



DEPUTIES GONE WILD

Sheriff investigates groping, fights, drunks at deputy party.

By Alan Pittman

At a holiday party thrown by the Lane County Sheriff deputy union, off-duty male officers allegedly grabbed women's breasts and buttocks, harassed women, drank until they threw up and passed out, cursed at bartenders and over microphones, were naked in hallways, had fights and tried to intimidate people from complaining, according to hundreds of pages of documents from an internal sheriff's investigation.

"Wow, those cops really party it up," a female deputy said during the investigation of the Lane County Peace Officers Association (LCPOA) party on Dec. 14, 2001 at the Doubletree Hotel in Springfield. The party was attended by about 120 people, including many guests from outside the Sheriff's Office and members of other local law enforcement agencies, according to investigators.

Just emerged reams of documents from a party-related case before the Oregon Employee Relations Board (ERB) provide a rare look into the secret world of how law enforcement officers are and are not held accountable for their conduct. The party sparked a three-month investigation, a legal battle between the county and union that stretched until this year and, ultimately, largely unsuccessful efforts to discipline four deputies for misconduct.

The revelations about the alleged sexual harassment at the party come at a time that local law enforcement faces increased scrutiny of their treatment of women in the wake of sexual abuse charges against two Eugene officers. The massive internal party investigation and litigation

involving hundreds of hours of staff time, 69 interviews and a private consultant, also comes at a time when sheriff officials complain they lack the funding and manpower to keep the county safe.

Although local police use mass arrests and undercover officers against rowdy campus parties and routinely charge locals for drunk and disorderly conduct, assault and sexual harassment, no criminal charges were filed for misconduct at the party, despite the large numbers of sworn law enforcement officers present.

Throughout the investigation, sheriff officials emphasized the importance of officer conduct rules designed to uphold the department's reputation. With a tarnished reputation, citizens may not trust officers enough to support them with higher taxes, believe them on the witness stand, want to help

them solve or prevent crimes and may fear them carrying guns.

Sheriff Jan Clements confirmed an "extensive" investigation of the party occurred. He said discipline was imposed on more than one

The same drunk deputy also allegedly reached over the back of a female deputy and grabbed her breasts.

deputy, but declined to provide details. He said the investigation and discipline did create some tension in the department. Some people were left "with their nose out of joint," but "there are other people that are applauding," Clements said.

Rhonda Fenrich, attorney for the Deputy union, did not return a call requesting comment.

But in testimony before the ERB, Fenrich denounced the county's "overblown view of what occurred [at the party], you know, the Tailhook," she said, referring to a Navy flyer party in 1991 in which 83 women were assaulted.

Fenrich complained the county spent "hours and months" on a "fishing expedition" to investigate false rumors of misconduct from the party.

On the other side, Assistant County Counsel David Williams argued that most of the initial rumors of a "mini-Tailhook experience" at the party turned out to be serious misconduct. The evidence shows the "rumors have more truth than fiction in them."



RULES OF CONDUCT

The Lane County Sheriff's department manual and the state law enforcement oath require deputies to live up to high standards of personal conduct while on and off duty.

"All employees of this department shall conduct themselves, on or off duty, in a manner that will not bring embarrassment, disgrace, or dishonor to the department, directly or indirectly," the manual states.

"Employee's conduct must be above reproach and must not impugn the credibility and honesty of the department or the law enforcement profession." The manual prohibits, "off-duty conduct that tends to lessen public confidence in the department or respect for the department, thereby impairing operations in any way and tending to cause a loss to the department in public support, monetary support, or lack of mutual respect and/or cooperation from other public agencies."

Other sections prohibit "profane language" and fighting in public and forbid wrongdoing by "omission of an act" and require that deputies behave not just legally but, "morally correct at all times." The department's official "vision and goals" include "maintaining the dignity of all people."

The manual requires off-duty deputies who witness a crime to call city or other on-duty police and be available as witnesses. Deputies must "take some initiative to prevent the crime from being committed and/or assist in the apprehension of the perpetrator."

Law enforcement officers swear when they pin on a badge, "I will keep my private life unsullied as an example to all." — Alan Pittman