



The Quarterly Publication of the
Novato Historical Guild, the Novato History Museum,
and the Hamilton Field History Museum

Preserving Novato's History

Feature Section

Contents © 2010 Novato Historical Guild, Inc.

October-December 2010

The Novato Historian

Volume 34, Number 4

Novato's First Men in Blue

By Diane Campbell and Mike Read

NEW YEAR'S EVE, 1960

Only on duty five minutes after the "baton" was officially passed from the Marin County Sheriff's Department to the newly-formed Novato Police Department, the first call came in. It was New Year's Eve, December 31, 1960, around 6:05 p.m. and then Mayor Wayne Womack was in the process of making a speech to the newly-appointed officers, probably about what a great town Novato was and how happy he was that we now had our own police force. Suddenly the police radio went off and so did the chief and the other four officers on duty to their first official call. The first arrest that was made that evening 50 years ago was the culmination of a year-long contentious endeavor of the newly-elected Novato City Council and the newly-appointed City Administrator.

APPROVING THE FORMATION OF A POLICE FORCE

In 1960 the voters of Novato decided it was time to take the future of their town Novato into their own hands by voting to incorporate the city. Part of the vision for the new City of Novato was to provide the services the citizens needed and desired. One of the first orders of business to be tackled was the creation of a Novato Police Department. Up until Novato incorporated, and through the end of 1960, police services were provided by the Marin County Sheriff's Department. The Sheriff's Department leased the former Novato railroad station at the end of Grant Avenue for \$1 per year and used it as their Novato substation.

Councilman M.E. (Babe) Silva contacted Marin County Sheriff Louis Mountanos to ask for a recommendation as acting chief. Mountanos recommended Sgt. Ed Levine who was already the sergeant in charge of the Novato substation. On January 20, 1960, the new City Council agreed to name Sgt. Levine as acting Police Chief until a permanent chief could be selected. For the interim, Levine would be a police chief in name only and would continue to work for and be paid by the Marin County Sheriff's Department. Sheriff Mountanos told the Novato Advance, "The most important problem facing the new City of Novato right now is the appointment of a Chief of Police. A Police Chief will have the duty of protecting the life and property of the citizens of Novato."

Minimum staffing requirements for a department in Novato, according to Mountanos, would be an eight-man staff consisting of a chief, two sergeants, and five patrolmen. Salaries comparable to the county would set salaries of the chief at about \$600 per month, sergeants at \$535 and patrolmen at \$414 per



Members of Novato's police force attending school daily in a classroom at Novato High until they took over law enforcement duties January 1 from the county sheriff's department. Lecturing is FBI agent Michael Tosaw of San Mateo on collection and identification of evidence. Listening left to right are H. Floyd Hollowell, Robert J. diGrazia, Chief Roy C. McLaren, Maurice Lafferty, Glenn F. Wright, and Wayne Knutila

month—a total annual cost of \$4,000 per month for salaries. Total annual police budget for the city would come to about \$70,000.

In contrast, in 1960 the Sheriff's Department had five police officers stationed in Novato. They were Sgt. Ed Levine and four deputies: Gerald Fries, Ernest Neilsen, Harold Goerndt, and William Brust. At least one man was on duty 24 hours a day.

After being assured by Sheriff Mountanos that two month's time was long enough to organize a force, Councilman Harvey Vicchio urged immediate formation of a department, observing "That's what we're here for." He was backed by

Mayor Wayne Womack, who claimed that current police protection was inadequate. After much disagreement and discussion, on April 26, 1960, the City Council agreed to establish a six-man police force in the fiscal year 1960-61 which began July 1, 1960. They agreed that the Novato Police Department would consist of five patrolmen and one police chief at an estimated annual cost to the city of approximately \$50,000.

However, Councilman M.E. (Babe) Silva still challenged the validity of the figures.

