

# The Pueblo Chieftain

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## FIGHTING A LONG WAR



JOHN ERCUL

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### *Officers hoped drug use was passing phase*

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By PETER STRESCINO  
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

It was one of the most surprising developments Pueblo Police Department Deputy Chief John Ercul had seen on the job in 38 years.

The breadth and depth of the involvement of South High School students in a recent drug operation staggered Ercul, who has worked the city's streets since January 1970.

Ercul and former Pueblo police officers John Koncilja and Les Tuell all say the widespread use of illegal drugs, pharmaceuticals and over-the-counter drugs is something that early in their careers they didn't think they would witness. The three have combined for more than 125 years of police work.

"I was surprised at the extent the kids were involved," Ercul said of the recent police investigation. "We were surprised there were major pushers at the school, who had some major contacts."

He said he cannot recall a large-scale drug bust at any other Pueblo high school. "We made 16 arrests (in the January raids) and six or eight were South kids. We got just a percentage of those actually involved."

Tuell, who now works as an investigator in District Attorney Bill Thiebaut's office, began as a Pueblo police officer in 1959 after four years as a fingerprint analyst at the FBI.

"When I started on the beat, basically, there was marijuana, and quite a bit of it," said Tuell, who later worked as a U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency officer in Germany, Mexico, New York City and Albuquerque, N.M. "But a bust of only a few ounces was a large bust to us.

"But it progressed from the early '60s on. When my dad worked for the railroad, he said marijuana grew wild all along the tracks. By the early '60s, they were shipping it up from Mexico."

It wasn't long before Tuell left to work for the federal anti-drug efforts. He returned to Pueblo in 2005.

Koncilja, who is Thiebaut's chief investigator, began as a Pueblo cop in 1962. He said he helped establish the first narcotics team on the force, and has been dealing with drugs and drug issues for more than 40 years.

"In the early '60s, people were bringing in large quantities of marijuana from Mexico. Heroin was around, but the largest quantities were pot," Koncilja said.

"There were a lot of connections. There was a guy in Pueblo who brought in a lot between here and the (Mexican) border and then shipped it to Chicago. He was known as 'The Phantom.' This was about 1964-65," Koncilja recalled recently. "(U.S.) Customs conveyed a large amount to him on the (St. Charles) Mesa, and there were federal agents riding in the truck. They got him dirty, with weed and money."

Koncilja can recall names, places, even the weather the day of a bust.

"I remember we made what we called a big bust then on Summit and Evans on a brutally hot day in 1962. We pulled a guy over and something bothered me. We did a little searching and got 20 joints, and the guy paid a hefty fine, but he could have gone to prison. You could have gone to prison for a single marijuana cigarette then.

"Another bust resulted from a telegram we intercepted, which said, 'The grass is green and will be cut soon.' We also did wiretaps and got about 8 pounds of heroin in the mid-'60s."

Koncilja said drug use wasn't widespread then. There was no drug culture. It was not well-accepted.

He said he remembers a tobacco product, Asthmador, made for asthmatics, that claimed it was medically treated. "The kids made tea out of it and it really made them hallucinate."

And another over-the-counter product caused problems.

"There were Valo inhalers, where if you broke them open and soaked the cotton in water, and shot it, it was a good substitute for heroin."

But in the mid-'60s, with the Vietnam War raging, political instability and assassinations and the rise of the counterculture, "the attitude was beginning to be that you didn't hurt anyone by doing drugs," Koncilja said. "That's a fallacy. We're paying for that attitude now."

Toward the late 1960s, crystal meth, or speed, started to appear on the streets. "Boulder was known as 'Crystal City,' " Koncilja said.

Ercul graduated from Central High School in 1965. He said there was a minuscule population of known drugs users, but such behavior then was unacceptable to most.

"We had 3.2 (percent alcohol) beer," he said. That level of beer was legal in Colorado to those older than 18 until 1987, when Colorado bowed to the federal threat of withheld highway funds if the state kept the 20-and-younger law. "We could go to Bucky's (where the Park East restaurant is now) and drink beer. But in 1965, we didn't have a drug culture and didn't know the language.

