Interview for Charles Herbert McMichen in Two Parts
January 23, 2017
Waverly, Georgia
Interviewer: Dr. Michael Van Wagenen
Transcription: James C. Wright

Part One

00:01 Charles Herbert McMichen started law enforcement in 1965 with the Clayton County Sheriffs Office. He also worked for the Fayette County Sheriffs Office and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. He served in the Organized Crime Information Center for 12 years. By the time cancer caught him, Charles had been in law enforcement altogether for 49 years.

00:49 Charles grew up poor with two brothers and two sisters, but did not know they were poor because his neighborhood’s income was generally equal. His father worked at a rock quarry in Tyrone, Georgia. Throughout middle and high school, Charles did not know what vocation he wanted to enter until he wound up in law enforcement.

01:23 Charles became interested in law enforcement at the birth of his daughter when he needed a regular, decent-paying job. His first law enforcement job was with the Clayton County Sheriffs Office, where he worked from 1965 to 1967. He then transferred to the Fayette County Sheriffs Office. At that time, Fayette County did not incorporate Peachtree City. In fact, it only had three officers: the Sheriff, chief deputy, and Charles as “the Indian.”

02:03 State Patrol occasionally came through Fayette County, but Charles and his two coworkers handled every police need in the county. That included traffic accidents, homicides, robberies, drugs, and illegal moonshine operations. Moonshine was rampant during Charles’s tenure there.

02:25 In 1971, Charles had an opportunity to apply for the GBI. He started as an undercover narcotic agent. There were about 30 narcotic GBI agents throughout Georgia at that time. Charles calls those days “good times.”

02:48 1971 was an early period of the narcotic trade. Atlanta’s Tenth Street was active, and pot festivals were frequent.

03:11 Narcotic agents traveled throughout the state. At the time, GBI was still under the Georgia State Patrol. Therefore, at the institution of the GBI drug task force, some GSP vehicles were sent to Alto prison to be painted solid blue by inmates for the drug force. The dark blue cars were meant to be for undercover use, but a careful eye could still make out “GSP” on the side of the vehicles. Drug officers were quick to make arrests of offenders who had vehicles the officers could impound and use for their operations instead of the repainted GSP cruisers.
Charles gained much experience in the GBI’s drug enforcement and investigation fields. He attended the FBI National Academy in 1973 in their 94th session (class), compared to their current (as of 2017) over 300th session. At the time, the Academy only ran two sessions per year and selected 2-4 candidates from each state to attend, so Charles considered it a privilege to attend the school.

When he arrived at the Academy, Charles informed the school that he had been on the cover of the FBI magazine in March 1969. He was a Fayette County deputy attending FBI fingerprint training in Atlanta when they were conducting a photo shoot for their magazine. He returned to the Academy in 1975 for SWAT training, and was the first GBI sniper.

Charles left the GBI to work for the Regional Organized Crime Information Center, sharing intelligence across law enforcement agencies. Charles returned to the FBI Academy again in April 2009 to teach a class. Charles noted it was nearly the exact month of 40 years since he first had training with the FBI.

Charles experienced a variety of cases including narcotics and bank robberies.

Charles has many memorable cases. One example is the S&S truck stop in Tallapoosa, Georgia. The station was selling black RJS amphetamine pills. Charles obtained and drove a tractor-trailer truck to the site with his supervisor, Phil Peters, and partner, Jimmy Davis, hidden in the back cab. Peters and Davis photographed the site through a small port window of the back cab.

Charles used the registered driver license photo of Wayne Wall to identify his suspect. Wall was known to give out special cards to people who must present the card back to him when they wanted to buy pills. Cards were distributed by acquaintance. Charles obtained a card through search warrant and seizure of an acquaintance of Wall’s. Charles hoped that in using the seized card, Wall would not remember every individual he gave cards to. Charles entered the truck stop diner and played “Ease 11” on the jukebox, then sat and ordered a meal.

Wall passed Charles so he called out, “Wayne, you been losing weight?” Charles took advantage of courtesy reticence in Wall’s not knowing who Charles was. Charles asked to buy some of Wall’s “special hamburgers” and presented the card to him. Wall replied, “how many do you want?” Charles then started to purchase pills from Wall. He collected approximately 3,000 pills before arresting Wall.