According to his investigation, Silva claimed the cost of operating a department would cost \$20,000 to \$25,000 more



Pictured in front of the first police station (train depot) are, front row from left, Officer Robert diGrazia, Chief Roy McLaren and Officer Wayne Knitila, and back row, officers Floyd Hollowell, Mike Lafferty and Glenn Wright.

than the \$50,000 estimated. Salaries for a police chief at \$650 a month and five patrolmen in the range of \$414 to \$505 a month would come to \$35,000 for the year. Purchase of one police car would cost \$2250. A second police car would be provided through installing a radio in the administrator's car for use in emergencies. The police department would continue to work from the railroad depot at a rental of \$1 a year. Other items listed were: office supplies, \$1000; telephone bills, \$700; vehicle maintenance, \$700; travel expense, \$500; office equipment, \$600; special equipment, \$700; uniforms, \$500. Also, ammunition, guns, tear gas bombs \$600; use of county jail, \$500; blood alcohol tests, \$100; base radio station and aerial, \$3000 = total cost \$47,740. Retirement costs would add another \$1800.

FINDING THE CHIEF

Written examinations for the position of chief were held on July 20. About 35 applications were received for the job. Only 25 of the 35 applicants were eligible to take the stiff examination which was given at various exam points across the state. However, of those 25, just a dozen chose to do so. All would be thoroughly screened with the FBI and the state police agencies. "For a position as sensitive as that of police chief, we must be absolutely certain of a man's probity, honesty, physical fitness and emotional stability. I begin to get a little doubtful about a man who has been divorced three or four times or who is head over heels in debt" said City Administrator Consultant Robert Bailey. "Such a man might be tempted to take graft."

Five applicants passed the test, and all were police officers in high administrative positions in California. Two were presently chiefs of fairly large cities, one was an assistant chief in a very large city, one a captain, and the other was a sergeant with duties normally assigned to a lieutenant, the minimum qualification for the job.

On August 24, the five were next screened by a technical board consisting of William H. Hydie, Police Chief of Palo Alto; John Fording, Police Chief of Berkeley; Marin County Sheriff Louis Mountanos; and newly-appointed (August 16) City Administrator J. Julian Baget. The City's new police ordinance, recently passed by the Novato City Council, stated that the police chief shall be appointed by the City Administrator, "subject to the approval of the Council."

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

On September 20, prior to the 8 p.m. council meeting, a secret executive personnel session (now called closed session) was held to discuss the new chief of police position, and the five candidates for the post. The whole question of whether to even organize a police department for the City of Novato was once again revived.

Councilman M.E. (Babe) Silva told the Advance after the meeting that he felt the City could save considerable money by continuing to contract with the County for the services of deputy sheriffs. Silva said he thought close to \$10,000 could be saved for the remainder of the current fiscal year, which then could be added to next year's City of Novato Police budget. Silva also had recently become convinced that the proposed five-man police department was inadequate. The county sheriff's office with its manpower reserves could perform a more satisfactory job, he said.

"Next year, when this year's savings are added to the police budget, Novato could then afford a nine to ten-man police department. We would really be in business and could do the job right," said Silva.

Mayor Womack told the Advance he felt that incorporation passed in Novato because people here wanted improved local services such as better police protection.

"Having our own police department was one of the basic elements of people wanting self-government – incorporation – here," said the mayor, "along with planning, zoning, and probably parks and recreation."

CHIEF IS APPOINTED

One week later on September 27 the City Council named Roy McLaren, 32 year-old Assistant Chief of Daly City as the first Chief of the Novato Police Department. His appointment was approved 4-1 by the Council with the only dissenting vote coming from Councilman Silva.

Silva said he knew personally of a top police chief, formerly well known in Marin County, who would have been available. However, the police chief, serving elsewhere at the time, would not leave his present post until the following year and also would not be willing to take over the department with only five officers. Silva's doubts were echoed by Jerry Fries, Novato deputy chief, who was leaving the sheriff's department. He told the council "Standards were too rigid for local men to get in."

Urging that the Council pick the “best qualified man” for the post was the Rev. Lawrence Doyle, Novato Methodist Church minister. “Patronage should not be tolerated, particularly in the field of police,” said Rev. Doyle. W. R. Wilson, a Novato resident, urged the Council to make a decision, one way or another on whether to pick a police chief. And the Council listened.



