

# Some deputies had records before being hired



## Pasco deputy did not reveal arrest record

By LUCY MORGAN  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

When Ronald R. Roppolo applied for a job as a Pasco County sheriff's deputy he signed affidavits saying he had never been arrested or convicted of a crime.

The department conducted a background check and paid for his police training at Pasco-Hernando Community College.

Just three months before applying for the job, Roppolo appeared in a Pasco County courtroom and pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge. Five years earlier, he had pleaded guilty to another one.

The two convictions might not make him ineligible to be a law enforcement officer, but not telling the truth about them on his applications could result in the withdrawal of his certification by Florida's Police Standards and Training Commission.

Since joining the Pasco force, Roppolo has been the subject of several internal investigations. One report detailed his association with a convicted felon who has since been indicted on a racketeering charge with reputed Mafia chieftain Santo Trafficante.

**RECORDS ON** file in the Pasco County Court-house detail both of Roppolo's convictions. In 1975, Roppolo was arrested by the Pasco County Sheriff's Department after he failed to appear in court to answer a petty theft charge.

When he did appear, on Oct. 8, 1975, Roppolo pleaded guilty and was sentenced by County Judge Dan C. Rasmussen to pay a fine of \$173 or spend 10 days in jail.

On Jan. 16, 1980 Roppolo was back in front of Rasmussen on a charge of failing to register as a person engaged in a building trade. He again pleaded guilty and was assessed \$25 in fines and court costs. Rasmussen found him guilty in both cases.

On April 18, 1980, Roppolo filled out an application for the Pasco County Sheriff's Department. He answered no when asked whether he had ever been convicted of a crime.

**A COMPUTERIZED** records check and fingerprints submitted to the FBI failed to turn up the two charges.

Roppolo, who had no prior experience in law enforcement, was hired as a corrections officer on March 16, 1981. He became a regular deputy on Aug. 30, 1982.

**1** AFFIDAVIT FOR CERTIFICATION

Name: Ronald R. Roppolo

4. Have you ever been arrested or charged with a crime?  
Yes / **No**

5. Have you ever been found guilty or pled guilty or no contest to a crime?  
Yes / **No**

I swear or affirm that I am a citizen of the United States, by birth or naturalization, that I have never been convicted of a felony or a misdemeanor involving moral turpitude, that I have a valid high school diploma or its equivalent, that my discharge (if any) from the Armed Forces was under honorable conditions, that I am of good moral character, that I have read all of the information contained in this affidavit and my employment application and it is correct, and that all other information I will furnish in conjunction with my application is true and correct.

Notary Public, State of Florida at Large  
My Commission Expires April 16, 1982

*Ronald R. Roppolo*  
(Signature of Applicant)

**2** Judgment and Sentence. Plead guilty. Adjudged guilty. Confined for 10 days - suspended for one year. Fined \$173 (\$100 now; \$75 due 11-10-75).

**3** STATE OF FLORIDA VS. RONALD ROPPOLO  
INFORMATION FOR: FAIL TO REGISTER AS PERSON ENGAGED IN BUILDING TRADE

The defendant was present for arraignment and waived counsel.

The defendant entered a plea of guilty to the charge.

The Court adjudicated the defendant guilty and imposed a fine of \$13.00 and Court Costs of \$

St. Petersburg Times — JOE TONELLI

(1) When he applied for work as a Pasco County sheriff's deputy, Ronald Roppolo swore that he had neither been arrested nor convicted of a crime. (2) In fact, Roppolo had two previous misdemeanor convictions, one in 1975 . . . and, (3) one in 1980.

Six months later, Tarpon Springs police accused Roppolo of helping John Cascio harass witnesses who were supposed to testify against Cascio in an aggravated assault case. No formal charges were filed against Roppolo in connection with the incident. A report to Pasco County Sheriff John Short indicated this was because: "Taking into consideration the type of characters who were witnesses and the frequency with which they changed their statements to investigators in Tarpon Springs Police

Dept., possibility of proving without a doubt Deputy Roppolo's guilt or innocence would be next to impossible without an extensive investigation."

At the time, Cascio was on probation for resisting arrest with violence in Pasco County and had been charged with carrying a concealed weapon and being a felon in possession of a firearm in Pinellas County.

Please see ARREST, 6-B

By LUCY MORGAN  
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer  
© 1984, The St. Petersburg Times

**NEW PORT RICHEY** — Some Pasco County sheriff's deputies know about law enforcement from both sides of the badge. Before joining the force, several had arrest records. Some had been convicted.

