

**LA PLATA COUNTY
SHERIFF'S OFFICE
{ DURANGO, CO }**



A BRIEF HISTORY

1871 – 2016

BY DAN BENDER, LPCSO
Revised September 21st 2016

Acknowledgments

Accurate history is a tenuous thing, especially when looking back over one hundred years. While every attempt was made to be accurate in this summary of the history of La Plata County Colorado Sheriff's Office, this story's contents are based on: a collection of sometimes conflicting newspaper articles spanning 140 years; interviews with people decades after the events; governmental records that were partially lost or damaged due to fires and relocations. A prime example is pinning down who was Sheriff in what year. Some accounts are based on year elected (most often in November). Other quoted dates are based on the year sworn in (usually January). Some people were simply appointed and accurate dates are sketchy. What success I had in reconciling names, dates, and events came from the guidance and knowledge of others. For their help, I thank: Dr. Duane Smith; La Plata County Historical Society; Fort Lewis College Center for Southwest Studies; Durango Herald; Rocky Mountain Boom Town, a History of Durango Colorado, by Duane Smith, University Press; Pioneers of the San Juan Country, Volumes I, II, III, IV compiled by the Sarah Decker Chapter, DAR (Daughters of the Revolution), Family History Publishers, Bountiful Utah. A Fort Lewis College student report written in 1971 by Denny H. Schilthius also proved very helpful. While readers may find errors, the central theme of this history of La Plata County Sheriff's Office is genuine & intriguing.

Note: The badge on the cover of this story was worn by Sheriff Hardy P. McConnell when he was La Plata County Sheriff in 1925 & 1926.



The Early Years: 1850's – 1908

The history of La Plata County Sheriff's Office pre-dates the current county seat of Durango. In fact, there was a La Plata Sheriff even before Colorado became a state. The appearance of Europeans in what is now La Plata County came slowly. The same year the 13 colonies were declaring their independence from England, (1776), Padre Francisco Silvestre Escalante passed through the area seeking a shorter route for Spanish interests between Santa Fe and California. However, a significant infusion of settlers did not begin until the mid 1800's when thousands came in search of reported gold and silver deposits. Along with the competition for possible riches, came disputes, crime, and the need for justice. At first, justice and community protection came in the form of vigilante groups. In most cases, trouble makers were forced out of town. Occasionally however, a man deemed to have committed a particularly severe offense would be found swinging from a large Ponderosa Pine tree near the south end of present day Main Street in Durango. It was used often enough to be referred to by area residents as simply, the Hanging Tree.

The territorial Governor acknowledged the need for official law enforcement in the area when he appointed, **Joseph W. Wallace** as the first Sheriff of La Plata County in 1871, until a formal election could be held. Wallace was also the first elected Sheriff when the local population voted for him to remain in office.

The HANGING TREE, South Main, Durango 1880s



James (John) F. Grennell was elected Sheriff in 1874. In the last year of his term, one of his Deputies, identified only as Deputy Harris, was shot and killed. Mr. Hugh Lambert, his wife, and three sons operated the Water Fall Ranch a few miles north of Durango. An Englishman, J.P. Lamb, bought land across from Lamberts and attempted to steal water from the waterfall on Lambert's property. When Lambert threatened to kill Lamb if he trespassed again, Lamb sought and got a warrant for Lambert's arrest.

Lambert, feeling he was within his rights, refused to accept the warrant. A posse, headed by Deputy Harris, arrived early in the morning of April 23, 1876. When two of Lambert's sons stepped outside, a young Irish boy, new to the country and a member of the posse, fired a shot. Lambert immediately shot Deputy Harris, between the eyes, killing him. The Lambert family continued to operate the ranch while Hugh Lambert spent the next several years in prison.

