

Frank E. Pooler: “The Railroad Dick”

“Bulls.” “Dicks.” “Shacks.”

These were all slang terms for the men employed by railroads as their own private police force.¹

In the smorgasbord of law enforcement agencies—local police departments, county sheriff departments, state patrol, FBI, ATF, DEA, border patrol, and others—railroad police are not one that usually ever comes to mind. Railroad police, however, can investigate and arrest people just like any other law enforcement agency, and their powers extend across state lines.²

An Onalaska man, Frank E. Pooler, was a “railroad bull” or “railroad dick,” in La Crosse for 31 years.³ He also served in local government and helped create some of the recreational amenities that we still enjoy today in La Crosse County.

Railroad police had their origin in 1849 when [Benjamin Latrobe](#) of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad hired 12 men to protect workers from attacks by strikers during a labor dispute.⁴

[Allen Pinkerton](#), a Scottish immigrant who became the first detective in the Chicago Police Department, quit the police department to establish his own detective agency. Before the Civil War, his agency was contracted by the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad and the Illinois Central Railroad to work solely on railroad-related crimes.⁵

Private police forces for railroads became more prevalent in the four decades after the Civil War when trains were lucrative targets for robbers and various thugs. The first train robbery may have been in May 1865 when a train headed for St. Louis was waylaid and pillaged near Cincinnati. After the end of the Civil War, gangs of former Confederate and Union soldiers held up passenger trains for recreation and lucre. Some of the most infamous outlaws in American history—[the Reno gang](#), [the James-Younger gang](#), [the Dalton gang](#), [the Burrow gang](#), [Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid](#)—made trains one of their prime targets, especially the baggage, express, and mail cars that transported payrolls, gold and silver from the western mines, and other valuables.⁶ Railroad companies had such a poor image in the late 1800s that train robbers were viewed sympathetically by much of the public.⁷

The [Pinkerton Detective Agency](#) did more than guard trains and pursue train robbers; the railroads also deployed them against their own workers. Pinkertons sometimes employed ruthless tactics, especially when they were utilized to break strikes by railroad workers, and public sentiment turned against them.⁸

The legendary occasional lawman [Wyatt Earp](#) was a railroad police officer.⁹ So was [Bat Masterson](#).¹⁰

As steel cars replaced wooden cars and armed guards were added, trains became a less enticing target.¹¹

Even though train robberies declined and virtually ended soon after end of the 19th Century, railroad police continued to protect and serve railroad companies and their property. While moving trains were victimized less often, thieves still raided stationary trains and freight warehouses.¹² Railroads employed watchmen, who were hired without background checks or training, to supplement their railroad detectives and police.¹³

One researcher described the railroad police like this: “In the early days of their existence . . . were to be found a number of thugs, criminals, and other undesirable characters. . . . Their duties appear to have been largely to spy upon their fellow workers, chase hobos, and prevent thefts from coal cars.” Railroad executives, perhaps counterintuitively because of the need, did not have a high regard for their private police officers, so the wages were low. There were no standards, and some of those employed by the railroads followed suit.¹⁴

There would be gradual improvement in the profession over time, and a man from Onalaska played a small part in the rehabilitation of the image of the railroad policeman.

Frank E. Pooler, who would eventually become the chief of the Milwaukee Road police in La Crosse, was born in Onalaska on June 15, 1877. His parents were George and Josephine Pooler.¹⁵ George Pooler, Jr.’s parents were born in Quebec, Canada.¹⁶ George was born in Maine in 1853. He had come to Onalaska when he was 20 years old and worked as a foreman for the C. H. Nichols lumber company for 22 years before employment with other local lumber companies.¹⁷ Josephine Greene Pooler, Frank’s mother, was born in Hamar, Norway, on December 15, 1855. Her family came to the United States when she was nine years old. After living in La Crosse for a few years, they moved to Onalaska. Josephine married George Pooler, Jr. in 1873.¹⁸ Besides their son, Frank, the couple had three daughters.¹⁹

Frank Pooler’s education ended after three years of high school.²⁰

In 1900, Frank Pooler was 22 years old and living in Onalaska with his mother and two younger sisters. “Day laborer” was his occupation.²¹