Charles felt privileged to be in amphetamines because he did not have to actually use drugs to convince dealers, as compared to agents of marijuana, cocaine, and LSD. Amphetamine did not require customers to try the product before leaving, but simply wanted customers to buy and leave swiftly.
One of Charles’s first cases was in Americus, Georgia. Phil Peters received a lead on a man who designed a pill press and was making amphetamine pills in his home. The CI (criminal informant) advised the officers to act drunk when they arrived to purchase pills. Peters and Charles bought a six-pack of beer and spilled some on themselves to sell the image. The CI escorted Peters and Charles to the house and talked with the suspect, who despite being friendly persistently refused to discuss drugs. The group kept hearing gunshots and inquired, to which the suspect responded that nearby farmers are always shooting something. Empty handed, Peters and Charles returned to their surveillance team and found them actively shooting beer cans.

Peters and Charles decided to prowl the house after dark. They heard the rhythmic ticking of the press and immediately sought a search warrant from a judge. They returned to the house at 3am and searched the premises. However, they could not find a single clue of any type of drugs anywhere in the house. They could still hear the rhythmic ticking and followed it to a windmill. The team exited the premises quickly.

Charles felt that every time he visited the FBI Academy, he learned useful intelligence.

Upon returning from the Academy, Charles received a case of a significant bank robbery in Molena, Pike County, Georgia. Robbers broke into the bank president’s home and held his family hostage in exchange for the bank’s safety deposit boxes. However, the effected bank did not have any safety deposit boxes, so the robbers had to alter their plans. They planned to post outside the bank and rob it the following morning at opening.

The robbery leader, a known Dixie Mafia kingpin, purchased an old Georgia State Trooper vehicle as a getaway car in order to blend in with police units. Unfortunately, they parked the vehicle too far from the bank, about forty miles, so after successfully holding up the bank and forcing the bank manager to drive them back to their getaway car there was already a police description of the manager’s vehicle on the radio.

Charles was working with the GBI at that time and was notified by the sheriff that the robbers were traveling north on I-85 toward Charles’s area. Charles and the sheriff planned roadblocks and deduced that the manager’s vehicle turned off at an exit. They caught up to the car as the robbers were transferring into their old GSP getaway vehicle.

Authorities chased the robbers into the woods and searched/engaged the suspects for three days. Upon apprehension, it was discovered that A.D. Allen, a Dixie Mafia leader, was among the suspects (see https://casetext.com/case/allen-v-state-1534). Charles also found a used 16 gauge shotgun shell in the trunk of the getaway car.
Charles recognized ejection markings on the shell, which he learned from FBI school. He sent the shell to the crime lab and was informed that the shell matched a casing from another bank robbery in South Carolina. The shells were analyzed and positively connected the two bank robberies together.

Despite not having the shotgun, the shell case evidence was enough to convict the robbers of both crimes. However, during the hearings the suspects were threatening the families of the jailers. The suspects were transferred to Clayton County, where the wife and daughter of a local minister were kidnapped. The suspects claimed responsibility and threatened to kill the minister’s family if they were not set free. The GBI investigated and tracked the kidnappers to Dublin, Georgia. The GBI rescued the victims but were unable to catch the kidnappers. However, the kidnappers became concerned that a few of their party may inform the police and killed some party members during their escape to Florida.

Charles and the GBI were able to identify all the kidnappers and eventually detained them. The suspects were transferred back to Pike County jail. Allen started to write down testimonies that he wanted his witnesses to state, which placed blame for the robbery on the other suspects.

During Allen’s composition, some of the papers accidentally landed in another detainee’s cell. The detainee paid a person to make copies of the testimonies and slipped the originals back into Allen’s cell so he was unaware of the copies, which ended up in Charles’s possession.

Charles and the District Attorney had a list of witnesses that they conducted background checks of before court. They waited for the first witness to state exactly what he was told to by Allen, and then exposed him for perjury. The District Attorney pressed charges for false statements under oath. The following day, none of the other witnesses on Allen’s list arrived to court.