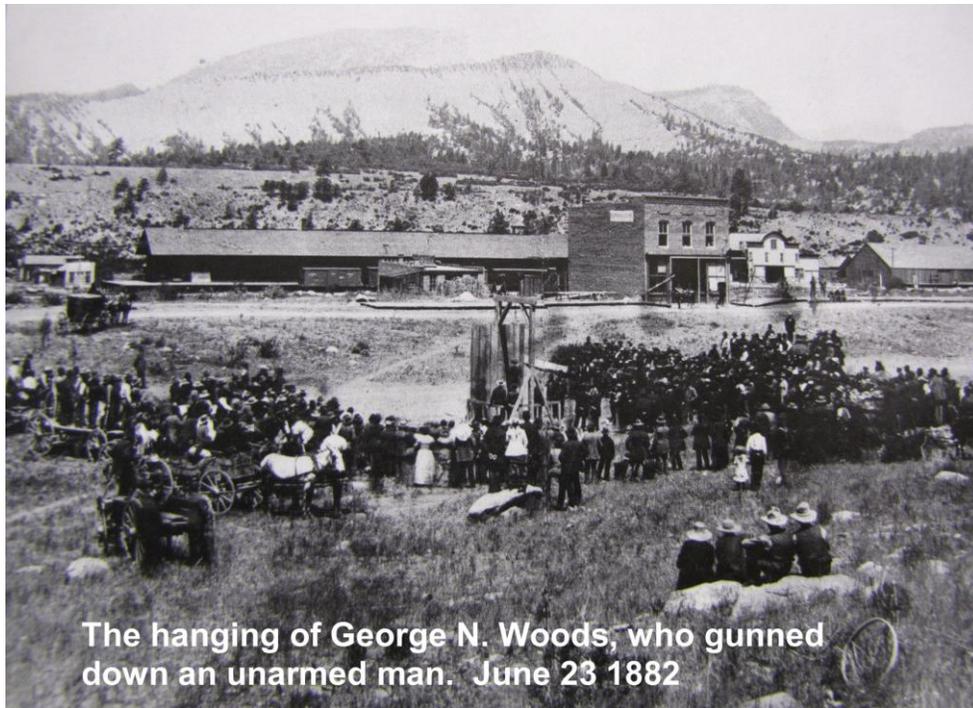
Richard Giles was elected in 1876, the year Colorado became a state. He died of an illness just a few months into his term. **Robert Dwyer** was appointed to finish Giles' term and was elected in his own right in 1878. Dwyer worked out of his office at Parrot City and later at Animas City. He resigned late in 1880, complaining he could not live on the salary of Sheriff. He did the first prisoner transport from La Plata County Jail to Canon City, escorting two prisoners. He was the first Marshal of Durango, 1880-81.

Durango was incorporated on April 27, 1881. Dwyer, a native of Ireland, typified the Sheriffs of La Plata County who faced many challenges. He was interviewed prior to his death in 1920. He recalled many events that created an image of a robust pioneer Sheriff in the rough and tumble area in and around the cowboy/miner town of Durango. Below are excerpts from that interview in Sheriff Dwyer's own words.

“Well, it was no easy task in this town. A typical instance of trouble-making was of the tough cowboy who had been painting the town red. He rode his horse right into a saloon, twirling a revolver in each hand. I started forward to arrest him when Mike Moran, the bartender, exclaimed, ‘For God’s sake Bob, don’t interfere or he will shoot up the place!’ One evening I returned from a hard trip over the mountains with really a vicious character having many enemies on account of his brutal treatment of a woman. A posse came and demanded my prisoner. I remained on guard all that night and the next. Then I placed a guard on the crude jail we had at Animas City and went home to bed. I arose early the next morning to find the prisoner hanging from a big pine tree behind one of the saloons. One instance I recall is of receiving a letter from a fellow, calling himself the Texas Kid, asking me to stand in with him and his gang.” [The letter asking Dwyer to allow a bank robbery, said in part ‘Bob Dwyer: We all wish you well. We have got to make a raise. If you stand in with us we will give you an equal share before we leave town. We will do our business without killing anyone except in self-defense. I have a good gang and can depend on them. Now Bob, this is in confidence, and if you think it don’t suit you, burn this letter up and that will be the last of it’.] “However I did not act on the bandit’s suggestion, but summoned as many men to my aid as I thought I needed, all well armed. Soon the whole band rode up, but followed their leader out of town, and no attack was made on our people.” Sheriff Dwyer once said, “Often as I look back on those days of trial, I think of the risks I ran, and yet, how it pays after all to be honest and true to duty and the trust placed in you.” (Pioneers of the San Juan Country, Vol 2, pp 44-47)

Luke Hunter took over as Sheriff in November of 1880 only to resign a year later. After a few months in office, members of the Stockton-Eskridge gang broke out of the jail in Durango and fled to Silverton. Hunter was on their trail when the gang shot and killed 33 year old Silverton Marshal Clayton “Clete” Ogsbury in a shootout outside the notorious Diamond Saloon at the corner Greene & 11th Streets in Silverton on August 24 1881. Two members of the gang were caught and lynched in downtown Silverton by persons unknown. Sheriff Hunter was replaced by **Barney Watson** in 1881. Sheriff Watson has the distinction of presiding over the only recorded legal hanging in La Plata County. On the morning of May 23, 1882 a man known as G.N. Woods, also called “Bill”, shot and killed an unarmed man by the name of M.C. Buchanan in the “Pacific Club Saloon”. A jury found him guilty of deliberate and pre-meditated murder.

