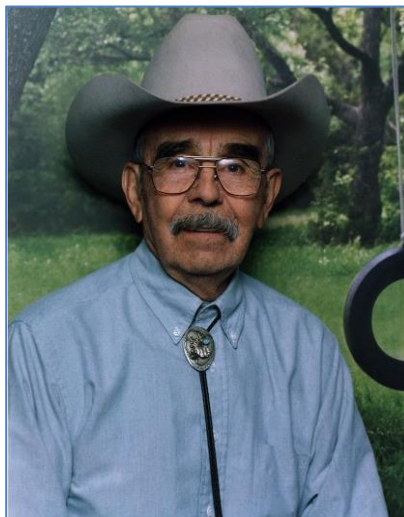


Editorial Note by Virginia Berg-Taylor: John E. Berg wrote this paper for an advanced writing course while attending New Mexico Highlands University on March 7, 1978. The format has been changed for the web, but the content remains the same. Thanks to Joe P. Chavez and Matilda Scheurer for sharing their family photos.

Mora County Sheriff Department under Palemon Chavez



Sheriff Palemon Chavez
Provided courtesy of the
Chavez Family.



Palemon Chavez

Mora County Sheriff Department under Palemon Chavez
by John E. Berg

The Mora County Sheriff's office for years has been the most sought-after political office, yet those individuals who have attained the position of sheriff have found it not to be as rewarding as it seems; therefore, few have retained the office for any length of time. Since 1971 there have been several different sheriffs who have held the office either by election or by appointment.

On January 1, 1971, Luis Garcia was elected sheriff. He took office, but for unknown reasons resigned his position on June 30 of the same year. Upon Luis Garcia's resignation, Pedro Mares took over the office on July 1, 1971, but due to ill health remained in office for only one month. He resigned on July 31, 1971. Upon Mares' resignation, Benny Anaya retained the sheriff's position for a period of seven months but resigned for unknown reasons in February 1972. Following Mr. Anaya's resignation, the Mora County Commissioners appointed Nazario Montoya to complete the term of the last legally elected official--Luis Garcia. Nazario Montoya was then elected to the office of sheriff and took office on January 1, 1973. After being sheriff of Mora County for a period of sixteen months, Nazario Montoya resigned. On July 1, 1973, Manuel Lujan was appointed sheriff by the newly elected Mora County Commissioners. Manuel Lujan was sheriff of Mora County for a period of seven months. On January 30, 1974, for unknown reasons the Mora County Commissioners dismissed Manuel Lujan. On February 7, 1974, the Mora County Commissioners appointed Palemon Chavez to the position of sheriff. Palemon Chavez completed the term of the last elected official to the sheriff's office--Nazario Montoya. On January 1, 1975, Palemon Chavez became the elected sheriff of Mora County and has retained the position for

the last three years.¹

The Mora County Sheriff's Department had been in a state of turmoil for the four years prior to 1975. When Palemon Chavez took over the office as the newly elected sheriff, the only equipment the department had was a pair of handcuffs and a few items in the office that were obsolete. Sheriff Chavez also stated, "The jail was dilapidated and in bad need of repairs."² Being that Mr. Chavez had served as deputy sheriff, off and on for the last three years, he knew what was needed to improve the department; therefore, he took on the challenge of making the department a properly functioning one.

Palemon Chavez did not become sheriff effortlessly. In the Primary Election of 1973, Mr. Chavez was the only candidate on the Democratic Party ticket that had an opponent. Yet he won the primary and went on to win the general election over the Republican, Ramon Romero, the Party's strongest candidate.³

Then in 1975 Mr. Chavez ran for a second term, and he was again the only candidate on the Democratic ticket to have an opponent in the primary elections. He won the primary, despite the efforts of his own Democratic Party to oust him out of office. Palemon Chavez went on to win the general election that year and was the biggest vote getter for the entire Democratic

Party. He defeated his Republican opponent, George Garcia, by getting 1,454 votes to his opponent's 845.⁴



Mr. & Mrs. Chavez with Buddy.

Sheriff Chavez is fifty-four-years-old and has been a lifelong resident of Mora County. He is married to the former Maria Elisea Pacheco, and they have three sons and six daughters. He is a World War II Veteran. He operated a sawmill for

twenty-seven years and later became a forest fire fighter. Prior to his

taking the job of Deputy Sheriff of Mora County, Palemon had been interested in law enforcement.⁵

Upon taking office, Sheriff Chavez took some law enforcement courses at the New Mexico State Police Training School where he received the following certificates:

- April 17, 1974, Uniform Crime Reporting Procedure.
- December 19, 1974, Jail Management Seminar #3.
- February 28, 1975, Accident Investigation Course #2.
- February 28, 1975, Police Para-Medic Course #2.⁶

With these certificates Sheriff Chavez believes that he is qualified to handle the job of sheriff of Mora County.

