

## The Insider

### Cop Caper

The curious legend of Otzelberger Park. by Leah Dobkin

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Leo Otzelberger was the only cop in Milwaukee history to have a park named after him. Well, sort of.

Certain facts are clear. Otzelberger was 6-foot-1 and 300 pounds, and could be a little scary to citizens and fellow cops. Officer Marvin Palk, who was supervised by Otzelberger, recalls their first meeting. "He was very gruff. He sounded like a mean, mean man. But he was really a pussycat, a great guy. A voice like gravel, but gentle as a lamb."

Otzelberger was born in Milwaukee on July 17, 1890, and joined the police force in 1917, becoming one of its first motorcycle cops.

"He was way too big for that motorcycle," retired officer Howard Maney remembers. "They had to make a special bench seat for him, but he was still too wide and his butt spilled over each side."

Otzelberger proudly helped escort such dignitaries as General Douglas MacArthur and Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy. By his retirement in 1962 at age 71, Otzelberger was a legend, one of the oldest and longest-tenured police officers in history. So his colleagues wanted to show their admiration.

The legend goes that there was an Otzelberger Park on Milwaukee's Northwest Side. While it wasn't named for Leo, according to retired cop Rudy Will, one day a group of police officers stole the park's sign and hung it from a tree in the little grassy area behind the old 3rd Precinct (47th and Vliet Street), where Otzelberger ate his lunch every day. And so it became "Otzelberger Park" from 1962 and into the 1990s, finally disappearing in 2001, when the station moved to its current location at 49th Street and Lisbon Avenue.

However, neither the Wisconsin Historical Society nor Milwaukee County Parks Department has any record of an Otzelberger Park. So the origin of the sign remains a mystery.

Today, the wooden placard is in the possession of Leo's great nephew, Detective Brian Otzelberger, and the old "Otzelberger Park" sits overgrown. Some retired officers would like to rededicate it, but given that the park was never dedicated to begin with, they've encountered obstacles.

But they may keep trying because, heck, old Leo was unforgettable. "He was like a father figure," says officer Rocky Todd. "He would take care of us."