A gallows was built on the site of the present Strater Hotel in Durango. At Noon on June 23, 1882 before a crowd of 300 men and a few women and children, Woods was hanged or, as people used to say at the time, “He was jerked to Jesus.”



Sheriff Watson's report to the court read, "La Plata County District Court: Have executed G.N. Woods within this 23rd of June, 1882. Barney Watson." Sheriff Watson was apparently a man of few words. Watson had been a Texas cowboy and Pan Handle Ranger before serving as Sheriff. Among his accomplishments was the arrest of the Stockton-Eskridge Gang that had been terrorizing the area.

While it was the Wild West during those early years of La Plata County Sheriff's Office, the bulk of the Sheriff's time was not unlike today. Much of the time was spent riding the large county, which extended farther north, east, and west than it does today, serving civil papers. There were also Sheriff's sales and prisoner transports across the Continental Divide to Pueblo and Canon City. **Sam Pedgrift**, who followed Watson into office in 1883, found time to also run the mail from Durango to Silverton and was commended for the excellent job he did.

Little happened of note from 1884 to 1906 as the area began to settle down to a more civilized pace. The courthouse was moved during this time and many records related to this time period were lost. It is known however that, in 1884, a Grand Jury ruled that the jail conditions were deplorable and ordered that a new brick jail be built. It took almost three years to pay the construction costs off through a bond issue that raised either three hundred dollars or three thousand dollars, depending on the source checked.

During these years, the following men held the Office of Sheriff: **John C. Turner** served two terms from 1886 to 1889; **William Longnecker**, 1889 and 1890.

Draper C Sargent served two terms through 1895; **John H Alexander**, 1896 and '97; **Charles C. Benson**, 1898; **P.T. McCartney** started off the new century as Sheriff, 1900 and 1901; **Joseph O. Smith**, 1902 through 1904.



Sheriff William Thompson circa 1905

The next election was a bitter one and led to the most notorious incident among law enforcement agencies in the history of Colorado. On November 8, 1904 **William “Bill” J. Thompson** was elected Sheriff. A Republican, he had narrowly defeated the Democrat contender, Jesse Stansel by 201 votes: 1,748 to 1,547. It had been a nasty campaign that ended with each man having hard feelings for the other. The Thompson family ran a large cattle ranch and other businesses in the area. Thompson Park near Mancos Hill west of Durango still bears the family name. Sheriff Thompson was an intimidating man. With a full head of hair and large handle bar moustache, he was well over 6 feet tall and 270 lbs. He was tough as nails. A drunk, ‘ner-do-well cousin slashed Thompson across the lower abdomen with a large knife in 1904 or 1905. He walked across the street with his bowels cupped hands to Dr. Winter’s office and was sewn up. He previously worked under a Durango town marshal in the 1890’s and was appointed acting Sheriff in August of 1898 when Charles Benson abruptly left office. (**T.P. Airey** also acted as Sheriff for a brief time in 1899). Having lost to Thompson, Jesse Stansel became town Marshal of Durango.

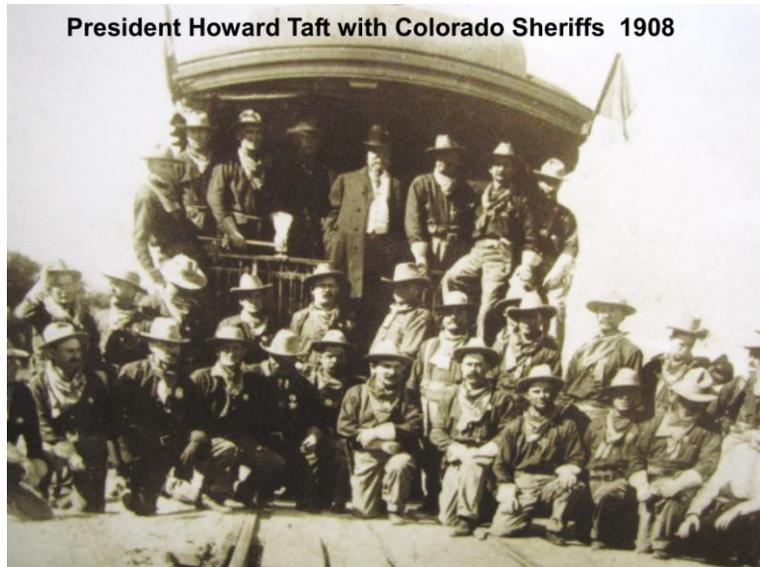
In the winter of 1905-’06, bowing to pressure from a group opposed to gambling in the county, Thompson began raids on saloons, including those in Durango. Stansel, who had owned a saloon in 1900, did not cooperate with Thompson. Things finally came to a head on Main Street, outside a saloon at almost High Noon on January 8, 1906. Sheriff Thompson had just come out of the El Moro Bar, where he had confiscated gambling equipment the night before, when he met Stansel leaning against a lamp post. Eye witness accounts of what happened next vary greatly. But, it is agreed that there was a verbal confrontation between the two men leading to both drawing their guns and opening fire. Thompson, who almost always carried a .45 revolver, had a light caliber pistol that morning. When both men’s guns were empty, Stansel had been shot twice through the lungs and Thompson was shot in one lung, his stomach, his neck, and had one bullet passed through his nostril into his brain. They both began to use their empty guns as clubs with Stansel striking the mortally wounded Thompson several times in the head. Thompson cried out, “My God, he has killed me!”

