

BACK STORY

NEVADA'S GYPSY DISTRICT ATTORNEY

BY PATTY CAFFERATA, ESQ.

Unlike gypsies, I didn't exactly flit around Nevada to be a district attorney (DA). I commuted from my home in Reno to the three counties where I served as DA. My first stint, in 1992, was in Lincoln County, about 425 miles from Reno. As part of my agreement with the county commissioners, they would furnish me with a vehicle to drive to Pioche, but I didn't specify the type of transportation. After my appointment to fill a term, the commissioners gave me the white pick-up truck the sheriff used to transport bodies to the morgue in Clark County.

Every week, I flew to the Las Vegas airport and headed north on U.S. 93 in that pick-up truck, usually arriving in Pioche hours after dark. I rented a comfortable little house across the park from the courthouse and ate most of my dinners at the Silver Café. After a few 11-hour work days in Pioche, I would reverse my tracks, beginning my drive to Las Vegas late in the afternoon and catching a flight home once I got there.

When I began my term, my staff consisted of a secretary; later the commissioners hired a child support clerk to assist me. Finally, the city of Caliente and the commissioners worked with me to fund part-time deputy district attorney, Steve Evenson.

At the end of the year, as much as I loved the job, I didn't run for election because the long days on top of the one-way, five-hour commutes were something I just couldn't face for four years in a row.

In 1994, when I was in Battle Mountain, Lander County representing a client in court, several people stopped me in the parking lot and asked me to run for DA. After some consideration, I decided to run and was elected. I bought a house in town because the job was full time. I drove 230 miles on I-80 to Battle Mountain on Sunday afternoons (that is about a four-hour commute) and stayed through Friday; at 4 p.m. on the last day of my work-week, I would pack up and drive back to Reno, arriving in the dark.

Because Battle Mountain is on I-80, my work load was sizeable compared to what it had been in Lincoln County, so the county employed a "large" district attorney staff: Deputy DA Bill Taylor; a child support clerk; and two secretaries, one for criminal matters and one for everything else. I served in Lander County until 1996, when I resigned to unsuccessfully run for Congress following my mother, Barbara Vucanovich's retirement.

In 2000, when I was appointed to fill a term as DA of Esmeralda County, I joined two other attorneys who had also



The author at her desk in Goldfield, where she served as Esmeralda County DA from 2001-2003.

served as district attorney of three Nevada counties: Benjamin Curler served in Churchill, Nye and Esmeralda counties, and Andy Demetras served in Nye, Esmeralda and White Pine counties.

I bought a mobile home in Goldfield because there are few places to rent and ever fewer houses to purchase in Esmeralda County. The one-way drive to Goldfield was 265 miles door-to-door. I drove to town every Sunday afternoon and drove back to Reno on Wednesday afternoons.

My only staff was a secretary who handled all matters, including child support. At the end of the term in 2003, I retired to my civil practice in Reno, believing that would be my last service as a district attorney.

In 2010, however, the DA of Esmeralda County abruptly retired with three months remaining in his term. The chair of the commission called me and asked if I'd fill the term. I agreed, and the commissioners appointed me DA. In October, my husband Treat and I began our weekly drive to Goldfield where we lived in my daughter Farrell's motor home, parked at the Goldfield RV Park. I still had only a secretary to assist me, but with the internet we were able to communicate and easily exchange documents when I was in Reno.

The DAs in rural counties have the same duties and functions at their counterparts in the large metropolitan areas, but with far less in the way of support staff. The DA is the chief legal advisor to the county and its officials on a variety of civil matters including contracts, land use issues, elections, employment law, jail conditions, child support, debt and tax questions. A DA also prosecutes criminals, and the crimes are much the same in the rurals as those committed in the larger counties: driving under the influence, domestic violence, possession of small amounts of illegal drugs and child abuse.

I still joke that I'm looking for a fourth county DA position, so I can hold the Gypsy DA record of serving in the most counties in Nevada. Know of any openings? ■



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