As the first GBI sniper, Charles attended special training with four other agents. Charles refers to the training as rough. Their instructor, Yogi, had been a Marine sniper instructor. While training at Parris Island in the swamp, Yogi got sick and had to resign his position. He was then hired to train snipers by the FBI.

Charles’s sniper class ran the Marine obstacle course three times a day. They were very fit. They also trained to spot hiding suspects through their scopes.

Scopes are efficient at locating people behind bushes. The Texas shooter was aware of that fact and used it maliciously.

Upon graduation, Charles was the first GBI sniper in Georgia. His first assignment was in Meriwether County, where a suspect shot a policeman. The suspect barricaded himself in a house. The Sheriff and Charles made an execution
plan for the suspect, entailing the Sheriff distracting the suspect by microphone while Charles obtained a clear shot.

24:02 However, despite antagonizing the suspect via microphone, the suspect never approached a window or door. Officers threw teargas into the house. Charles then spotted movement and zoomed in his scope, discovering that the Sheriff penetrated and entered the house under cover of the gas. Charles was in command of the SWAT team and used this incident as a lesson to his subordinates—always have positive identification of the suspect. Had Charles not double-checked his target he could have “shot the sheriff.”

25:06 Charles was fortunate that he never had to actively fire at a suspect as a sniper. His command of the SWAT team lasted several years.

25:32 Charles had a bad case involving the training of a young deputy sheriff. The deputy was on patrol one night and stopped a vehicle for speeding. The driver was a Vietnam veteran who was angry after an argument with his mother.

26:01 The driver became belligerent with the deputy, claiming “I was defending the country while you were still in diapers so you cannot tell me what to do. I have a gun in my truck; I’m going to load it and shoot you.” As the man returned to his truck and loaded his rifle, the deputy did not try to stop him. Instead, the deputy returned to his cruiser and radioed for help. The driver opened fire on the deputy.

26:52 Charles notes that when he started law enforcement in the 1960s, officers had a duty to detain and bring suspects to court by force. Suspects could voluntarily comply with officers or they would get shot. Today, soft-handed methods of detaining suspects have evolved into such tools as mace, spray, Tasers, and rubber bullets.

27:47 Charles uses the case of this deputy as an example of what not to do. Upon a suspect telling an officer he has a gun and intends to use it, the officer should not allow the suspect to return to his vehicle. The deputy should have used the soft tools at his disposal to control the suspect. The driver and the deputy exchanged fire and grazed each other. Charles further notes that military personnel are better at weapon engagement because officers are trained to fire from a stationary position, whereas the military is trained to shoot and move. Mobility is a significant advantage in a firefight.

28:46 The deputy was wounded in an area in front of his dash camera. The veteran stood over the deputy and was going to kill him, but the deputy begged for his life. That persuaded the veteran to have mercy on the deputy and turn to leave. However, once the veteran’s back was turned the deputy fired again and missed. The veteran then lost his compassion and killed the deputy. He returned home. Charles’s SWAT team responded to the veteran’s house and infiltrated it, but he was gone. A search ensued.
29:42 Helicopters with heat detection were used in urban areas and the surrounding woods to no avail. All roads were well covered, so officers knew the veteran had not escaped; he was still hiding in the area.

30:06 Officers noticed the veteran’s dog near a wood line and knew that dogs tend to linger with their owners. Officers followed the dog to a semi-bunker of tin that disguised body heat and reflected the surrounding environment.

30:37 Charles once worked a case where he was the HIC. A man in Valdosta was hiring an assassin to kill a DNR ranger. The man was a known poacher who had no regard for seasons or hunting regulations. The poacher and ranger had a firefight in which the poacher was injured. The ranger shot the poacher with a high-powered rifle. The poacher survived and sued the state and local authorities unsuccessfully. In losing his lawsuit, the poacher decided to have the ranger assassinated.

31:31 The poacher informed several people, who in turn contacted the GBI. Charles was sent to investigate as an undercover hitman. Charles convinced the poacher he was the assassin for the job. He asked the poacher how he wanted the murder conducted, to which the poacher stated “I want him shot with a high-powered rifle, that way everyone will know it was me.” Charles pointed out that if everyone knows it was the poacher, the sheriff would surely come for him. The poacher responded “they’ll never get anything out of me.” Charles chuckles because he was recording the conversation by wire.

