

David Couper

Interviewed by Ruth Doyle on January 29, 1990 at Mrs. Doyle's home.

Oral history tape number: 18

I'm interviewing David Couper, the police chief of the city of Madison. It's taking place on January 29, 1990, in my home. I'm Ruth Doyle. I am doing this for Historic Madison, Incorporated, which has an oral history project containing tape recordings of the many interesting people in the city of Madison. Now, Mr. Couper, where did you come from before you came to Madison?

I was in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, in a suburb called Burnsville, Minnesota, and I was there for about four years as the chief of police. Prior to that I was with the Minneapolis police department for about seven years.

So you were a man of lots of experience.

I tried to be.

What about your educational background?

Let's see. I came here in 1972. In 1968 I had finished up my bachelor's degree and in 1970 I had gotten my master's degree from the University of Minnesota in sociology, deviant behavior. I did that all the time... I was working full time while going to school. That was kind of a tough job. I wouldn't want to advise that to anybody else.

A lot of restless people have to do it that way – the only way they can. They feel idle any other way.

Could be.

I always thought it would be nice, if the Russians were coming, to have the police chief at the gates of the city able to talk to them in their own language. Now it's different, of course. You'd have to go over there. People know how to be policemen.

That's right. These are interesting times we live in.

They sure are.

All over eastern Europe, the Berlin Wall. I thought: not in my lifetime. But just the winds of change without a lot of bloodshed, I mean, considering...

Yes. Maybe there will be bloodshed later, but so far... it's been very interesting. I don't see how you can take a communist country and make it into a capitalistic one. The remodeling of the economy must be... Anyway, you came to Madison. What attracted you to Madison?

Well, it was they had a job opening. That certainly interested me. Also, I think, the kind of city. The city manager that I had worked for had gone to the University of Wisconsin, when I was at Burnsville. The Burnsville city manager, Scott McGinnis, had attended the University of Wisconsin here. He felt very positively about the city and said it was lot like Minneapolis, but on a little smaller scale. I was sort of looking for a city that had a university, because of the cosmopolitan nature of that, and it was nice as the capital city, and the size was about right. So, lo and behold, here I came.

You brought a lot of change with you. Maybe you could talk about your early days in Madison, which weren't all pleasant.

That's right. When I started out, the Police and Fire Commission was appointed... they had all been Mayor [William] Dyke appointees. Stuart Becker, who has since died a number of years

after that, had always remarked that I sort of came here on a one to four vote, that it was Tom Stevens, who was president of the commission, who wanted me to be the police chief, but the other four didn't. Then Stuart said, well, he thought maybe it might be a good idea, and then it was two to three. Then I guess in the last minute they got Andy Sommers to go along with that and that became three-two.

You were not unanimous.

I was not a unanimous choice. I didn't particularly care. I wanted to come down here and I wanted to see what kind of job I could do. I was thirty-five years old then.

It's a different world.

Yes, it really was. I was happy to come down here. A large segment of the department was not too interested to see me. It meant a lot of changes from a pretty rigid, paramilitary organization. When I came down here it was that we wanted to change some of that. I remember the first demonstration we had. It was a China Day demonstration. It must have been just about in January.

This was right after you arrived?

Yes, just after I arrived. Within a month or so. I had gone down there and met with some of the students about the demonstration. They wanted to know what would happen and I said "We're here to facilitate this. We're not here to stop it." They were a little surprised.

They couldn't believe that!

Couldn't believe that. I wanted some officers to come down and help with the traffic, so a couple of them started getting their sticks out and everything. I said "No, no. We're here to help with the traffic. We don't have any problems here." I don't think they knew who I was, a lot of people, so I kind of walked around in front of the group. We walked over to the Union South. That's one under my belt. I've got one demonstration without any problems.

We went through most of the 1970s still with a tremendous amount of demonstrations on campus. I suppose we've been through scores of them without any of them blowing up. I think our strategies of working with the people before, working with the students, we're standing by what we're here for, that we're not going to do anything crazy and we expect them not to. We were facilitators and not people that were trying to block the right of people to peaceably protest.

But your department didn't... some of the senior officers...

That's right. There were some tough times there. But to the department's credit, we always had enough younger people and a few senior people that were tired of the old ways and would come and help me. If everybody was against me I never would have survived. Then April came along and Bill Dyke got defeated in the spring election and Paul Soglin got elected. That was a major thing. I think Paul was very supportive of me and what I was trying to do. I think it would have been, again, a lot tougher and maybe I couldn't have even survived if Bill Dyke had stayed in office and still felt very strongly against me.

There are a lot of people that couldn't have survived another term. But you were in a critical spot. I remember you were attacked. Was this the first demonstration that you led? Somebody said you carried a candle.