And some did not tell the truth about their criminal records when they applied to work for the Pasco County Sheriff's Department.

For its part, the department's background checks were often so superficial that the false statements of the would-be officers were not caught. Of those people, some were hired even though they had been arrested and convicted of crimes within Pasco County in the last 10 years.

A *St. Petersburg Times* investigation shows that today, among the 195 sworn officers serving the department run by Pasco Sheriff John Short:

✓ At least one in every eight officers has an arrest record — and the ratio could be much higher.

✓ More than half of those officers with arrest records signed statements falsely swearing that they had never been arrested or charged with a crime, or they did not correctly list all their arrests.

✓ At least one in every 13 officers was convicted of a misdemeanor before joining the force.

**THESE FACTS** raise questions about the integrity of some of the people who enforce the law in Pasco County and of the administrative ability of the sheriff's department to meet its own standard, which says that deputies must keep their lives "untainted as an example to all."

State Attorney James T. Russell must prosecute the cases made by Pasco deputies. When told the results of the *Times*' review of Pasco Sheriff's Department personnel, Russell said:

"I don't think that's right. I think the sheriff's office owes a duty to the county to be certain that the people who are the protectors of our society are qualified to do so. If what you are telling me is correct, the sheriff has an obligation to explain what he is doing."

On Feb. 14 and several times since, the *Times* asked Sheriff Short for an interview so that he could answer questions about his department and tell his side of the story.

Short refused. He asked a reporter to "put her questions in writing. I will respond in writing to the questions I wish to answer." The *Times* submitted 29 detailed questions to Short Wednesday morning. He refused to answer any of them. Because he has forbidden his employees to talk with the press, the *Times* asked for interviews with those to be mentioned in the stories printed today. A spokesman for Short said none of the people wanted to talk.

### 'Good moral character'

Before hiring anyone to be a law enforcement officer, the state demands that a police or sheriff's department certify that the applicant has been subject

More stories in the series, pages 6-B, 7-B.

Please see DEPUTIES, 8-B

31

## Deputies from 1-B

background investigation" and is "satisfied" that the person is of "good moral character."

The Pasco County Sheriff's Department made just such a certification when it hired:

✓ A former Monroe County deputy to work in the department's canine unit in 1982. The man had been charged with stealing the police dog he intended to use in Pasco County. The charges against him were dropped the day he started work after he agreed to pay for the dog. He is no longer a Pasco deputy.

✓ An auxiliary deputy who had been charged with armed robbery in neighboring Hillsborough County. The charges against him were dropped after he testified against a codefendant who received a 45-year prison term. The deputy, who is still on the force, did not tell the truth about his prior arrest record in a sworn affidavit filed with Florida's Police Standards and Training Commission.

An arrest or a conviction on most misdemeanor charges does not automatically exclude an applicant from consideration. But the state wants to know about it. (A felony conviction is grounds for exclusion, as is conviction on a misdemeanor involving "moral turpitude." Details of the state's requirements are in a story on Page 6-B.)

The *Times'* review found no Pasco sheriff's personnel with felony convictions.

**IN ADDITION** to their police records, applicants are asked about such things as whether they have ever been fired from a job or have a history of drug or alcohol abuse. Applicants must swear their answers are true.

But law enforcement agencies aren't supposed to take their word for it.

Everything from the applicants' age and physical condition to their fingerprints and police records are to be checked. Written explanations are required when, for instance, an applicant acknowledges having been arrested or fired from a job. The state suggests that agencies look at all available records, interview neighbors and associates and take "such other means necessary and proper to complete its investigation."

Then, somebody from the agency must certify that this was done.

### Background checks

The *Times* has found, however, that on numerous occasions, the background checks conducted by the Pasco County Sheriff's Department met neither the letter nor the spirit of the state requirements.

Some applicants were apparently subject to no background checks whatsoever.

One of those apparently was John T. Moorman, the millionaire part-time deputy who has helped Short profit from a series of real estate transactions.

Short signed a statement advising the state that he had conducted a background investigation and could vouch for Moorman's good moral character. But personnel files in Short's office include no background report.

The *Times* talked with Sheriff Gerry Coleman of Pinellas County, where Moorman was registered as an auxiliary deputy from Sept. 14, 1976 to June 16, 1977.