Upon taking office, Sheriff Chavez set out to reorganize the Sheriff's Department. He hired his own deputies, secretaries, and jailer. The hiring of these officials had never been done by the sheriff himself, but had been handled through another agency in the county. He established certain hours for himself and his employees to work. Although he established certain hours for each employee to work, he himself is still on twenty-four hour call. He coordinates all duties of his deputies and secretary-dispatchers. He sees that all reports are sent into Santa Fe and that his whole department functions in a professional manner. According to the Sheriff, the principal duty of the sheriff's office is to handle civil procedures within the county. He serves legal papers, attempts to settle family arguments, assists the New Mexico State Police with traffic violators, keeps peace and order at public dances and, in general, sees that laws are not violated within the county.⁷

Sheriff Chavez considers the New Mexico State Police an essential part of law enforcement in Mora County. The Sheriff states that, "The main position of the New Mexico State Police is to back-up the sheriff; his main function is highway accidents. By having a state policeman stationed in

Mora, there is a feeling of security for the sheriff's department."⁸ Sheriff Chavez believes that the best state policeman he had ever had stationed in Mora was Officer Johnny Cordova, who helped him when he first took over his duties as sheriff. He also feels grateful to State Police Officer Paul Mares, who helped establish operational procedures for the radio system, which the sheriff's department presently has.⁹

The Mora County Sheriff's Department has two full-time deputies whose duties are to assist the sheriff and to enforce the sheriff's duties when he is not on duty. His first deputy is Alfonso Maestas. Mr. Maestas is seventy-four years of age, and a former guard at the Muers Drum Company in San Pablo, California. Mr. Maestas had been a former deputy in Mora County in 1975 and had worked for twelve months under Palemon Chavez. Mr. Maestas became a deputy again in August 1977 and is now first deputy for the Mora Sheriff's Department. Mr. Alfonso Maestas stated, "I furnish my own gun, shells, handcuffs, and badge."¹⁰ The sheriff has provided such equipment, but they were old and used and had been donated to the sheriff's department from some other law enforcement agency. Mr. Maestas feels that this equipment was rejected by another law enforcement agency because it was not adequate; so he feels more secure using his own equipment.

Tino Branchal is the second deputy, and he has been with the sheriff's department for the last year. Since Mr. Branchal has been with the sheriff's department his main duty is to patrol the town of Mora at night. He also assists the state police in handling all traffic violations and accidents.

There are four secretary-dispatchers in the sheriff's department. They are Caroline Armijo, Angie Vigil, Pauline Gonzalez, and Norma Romero. They all work eight-hour shifts, which are rotated every week.

I interviewed Caroline Armijo who is the first dispatcher in the sheriff's department. She has been with the sheriff's department since October 1, 1975, but prior to that she had no law enforcement experience.

Her main duties consist of secretarial work such as sending out Uniform Crime Reports, which are due the seventh of every month to the New Mexico State Police in Santa Fe. The paperwork reports felonies, burglaries, assaults, and civil crimes. She also writes the funding proposals for the sheriff's department and assists Sheriff Chavez in presenting proposals before the Governor's Council Meetings. These meetings are held by the State Commission on Law Enforcement, and the Commission approves or disapproves any funding for the sheriff's department. As radio-dispatcher, her duties are to take incoming and outgoing calls and direct them to the sheriff or state police. Caroline Armijo states, "Through State Policeman Herman Silva's help, I have learned how to operate the dispatcher radio, write out accident reports, and have established the first filing system for the department. I think we have the best State Policeman Mora County has ever had."¹¹

Local State Police Officer, Herman Silva, was first assigned to Mora on December 30, 1974. Officer Silva has worked in conjunction with the sheriff's department since Mr. Chavez became sheriff. The sheriff's department primarily handles civil law violations, while the state police handles traffic violations. One big difference, as stated by Officer Silva is, "If the sheriff is called on any violation, and he refuses, then the state police are called, and I have to go."¹² Officer Silva believes that Sheriff Chavez has a good organization, but he also believes that the sheriff is old-fashioned in his ways of law enforcement, which are contrary to the system that he, as a state policeman, has to follow. Officer Silva feels that the sheriff and his deputies could use some additional training on law enforcement.¹³

The most outstanding problem the sheriff's department has is acquiring funds to keep the department functioning smoothly. All funds for the department must be channeled through the Mora County Commissioners. The Commissioners have a county manager who works in conjunction with the

sheriff's department. According to Sheriff Chavez, the problem in obtaining funding seems to be the inefficiency of the county manager to get proposals submitted on time to meet the proposal deadlines, and if the deadlines are not met, monies for the sheriff's department are lost.