32:22 Charles asked for a map to the ranger’s house, to which the poacher drew him a detailed sketch on notebook paper. Charles started to take it, but the poacher stopped him and told Charles to draw his own map.

33:06 Charles asked for a coke. While the poacher left to the kitchen, Charles took the sheet of paper under the poacher’s sketch and put it in his pocket. Charles hoped the lab would be able to analyze the poacher’s sketch indentation from the top page. When the poacher returned, Charles continued by drawing his own map.

Part Two

00:01 The poacher planned to create a good alibi by being at the sheriff office yelling at the officers while Charles would kill the ranger. Charles asked what the poacher wanted done to the ranger’s wife. The poacher said that she had been a “bitch” and to kill her too.

00:40 Charles notes that the ranger’s wife was a local schoolteacher who was well liked in the community, so the poacher’s case was less sympathetic to the jury in the impending prosecution.
Normally, Charles would back out of these kinds of agreements as a means of escape, but decided for this situation to simply tell the poacher, “once I walk out that door, we don’t know each other. We will not contact one another. When I leave, this is a done deal. Are you sure this is what you want?” The poacher confirmed his desire and Charles left. Authorities arrested him shortly thereafter. The recorded conversation forced the poacher to confess in court.

Interviewer question: You started your law enforcement career in the mid-1960s amidst Civil Rights movements. How have you witnessed the cultural change in law enforcement?

Charles participated in many of the marches, usually undercover. He was present at the march of Jose in Cummins, Georgia, along with several other undercover officers. Their goal was to identify persons of potential violence. If a protestor admitted they had a gun, undercover officers communicated that to nearby state troopers who would detain the protestor and drive away without disturbing the march.

Law enforcement kept check and internal intelligence on Civil Rights events. There was a lot of unrest. When undercover officers first arrived at the Jose march, protestors were throwing rocks. Despite cold and snow, officers continued to march with the movement.

“It was a time when they were trying to express their thoughts and we were trying to protect them from the inside.”

Charles feels that Civil Rights did not cause division in law enforcement. Most officers did not know what was happening, much like drug dealers. Charles jests about undercover officers who feigned desire to purchase dope in crowds and talked dealers into selling near a van. Once the dealer showed his drugs, 4-5 officers would pull him into the van and drive him away as the crowd was unaware what was happening.

Atlanta’s Tenth Street was a big deal back then. In one instance, Charles talked to a dealer that claimed he knew a place where they could buy any drug they wanted. Charles talked the dealer into the cleaned and altered police van to travel to the dealer’s source for business. It was 3am.

Upon arrival at a house, one of the undercover officers feigned illness so he could explore the house for a search warrant later. A hidden police radio chatted and was exposed to the dealer. Charles swiftly explained that he had to track police location and activity. The dealer thought it was a “cool” idea and proceeded with the drug deal.

“People’s greed takes over.”
Law enforcement changed with the Miranda rights and warning. Officers thought that would be the end of law enforcement at the time. However, Charles believes that helping a person to defend their rights is the right thing to do.

“It’s like an old bootlegger.” If caught properly and legally, suspects held no ill feelings of vengeance or retaliation. Illegal alcohol smugglers were good people just trying to supplement income for their family. Today, gangs and violent criminals threaten officers and their families in revenge for getting arrested.

Violent criminals today devalue human life. That devaluation has become popular in society, especially in entertainment. Children play violent video games where shooting people is common and glorified, which desensitizes them to violence and makes them more prone to committing violence.

Charles believes that law enforcement today is excessively difficult. He worries for officers still working on the streets now.

Interviewer question: Any final words for viewers or researchers?

The great majority of law enforcement officers are there to protect people “on both sides.” They learn the law and enforce the law, but operate in the middle ground of innocent and criminal civilians. Society cannot last long without them.

It may be found in the future that young people can take a pill and mellow out, then they would stop being so angry at the world. They don’t realize that there are murderers and people with homicidal intentions in the community.

Charles believes that an armed populace can help stop public shooters. Most public shooters engage in crowded places, so armed citizens can assist with stopping or slowing down active criminals. The right of a citizen to carry a gun helps protect innocent people and the citizens themselves.

End of interview.