Thompson took a few steps and fell to the ground. He died in a wagon on the way to the hospital. Stansel was found not guilty of murder in a long and contentious trial.



La Plata County Sheriff's Office circa 1905

Sheriff Thompson's brother, **George W. Thompson** was appointed by La Plata County Commissioners to finish out Bill's term. The Thompson-Stansel incident was a climax to the turbulent times of the 1800's to the threshold of a more temperate 20th century.



Wheels & Wings: 1909-1978

In the years that followed 1906, each La Plata County Sheriff dutifully and quietly fulfilled the responsibilities of Office. While there would still be times of high drama and moments of danger, the often lawless days of La Plata County faded into history. The line of elected succession to the Office of Sheriff continued: **John Clarke**, (and/or **D.C. Bonner**, records conflict) 1909-1910; **Timothy J. McClure**, 1911-1912; **Arthur C. Fassbinder**, 1913-1918 (3 terms); **John N. Alexander**, 1919 through 1920.

George N. Rowe served two terms 1921-1924. Prohibition, the crack down on alcohol sales and manufacture in the U.S., was in full swing. Rowe was very proud of his efforts to enforce the Volsted Act which banned all alcohol. He led many raids in the county. He knew where to look to. He was 6 when his family moved to the area. He was well known and liked by residents. After being Sheriff, he still maintained an interest in law enforcement. He was still doing late night business security checks on foot patrol with Durango Police Department more than 25 years later. In the early 1950's, he walked the night beat with a young rookie name Jesse Ellis, to whom he related his stories of La Plata County law enforcement in the "Roaring Twenties." Ellis went on to work parts of 4 decades with Durango Police Department, retired from there, and worked another decade with La Plata County Sheriff's Office.

Hardy P. McConnell served 1925-'26. His, 6 year old son John was shot & killed in March 1926 while on the porch of the McConnell ranch house by an unknown person. Many believed the shooting was in response to the Sheriff's strict enforcement of Prohibition laws. He moved his family to California a short time later.

Sheriff Ed Painter served two terms, 1927-1930. It is often said that the spouses of elected officials also serve. This was very true in the case of Painter's wife, Bertha, who helped out as a Deputy Sheriff when there were female prisoners to be dealt with. She also did prisoner transports with her husband, often by train to Pueblo. Unlike Sheriff Rowe, Sheriff Painter was not from the area. He was a professional baseball player for 13 years. He played 3rd base for Detroit and then for the Cleveland Indians before a knee injury ended his baseball career. He moved to Durango prior to 1921. Like Rowe, much of Sheriff Painter's time was spent attempting to enforce Prohibition. One night, he received word that "Two-Gun Jimmy" who was wanted by the police was at a dance in Ignacio, 22 miles south of Durango. Painter went there by car. This helped get him out of a fix. After putting "Two-Gun Jimmy" in Painter's car, Jimmy's friends who had been at the dance surrounded the car. Sheriff Painter simply said in a loud voice, "I am leaving now, boys, and anyone who is in my way will get run down." With that, he put his car in gear and people scattered in all directions. In another incident, Painter saw a fugitive running from him. When his car could not go any further, Sheriff Painter got out, swam across an arroyo, and caught the man on foot. Normally a fearless man, one thing did scare him. For his entire life, he refused to ride in a car with a woman driver.