For example, presently the sheriff's department has been without a police car for over a year. Yet the only cars the sheriff's department has ever had have been used--state surplus cars. At present the sheriff and deputies use their own cars for law enforcement duties. The only reimbursement they receive is mileage from the sheriff's department funds. On July 1, 1977, Sheriff Chavez requested a new car, but because of the inefficiency of the county manager he has not received it. Another problem that confronted Sheriff Chavez was when the department did have a police car the county refused to allow him money to buy gasoline for its operation. Therefore, most of the time, even though they had a police car, they could not operate it for lack of gasoline.¹⁴ As of yet, there does not seem to be any hope for change in obtaining funds for the department.

There is also the problem of maintenance. The Mora courthouse, where the sheriff's office is located, has two janitors for its maintenance. Sheriff Chavez has had constant difficulty in getting the janitors to do their jobs. Being that the janitors have refused to do their jobs, either directly or indirectly, Sheriff Chavez has had the jailer do the janitorial work for the department. A good example of the inefficiency that exists within the department is a ventilation system in the jail that has been out of order for over a year. The sheriff's department has approached the County Commissioners several times concerning this matter. Nothing has been done. Whenever there are prisoners in the jail they have to be taken out of the jail during the day for fresh air because of the lack of air circulation in the jail itself. Recently a juvenile officer came to check conditions in the jail. Because the jail is also used for juvenile detainees he commented that

the jail was not adequate for their detention and made a notation about the ventilation system, which he said would be reported to the state. Sheriff Chavez hopes that with an agency from Santa Fe complaining to the County Commissioners, the ventilation system will get repaired.

Another problem in law enforcement in Mora County is the uncooperative Magistrate. Sheriff Chavez states, "Magistrates have not been suitable since I have been in office for different reasons. The present Magistrate is very liberal. It may take me up to three days to locate someone on some violation, and after I have arrested him and taken him before the Magistrate, the Magistrate will turn him loose within five minutes with no bond or anything other than his own say-so. The Magistrate is not backing up any law enforcement officer."¹⁵

Sheriff Chavez has also stated that he considers the present Magistrate to be prejudiced against strangers, for he seldom invokes heavy fines on local people, even though they may be brought before him several times. Yet, if a stranger is taken before him for any law violation, he is given the maximum sentence the law allows. Not only does Sheriff Chavez feel that the Magistrate is prejudiced, but he also uses his office for political reasons, ie., when a Democrat is taken before him he is generally fined or given a very light sentence. On the other hand, however, if a Republican is taken before him he is generally prosecuted and given a much stiffer sentence.

This poor cooperation is not only towards the sheriff's department. It is also confirmed by the New Mexico State Police who feel that, because of lack of sufficient prosecution and low fines, there are repeaters going before the Magistrate constantly. Most of these repeaters are local people, yet outsiders get heavy fines. This indicates to the New Mexico State Police that the Magistrate's office is not performing in a professional manner, thus contributing to more violations in Mora County.¹⁶

Despite the problems that Sheriff Palemon Chavez has encountered there have been many improvements in the department. When Sheriff Chavez took office Mora County was considered a non-submittal county, as far as crime reports were concerned. Now it is on a monthly reporting basis.

The jail was old, rundown, and dilapidated. It was located on the second floor of the courthouse. It had a very poor heating system, windows were generally broken, plumbing didn't work, and prisoners had to sleep on springs because of the lack of blankets and mattresses. Now there is a new jail addition to the courthouse. The facilities are kept clean, warm, and prisoners are provided with bedding. The jailer lives next to the jail and provides meals for the prisoners.

In 1975 the only communication system the sheriff's department had was a telephone. There was no secretary, and the sheriff had to use his own car. At present the department has a radio-dispatch system, which operates twenty-four hours a day. This system is on the same frequency as all law enforcement agencies, thus providing full communication with the New Mexico State Police Headquarters out of Las Vegas, New Mexico. There are four radio-dispatchers on duty twenty-four hours a day. These dispatchers also do the secretarial work, which helps to keep the sheriff's department running smoothly. Although the police cars that have been provided for the sheriff's department have been used, at least off and on, they have had transportation, which is something that was never provided before. Hopefully the new police car which has been on order for over a year will come soon. This would allow the sheriff's department more law enforcement capability.

The increase in the budget for the sheriff's department has also been noticeable. The budget allocated to the department in fiscal year 1971 to 1972 was \$9,630.00. This has been increased to \$55,678.00 for the fiscal year 1977 to 1978.¹⁷ The sheriff's salary in 1975 was \$349.00 per month. It has increased to \$571.00 per month, which is still a low salary but much

improved from what was previously paid. The deputies' salaries in 1975 were a mere \$173.00 per month; this has been increased to \$382.00 per month.

