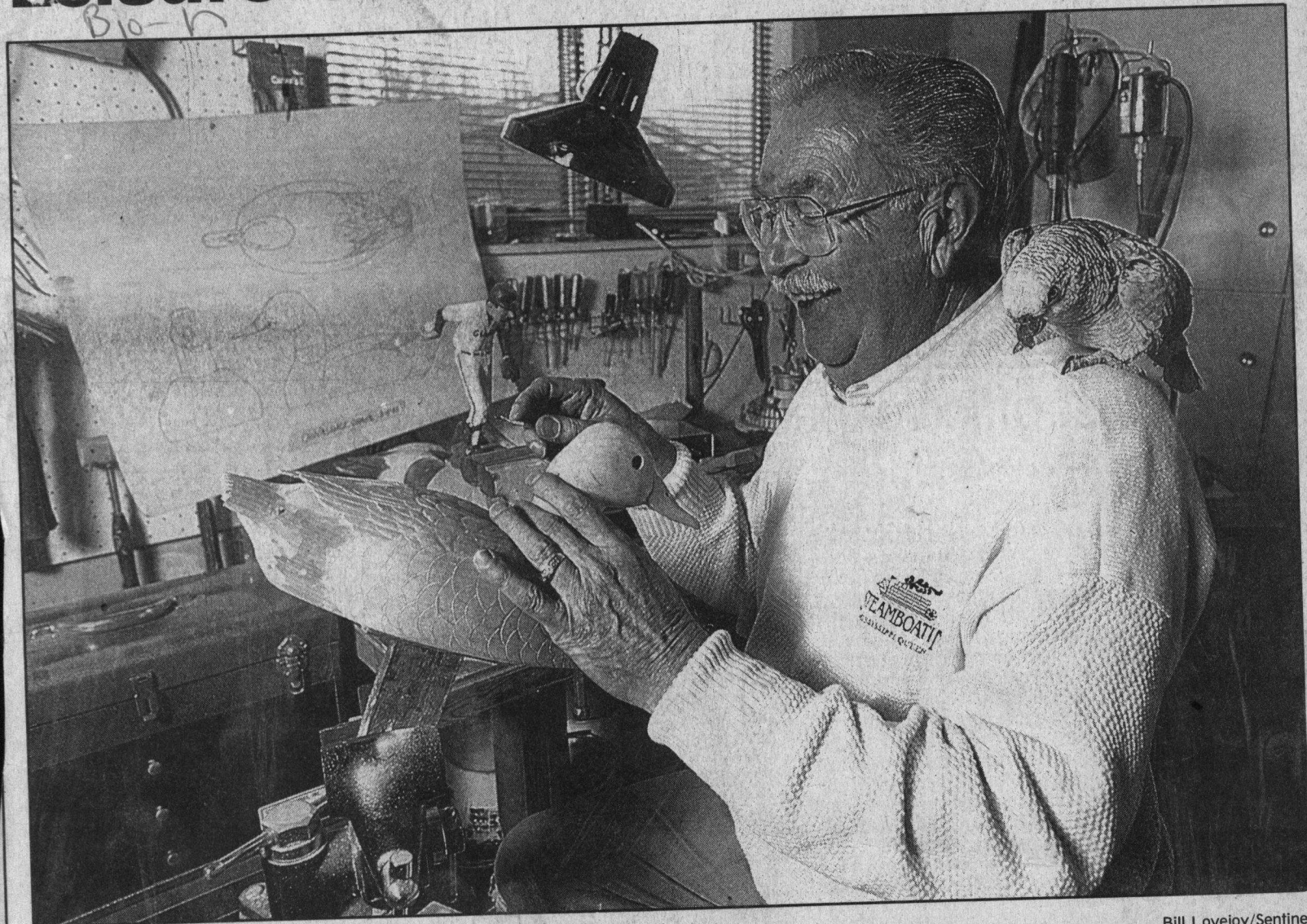


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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Retirement will give Sheriff Al Noren a lot more time with his wood carving and his pet parrot.

## End of an era: Noren retires

By MAY WONG  
Sentinel staff writer

**T**HE "BIG GUY" is retiring.

With five terms, four mass murders, three deadly disasters, a recession, and dozens of demonstrations behind him, Al Noren, 58, is turning in his badge. His last day as sheriff-coroner is Friday.

