

Reedsburg's Silent Policeman

by Bill Schuette

Before the days of the automobile, horse and buggy drivers pretty much drove where they pleased, obeying rudimentary traffic rules. Generally, horses themselves would not run into each other, regardless of the lack of attention being paid by their driver. There were no one-way streets around the turn of the 20th Century, and traffic laws were still in their infancy. If drivers kept to the right, few problems occurred.

However, with the advent of the newfangled gasoline-powered automobiles which came upon the scene during the early 1900s, drivers of both horses and autos became much more aware of the problems which arose when they met, many times with disastrous results.

Horse owners complained of the high speeds that autos drove—up to 20 miles per hour! —and the noisy engines which spooked their horses. To accommodate and protect the horse teams, proper etiquette dictated that cars must keep to the right of center, and not exceed a 6 mile per hour when turning street corners.

But how far right, was right? Some vehicles would cut a corner, thereby traveling into the oncoming lane with potential diestrus results. Intersections were the worst where four streets met. Few, if any, stop signs existed then, so who had the right-of-way?

Instead of having a traffic officer at each busy intersection directing traffic, the problem was solved with the installation of what was then called a “Silent Policeman”. It consisted of a cement pillar about 5 feet high, usually with a shiny globe on top. The globe was sometimes lit up at night for better visibility. It was understood that, upon entering an intersection, drivers must always keep to the right of the Silent Policeman if they were going straight. If a driver wished to make a 90-degree left-hand turn at an intersection for instance, the driver would have to circle the pillar on the right side then turn left and exit on the desired street. It was a type of “roundabout” commonly used in Europe at the time.

These silent policemen eventually became obsolete in the late 1920s as horse teams became fewer, and automobiles became more abundant. This Silent Policeman no longer exists.

(Photo caption: This Silent Policeman was located at the intersection of East Main and Water (now Webb) Streets. The 33W indicates it was on Highway 33.