Sgt. Ed Levine of the Marin County Sheriff's Department, here showing off his gun, was named acting police chief of the new City of Novato on January 20, 1960.

Chief McLaren's pay would be \$675 a month or \$8100 a year, a cut from the \$9516 he was receiving as assistant chief at Daly City. He had been assistant chief since 1957. He held a B.A. in Police Science from USC. Born in Berkeley, he saw naval service and worked for the CIA. His first police work was with the Berkeley Police Department in 1951 as a patrolman and at the same time attended UC graduate criminology school. “I liked the

opportunity for advancement in a brand new city and also, to a certain extent, being my own boss,” he said. McLaren said that he would try to build his department up to the Pacific Coast average of one man per 1,000 people as time went by.

CARS BEFORE COPS

The City Council voted to restrict the bidding to supply the needed police cars to only Novato car dealers. John Angeloni, himself a Dodge dealer (Nave Dodge) was unable to place a bid as he was a council member at the time.

The bid for the City's three cars was awarded to Dervin



The keys to three new police cars were presented to City Administrator John Baget and Police Chief Roy McLaren by L.J. Dervin, owner of Dervin Ford (now Novato Ford).

Ford whose bid came in at a price of \$6,138.06. Two of the cars would belong to the Police Department and the third was to be for the use of the City Administrator. The third car was equipped so that it could double as a police car. The only other bid was from Andersen Chevrolet for \$6300.64.

On December 5 the keys to three new police cars were presented to City Administrator J. Julian Baget and Chief Roy McLaren by L. J. Dervin owner of Dervin Ford. The new cars were a solid silver-grey and sported a bucket sized red light on the top. One unusual state-of-the-art feature of the police cars was a siren which also doubled as a public address system.

THE SEARCH FOR POLICE OFFICERS

With the new Chief of Police Roy McLaren now in town, the search for qualified police officers began in earnest. One of the hiring requirements set by the City Council was that a qualified candidate should have at least one year of experience in law enforcement. Administrator J. Julian Baget reported that the City had received about 100 applications for the five officer positions. About thirty of the candidates appeared to meet the requirements. The major cause of ineligibility for the others was the one-year experience requirement. “We're finding a number of applicants in the greater Novato area would otherwise qualify if it wasn't for the experience requirement. We may be overlooking some worthwhile candidates.”

The City Council dropped the requirement that the five jobs for the Novato policemen must have one year of experience, but in order to avoid a force of “green, inexperienced men,” at least two of the force were required to be experienced officers. On Friday, November 25, sixty-nine applicants turned up for the written examination held in the Novato High School cafeteria. The top ten scorers in the exam were then interviewed by McLaren and John Baget, who announced their choices on December 5. McLaren said that the top characteristic he'd look for in a prospective patrolman would be “humility.”

FIVE OFFICERS HIRED

On December 6, City Council approved for hire the five patrolmen candidates recommended by McLaren and Baget. They were:

Robert “Bob” diGrazia, 32, of Novato, who was serving as a deputy sheriff in the Novato area. diGrazia scored highest in the examinations. He would be the top man among those hired and would have seniority over the men as second in command. He lived at 570 Arthur Street in Novato, and had played a key role in the week before his hire in the capture of suspected teenage armed robbers at the corner of Grant and Highway 101. He attended the City College of San Francisco and the University of San Francisco. Bob went on to become Novato's acting Chief in November 1963 and served as Chief from January 1964 through November 1969.

Wayne W. Knutilla, 39, of Colma. He attended UC and USF where he trained in pre-criminology and completed 320 hours of additional training in police science. He had a class D teaching credential. Knutilla was with the Berkeley Police Department for six years.