George Pooler, Jr., Frank’s father, was working in Arbor Vitae, Wisconsin, in early 1903 when he died of a ruptured blood vessel in the brain. He was 50 years old.²²

Following the death of his father, Frank Pooler went to Fairbanks, Alaska, where he lived from 1904 to 1908.²³ These were the years of the Alaskan Gold Rush. Felix Pedro, an Italian immigrant, found gold in the Tanana Valley of Alaska in July 1902. In November 1903, the city of Fairbanks, named after an Indiana senator and later [vice-president of the United States](#), was incorporated where there had been no inhabitants just two years prior.²⁴ We do not know if Frank Pooler went there in search of gold, to make money supplying miners with equipment and goods, or just for adventure.

His next move was to the west coast of the United States where Pooler operated motion picture theaters.²⁵ In these years just before World War I, the motion picture business was in its infancy.


In 1914, after returning to Onalaska, the now 37-year-old Pooler switched his career path to law enforcement. He ran for La Crosse County Sheriff in the fall election.²⁶ Although he was not elected sheriff, Pooler was hired as a Milwaukee railroad policeman that same year.²⁷

The railroad police mostly dealt with trespassers, thefts, and general security.

Hitching rides on trains was common for transients in the decades between the Civil War and World War II. Hoboes wandered the country looking for temporary work, and the most efficient way to travel the country was by train. Better yet, it was free. That is, if they could stay out of sight of the train crew and railroad police.²⁸ During the Depression era of the 1930s, as many as 1,000,000 transients were riding the rails free of charge.²⁹ Railroad police patrolled the rail yards and searched trains for any of the hated

“free riders” who sometimes also damaged railroad property. It was an ongoing cat-and-mouse game with sometimes fatal consequences, either by accident or action. Occasionally the police would accept a bribe to look the other way, but a few took pleasure from beating up and even killing hoboes.³⁰

Paid Advertisement—Authorized
and \$1.50 to be paid by Frank E.
Pooler, Onalaska, Wis.



Frank E. Pooler
ONALASKA
Democratic Candidate for
Sheriff
Primary Election,
Sept. 1, 1914

Campaign advertisement

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1914 August 29, page 6)

Trespassing could also have serious accidental outcomes, and not just for hobos and tramps. Juveniles fooling around in forbidden areas and people using railroad property as shortcuts sometimes met calamity. In 1923, for example, 2,779 people were killed and 3,047 more were injured while trespassing on railroad property in the United States.³¹

The standing order of the Milwaukee Road was to arrest all trespassers. From March 21 to May 1918, 25 men (“for the most part tramps”) were arrested and arraigned in La Crosse County court for trespassing on railroad property.³²

Aggressive enforcement of the trespassing law may have played a role the following year when a Milwaukee Road policeman in La Crosse, Lewis Ruehl, shot and killed two men who were walking on the tracks. One of them turned out to be a Milwaukee Road employee. There was much controversy about who was to blame for this tragedy, which was dramatized by the La Crosse Public Library Archives staff in their Dark La Crosse Stories episode [“Death on the Tracks.”](#)³³

Lawrence Benson was the head of the Milwaukee Road police in La Crosse during this time. He later worked in Seattle, Washington. In January 1923, Benson was appointed the chief of the 5,000-man Milwaukee Road police force.³⁴

Coincidentally, on May 1, 1923, Frank Pooler became district special agent for the Milwaukee Road, and in 1925 he was named inspector of the entire Milwaukee railroad police force.³⁵



Grand Crossing in La Crosse, 1910 ca.