That's right. In fact, that's one of the better pictures. It was on the front of the *State Journal* and

shows me holding a candle. A lot of people really liked that picture and it really inflamed a lot of the very ultra-conservatives in the community that felt that we should be beating the heads of the students. The actual facts of that were... the story is much better, about me leading this demonstration, this peaceful demonstration. But the actual fact was that it was after the demonstration and there was a candlelight parade. It went down, I think, through the campus and then over on Dayton Street at a minority affairs house that was over there. Then it had broken up and things had gone well. I was standing around talking with some of my officers. Some person walked by with this candle in a cup and handed it to me and said "Here. Good demonstration. Thanks." While I was there somebody came up and took my picture. That was to some a very inflammatory picture and to others a very peaceful setting, that things were going to be different.

When things began to calm down, what has happened to the police department as Madison grows and develops now?

What has happened is I think that over the years we've been able to attract high quality men and women to join the police department. That's really going to be the legacy of the time that I was here: that we were able to turn the job around to an important social service job within the community, that people again want to be police officers, and that people who are on the department have some pride in their job, and that there's no significant argument about whether or not we're crime fighters or community workers, that for the most part, overwhelmingly, that officers of the department see themselves as community workers to help with problems, to work with people, to work those problems out. The role that they're only a crime fighter, that that's their only job has, I think, been pretty well pushed aside.

One of the problems is that on television, the nightly news, you would think that there's nothing but crime in Madison. You hear about murders. I remember a number of years ago nobody got murdered in a whole year in Madison.

That's right. That's right.

Now there are a lot of people getting murdered. It looks as though we've turned into a crime-ridden community.

Well, I think there's a certain emphasis on that. Crime sells. We still range from three to five murders a year, which is pretty sleepy-time city compared to across the United States. When we look at cities around our size, we seem to do pretty well in that crime data side. But it's what I guess the viewers want to see.

Three to five murders is nothing to talk about even.

Yes. For a city our size.

What about the gangs?

One of the downsides of having an integrated city is also the possibility that people will want to come and live here and they're going to want to bring their kids here. A lot of times those kids have had really negative influences, that they themselves have been negatively influenced by gangs, predominantly from Chicago. A lot of people want to move out of Chicago, and Madison is a nice place to come to. It's got a good school system, it's got a good fair-housing background to it. There's not even ghettos as such within the city.

I think still to make a gang flourish you've got to have the kind of oppressive conditions – housing, jobs, education. This city can stay on top of that. When people are adequately housed

and have equal opportunity and their children have a chance for a good education the less chance that drugs and the gang life will be the... in a lot of our larger cities there is no alternative. In most cases that's the only alternative. I think kids still have choices in our community.

What about the people living on the streets? They're from out of town, I gather, from what you say.

Well, there's some network of homeless that come in and out of our city. I think we've done a pretty good job, from everything that I see and from what my officers tell me, of housing people through the churches. Grace Episcopal Church has taken a major role in that. There's been some very active community groups to provide shelter and housing for people. I think we're taking up the slack. And let me not forget to mention the Salvation Army. Those caring people all these years have provided such an important service. There is no reason for someone who comes to our city not to have shelter, or not to be able to get food.

There are people available. What do they do when a homeless family arrives here? How do they get in touch with them? They go to a church?

There's a communication network through the church, through Dane County Social Services, through our officers on the street who might find somebody stranded at a bus depot or some place like that.

I worked briefly, before my husband died, for an organization called First Cry for Help. That was a telephone network that accepted calls with the United Way.

It's precisely those kinds of community networks that we have in the city that a lot of people don't know about and how important that is in providing services and helping people.

We don't know much about... if you live in an area like this, even in a smaller city like Madison, you can live your whole life and not be aware.

Oh, yes! Yes! Out here on the west side, that's right. It's pretty comfortable.

How many officers are there on the Madison police department now?

Let's see. We have, I think, 306.

That's gone up by three times since you came?

No. It's gone up by about eight since I came. And that's just the last two years. We went fifteen years without an increase in the number of police officers in the department.

How could that be?

Well, we were trying to save money. In the last six to eight years we have been pretty sorely tried here and had really been able to present the information and the evidence to the Council that we needed. There was originally a three-year staffing program where we would get eighteen additional officers; now it's going to be done probably in about four years. We will go up to about 310 or 312 officers and that should hold us for a while. But we were pretty short-staffed and, consequently, we were burning up a lot of over-time money because of the extra calls for services and that.

Our city, while it's only grown about six percent in those fifteen years, the complexity of things... things have gotten so much more complex, and the family violence and child sexual assault kinds of cases, just the difficulty and the complexity of everything takes so much more

time.

Is it more than it used to be? Or is it just that the police are doing a much better job?

Well, I think there's a lot more complexity to our society, and I think that we are also starting to uncover an area that not much attention was paid in the past. That's intra-family violence, intra-family sexual assault. Working with kids in the schools has unearthed that. I think those incidents probably always occurred but were pretty well kept quiet. We didn't want to deal with that, we didn't hear the kids cries for help as clearly as we ought to. So that has unearthed just a...

