

Getting drunk is easier than it feels



Lt. Frank Lauhoff of the Farmington Public Safety Department gives Observer reporter Craig Piechura some last minute instructions as the test begins.



Down goes the first of four two-ounce drinks...



Then a pause...



Finally, some notes about his reaction to the alcohol.

By Craig Piechura
staff writer

I had to get-drunk for work Wednesday. No joke. There are already too many jokes about drinking.

To see how many drinks it takes to be declared legally drunk and to find

out how one performs in that condition, John Richardson, former Farmington mayor, and I volunteered to participate in a controlled drinking experiment conducted Wednesday afternoon by the Farmington Police Department.

The setting for all this imbibing was the basement of the Salem Evangelical

United Brethren Church in downtown Farmington. At the controls of the Breathalyzer machine was Lt. Frank Lauhoff, Public Safety Director G. Robert Seifert lectured from the podium to members of the Farmington Exchange Club.

I fully expected to be jabbed in the

ribs by men wearing white shoes who'd say such an assignment was "nice work if you can get it — ha, ha." But most club members were seriously interested in the subject and asked the police chief good questions.

Under strict instructions from Seifert, neither Richardson nor I were allowed to eat anything while we drank. Earlier that day I'd eaten some Munchos potato chips washed down with a couple of cups of coffee. Richardson had eaten a Kellogg Pop Tart with his coffee prior to playing racquetball before going to work at the veterinary office.

WE HAD to pass up the ham and scalloped potatoes served to club members and I was probably fortunate that we did.

We downed our first two-ounce belt of booze at 12:03 p.m. It was the first of four drinks the two of us consumed in a span of about 45 minutes.

I was drinking double-shots of 86 proof Johnnie Walker Red scotch diluted with water and ice while Richardson opted for 100 proof Southern Comfort whiskey on the rocks.

I am 29 years old, 5-foot-11-inches tall and weigh 190 pounds.

Richardson is 49, 5-foot-8-inches tall and weighed in at 150 pounds.

At 1:10 p.m., eight ounces of alcohol later, Richardson tested .14 on the

Breathalyzer. Minutes later, I blew a reading of .11, one-tenth of a percentage point above the legal definition of drunk (.10 on the Breathalyzer). Twenty-five minutes later we were tested again. Richardson's blood/alcohol level had risen a percentage point to .15 while mine stayed even at an inebriated .11.

Studies done by Kemper Insurance company say the average adult eliminates only .015 percent of blood alcohol per hour after drinking. So, even at .11 it would be more than two hours before I would be below the legally "impaired" figure of .08 to legally drive. According to the Kemper figures, Richardson would not be able to drive for almost five hours.

Neither of us were obviously loaded. Richardson appeared to be a little more gregarious than normal and I might've been a little quieter than usual. However, insurance studies show a person could conceivably consume three-quarters of an ounce of whiskey an hour for 24 hours without ever becoming legally intoxicated.

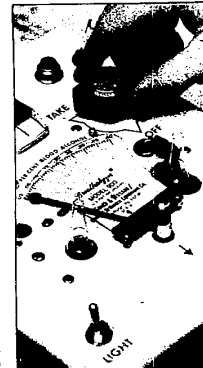
The test results which showed both of us over the legal limit caused club member Roger Walker to comment:

"WHAT BOTHERS ME is these fellows, really in spite of the test, they, to me, are not drunk."

Seifert agreed that although both of us were well over the legal limit we

wouldn't be called "drunk" at a party or a bar.

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The Breathalyzer is an extremely accurate instrument.

Majority of drivers tested surpass minimum legal limit

The average reading for Michigan drivers tested with the Breathalyzer machine in 1981 was .17, well over the legal limit for drunkenness and more than twice the level of alcohol required to be judged impaired.

To put this in perspective, in the controlled drinking experiment conducted Wednesday, two subjects drank eight ounces of alcohol — four double-shots — in an hour's time and neither had reached .15 ratio of alcohol in their blood.

The Michigan State Police Department recently compiled totals for 1981 of all drivers given Breathalyzer tests. Results show that 55,014 persons were tested and even though 11,944 persons refused to take the test, 30,342 drivers

tested .15 or above — some registering readings higher than .35, which requires hospitalization.

The statistical breakdown, provided by Judy McNitt, departmental analyst in the traffic section of the Michigan State Police headquarters in Lansing, said 1,617 tested in the legal range of .0 to .07. Another 1,089 tested in the impaired range of .08 to .09. The number jumped to 10,022 testing in the .10 to .14 range.

The vast majority of these given Breathalyzer exams tested above .15. Almost three-fifths of all arrested — 30,342 persons — registered .15 or above, said McNitt.

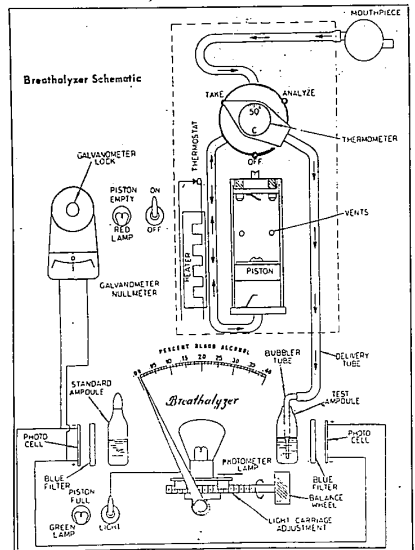
State Sen. Doug Ross (D-Southfield), who represents the communities of

Southfield, Farmington, Farmington Hills and Lathrup Village, says alcohol-related accidents kill an average of three people in Michigan every day.

MORE THAN 25,000 persons were injured by drinking drivers in 1980 in Michigan alone. Nationally, someone is killed every 23 minutes in the United States in an alcohol-related auto accident, Ross reports.

The state senator is seeking to enforce stiffer penalties for convicted drunk drivers including mandatory minimum jail sentences ranging from two days to 90 for first-time offenders convicted of driving under the influence. Currently no minimum is proscribed.

How it works: The arrested driver blows deeply into the mouthpiece. The breath is stored in a chamber before being released into the test ampoule. Both the test and standard ampoules contain the same color chemical. When the breath is released into the test ampoule the amount of alcohol present causes a change of color in the liquid. The amount of color change is registered by a photoelectric cell, which compares the amount of light passing through the test and standard ampoules. This causes electric current to flow into the galvanometer which moves the needle off center. The operator then moves the Breathalyzer to center the galvanometer needle. When this occurs the Breathalyzer needle is then pointing to the amount of blood alcohol present.



Craig Piechura (left) and John Richardson share some comments during the experiment.



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