(La Crosse Public Library Archives, PC 001-10-11-001)

Theft was a continual problem for the railroads. In 1921, \$10,386,000 worth of dry goods, tobacco, boots and shoes, and automobile parts were stolen from railroad freight cars. By 1930, that total had decreased to \$1,080,000. The main reason for the decline in thefts was better police personnel.³⁶

It was in 1923 that Pooler was involved in a well-publicized case of theft from trains that the local newspaper called “almost unparalleled in the history of the upper Mississippi Valley.” After a six-month investigation in cooperation with the Burlington railroad, four men were arrested for stealing caps, shoes, shirts, and sheep-lined coats from Milwaukee and Burlington railroad cars on sidings in several states, including the Milwaukee Road railyard in La Crosse. The thieves sold the apparel at bargain prices, claiming it came from government surplus sales in Chicago and bankrupt store stock. Alexander Pendak of La Crosse pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three years in Waupun State Prison. Mike Ryan of Garvia (sic), Iowa, and Henry Clay and John Jones, both of McGregor, Iowa, were handed six-month prison sentences after pleading guilty. Most of the goods were not recovered.³⁷ The total value of stolen merchandise was \$75,000.³⁸

Railroad police in La Crosse solved another notorious case of box car thefts, that occurred over a three- or four-year period, when they arrested Scott Enos, 23, and Edward Lachman, both of La Crosse, on the night of June 11, 1924. Milwaukee Road policemen J. D. Taylor, Joe Shannon, and A. Decker were staked out in the Milwaukee Road railyard at the foot of Vine Street when they caught Enos and Lachman loading a rented car with 12 sacks of sugar taken from a freight car. Authorities believed the sugar was destined to be used in the manufacture of moonshine liquor. Enos and Lachman, who had both already served prison time for robbery, were also implicated the mugging a couple days earlier of Theodore Evenson, who lived in a house boat at the end of Cameron Avenue. Evenson was slugged and relieved of \$26 and a gold watch.³⁹

Not all thefts from the railroad were so spectacular. In the “cracker caper of 1935,” thieves broke into a box car on a Milwaukee Road siding in La Crosse and made off with a six-pound box of soda crackers and an eight-pound box of firecrackers.⁴⁰

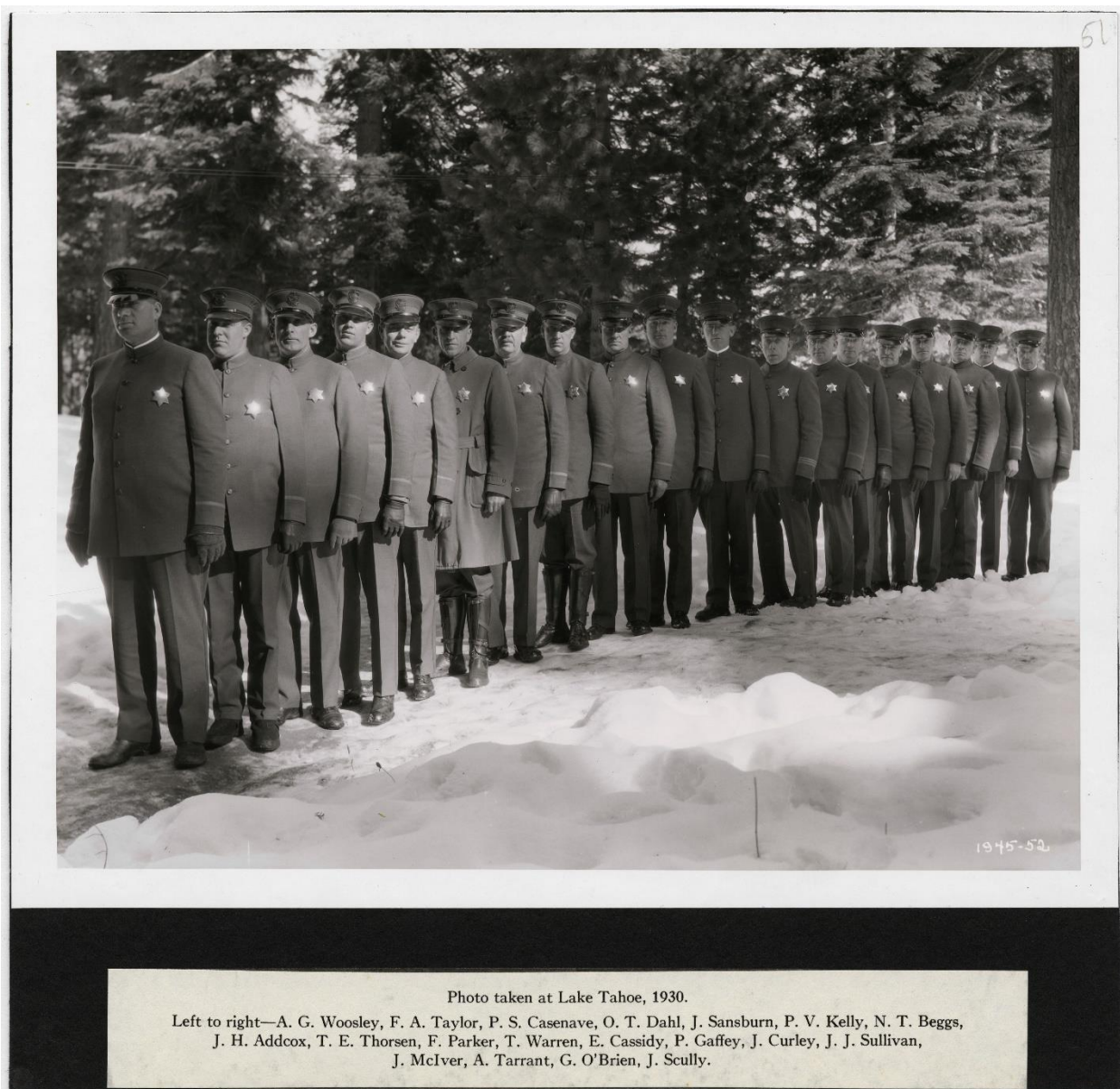
Doing the work of a railroad policeman could be dangerous. In 1928, 13 railroad policemen and watchmen were killed and 259 were injured in the line of duty.⁴¹