People tend to discount those stories.

Yes, that's right. Yes.

I was interested in this new law that requires that the police officer make an arrest. You picked up this 81-year-old lady the other day. She got into the paper.

For battering her husband?

Yes. She slapped her husband. He called the police and they took her in.

That's the problem in mandating arrests. I have never been a big fan of mandating arrests, but there's the legislature that thinks that that's what we ought to do. It has caused a lot more arrests. Our arrests for family violence are probably up about 20 or 25 percent just this year. We had a pro-arrest policy for a great number of years. So even though we had a pro-arrest policy, this has driven it even more.

I suppose when you think again those people are generally discharged.

Oh, yes. They would bail out, yes.

What about the university, the cooperation between the city and the university? I think people are interested in what's happened.

Well, there certainly could be a lot more cooperation between the city police department, the Sheriff's Department, the university and the suburbs such as Middleton and Monona and Fitchburg and the Town of Madison.

There's a great number of departments.

And Shorewood. Don't forget Shorewood. I think in the future we're going to have to do some consolidating of a lot of the things that are redundant – things like records, records-keeping and training and evidence. Those things could be done better. But everyone sort of wants to have their own police department in small cities. And until larger departments can be more community-oriented, they're going to opt to go with smaller departments because they feel that they fit their needs better. I think large departments have to ask why people feel that way and to try to be a little bit more attentive to community needs.

That's some of the stuff that we've done in the last few years of putting officers on foot in certain neighborhoods. That's been a very positive program, and I think we have a high degree of customer satisfaction in those areas.

People feel safer.

Yes.

What about 9-1-1? What has that done?

Well, I think we're a little late. I think 9-1-1 would have been great in the 1960s. Unfortunately everybody thought that they wanted it and they were going to feel that they needed it. But there's a downside to 9-1-1, you know. It's great for medical kinds of things, because they don't have a high volume of calls. Every call that comes in to an ambulance or the Fire Department, they take it and go because they don't have an excess number of calls. Unfortunately, there are many times during the day, many times during the week that we have an excess number of calls that we can't service. We can't afford to have the number of police officers on duty that would say could take every call, so we have to delay some calls. When we do that, then that causes some trouble within the 9-1-1 system, because they like to get the calls out.

We're going to want to develop – a lot like the number of neighborhood officers – sort of a medical model. That is, if you have an emergency, you call 9-1-1, a police emergency, medical emergency. That's your emergency room physician. But if you have pain or a problem, you're going to want to talk to your family physician. We're equating our neighborhood officers to be sort of like family physicians. They'll know the people, be able to work long-term problem-solving with them. Both of those models, I think, are going to have to exist. We obviously have to provide an immediate service if at two o'clock in the morning somebody breaks the window out and is trying to get in your house. We've got to be there immediately. That's what 9-1-1 is for. But we also have to have systems in place so that if there's a noise problem in your neighborhood, problems with maybe kids vandalizing your house and it's a kind of harassing kind of thing and you don't know who it is but it's really bothering you, then you're going to want to work with a police officer – someone who is going to know the kids and know what's going on and try to spend time with you, find out what's going on, talk to kids in the neighborhood. All that extra stuff. Like a family physician does.

On the emergency model they're going to tell you, "When they cause you problems again, call us and then we'll send somebody out. When they do it again, we'll send somebody out; when they do it again, we'll send somebody out." Whereas our preventive model is "the first time we have this problem, let's work it so we don't get the second, the third, and the fourth calls."

That's hard to do.

That's going to be a challenge for us in the coming years.

What about the dope in Madison?

It's not as bad as larger cities, yet we would like to see it a lot better. I think it's going to be a major problem not only in this city but nationally. And there's going to be sort of trouble with the drug dealer over the years. I think there will be a lot of public pressure that we need to be attending to people who use illegal drugs because they are part of the problem. If your middle class and upper middle class starts using drugs and thinking it's kind of their little way to be cool or something, they're spending a vast amount of money that's supporting cocaine babies and overdoses in the ghettos.

I'm putting it that clear: if you buy illegal drugs you're part of the problem. You're leading to the deaths and deformities of children within our nation's cities because you're supporting an illegal operation. About the only way that that changes is if somebody says that somehow that the user has got some marijuana seeds and they grow their little marijuana plants. Okay, then I think they can maybe make that argument. But I don't know too many people that do that.

They're all buying from dealers and it's an inflated price and it's leading to a lot of misery in this country.

In Madison are there certain places you're aware of where people go to get drugs?

It's not like you see on the national news, you know, whole blocks of people, coke houses, people coming by, driving up and down the streets and that. Most of the drug connections are made through bars.