The next 24 years would see only 3 men serve as Sheriff of La Plata County, with each being elected to 4 two year terms: **Harry T. Ayers**, 1931-1938; **R. Bruce Sullivan**, 1939-1946; **Chester J. Pettey**, 1947-1952. When Pettey was elected he was the youngest Sheriff to hold office up to that time, being in his early twenties. Although all three of these men contributed to the Office of Sheriff, Sullivan seemed to represent the bridge from old west Sheriff to a more contemporary one. Sullivan had one foot in the past. He came from a family of ranchers. He was remembered for his deadly accuracy with a revolver and his many championships won as a cattle roper. His other foot was firmly set in the future. He attended the FBI academy twice. He formed the first "Sheriff's Posse" in Colorado after seeing similar organizations in Arizona. He kept very accurate records which allows us to know today what took place during 1944: 134 prisoners handled; 108 arrests made; 94 investigations conducted; 15 fires fought. Until the 1980's, there were no fire districts in parts of La Plata County. The Sheriff had the responsibility of fighting fires as County Fire Marshal. Today, low pay is often cited as a problem in attracting and retaining law enforcement officers. It was no different in the time of Sullivan who lost money from not being able to properly attend to his ranching business. His \$2,000 a year salary as Sheriff did not begin to make up the difference. Sullivan Once lamented, "for a person to be Sheriff, he must almost have to be retired or have an additional source of income."



When Sheriff Sullivan left office in 1946, he went on to serve in the Colorado House of Representatives. He also served in the Colorado Senate where he introduced a bill that resulted in then Fort Lewis College A&M to be moved from south of Hesperus to its present location. When serving in the House and Senate, Sullivan was often called upon to sing for various functions and was said to have a beautiful voice. He developed it while singing to his family's cattle herd. He was also a cowboy poet. One of his favorite poems, 'Lots of Luck,' ended this way: "If my luck continues....I'll tell you no lie....I think I'll live until the day that I die."

Beginning in 1954, La Plata County Sheriffs were elected to four year terms instead of two years. The first 4-year term was served by **Ralph D. Graham**, 1955-'58.

After Graham, **Herbert McKinsey**, was Sheriff from 1959 through 1962. McKinsey also appears to be the 1st to defeat the daunting Rocky Mountains and Continental Divide by transporting prisoners to other facilities in the state by aircraft. No newcomer to challenges, McKinsey served during WWII with the 921st Military Police and was also a member of the legendary U.S. Army jungle fighters known as Merrill's Marauders. He was wounded in Burma while with the Marauders. He knew more than any previous La Plata Sheriff that it was far quicker, and took far less man hours to go over the mountains rather than through them. He had been re-supplied in remote areas of Burma by aircraft and had a tremendous respect for their capabilities. He flew with pilot Jim Gregg to move prisoners to and from the Four Corners area of which La Plata County is a part. In 2014, the next generation of Gregg's was still flying inmates on a regular basis for L.P.C.S.O.

Communications were primitive in the area served by La Plata County Sheriff's Office. In the first half of the 1900's there was no radio dispatch center. If a resident had an emergency, they called the telephone operator. The word would be passed and a red flag would be put out in front of a gas station on Main Street in Durango. If a Colorado State Trooper, Durango Police Officer, or La Plata Sheriff's Deputy saw the red flag, they would call the telephone operator to receive the emergency call. The flag was later replaced with a red light. One day in 1950, Jesse Ellis, who had just returned from the Army, saw the red light on. He ran to the pool hall, where officers from all three departments tended to gather, and told them of the emergency signal. They were playing cards so they told Ellis to call the phone operator to determine the nature of the call while they finished their hand. Law enforcement response time is measured in seconds and minutes today. The pace was not that fast in the 1950's.



In the 1950's, La Plata County Sheriff's Office response to emergencies took a giant step backward, to its earliest years, when the volunteer organization, Colorado Mounted Rangers Troop "D" was activated in the county. The original Colorado Rangers was formed by the Governor in 1876 when Colorado became a state. Their number ranged from 8 to 18. Their primary role was protecting gold shipments throughout Colorado. With the advent of automobiles and highways, the Rangers merged into the Courtesy Patrol. The Courtesy Patrol eventually became the Colorado State Patrol which led to the demise of the Rangers. But, in 1954 La Plata county resident Jack McConnell sought to form a group of local horsemen into a volunteer troop of Mounted Rangers. He approached the Governor who was a friend of his and the state legislature eventually recognized the resurrected Colorado Mounted Rangers, with the legal right to carry a gun and badge. They assumed a new mission of responding to any request from Colorado law enforcement for assistance in civil preparedness, and emergency response to events such as disasters and search & rescue missions. In 2011 the majority of the Troop D Mounted Rangers formed the La Plata County Mounted Patrol and remain an integral partner with La Plata County Sheriff's Office, La Plata Office of Emergency Management and La Plata County Search & Rescue. Today "Mounted" can mean not only horses but also snowmobiles, ATV's, skis, dirt bikes, and mountain bikes

In 1963, **Walter Conrad** was sworn into office and served 3 terms: 1963 through 1974. He was followed by **Denny H. Schilthius**, 1975-1978. (While studying at Fort Lewis College, in 1971, Schilthius wrote a paper on L.P.C.S.O. It has been a key source in the preparation of this document.)

