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August Vollmer biography explores famous police chief's UC Berkeley ties

New book tracks the extraordinary life of a man with an elementary school education who became a Berkeley professor and police chief and criminal justice pioneer

By [Gretchen Kell](#)



This well-known photo of Vollmer is on the cover of Oliver's book and shows the police chief at work around 1925.

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With police-citizen encounters a hot topic, Willard Oliver's new book is timely — and has UC Berkeley roots. August Vollmer: The Father of American Policing is a biography of Vollmer (1876-1955), Berkeley's first police chief and founder of the campus's old criminology department. Vollmer's own education consisted of just a few years in elementary school, but his humanitarian and progressive efforts to improve policing — including putting police on bikes and in cars and striving for a more diverse, college-educated police force — spread globally and proved him "a man ahead of his time."

Berkeley News recently talked with Oliver, a professor of criminal justice at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, about Vollmer's impact on campus and world history.



A well-known photo of Vollmer that is on the cover of Oliver's book and shows the police chief at work around 1925. (Photos courtesy of retired Sgt. Michael J. Holland of the Berkeley Police Dept. Historical Unit)

Who was Vollmer, and why is he important?

Vollmer was a highly progressive police chief who made the city of Berkeley the center of his innovations. He became Berkeley's first police chief in the early 1900s and began advancing policing in its use of technology, training and, most importantly, education. He influenced so many people within and outside of the Berkeley Police Department that his ideas began gaining traction first in California, then across the United States, and eventually around the world. When people spoke of good policing in the first half of the 20th century, they spoke about August Vollmer. His was a household name by the 1920s, and by the 1940s he was featured in popular magazines such as *Collier's*, *True Detective* and *Reader's Digest*.

How did Vollmer become involved in policing?

He was born to immigrant parents from Germany in New Orleans in 1876. His father died when he was young, and his mother eventually moved the family to San Francisco and then Berkeley. Eventually, "Gus" opened a feed store in Berkeley with a partner and, before he was 20, helped organize the North Berkeley Fire Department. When war broke out against

Spain, Vollmer enlisted as a volunteer and was involved in the taking of Manila, followed by 25 combat engagements. He returned home a war hero and was given a political patronage job as a letter carrier in Berkeley. On his mail route one day, he stopped a construction flatcar from colliding with a commuter train on Shattuck Avenue. His heroics led to Vollmer being asked to run for town marshal. He was elected in 1905 by a landslide, but had only a little experience to help him on the job. He became Berkeley's first police chief in 1909, when it adopted its city charter. Vollmer became determined to figure out how to be effective in his new role.

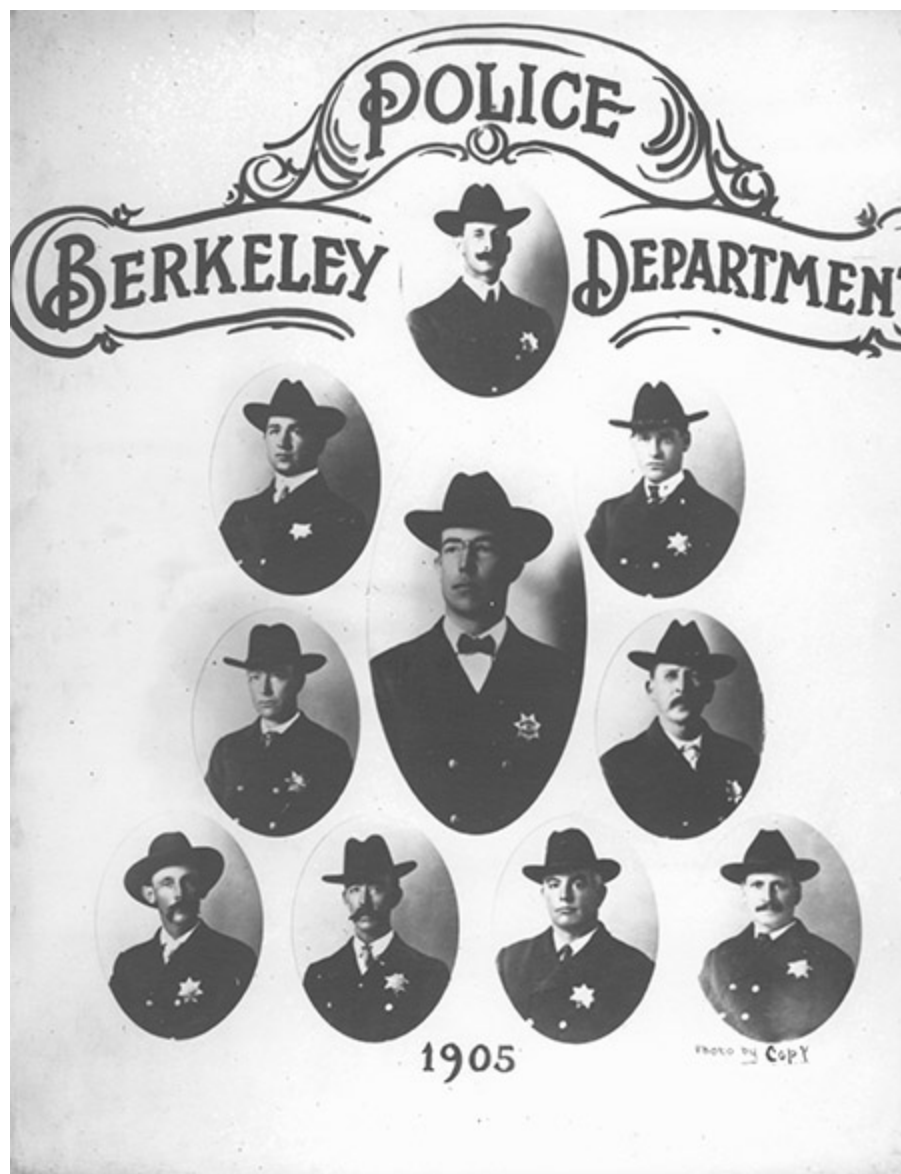
Vollmer only attended elementary school for a few years. So how did he become a Berkeley professor and an educational and criminal justice pioneer?