When Sheriff Chavez took office and acquired a secretary, the salary for one secretary was \$365.00 per month. This has been increased to \$459.00 per month per secretary, and there are now four secretary-dispatchers. These are definite improvements that Sheriff Chavez has brought to the sheriff's department.

Upon interviewing Sheriff Chavez, I asked him about remarks made by various people about the manner in which he conducts himself, namely collecting beer cans on the streets. I also asked Sheriff Chavez why he gathered beer cans off the streets. He replied, "I collect aluminum cans, not so much for their value, but as a diversionary measure. For people that I have been looking for with a warrant will hide or avoid me, and I cannot locate them when I'm in a police car. Yet I can be on the streets picking up cans and they ignore me. I'm always watching to see where people are and later I can go pick them up. When I pick them up they will wonder how I ever found them. As for the cans I really do collect, I sell them and use the money to buy tickets from local charities."¹⁸

The most exciting incident for Sheriff Palemon Chavez occurred on July 16, 1977, when, according to Sheriff Chavez, there was a shooting in the hallway of the sheriff's office. Johnny Martinez, age thirty, who had been freed by the Mora Magistrate on assault charges on two elderly men from Ocate (ages seventy-six and eighty-seven-years-old), and whom Sheriff Chavez had again arrested on July 4, 1977, (on charges of disturbing a family) again was freed by the magistrate, walked into the sheriff's department with two guns in his hands, and said he was going to kill the Sheriff. Mr. Martinez had previously threatened to kill Sheriff Chavez but had done nothing. Sheriff Chavez was taken by surprise. Martinez shot at the Sheriff twice, but missed. Sheriff Chavez pulled his gun out and shot into the air as a

warning. Martinez did not lower his guns. Upon seeing this, the Sheriff shot again and hit Martinez in his left arm. Martinez ran out of the sheriff's office with the Sheriff in hot pursuit. Sheriff Chavez caught up with Martinez in front of William Gandert's Garage approximately three blocks from the sheriff's office. Martinez was lying wounded on the street. From there, the Sheriff had Martinez picked up by ambulance and sent to the Las Vegas Hospital. Later Martinez escaped from the hospital, but was soon apprehended by local authorities in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Sheriff Palemon Chavez, knowing that his life could still be in danger, had been worried so Martinez was kept in jail in San Miguel County. Two or three days later Martinez escaped from the San Miguel County jail along with five other convicts that were being held on charges concerning a murder. It was several days before Martinez was recaptured. On September 28, 1977, Martinez was sentenced to the State Penitentiary for assault on a peace officer (Palemon Chavez) and is presently serving two to ten years.¹⁹

Criticisms abound by local people about the way that Sheriff Chavez has run his office, yet it seems to be operated in a very professional manner. With all the department's problems, which are gradually being overcome, Sheriff Palemon Chavez has made many advances in improving the department. A new jail, two deputies, four radio-dispatchers, secretaries, and a full-time jailer are all improvements. The increase in the sheriff's department budget, higher salaries, and transportation are also quite noticeable. Overall, Sheriff Palemon Chavez has proven that Mora County can indeed have an efficiently run sheriff's department.

NOTES

¹ Mora County Clerk Office, Payroll Record Book Mora County, Payroll Records, Mora County. Mora, New Mexico, 1978.

² Interview with Palemon Chavez, Mora County Sheriff, Chacon, N.M., 14 Feb. 1978. Hereafter, Chavez.

³ "All Demos Victors in Mora," Las Vegas Daily Optic, 6 Nov. 1974, p. 1.

⁴ "Mora Favors Democrats," Las Vegas Daily Optic, 3 Nov. 1976, p. 1.

⁵ "Mora Democrats Announce Positions," Las Vegas Daily Optic, 20 Oct. 1976, p. 8.

⁶ Chavez.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview with Paul Mares, State Policeman stationed in Las Vegas, N.M., Las Vegas, 16 Feb. 1978.

¹⁰ Interview with Alfonso Maestas, Deputy Sheriff, Mora County, N.M., Mora, 2 Feb. 1978.

¹¹ Interview with Caroline Armijo, Secretary, Mora County Sheriff's Office, Mora, N.M., 21 Feb. 1978.

¹² Interview with Herman Silva, State Policeman stationed in Mora, N.M., Mora, 2 Feb. 1978. Hereafter, Silva.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Chavez.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Silva.

¹⁷ Interview with Eloy Valdez, County Manager, Mora County, N.M., Mora, 21 Feb. 1978.

¹⁸ Chavez.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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"12 Sites for Voting in Mora." Las Vegas Daily Optic, 4 Nov. 1974, p.1.