"Now, there's a widespread drug culture and even the good kids who don't use know who does, where to get drugs and they all speak the language, whether they use it or not."

That small percentage of '60s drug users was about to grow exponentially, even in isolated Pueblo.

"In the late '60s, kids were starting to drop acid (LSD), take speed and smoke marijuana," Koncilja said. "I thought in 1968, 'Is this going to go any further?' "

Koncilja said officers were trying to get drugs off the streets. It was a trying time, but he was determined.

"People made fun of us," he said of police efforts. "I felt sorry for the kids. We were sworn to protect them whether they wanted that protection or not."

He recalled a state-unit drug bust that he took part of in Westcliffe.

"We heard there was a big LSD party out there, and we caught a number of them. They were really hitting (the acid) hard. Two (partygoers) were really high and took off into the woods. We were worried they'd get killed, because it was deer-hunting season. But they were taunting us, yelling from the woods, 'Johnny K. come and get me!' "

Koncilja caught them.

Ercul remembered a party in Beulah before he turned 18 where there was a lot of beer, which some would term a more innocent form of entertainment than an acid party. But when the police came, Ercul, the future cop, "ran about a mile into the woods. That killed my taste for beer for a while."

Koncilja became involved in more state-level drug enforcement in the early 1970s, and began having doubts that the widening use of drugs was a short-term phenomenon.

"(Officers on the state task force) started swapping stories. I knew then we were in it for the long haul," he said.

About that time, Ercul became a member of the police force here.

"The general use of marijuana was really becoming more acceptable when I started," he said, "even though possession was a felony. Possession of a small amount now amounts to a traffic ticket. Then, there was some acid, although I think Pueblo was behind the national curve on that, and a lot of heroin. Every cop on the force knew every heroin addict."

Ercul said the cocaine boom began to take root here in the mid-1970s, but he said he didn't see much coke use among high-school students until the late 1970s.

"I also don't recall much crack (cocaine concentrated and smoked, producing a much faster, deeper high) in high schools, either."

In fact, he said, while drugs have been used by high school-age kids for decades now, its acceptance level is by far at an all-time high.

"In the '70s, we worried about pot and cocaine. In the '80s, there was crack and, to a lesser degree than now, prescription drugs. That was also true for much of the 1990s, and then methamphetamine came in. But this was all among the general, older population. Kids in high school did drugs, no doubt, but not on the scale of today."

In fact, Koncilja said, he was more worried about cocaine and marijuana use in the 1970s among professionals, including members of Pueblo's two local governmental bodies.

"In the mid-1970s, coke was rampant, heroin in decline," Koncilja said, "especially among professionals. It got to the point that lawyers, doctors were smoking pot and taking cocaine. I was aware of people in both local governments who were chronic marijuana users."

"We were able to add a few people to the local unit to combat it. And Major (William) Hurley (a top police official then) never allowed us to ignore the small quantities. If we busted you, we gave you the opportunity to cooperate. Hurley came up with the idea of cash fines, hit them in the pocketbook."

Despite Hurley's good intentions about assessing fines in lieu of imprisonment for possession of small amounts, Koncilja said that may have been a mistake.

"Denver police made pot a low priority," Koncilja said, illustrating his opinion. "That's a bad idea. When you ignore, you're encouraging."

All three cops, who continue the battle on some level, said the scope, depth and acceptance of drug use among the population in general is sad.

"I never thought it would get this bad," said Tuell, who worked in New York City during the days of drug kingpin Frank Lucas, now the subject of the movie "American Gangster."

"People say enforcement does not correct the problem. But how bad would it be without it?"

"Not long ago, we busted a kid who had a ton of prescription drugs around a school," Ercul said. "He was giving pills away, partly to be accepted. He was stealing the pills from his sick mother.

"What was not prevalent or accepted before is now generally acceptable. Now, anything goes."

Koncilja said the acceptance of marijuana fuels the problem.

"The door-opener to drug use is pot. It's still the leading drug," he said. "It's a far more accepted behavior now.

"I had hoped it was a passing fad," he concluded. "I was terribly wrong."

CHIEFTAIN PHOTO ILLUSTRATION/MIKE SWEENEY This is a collage of drugs that have been abused over the years.