A photo of Vollmer in 1905, when he became Berkeley's town marshal.

Vollmer had a thirst for knowledge and self-educated himself by seeking out professors and books at UC Berkeley. He approached Jacques Loeb, a German physiologist and biologist on campus who gave him a copy of Hans Gross's *Criminal Psychology*. Vollmer took to it immediately and, after finishing it, returned to Loeb for more. That necessitated a trip to the university library, where Vollmer found dozens of new sources.

He became such an authority figure on police knowledge and education that he started publishing articles in magazines and journals related to policing and was sought out by many people. He also had an engaging personality, and later, after a visit to Chicago with some University of Chicago faculty members, he was invited to teach as a professor there, and he did in 1929. A similar arrangement was made for him to teach at UC Berkeley, where, in 1932, President Gordon Sproul appointed him a professor with tenure. He taught full-time until 1937, co-authored two books and wrote another one solo. He taught on a class-by-class basis through World War II.



Vollmer and his deputies after he'd expanded the number of officers, fired previous corrupt ones and adopted uniforms.

How did Vollmer view the role of the police, and did this match the general public's view of policing at the time?

Before Vollmer, the local marshal's office was essentially a small group that collected graft from illicit operations such as gambling establishments and opium dens.

Vollmer was advised not to run for town marshal. But he did, and did not become corrupted, and from there, he began to change things, not just in Berkeley but across the country. For instance, Vollmer was a humanitarian. He treated those he arrested with kindness. He often shared a drink with those being released from jail, and he always made sure they left with a full breakfast, knowing it might be their last full meal for days. Many prisoners often came to Berkeley to visit him upon their release from San Quentin or elsewhere. Again, he treated them with respect.

What value did Vollmer place upon diversity in the police department?

Vollmer hired UC Berkeley students as police officers – only a high school education was required of officers before then – and in 1919, one of the first he hired was Walter Gordon, who played football and boxed for Cal and was African American. When Gordon was placed in a largely white neighborhood, and there was some pushback, Gordon offered to move or quit the police force. Vollmer would hear nothing of it. He told Gordon that he put him where he was needed, end of discussion. When some officers came to Vollmer's office to tell him either Gordon went or they did, Vollmer said he was sorry to hear that; they could leave their badges and guns by the door on the way out. Vollmer also hired one of the early women police officers.

Which of Vollmer's innovations have endured?



All of Chief Vollmer's police officers on bikes in the early 1910s.

Many of Vollmer's practices are common in today's police departments. Most of these things

he did not invent, nor was he the originator of the idea. Vollmer's true contribution was in taking ideas, building on them, advancing them and making them better, as well as in getting his police officers and others interested in the projects.

A good example is the police bicycle patrol. Vollmer didn't create it, but he saw its merits in getting officers to their calls faster. So, he created an initiative in 1906 to have every one of his police officers on a bicycle. In 1908, he had his officers ride patrols in vehicles, and the citizens of Berkeley laughed at him.



From left, Berkeley police chiefs John Holstrom (1944-60), John Greening (1932-44) and August Vollmer (1909-32)

The polygraph, or lie detector test, was invented by John Larson, a Ph.D. student at Berkeley, at Vollmer's request and was first used in 1921. And while chief of the Los Angeles Police Department (1922-23), Vollmer used an early form of the computer to identify locations with high crime, and placed officers there to deter future crimes. Today, this is called hot spots policing.

Vollmer's greatest legacy, and the one closest to his heart, was UC Berkeley's School of Criminology (1950-1976). He also worked to see that police higher education programs were established at schools including San Jose State and Washington State College (today Washington State University).

Vollmer committed suicide in 1955. Why?



Vollmer (left) and Duncan McDuffie, a developer, conservationist and mountaineer who helped establish the state park system and the East Bay Regional Park District. Vollmer Peak, the highest point in the Berkeley/Oakland hills, is named after Vollmer, who also supported the park district's creation.

Vollmer had always been active and healthy, but in the late 1920s, he had a heart attack followed by at least six more major heart attacks. In the early 1940s, he had problems with his eyesight. In the late '40s, he had a series of operations — for a benign stomach tumor and throat cancer. During the second operation, his spine was nicked, so he developed back problems.

It was, however, Vollmer's diagnosis of Parkinson's disease in the 1950s that led to his suicide. He was a true progressive of the era and believed in euthanasia. He was a member of the Hemlock Society and a board member for the California chapter of the Euthanasia Society. On Nov. 4, 1955, Vollmer shot himself. There was no funeral, no service, no flowers, no headstone, no grave — he had donated his body to science. It is a fascinating and sad ending to his life.

Willard Oliver will be in Berkeley on Sunday, April 23, at 2 p.m. to give a free public talk about Vollmer at Berkeley City Hall. Immediately after that, at 3 p.m., an exhibit Oliver curated for the

Berkeley Historical Society that is based on his new book will open across the street at the Berkeley History Center, 1931 Center Street. Oliver will sign copies of his book. The free exhibit will run for about six months and be open Thursday through Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m.

Oliver also will lead a on walk on Saturday, April 22 at 10 a.m. through parts of Berkeley where Vollmer's achievements occurred. The walk is free for members of the Berkeley Historical Society and \$10 for non-members. Those interested should call the Berkeley History Center at (510) 848-0181 before 4 p.m. on Friday, April 21 and leave their contact information, including a call-back number.

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