Passage Into a New Century: 1979-2016

The population of La Plata County increased from about 23,000 in 1979 to a projection of nearly 54,000 in 2016. During that period La Plata County Sheriff's Office grew from 20 employees to over 130 full time, including over 100 POST certified officers in 2016. Average jail population in 1979 was 8. By 2016 there were 100 to 130 inmates on any given day. 1979, a person could be hired with no police training, receive an informal orientation of a few days, then be sent out to perform the duties of a Sheriff's Deputy, with the understanding at some point over the next 12 to 18 months, they would attend the Colorado Law Enforcement Training Academy.

By 2016, Sheriff's Deputy applicants to the Public Safety (Patrol) Division are not even considered unless they have already successfully graduated from a recognized, certified, police academy where they receive over 600 hours of training. Many officers might a few years in the jail, where they receive up to 700 hours of in-service training before going to Patrol where they receive yet another 540Hrs in the Field Training Officer Program. A typical Public Safety Deputy can have close to 2,000 hours of formal law enforcement training before they even begin patrolling on their own. They are also required to receive a minimum of 24 hours in-service training every year.

Crimes Deputies responded to in 1979, were typically domestic violence, thefts, assaults and an occasional murder, every few years. Unfortunately, those became the "Good Old Days". The 80's and 90's found Deputies responding to incidents such as two Durango Police Officers shot, a State Trooper shot, four officers in neighboring Montezuma county shot in one incident, and other incidents where officers were shot at. The specter of terrorism descended on America on the quiet morning of September 11 2001. LPCSO Deputies found themselves supporting Army National Guard troops armed with M-16 rifles, providing security at Durango-La Plata airport in the aftermath of 9-11. La Plata Sheriff Office staff also provided security training to the Army National Guard. Beginning in the 90's a new term entered our vocabulary which has become part of the lives and deaths of Coloradans: Active Gunman.

The facts above demonstrate that dynamic and significant changes swept through La Plata County and the Sheriff's Office during the last decades of the 1900's and the tumultuous beginning of the new millennium. Coping with such growth and change in law enforcement, required that a Sheriff already be an experienced, professional law enforcement officer. A local rancher or business man could no longer expect to take office and hope to learn the job as they went, which was the norm in the 1800's and most of the 1900's. Three men would guide LPCSO through these eventful years. Serving two terms each were **Alvin L. Brown**, 1979-1986 and **Bill Gardner**, 1987-1994. Sheriff **Duke Schirard**, would take office in 1994 and serve an unprecedented five terms through 2015.

Many who moved to La Plata County during these years of rapid growth were from Texas and California. **Al Brown**, was one of those Californians. He served in various law enforcement roles for many years in Southern California and applied that vast amount of experience to the improvement of LPCSO operations. He inherited a Sheriff's Office with little equipment, poor vehicles, and an antiquated jail. To say that employee turnover was a problem, would be an understatement. As an example, there were 14 Deputies in September 1980 when a new Deputy was hired to work in the jail. Three months later that Deputy had moved up 10 notches on the seniority list. To address the many problems, Brown transplanted several other veteran California Deputies into key positions to act as the nucleus as LPCSO tried to keep pace with county growth and change. Standards, equipment, and procedures were improved.

One indicator of the stability and professionalism that Al Brown laid into the foundation of LPCSO could be seen in the fact that, as the year 2000 approached, several administrators with LPCSO had been initially hired by Brown, 2 decades earlier.

Bill Gardner was a career law enforcement officer when he was elected in 1986 to the first of his two terms. He worked as a Deputy for San Juan County Colorado Sheriff's Office and later was Police Chief of the town of Silverton, also in San Juan County. He started as a Deputy for LPCSO in the late 1970's and eventually served as Patrol Lt before being elected Sheriff. Besides his seemingly limitless energy, Gardner brought two other things to LPCSO. One was his belief that the Sheriff's Office was a dynamic organization in an environment of change. He placed a heavy emphasis on 'Management By Objectives' and encouraged all employees to actively participate in organizational planning.



