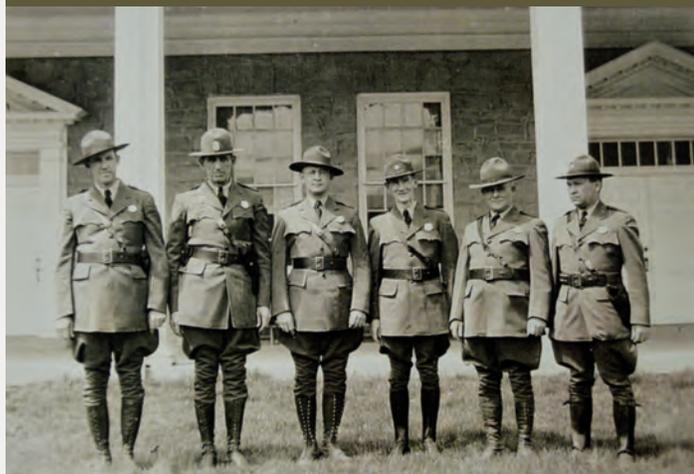




GEARED UP

As times have changed, so have the uniforms of West Virginia's oldest statewide law enforcement agency.

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COURTESY OF THE DIVISION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Whether it's military personnel or law enforcement officers, few things convey authority as quickly as a uniform. Yet, in the early days of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources' Law Enforcement Section, officers just had to wear whatever garb they already owned. Although the agency was formed in 1897, standard-issue uniforms didn't come into use until after World War I, when lots of men returning from the conflict in Europe went to work protecting West Virginia's woods and waters.



The 1920s and 1930s

Uniforms of the 1920s closely resembled what many officers had worn during World War I. Conservation officers, as Natural Resources Police Officers were called then, received wool jodhpur riding pants and wool shirts, which were to be buttoned to the neck and worn with neckties. These were topped with mid-thigh-length coats.

On top of the coats they wore Sam Browne belts, two-piece accessories consisting of a wide leather belt around the waist and a narrower belt across one shoulder. The belts were originally intended to support swords, but also worked well to support the heavy revolvers officers carried at the time. Officers kept their guns in cross-draw holsters. The gun was worn opposite an officer's strong side, so he had to reach across his body to draw the weapon.

To go along with their riding pants, conservation officers of the day wore knee-high, lace-up riding boots. All this was topped with broad-brimmed campaign hats. In a 1998 issue of this magazine, writer Catherine Henderson observed that, had the uniforms been red instead of olive drab, the officers would have looked like Royal Canadian Mounted Police.



The 1930s to 1970s

As the 20th century progressed, conservation officers began to look less like a military unit and more like law enforcement. They traded their campaign hats for the billed “busdriver caps” common among policemen of that era. Their mid-thigh-length coats were also replaced with waist-length “Eisenhower jackets,” although it was no longer mandatory to wear the coat while on duty.

The uniform maintained the jodhpurs and riding boots for a time, although the boots were updated from the original lace-up style to a more modern buckled style. Eventually, however, the standard issue uniform was given straight-legged pants and low-profile shoes.

The Sam Browne belt also went away, replaced by a gun belt with a holster and some pouches for additional ammunition. Officers also wore lanyards connecting the butts of their guns to one of the epaulettes on their shoulders. That way, if an officer dropped his weapon, it would still be attached to his person. Unfortunately, the cord also gave culprits a handy way to grab onto officers.



The 1970s to Now

For most of the agency's existence, DNR law enforcement uniforms were a classic forestry green color. But then the state Legislature passed a law making the West Virginia State Police the only law enforcement agency allowed to wear green. DNR transitioned its uniforms from green to the dark brown that today's officers still wear.

Officers eventually traded in the busdriver caps to return to Stetson-style campaign hats. Unlike their predecessors, today's officers have different uniform options for different weather conditions. There are short-sleeved shirts for warm weather and long-sleeved shirts for colder temperatures. Likewise, officers have felt hats for winter and straw hats for summer, as well as baseball caps and knit caps in case the need arises. There are even lightweight uniforms officers use while working on the water.

The patches on those uniforms have also changed. In 2010, then-Governor Joe Manchin signed a law changing the officers' official title from "Conservation Officers" to "Natural Resources Police Officers," leading to a redesign of the agency's official emblem.

Instead of a six-shooter with dump pouches or speed loaders, officers now carry Glock semiautomatic pistols with two additional magazines in pouches on their belts. Their belts also feature brackets for their high-tech radios, which allow them to communicate with any law enforcement agency in the state, and high-powered LED flashlights.

But the most important and useful tool on a modern officer's belt is usually holstered right next to their gun—the agency-issued iPhone. How times have changed. 🍷