Coleman said Moorman was forced to resign after he abused his authority as a reserve deputy during a confrontation with Moorman's girlfriend and another man.

In 1980, Ronald Roppolo signed affidavits swearing that he had never been arrested or convicted of a crime. He was hired. The department's background check did not turn up two misdemeanor convictions in Pasco County, one of them just three months earlier. (See graphic, 1-B. Details, 1-B.)

**IN 1982**, Rick Parrillo swore on his application that he had never been arrested. His initial state certification was rejected when an arrest record was discovered. Parrillo then said that since the charges against him were later dismissed, he thought he had not been arrested. (Details, 6-B.)

(On the other hand, some applicants gave such detailed responses that they listed minor traffic violations and parking tickets under a portion of the form asking for a list of criminal arrests.)

While Sheriff Short is not talking, spokesmen for other departments say they take the background checks very seriously — especially when it comes to an applicant's arrest record.



St. Petersburg Times — JIM GOFF

Pasco County Sheriff John Short appears at a news conference shortly after an earlier story about his department was published in the *Times*.

Donahue was indicted on racketeering charges last year with alleged Mafia leader Santo Trafficante and others. Donahue was found dead, with a gunshot wound in his head, last April.

**IT WAS THE** Donahue case that led the *Times* to review the records of hundreds of men and women who carry guns and badges in Pasco County.

A *Times* reporter reviewed the records of more than 500 current and former deputies, corrections officers and auxiliary deputies hired by the Pasco County Sheriff's Department since John Short became sheriff in 1977. Those records are on file at the State Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission in Tallahassee. The *Times* also obtained from the sheriff's department the personnel files of about 200 employees.

The *Times* examined the employees' statements about their arrest records and compared them with public records in a number of Florida counties. While the *Times'* review was far more limited than a thorough background investigation, it does show that:

✓ At least 40 of the sworn personnel hired by Short had arrest records for misdemeanors and felonies at the time they were hired. The charges ranged from gambling and petty larceny to armed robbery. Twelve applicants, eight of them still on the force, had been arrested by the Pasco County Sheriff's Department, and a number of others had

arrest records in neighboring counties. Six of the 40 officers with arrest records left the department while the *Times* was examining their background.

✓ Nineteen of the 40 did not tell the truth about their arrest records on sworn applications on file in the department, or on affidavits filed with the state, or both.

✓ Twenty of the 40 were convicted or pleaded guilty to the charge for which they were arrested. The disposition of the charges against four others could not be determined.

There are about 195 sworn officers in the 360-person Pasco County Sheriff's Department. Of those 195 officers, the *Times'* investigation shows that on the force today are: at least 25 with previous arrest records; at least 14 who swore falsely on their applications that they had never been arrested or charged with a crime, or they failed to list all their arrests; at least 15 with previous misdemeanor convictions. (The actual figures could be much higher. The *Times* checked the arrests records of only about half the sworn personnel, and the check included records available in only a few Florida counties.)

The *Times'* review found that some of the references questioned during background investigations done by the sheriff's department were the fathers, brothers or other relatives of the applicants. The department sometimes ignored a state requirement to check with all other law enforcement agencies that employed the officer.

**IN ONE INSTANCE**, Roger Michels, the administrator who conducted many of the recent background investigations, was listed as a reference by an applicant. Michels listed himself on a document spelling out the results of the applicant's reference check. In effect, he interviewed himself. On the same document were the names of two of Michels' close friends. Based on those references and others, he hired the son of a third friend.

The problems at the Pasco County Sheriff's Department are not limited to personnel.

Sheriff Short has placed much of the real authority within the department in the hands of his former secretary, Donna Lewis, and Michels, a longtime friend and campaign worker.

When Short took office in 1977 he hired two respected police administrators, Maj. Gil Thivener, director of operations and Maj. Lee Henley, director of administrative services. Both men are still there, but often take a back seat when it comes to decision-making.

Mrs. Lewis, director of administration, and Michels, deputy director of administration, have no other law enforcement background or training. Short's increasing reliance on them has irritated some employees.

Short keeps a tight rein on the department and has threatened employees with polygraph tests and dismissal if they talk to outsiders, especially reporters.

Short's control of the department is bolstered by the fact that Florida law allows sheriffs to hire and fire their deputies at will.

Sheriff's deputies are exempt from the Policeman's Bill of Rights, a state law that gives municipal officers certain basic rights when they are confronted with adverse personnel decisions or dismissal.