

## Elkhart: River Patrol returns to Upper St. Joe



Truth Photo By Chris Mackler Safe: Elkhart River Patrol officer Tom Shoff (right) talks to Konrad and Brenda Seifert about boating safety Monday on the St. Joseph River.180463 Truth Staff

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by: Truth Staff

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ELKHART -- When Tom Shoff and his wife, Martha, sit on their patio facing the Upper St. Joseph River, they hear boats before they can see them coming around the bend.

"We'll hear one coming down the river at full speed. They'll get to this boathouse and go neerohmp," Shoff imitates the sound of a motor slowing down. When the boaters are out of sight, he says, they take off again.

Shoff is a River Patrol officer. After a seven-year hiatus, he's only been out patrolling by boat since June. Still, people on the river know who he is, and that they should behave when he's around. His job is to keep the river safe.

He's only on duty during the weekend, and during the week he works full-time at his home security business, Shoff Security Systems. But he's lived on the river all his life and patrolled it for the first time in 1974 as a 14-year-old cadet.

And it was Shoff who initiated a regular patrol in 1996 after the women's Olympic rowing team used the river for practice, requiring river security. He stayed on until there wasn't room in the police budget anymore and the program was cut in 2000.

As a marine officer, his primary concerns are unsafe or reckless operation of watercraft, out-of-date registrations and licenses, floating obstructions that could cause accidents and stranded boaters. Other problems he often encounters include river pollution and waterfowl safety.

Leslie Sackett lives on the river near Martin's Landing and occasionally sees watercraft operators chasing down swans. On the first weekend Shoff patrolled this summer, she ran into him and pointed out the personal watercraft she'd seen.

"He went and had a nice chat with them," Sackett said. "And it's been much quieter since."

Mostly she appreciates the feeling of safety his presence brings.

"I like to know that when I see dangerous and hurtful behavior exhibited by boats on the river, that there is someone I can call who can and will investigate that," she said.

Anyone who breaks a boating or other law can receive citations, but Shoff says he goes out of his way to avoid that. He only gave five citations throughout the time he patrolled in the '90s.

Still, over the years he's had a number of unusual incidents that spice up his days. He found three men with warrants out on them while checking for fishing licenses. And occasionally, if a lawbreaker is running from street officers and finds his or her way to the river, Shoff is able to act as reinforcement.

But Shoff does the job because he wants people to be safe, and he wants to give back to Elkhart.

"I'm not out here to ruin anybody's fun," he said.

As a police reserve, the 350 hours Shoff puts in each season are unpaid. Plus, in 2001, he retired with 20 1/2 years of service behind him.

"I had given all of my equipment away, thinking that part of my life was over with," Shoff said.

But Police Chief Dale Pflibsen and Mayor Dick Moore, who lives on the river, decided the program should be started again. They asked Shoff to come out of retirement, at least for a while.

"We certainly couldn't afford to be taking officers off the street and putting them on the river," Pflibsen said. "When we approached Tom about coming back, he was willing to do that and we greatly appreciate that."

"I told them no three times," Shoff said.

But he finally agreed on the fourth request when he realized no one else was jumping up to do it.

Pflibsen is thankful for the experience Shoff brings to the work and that he's willing to donate his time.

"He does a real good job with it," Pflibsen said.

It's likely that not many people would be willing to do what he's done for the program. He pulled the old boat, donated by Godfrey Marine in 1996, out of police storage, but otherwise everything he needs he purchases himself, including gasoline, and -- "I had to buy my own gun," Shoff said.

He's spent about \$3,000 so far. Not one taxpayer dollar has been used.

He says he'll continue the job as long as he's having fun, but it's also important to him that it's accomplishing something.

So he writes down the name and address of everyone he stops and asks Chief Pflibsen to send them a letter requesting feedback. It's a letter Shoff composed himself, asking about his demeanor, the usefulness of the program and giving the opportunity for questions or concerns.

He was fully expecting at least a handful of negative responses.

"But no, everything's been positive," he said.

Most, like Sackett, say how much they appreciate having him back on the water.

"It gives me great peace of mind," Sackett said. "I don't want to see people killed and I don't want to see wildlife killed."

Pflibsen wants the program to expand to the Lower St. Joe, but there's no room in the budget for another boat.

Shoff's been in discussion with Godfrey Marine for that very reason and just last week the business said it might have another boat to donate to the cause.

Soon he'd like to start patrolling evenings and he hopes boaters continue to be aware of his presence.

"Most importantly, I want boaters to know I am here to help them," Shoff said.

Sackett knows, and appreciates it.

"I really commend and respect him for that," Sackett said. "It's a huge public service, commitment and gift."

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