Secondly, Gardner helped create one of the finest Search & Rescue teams in Colorado. He was aided by his strong mountaineering background. He was part of a team that successfully climbed 20,320' Denali Peak, also known as Mt. McKinley, in Alaska. Denali has a vertical relief of 18,000 feet, greater than that of Mt. Everest. He also operated a mountaineering school in the San Juans. Search & Rescue is a legislated responsibility of each County Sheriff in Colorado. In 2011, Gardner was the Director of a regional law enforcement academy in Grand Junction, Colorado.

When **Duke Schirard** took office as Sheriff, he already had 27 years of experience in law enforcement. He worked at LPCSO from 1974 to 1979 rising from Deputy to Undersheriff for Sheriff Denny Schilthuis, then acting Sheriff when Schilthuis left prior to completing his term. He then served with Durango Police Department and was the Marshal of the town of Bayfield until becoming Sheriff in 1994. With a degree in Agriculture, Schirard had a close identity with those who still work the land as farmers and ranchers, much in the same way as those who came to the area in the 1800's. Under his tenure, the Sheriff's Office continued to grow along with the community. Employee turnover, a chronic problem throughout the history of L.P.C.S.O., was brought under control. Some of the problems faced when he became Sheriff were no different than those Sheriff Watson had to deal with in 1884: an over-crowded, inadequate jail; continued population growth within the county; limited resources with which to meet a variety of law enforcement related objectives; the need for community support and participation to deter crime.



During Schirard's tenure of 20 years, LPCSO became a law enforcement team in tune with societal change and technological advances:

- Several programs developed and initiatives taken to work with offenders in alternatives to incarceration, from educational and counseling programs to electronic monitoring systems that allowed monitoring of offenders outside of a traditional jail confinement setting.
- Patrol vehicles equipped with computers, digital video, 800MHZ radios, etc, to improve information exchange and situational awareness in the field.
- Staff training in the latest techniques of DNA evidence collection, satellite communications and tracking systems, investigation of crimes taking place in cyber space as well as in the physical world, including crimes against children, and identity theft.
- Personnel employed the latest managerial and emergency response principles through NIMS, ICS, CSOC, NSA, and FBI instructional models, in addition to honing tactical techniques to confront the latest domestic threats from terrorism.



In the early summer of 2002 what became known as the "Missionary Fire" broke out on the west face of Missionary Ridge, 10 miles north of Durango. Before it was contained weeks later, it had covered 73,000 acres and effected 112 square miles, from the Animas Valley, to Lemon Lake, to Vallecito, to Falls Creek. Over 50 homes and other structures were lost.



One firefighter lost his life. Firefighters came from all over the U.S. to battle the blazes. All marveled at their welcome by the community and the outpouring of local support. During the fire and the mud and debris flows that would follow, every employee of La Plata County Sheriff's Office excelled in the performance of their duties under very difficult, often dangerous conditions. They demonstrated poise, heroism, and a dedication to duty that was widely praised by the community.

When **Sean Smith** started his first term as Sheriff in January 2015, he continued the stewardship of almost a century and a half earlier: to promote the safety and welfare of not only those who are fortunate enough call La Plata County Colorado their home but also those who come to visit this wonderful area. Examples of steps taken by Sheriff Smith to better serve the community include: an expanded School Resource Officer program; established a centralized training coordination unit; increased the number of detection K-9's and handlers; upgraded the fleet of patrol vehicles with enhanced information exchange systems; increased patrols in rural areas of the county; created a watercraft unit patrol and provide rescue capabilities on area lakes; promoted an ongoing commitment to excellence, professionalism, and community partnerships with emphasis on values within the organization and involving members of the community in organizational decision making. Such initiatives helped earn the trust, respect and confidence of the community by treating all persons with compassion and fairness while honoring the constitutional rights of all people. Stewardship also extends to the resources entrusted to an organization. LPCSO closed out the first year of Sheriff Smith's term approximately \$1 million under budget.



