

Coroner will finally hang up his hat

August 31, 2004



Phil Luciano
Peoria
Journal Star

Bob Dubois became a coroner for all the right reasons:

To investigate deaths.

That might sound like a given, but it makes Dubois a maverick in the world of coroners - one dominated by funeral directors with little knowledge of police investigation.

Dubois, 64, is Tazewell County's coroner and has chased evidence since his teens, in the days before professional crime-scene training. An amateur shutterbug, the Washington High School student would get pulled out of class whenever the Woodford County coroner needed crime-scene photos.

"Working a crime scene was just taking photographs, then (police) taking someone in the back room and working them over to get a confession," Dubois says.

After graduation, Dubois took fingerprint lessons in Chicago, then caught on as a crime tech with the state police. Though working the Peoria area, he had to transport evidence to the state's lone lab, in Springfield. He spent more time in a car than at home.

Plus, the labor was painstaking. In one case, he pored over 10,000 fingerprints - by eyeball - and found just one match. But that led to 18 indictments.

Schools taught no crime-scene investigation. So Dubois read books and experimented.

"They said you couldn't pour a plaster cast in snow," he says. "I said, '(Baloney)!' - and we started to do it."

In the '70s, the state opened its crime lab in Morton, which became Dubois' headquarters. When not working cases, he supervised all state crime techs in the northern half of Illinois.

Dubois wrote an evidence manual for use statewide. In the mid-'70s, when the state started the Police Training Institute in Champaign, Dubois lectured on crime scenes.

In 1980 he became a tech for Tazewell County, then chief deputy coroner. When the coroner retired in '96, Dubois ran for the office and won.

His first job: writing a manual spelling out coroner-related statutes for his deputies.

"Most coroners don't know the statutes," he says. "I don't know how you play the game if you don't know the rules."

State statutes call for no law-enforcement prerequisites for a coroner. Many work full time as funeral directors - and may or may not use the post to drum up extra business.

With a lack of police expertise, a coroner might close a crime scene prematurely. But nearly all of Dubois' deputies have police backgrounds.

"You have to know what the law says, you have to know how cases are made, and you have to know how to work with the state's attorney," Dubois says.

Dubois' departmental manual is now required reading for all of Illinois' new coroners.

Success brings bittersweet pride to Dubois. For five decades, he's been on duty 24/7. For all the bad guys he put behind bars, he can recall birthdays and holidays missed with his family.

"I was never home," he says flatly. "My wife (Marti) basically raised the (two) kids.

"I do owe her some time."

Plus, his pensions have kicked in. So, today he retires three months early, leaving the office in the hands of his protégé and deputy, Dennis Conover, who is unopposed in the election.

Dubois says he's looking forward to time with his wife. Yet he admits to already suffering withdrawal from crime scenes.

"This has not been a job. This has been my life," he says. "This has been an obsession."