Just go in and ask for...

Oh, you've got to know somebody. But if you hang around, my people tell me it's pretty easy to get drugs in most bars in Madison that have a high-volume bar business.

The word is out which bars those are.

I think people know what they are, yes. And that's unfortunate.

What about the dispensing of justice in Madison, in Dane County? Are there long delays?

Again, we're not suffering from that huge problem of larger cities in back-ups and that. Cases seem to move fairly rapidly. We have a history of a good judiciary, all the way back to Jim Doyle when he was on there, too. So I think there's a good sense of a good judiciary, both in the county court, state Supreme Court, and the federal bench. I don't hear issues of justice as much as you would in larger cities.

In large cities sometimes you hear about young people that get locked up without being arraigned for months.

Oh, yes. The system is in place for a normal volume. What happens is that the volume has gotten such that people can't process people in a humane way and so there are backlogs and people getting literally lost in the jail system.

Or else being set free without anything ever happening.

Set free. Being assaulted, inhumane conditions within the jails, and that. I think our progressive traditions and sense of fairness and justice in the community are still pretty well maintained.

And the relations to the university are okay?

Yes. Much, much better. I think that, as Stuart Becker said when I took the job here, "A very important thing you've got to remember in Madison is that there's two ends to State Street. One is the Capitol end and the other is the Bascom Hill end. I think that that's good advice. I certainly tried to keep my contacts with the faculty and staff that I know at the university and so I think there's good connections there. They certainly could be much better. The city and the university could be doing a lot more things together. But I think that there's open access between the chancellor's office and my office, between the athletic department and my office. I think people have a sense that they can call on one another when problems start.

The university has a growing police force, I gather.

Yes. There must be fifty or sixty officers there now. I don't know how long that will continue before someone might talk about the university being a district station from Madison. I don't know if there's any interest in that at all.

You mean really? You're thinking about integrating the two?

Yes, yes.

There is some talk about that?

There was at one time, but nothing really seriously.

Everybody has too much to do. Can't think about it.

That's right. I think that's a large part of it.

A lot of your new officers are university graduates.

Oh, yes. A large number of them. Some with graduate degrees. And the average age of our class is about twenty-eight. We're getting people that are older, educated, and they've had good job experience. They are really our hope for the future: our ability to get high-quality men and women coming on the department. We seem to be able to do that, whereas a lot of other police departments around the country are not able to attract people that want to come and work with them. That's going to mean some significant changes that we have undertaken but which most other police departments haven't. You've got to change the work environment so that people are comfortable working there, have a chance to be creative, find some self-esteem and a sense of personal growth.

What about salaries?

We are competitive with other people who are looking for four-year college graduates. And with our incentive program that was started back in 1968, we do pay a premium for people with baccalaureate and graduate degrees.

How much do they get?

On top of a base salary, a person with a bachelor's degree gets 18 percent on top of base and 21 percent for a master's degree.

What's the base?

It must be around... It goes up each year. I think the entry is, I don't know, somewhere in the middle 20s or so. I think a police officer with a BA degree, after about four to five years' service...

In regards to law and order generally, what do you foresee? For the people a hundred years from now who are going to listen to this, I hope, when they're working on a history.

I think that we're going to get away from the authoritarian organizations that have been so much a part of American life for the last hundred years, since the turn of the Industrial Revolution; and that we're going to find workplaces that are highly energized, even satisfying to people; and that police departments and other government departments will be working very closely with the people and consider them to be customers. Rather than talking about crime control they'll start talking about long-term customer satisfaction, just as if they were running a business out of the private sector. And [I think] that we will be able to use technology and still have technology work for us but not at the expense of individual liberties, and that the American police will set the tone for the rest of the world in how a police department works in a democracy with some particular pushes and pulls and checks and balances.

Right now that's coming up, isn't it?

That's right. I think so. We're going to be sorely tested in many, many areas. The police will be

considered to be community organizers, community workers, working with the public out there and working with them to do not only handle crime but other senses of community disorder that go on there. What we find out now is our neighborhood officers are very good listening posts. They're very good people to find out how trash collection is going on, how our public health system is going on, that we also get concerned about trash collection, the street lights that are out, potholes in the street. Because we're out in the community, people feel free to contact us. I think the role is going to change to sort of the police of the future being social ombudsmen, to handle a lot of community problems and be the coordinators and the facilitators between other governmental services.

A number of these countries that are making the big changes, the police have been secret police and the prisoners have been political prisoners.

Yes. Yes. It's going to be a tremendous change for them to move into using a democratic model. I wish we had in our country right now a better overall model to show eastern Europe countries.

They'll be looking.

I think so.

I suppose the matters of traffic control and other sorts of auxiliary things take up a great deal of time in your department.

Yes, still a lot of traffic. But still a tremendous amount of problem-solving and working with people. That's the gratifying part of the job.