IN THE LINE OF DUTY

A career in law enforcement can be very rewarding. It can also be inherently dangerous. It is one of the few civilian professions where getting dressed for work includes donning a bullet proof vest. Sometimes that cannot be enough protection, even in a rural setting such as Southwest Colorado. Examples of that: two Durango Police Officers shot in the 1980's by a sniper; the killing of Cortez Police Officer Dale Claxton and wounding of 4 other officers in 1998 by three killers armed with assault rifles; the serious wounding of a Colorado State Patrolman while on a car stop in Montezuma County in May of 2003; numerous other incidents over the years of officers, including LPCSO Deputies, coming under life threatening attacks. Members of LPCSO have lost their lives trying to uphold the law. On April 23rd 1876, Deputy Harris was shot and killed when his posse attempted to serve a warrant at a ranch a few miles north of Durango. On January 8th 1906 Sheriff William Thompson was shot and killed during a shootout with the Durango Town Marshal while trying to stop illegal gambling. On October 13th 1972 Deputy Donald Kartchner was killed during a vehicle pursuit near Vallecito. On June 21st 1979, Deputy John Robinson III was accidentally shot by another Deputy when testing a handgun while off duty. On July 5th 1981, Sgt Frank McAteer died of a heart attack after struggling with an arrestee. Thankfully, no other LPCSO Deputies have made the ultimate sacrifice in over 35 years. We pray that no others join the ranks of the Remembered Fallen.



LPCSO employees in the Operations, Detentions, Investigations & Administration Divisions continue to carry out their diverse missions the same way as those who have served La Plata County for the last 145 years, with compassion, dedication, and a determination to see the job through. The tools and methods have changed. But the result is the same: a community served and protected by professionals who care.

Record of La Plata County Sheriffs

[Includes appointed & elected. Poor and lost records and some listings showing terms starting at election in November and others sworn in, in January, has resulted in some minor discrepancies in the list, below.]

1871-1874 **Joseph W. Wallace** 1st Sheriff. Appointed by Territorial Governor

1874-1876 **James Grennell (aka John F. Greenell)**

[Beginning in 1878, Sheriffs were elected to **2 year terms** until 1954. Most dates below indicate date of elections.]

1876-1877 **Richard Giles** (Died shortly after elected)

1878-1881 **Robert Dwyer** 1st elected Sheriff, served a total of 3 years

November 1880 **Luke Hunter** (appointed to fill vacancy until Sept. 1881)

11-8-1881 **Barney Watson** elected and replaced Luke Hunter who resigned.

11-6-1883 **Samuel Pedgrift**

11-3-1885 & 11-8-1887 **John C. Turner**

11-5-1889 **William T. Longnecker**

11-3-1891 & 11-7-1893 **Draper C. Sargent**

11-5-1895 **John H. Alexander**

11-2-1897 **Charles C. Benson**

1888-'99 **T.P. Airey** (Appointed when Benson left office)

11-7-1899 **P.T. McCartney**

11-5-1901 **Joseph O. Smith**

11-8-1904 **William "Bill" J. Thompson** (Records conflict. Could be Stansel, below)

11-6-1906 **George W. Thompson** (Bill Thompson's brother. Appointed to office by County Commissioners after Bill was shot and killed on January 8th '06 at just before Noon on Main Street Durango by the town marshal, Jessie C. Stansel during an argument over a gambling raid by Bill Thompson the previous evening. Stansel was shot twice, Thompson four times.)

11-13-1908 **John Clarke** (other sources also show **D.C. Bonner**)

- 11-8-1910 **Timothy J. McClver**
- 11-5-1912 **Arthur C. Fassbinder** (served 3 terms & won 1st county primary in 1912)
- 11-5-1918 **John N. Alexander**
- 11-2-1920 **George Rowe** (served 2 terms)
- 11-4-1924 **Hardy P. McConnell**
- 11-2-1926 **Ed Painter** (served 2 terms)
- 11-4-1930 **Harry T. Ayers** (served 4 terms)
- 11-8-1938 **R. Bruce Sullivan** (served 4 terms)
- 11-5-1946 **Chester J. Pettey** (served 4 terms)
- [Beginning in 1954 County Sheriffs were elected to 4 year terms rather than 2 year terms]
- 11-2-1954 **Ralph D. Graham**
- 11-4-1958 **Herbert L. McKinsey**
- 11-6-1962 **Walter Conrad** (serve 3 terms)
- 11-5-1974 **Denny H. Schilthius**
- 11-7-1978 **Alvin L. Brown** (served 2 terms)
- 11-4-1986 **Bill Gardner** (served 2 terms)
- 11-3-1994 **Duke Schirard** (served 5 terms)
- 11-4-2014 **Sean Smith** (Began 4 year term 1-13-15)

[List compiled by Dan Bender, LPCSO September 15th 2016 based on a combination of information from: La Plata County Clerk records; F.L.C. college paper, "History of LPCSO" by Denny Schilthius in 1971; "Pioneers of San Juan Country," DAR 1995]