two weeks later, McDermott was present in an interrogation room when a 26 year-old robbery suspect named Manuel Gallego attempted to escape by grabbing the weapon of Deputy Leland Thorne. Thorne was wounded by the suspect, but Gallego was shot in the stomach by another deputy and was then overpowered by McDermott and others.

In August 1928, McDermott assisted in the interrogation of a man who was an accomplice in the shooting and failed robbery of a gas station owner in Victorville. Then, in November, he and another deputy thwarted an effort to smuggle morphine into the County Jail. The following May, he was part of a team of deputies who busted down the door and arrested murder suspect Lee Cochran. Cochran was the alleged leader of a robbery crew who machine gunned two armed guards as part of an \$85,000 heist in San Diego County. In May 1930, McDermott and a number of other members of the Robbery Detail adopted an array of disguises while staking out the spot of a money drop where an extortion suspect hoped to collect money from a wealthy San Marino widow he was threatening. When the suspect finally showed himself to collect the money, McDermott and the other detectives arrested him.

On August 25th, 1931, the night before he was killed, McDermott was part of a crew of deputies who located one of the largest active, illicit distilleries ever discovered in Los Angeles County during Prohibition. The still was on the Hauser Ranch, three miles north of the Mint Canyon Road near Agua Dulce. It was capable of producing 250 gallons of alcohol a day. In addition to the still, two operators of the apparatus were arrested and 5,000 gallons of finished product in wooden vats were seized.

Given the danger that McDermott routinely faced as a member of the Robbery Detail, his bizarre death doing a simple task was cruelly ironic. On the evening of August 26th, 1931, McDermott drove one of the Department's Ford Sedans into a service station at 1705 North Broadway, Los Angeles. There was apparently some problem with the vehicle, because one of station's attendants witnessed him standing over its open hood looking down at the engine. While engaged in this mundane task, the vehicle's brakes suddenly failed and the car started rolling. McDermott hastily jumped on the sedan's running board in an effort to stop it.

To appreciate why McDermott would be frantic to stop the car it is necessary to understand the terrain of the area. The service station was located on the corner of Broadway and Pasadena Avenue on the eastern end of the Broadway Bridge where it crosses the Los Angeles River. Included with this article are two photographs showing the Broadway Bridge in 1924 and 1937. Each photo is taken looking east. What is not visible in either photo is the Broadway and Pasadena intersection. If you look to the right of the extremely crowded bridge in the photo taken

in 1937, you will understand why. Here the eastern end of the Spring Street Bridge can be seen. Notice the significant decline at the eastern end of this bridge. This drop off was also present at the eastern end of the Broadway Bridge. This extreme slope is present there even today and extends well beyond the intersection of Broadway and Pasadena Avenue all the way to where Broadway intersects with Spring Street. When the brakes failed in McDermott's sedan, it quickly accelerated as it began to roll down the steep decline in the service station parking lot.

Both photographs of the Broadway Bridge also show another reason why McDermott was probably so anxious to stop the car. In the 1930s, Broadway was a much busier thoroughfare than it is today. Not only was it congested with automobiles and trucks, but there were also two tracks for Pacific Electric trolleys. McDermott's out of control sedan would be a serious hazard to traffic. Fearing what damage his driverless vehicle might cause, McDermott jumped on the running board in an effort to stop it. The tragic results that followed testify to how steep the service station parking lot was and the speed the car quickly attained. McDermott was impaled on a metal hook used to suspend air and water hoses. The sharp end of the hook pierced his chest just below the heart. An ambulance was quickly called, but he died en route to the Georgia Street Hospital.

James McDermott was 40 years old at the time of his death. He was born in Kansas. His wife's name was Mabel and they lived on Ellenwood Drive in Eagle Rock and had no children. A Coroner's inquest determined his death to be accidental and confirmed that he was on duty at the time he died.

Services were held for McDermott on August 29th at the Delmer A. Smith Chapel. He was a Mason and a member of the Star Post 309 of the American Legion. Members from each organization participated in the services. He is buried at the Veterans' Cemetery at Sawtelle.

Detective McDermott's sacrifice will be formally recognized at memorial ceremonies in May of next year. The Sheriff's Department is seeking any living relatives of Deputy McDermott to represent him in May 2014 at the Los Angeles County Peace Officers Memorial Ceremony. If you can provide any information in this regard, please call the Sheriff's Headquarters Bureau at 323-267-4800.

Photo Credits:

Broadway bridge, Los Angeles Water and Power website www.WaterandPower.org

Sheriff's Robbery Detail, 1928, Los Angeles Sheriffs Museum www.Museum.lasd.org

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John L. Scott, Sheriff

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department

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