"I've enjoyed it," Noren said. "After 34 years (in the department), I'm leaving of my own free will. I've never had any scandals, and I've got the best department in the county, in the state."

His nickname — coined by his staff early in his administration — suits him well.

It springs not so much from the fact that at 6 feet 2 he towers over many of his deputies, but because he stands unswayed by others.

Surly and stubborn — but with plenty of jokes in between — Noren managed a depart-

ment charged with operating the jails and protecting the public in a 421-square-mile area 24 hours a day. In his 20 years as sheriff, he commanded a high standard of ethics and fought with those who held the office's purse strings. He tossed barbs with little remorse.

"He's not a back stabber. No, he'll stab you right in the stomach," said Superior Court Judge Bill Kelsay. "But I find it refreshing that with all law enforcement I deal with, I know where I stand with him. I'm going to miss him."

As a conservative Republican in a largely liberal community, Noren held his own.

At public meetings and in underground publications, he was called everything from a "fascist" for his unwavering efforts to clamp down on marijuana growers and sellers to running a "gestapo" for developing a SWAT team, a bomb squad, and other special task forces.

But Noren stuck to his guns, so to speak, plowing ahead with a fiercely traditional approach to law and order.

Today, many — even those stung by his words — credit Noren for leading by-and-large a good, clean department over the past two decades.

"He's left us with a wonderful department," Kelsay says. "They have a fine staff up there and I think they do a good job, and the man at the top is in the position to take credit for that."

### No ego

**I**N A RECENT interview in his corner office on the third floor of the county government building, Noren reflected on times past.

He didn't become sheriff for the show. He marshaled two parades — his first

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and last — in the late '70s. His reason was expressed in a remark Olympic silver medalist Nancy Kerrigan made at a Disney World parade in February. "This is so corny," she told Mickey Mouse as they waved to the crowd.

"I never felt so dumb in my life," Noren says.

He hates flaunting stars and stripes, and shamelessly berates other law enforcement brass who wear brimmed hats with "scrambled eggs" on them.

"You've really got to have an ego to wear crap like that," he says.

Noren doesn't need a uniform to affirm his authority.

His steely eyes, lumbering build, and gruff exterior perfectly embody a sheriff.

Yet, "I never wanted to be a sheriff, you know," he says.

That is, not until he got "pissed" one day.

Noren grew up on his family's ranch on Old San Jose Road in Soquel. He graduated from Santa Cruz High School and attended Hartnell Community College in Salinas.

His father wanted him to be a dentist, but at 19, he fell in love with catching crooks during a stint with the Air Force, working with the Japanese National Police.

He returned to his hometown four years later and had his first day at work in the Sheriff's Office on Sept. 19, 1960 — back when deputies had to buy their own uniforms, badges and weapons.

He climbed the ranks to lieutenant but had no aspirations to become the county's 22nd sheriff until morale began dropping under then-Sheriff Doug James, who was first elected in 1958.

The final straw, Noren says, came when James pulled him off a drug grant proposal that Noren put together.

In 1974, Noren ran for the top post, and with the support of fellow deputies and 53 percent of the voters, unseated James. James died in 1990.

Three months into office, Noren faced a potentially explosive confrontation over the preservation of an Ohlone Indian burial ground discovered at a construction site on Lee Road outside Watsonville.

"I didn't know what to do," Noren says in retrospect, "but I had to look like I knew what to do."

For a day, American Indians and their supporters armed and barricaded themselves at the site. Many had feared a bloody clash with sheriff's deputies and Watsonville police, but the standoff ended peacefully. Negotiations led the property owners to agree to sell the land to an American Indian group.

Gary Patton, then a fledgling county supervisor, recalled how he and Noren argued over tactics as they drove around the site.

"He wanted to give them warnings, then make arrests," Patton says. "I was afraid someone might

get hurt. I saw it as an assault."

That issue was the first of many over which the pair would lock horns.

## Against the law

**SITUATED** on opposite ends of the political spectrum, the two disagreed on almost everything from the formation of a SWAT team to jail management to marijuana enforcement.