Frank Pooler was a bachelor much of his adult life. In 1920, he and his mother were living at 315 North 2nd Street in Onalaska with his niece, Margaret (Krueger) Ahlstrom and her husband, Roy Ahlstrom. Margaret was the daughter of his sister, Harriet (Pooler) Krueger.⁴²

Bachelorhood finally ended for Frank Pooler when he was 48 years old. On July 29, 1925, he married Florence Carolyn Mairich at a Lutheran church in Minneapolis. Carolyn was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. George E. Mairich of 1121 West Avenue South in La Crosse.⁴³ Florence was 28 years younger than her husband.⁴⁴ The newlyweds made their home at 316 North 2nd Street in Onalaska.⁴⁵

Pooler became a father at the age of 51 when Florence gave birth to a son on August 31, 1928, at St. Ann’s Hospital in La Crosse.⁴⁶ The boy was named Frank M. Pooler. The couple would have another son, Larry G. Pooler.⁴⁷

By 1929, there were more than 10,000 railroad police.⁴⁸ As a comparison, there were just 339 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents that same year.⁴⁹



Southern Pacific Railroad Police, 1930

[Group portrait of Southern Pacific Railroad police]. 1930. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <https://californiarevealed.org/islandora/object/cavpp%3A112247>. (Accessed October 3, 2022.)

Frank Pooler became the captain of the La Crosse office of the Milwaukee Road police in 1933.⁵⁰

When Republican presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie's train stopped in La Crosse on October 19, 1940, he spoke to a crowd of 5,000 from the rear platform of the train. Before the train left for its next stop in St. Paul, 40 railroad policemen under the direction of Captain Pooler boarded the train to provide additional security.⁵¹

World War II brought heightened security all over the country to thwart sabotage of vital facilities. On the evening of December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Milwaukee railroad police started guarding the railroad tunnel in Tunnel City between Sparta and Tomah, and bridges over the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers.⁵² The La Crosse County Sheriff's Department and the Wisconsin State Guard contributed men to help guard Milwaukee Road bridges in the La Crosse area: the drawbridge over the Mississippi River main channel, and the bridges over the Black River, French Slough, and Mississippi River east channel.⁵³

