

Unsung County Employees of Fresno County

H.A. Sessions Probation Officer

Prior to World War one, when the world changed, the city and county of Fresno, California was experiencing great growth and prosperity, characterized by steady economics and expansion of the city. It was a time for people to enjoy the simple pleasures.

The barn crew on Mono Street kept the modern streetcars rolling. Citizens had neighborhood peddlers that sold the freshest of goods right at their doors, and free markets in which to shop were seemingly unlimited. Students played unfettered at Fink-White Playground near downtown Fresno, and teenagers photographed at Fresno High in 1909 created marvelous works of art while in formal attire.

Citizens strolled Fulton Street with its convenient parking for both autos and horses. A new Chamber of Commerce, a new post office for citizens. And by 1909, the Grecian-inspired Courthouse with entrances and exits for bicycles was the center of social and legal affairs for the valley.

The county population was growing, with 75,000 in the county and almost 25,000 in the city; with population, came crime.

The Jail moved from the basement of the Courthouse to a facility in Courthouse Park, with ultimately the county's only hanging occurring outside the County Jail.

Concerns created the Office of the Probation Officer next to Indian affairs in the courthouse, H.A. Sessions serving without pay from 1884 to 1911, was sworn in as the first chief probation officer in 1909.

In formulating his recommendation to the courts for Charlie Davis, a digger Indian who killed his medicine man, Sessions convinced tribesmen to take their sick to the new county sanatorium and not kill the medicine men when their efforts did not work. Sessions was known for his efforts to prevent violence and promote healing among the tribes'

He then recommended probation for Davis. But Judge Church sent him to San Quentin. Chief Sessions circulated a petition signed by the Board of Supervisors and traveled to Sacramento to win his release. The innovative Chief Sessions was noted for many things beyond not being paid for seven years.

He built and ran a parental home for wayward children, taking the children out of the courthouse basement to a facility near the county hospital. Chief Sessions was followed by O. M. Akers, 1921 to 1941 and Jack Tarr 1941 to 1944.

John Ashton, 1944 to 1955, devoted his time to the youth of Fresno and was ultimately responsible for the planning and developing of the new Fresno County Juvenile Hall that opened in 1957. The hall was located in the rural area south of downtown Fresno on 10th Street.

Unfortunately, he died in office before the facility was started.

Two chief probation officers served from 1955 to 1971: L.B. Stagner 1955 to 1967 and Frank Bailey, 1967 to 1971. L.B. Stagner opened a \$438,000 facility with construction

beginning in 1956 and completed in 1957. The facility would hold approximately 50 children.

Not all rebel youth were moved into the new facility from the county jail minors for crimes such as driving without a license, possession of liquor -- and one troublemaker who jammed the lock on a cell remained in jail.

Chief Stagner grew the department to approximately 130 staff, and the juvenile hall was expanded to include a treatment center for minors in 1967, housing both the Ashton Center and the Wakefield School.

Girls also found a home for treatment in the annex added in the 1970s.

In 1966, Probation gave up its space in the old courthouse and moved to the roomy seventh floor of the new Fresno County courthouse. While Justice, ever vigilant, watched.

James Roland, 1972 to 1983, brought crime victims to the forefront of the justice system locally, statewide and nationally. He established crime victim services in the probation department and created legislation for crime victims statewide. He instituted victim impact statements that later became law and brought national attention to victims of violent crime. Jim Roland and his staff, including volunteers, to this day continue to give a voice to victims.

In 2008, the James Roland Crime Victim Assistance Center was formally dedicated in downtown Fresno and provides services to over 5,000 crime victims per year.

Don Hogner, 1983 to 1988, was responsible for over 300 employees and a 12 million dollar budget. He accepted the

first eight victims program award from Governor Deukmejian with his trusty staff at his side. He took correctional efforts out to the community and established the Adult Offender Work Program, Work Furlough, and many community and diversion programs to keep offenders out of the justice system through community sanctions and programs.

Juveniles were now placed in work programs to benefit the community as well as hold them accountable. Superior Court Judge Frank Creed, after putting the minors on the work program, often meant them at lunch to read history to them and check on their progress in the program.

Chief Vern Spears, 1989 to 1995, began the process of arming probation officers in positions that constituted a greater threat to their health and safety. He out-stationed probation officers in schools with police officers to provide direct and intermediate prevention and intervention services. He began the process of planning for a county juvenile boot camp.

Chief Larry Price, 1995 to 2005, came to the department, while the budget grew from 23 million to \$50 million. He opened the facility that became known as the Elkhorn Correctional Facility, a nationally known boot camp experience for minors where staff trained and graduated in the military model. The camp was visited by notables, including the Secretary of the Army.

Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, the colors were retreated in April of 2009.

Under his direction, the county began construction of the new Juvenile Justice Campus on the corner of American Avenue and Highway 99.

Chief Linda Penner was appointed county probation officer in 2005, becoming the first woman to serve in that capacity.

The Juvenile Justice Campus opened under her watch in a military style operation with the cooperation of state and local police, minors were moved in a convoy all day in July of 2007, making their way safely to the new Juvenile Justice Campus.

The new Fresno County juvenile court was dedicated on July 10th, 2009, with the long-serving juvenile hall and juvenile courts on 10th Street shuttered on July 2nd.

In 2009, a 100 years after its humble beginning, the department now has over 600 of Fresno County's finest employees. From horses to computers, the probation department has grown to be a mainstay of the Fresno County justice system.

Today there are over 8,200 officers and employees and a budget of over \$53 plus million dollars.

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