

# He has seen sights calling for patience of Job

By JEANNE WHITTAKER

Officer George Darrell drove his truck into a subdivision. He had been directed by the hand signals of a driver headed in the opposite direction.

"Most often, they'll point to where the dogs are, then drive away quickly so no one will be able to say that they're the ones who called us," he said.

Ahead, past overturned garbage cans and attendant litter, stood the "pack" the animal control officer had been summoned to capture. In this case, the only culprit was a brindle mutt which took off like a shot at the sight of Darrell's truck.

The scene is virtually the same—a house with no fenced yard, a dog on the loose, and complaining neighbors watching from behind closed doors and windows—whether control officers are patrolling Birmingham or Walled Lake, Bloomfield Hills or Commerce.

OFFICER DARRELL is one of 10 officers who patrol more than 800 square miles of Oakland County. On an average day, he will drive 100-165

miles. Much of his time, he said, is spent driving in and out of subdivisions to answer complaints friends and neighbors lodge against one another.

Although the Oakland County Animal Control Center's primary responsibility is to prevent the spread of rabies, Darrell said his main job is to pick up strays, cajole owners into buying licenses, and all too often deliver the news that a lost animal has been killed by a car or truck.

"I take more abuse in one day than I did in six months before I took this job," said the five-year veteran officer when schoolchildren gestured obscene messages as he passed. There is no sense getting mad at them, he said, because they are only imitating what they have learned from their parents.

Officer Darrell believes that most people shouldn't be allowed to own pets. He has seen sights, he said, that call for all the control he can muster.

"As you can see," he said pointing about the truck, "we use no nets. There are no tranquilizer guns. Yet, I've seen people swear in court that we walked into their homes and took their animals."

Sometimes they'll bring a friend as

a witness. They know that we know that they are lying. But what can we do? The law says the crime has to be performed right in front of us to be a misdemeanor.

DARRELL'S MANNER indicates that he genuinely likes animals. When he stops to listen to complaints or pick up an animal, his only tools are a clipboard and a rope leash similar to a short lariat. Although he is an expert marksman, he said that he has used his regulation revolver fewer than four times in five years. His best weapon, he said, is bluff.

"It works better than a gun," he said wryly. Once he has gained control of the animal, it is put into the partitioned rear of the truck with a gentle word and an encouraging pat. Sometimes, while he drives he thinks about redesigning the truck to make the more comfortable for the frightened animals.

"All the officers like animals," said Chief Aldyn Carrell. "They know that it's not the dog's fault. I've always loved animals and that's why I'm hard on people."

"Do you know that I've taken fish hooks out of dogs' gums and tongues? In most cases, it's just plain neglect and stupidity that makes an animal a problem."

Darrell agrees. At a handsome tri-level home, he stood quietly talking

with a teenager about the family pet who was caught running loose through the subdivision. It was Darrell's second trip to the area that day. Across the street, the neighbor who lodged the complaint was listening behind the curtains.

Completing the conversation, Darrell handed the boy a tag on which he had neatly typed "Michigan law requires you to confine your dog to your own property at all times unless on a leash."

THE MESSAGE ANGERED the teenager. The conversation concluded with the boy hurling invectives after the departing officer.

"He wanted to know if I expected them to let the dog soil their own lawn," he explained wearily as he climbed back behind the wheel.

"After a while, they all begin to sound alike," he said. "Yes, we have a license. No, the tags are in a drawer someplace and I can't find them."

"Technically, I can take the dog. But I usually give them a warning and hope that they'll get the license."

At still another house, Darrell stood gingerly balancing his weight, hoping that the rotten floor would not give way beneath him. Again the license tags were missing, lost in the litter of filthy dishes and empty beer bottles.

Darrell asked two unkempt teenagers who would pay the fine if he

issued a citation. The two looked at one another for a moment then announced that their absent mother would.

"That poor woman is probably out trying to earn enough money to feed those two jokers," he said later in disgust.

"I sure as heck wasn't going to leave a \$20 ticket to a woman when it's probably all she's earned that day."

Another portion of his time is spent testifying in court. Too often, he said, he enters the court knowing that his case is lost before it begins.



Contrary to some popular rumors, when stray or lost pets are delivered to the Michigan Humane Society shelter in Pontiac Township, they are received with warm affection, fresh food and water. The Oakland County facility, which cares for animals gathered by the Oakland County Animal Control officers, estimates that it receives as many as 27,000 animals each year. (Staff photos by Stephen Cantrell)

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