At one time, Patton threatened to strip Noren of control over the jails because of his "stonewall refusal" to offer more religious access and infant visitation. Noren defended his decisions, saying it was a matter of security.

More recently, Noren blasted the supervisors for unanimously supporting a failed state bill that would have allowed doctors to prescribe marijuana.

Noren speaks passionately about marijuana and the never-ending battle to put a crimp on the illegal crops hidden in the county's rural areas.

"It's crazy. It's against the law. That's why I arrest people," Noren says. "They say it's a victimless crime, but that's a crock of ----. People on drugs kill people."

Despite the feuds, Patton and Noren learned to work together.

In 1991, Patton even praised Noren for an alternative jail program he started, including an auto body shop, a farm, and upholstery and carpentry classes.

"We certainly haven't seen eye to eye in the past," Patton said shortly before his own recent departure as county supervisor. "But over the years, I have grown to

respect the way he's handled the department."

## Behind the words

**NOREN DOESN'T** need any reminding that he's mouthed off perhaps one too many times.

"I wish I had more tact sometimes," Noren says.

One verbal faux pas, he says, came in 1983 after a self-proclaimed survivalist committed suicide after fatally shooting Deputy Mike Gray in Felton. Noren raised the ire of the Roman Catholic bishop by saying the gunman's suicide was a "blessing."

"It was a poor choice of words," Noren says.

But it is the man behind the words that critics don't like.

His uncompromising streak stirred respect in some quarters and disdain in others.

"He ruled that place with an iron hand," says Joe Henard, who left the Sheriff's Office to become an investigator with the District Attorney's Office and ran, unsuccessfully, to succeed Noren. "To me, that's not a good way of managing. What did he ever do? He just had the right people doing the job."

Privately, some members of other law enforcement agencies say Noren was very difficult.

Some criticized his leadership of the inter-agency Santa Cruz County Narcotics Enforcement Team, or C-NET he helped form in 1984. They thought he chose the easy route by pulling his deputies off the team last year after widespread publicity about a magazine article and videotape depicting an officer kicking a suspect in the head and

two officers making derogatory comments about women. An investigation by the state Attorney General's Office cleared the officers of misconduct.

Noren says other factors were behind his decision to back out of CnET and form his own narcotics unit. "It was a series of unfortunate incidents," he says, including allegations of racial discrimination.

Some say it was time for Noren to hand the reins over to someone else — someone more flexible, a better people-person. Someone who could lead the department with a \$20 million annual budget and 266 employees into the next century.

But Noren himself knew his time had come.

He wouldn't be able to do, he says, what his deputies now do in a more modernized, politically correct, and lawsuit-laden society.

"You'd have more citizen complaints than you could point a stick at," he says.

In the past few years, he's increasingly given more authority to his subordinates, though they knew who made the ultimate decisions.

"He is the boss," says sheriff's Lt. Mark Tracy, who was elected sheriff in November and will take over Noren's post after working 20 years under him. "Although input is accepted, and there's discussion on issues, he is the boss."

As the new sheriff, Tracy says he hopes to maintain the integrity and high standards that Noren set for the staff.

"That's what I'll take from him more than anything else," Tracy says.

## Time to relax

**NOREN'S STROLL** may be more relaxed now, but his opinions come as fast and hard as they always have.

Just last week, he told a reporter he thought the county supervisors "fell flat on their asses" for not reprimanding District Attorney Art Danner for putting an employee on paid leave for four months while charges of drug use were investigated.

But the mutual dislike between Noren and Danner has never been a secret.

Danner declined to comment for this story.

For now, Noren is looking forward to the first Christmas in three decades where he won't be on call.

Aside from wood carving, he's not sure what he'll do with his time off or his retirement benefits of about \$72,000 a year.

"I don't know. I've never retired before," he says. "I'm going to miss the people, but I won't miss worker's compensation claims or the lawsuits or going to jail, having some guy in a holding cell scream at me or a lady giving me the finger. Those things I won't miss."

He's not interested in starting a second career, he says. He dismissed notions that he might take a shot at a supervisorial seat.

"If I don't like you, I don't kid with you. I'll be civil, but I couldn't call someone an 'esteemed colleague' when he's a horse's ass. That's why I don't think I could survive in politics."