The Milwaukee Road held a picnic for soldiers at Camp McCoy in Myrick Park on June 28, 1942. Entertainment included a 51-piece band from Milwaukee and barn dances in addition to food and refreshments and games for children and adults. Milwaukee Road police officers Frank Pooler, James Taylor, Charles Smith, James Haug, and Raymond Wilhelm patrolled the park during the event.⁵⁴

Frank Pooler also served the community in two stints on the La Crosse County Board of Supervisors representing one of the wards in Onalaska, the first being 1932 to April 1938 and the second from 1940 until his death. Notable were his contributions as a member of the county park board and his role in creating the county forest reserve.⁵⁵

Being on the county board meant running for election every two years. Pooler won his first election to the county board in April 1932 by 42 votes.⁵⁶ He had no opposition for reelection in April 1934.⁵⁷ Nobody ran against him in April 1936 either.⁵⁸ The April 1939 election brought Clifford A. Fossum as an opponent, and Fossum came out on top with 117 votes to Pooler's 73.⁵⁹ Pooler regained the seat in April 1940, besting Fossum 193 to 76.⁶⁰ Pooler was unopposed in the 1942 election.⁶¹ For some reason, there was another spring election in 1943, and Frank Pooler easily won re-election with 94 votes against 22 votes for challenger William Lemke.⁶² Pooler won his last election campaign in April 1945 when he won over challenger Charles H. Guenther, 81 votes to 41 votes.⁶³

Pooler was active on the county park commission. This group oversaw the development of county parks near the Oak Forest Sanitorium in Onalaska (six acres) and in the La Crosse River valley near West Salem. The [Works Progress Administration](#) built a large stone shelter in the Onalaska Park to go along with other park amenities. The new Waterloo Park (later Veterans Memorial Park) consisted of 16 acres, and it also had a WPA-built stone shelter in addition to picnic tables, playground equipment, and a ballfield.⁶⁴ In the summer of 1941, the committee approved construction of an artesian well near the entrance of Waterloo Park. Besides providing water for a decorative fountain, the well funneled 240,000 gallons of fresh water a day into the nearby slough that had been, up to that time, stagnant and smelly.⁶⁵

Frank Pooler died of a heart attack on October 31, 1945, at the age of 68.⁶⁶ His funeral was three days later in the Nelson Funeral Home in La Crosse. Pallbearers were Milwaukee Road police officers James D. Taylor, Basil E. Ledman, Raymond L. Wilhelm, Ira W. Syck, Harlan J. Little, and James F. Hough. Many officials of the Milwaukee Road attended his funeral. Burial was in the Onalaska cemetery.⁶⁷

A resolution of the La Crosse County Board read, in part: "Frank E. Pooler was for many years a faithful and beloved member of the La Crosse county board of supervisors. He gave generously of his time, wisdom and energy to the workings of this organization. We, who labored with him, found him to be steadfast of purpose, honest in endeavor and generous in heart. He cared not for display or personal credit, but rather sought to promote the common good and advance the cause of his fellow man."⁶⁸



Frank E. Pooler

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 November 8, page 1)

At the time of Frank Pooler's death in 1945, there were about 9,000 railroad police officers in North America. Standards and training had improved since the early days of the hired guns employed to chase train robbers and combat strikers.⁶⁹ As of May 2021, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates there are only 460 railroad police officers in the United States.⁷⁰

The railroad police force has declined since the days of the wild west and the early 20th Century, but railroad thefts have not. Earlier this year, California Governor Gavin Newsom expressed his outrage at the mess left in Los Angeles after thieves broke into cargo containers sitting in a railyard and scavengers picked through what was left. Newsom ditched his suit and tie to help workers bag trash during the cleanup. With so many cargo containers coming into Southern California ports and backlogs in the supply chain, railroad freight cars sit in railyards for long periods making them tempting targets for thieves. According to a Los Angeles police captain, the Union Pacific railroad has just six railroad police covering all their property from Yuma, Arizona, to Los Angeles. Union Pacific officials say an average of 90 shipping containers are "compromised" every day.⁷¹

Even though the railroad police are unlikely to ever regain the numbers that they had during Frank Pooler's time, there is still the need to protect the commerce of the country.

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