Glenn F. Wright, 34, of Benicia. He had advanced through law enforcement training from UC training institutes and FBI

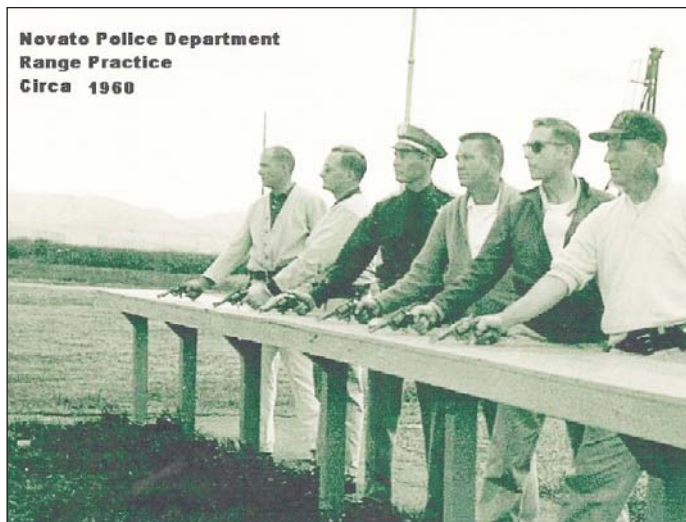
schools. He had been with the Benicia Police Department for the previous nine years.

Maurice D. Lafferty, 29, of San Jose. He studied psychology at Stockton College and had a Bachelor of Arts degree in Police Science from San Jose State College. He was a security officer for Richmond Chase Company and Lockheed Aircraft.

Howell F. Hollowell, 32, of Carlsbad. He attended college at Oceanside in addition to classes at the San Diego Police Academy. He was employed for two years as a fireman and four years as a policeman at Carlsbad.

THE NEW DEPARTMENT

On December 19 the five new officers attended special police school conducted at Novato High. The patrolmen received 70 hours of schooling by Chief McLaren and the FBI, some 90 hours less than required by the state. The training included a review of criminal law, rules of evidence, patrol procedure, first aid, self defense, transportation and handling of prisoners, and public and human relations.



Novato Police at firing range December 1960 - Left to right, diGrazia, Hollowell, Chief McLaren in uniform, Knutilla, Lafferty and Wright

The call letters KAW383 were the identifying numbers on the short wave radio for the Novato unit. The new department was housed in the old Northwestern Pacific Railroad depot. McLaren and his five “volunteers” gave it a coat of paint before they moved in. Their furniture consisted of one file cabinet and a few second-hand civil defense desks the city purchased. “We don’t intend to buy any new furniture for some time,” McLaren said.

The officers’ trousers were light blue and jackets were navy with light blue shoulder straps; the shirts were navy blue. One shirt, one jacket, and one pair of pants cost \$101. Guns ran from \$50 to \$65 each and were required to be .38 specials, Colts or Smith and Wesson. Monthly starting salary for the officers was \$414 or approximately \$2.40 per hour. Federal minimum wage was \$1 per hour in 1960. In a recent conversation with former Officer diGrazia, he confirmed the uniform and equipment were provided at the expense of the newly-hired officers. There

were no health benefits and definitely no overtime allowed.

Finding a telephone number that was easy to remember and quick to dial was a problem. Most of the short TWINbrook 2 numbers had already been taken. The new exchange of TWINbrook 7 would go into use the following spring which would help to solve the problem. Beginning April 1961, the police number was TW 7-1122. In the meanwhile it was TW 2-6000.

Officially the City’s new police department was to assume responsibility for the protection of Novato’s lives and property at midnight January 1, 1961; but for practical purposes the first shift began at 6 p.m. December 31 when four policemen came on duty.

Robert diGrazia, Mike Lafferty, Floyd Hollowell and Glenn Wright worked from 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. in the morning. The fifth member of the department, Wayne Knutilla, came in at midnight. Chief McLaren started at 4 p.m. and stayed on “indefinitely.” Police clerk and dispatcher Mrs. Florence Canmariato started at 5 p.m. and worked until 2 a.m. when calls were taken by the county sheriff’s office and relayed by radio units to Novato.

HAPPY NEW YEAR

The night is remembered mostly as being miserably foggy and nippy as the largely rural bedroom community quietly celebrated New Year’s Eve. Mayor Wayne Womak was on hand to officially welcome the new officers on board when the first call came in at around 6:05 p.m. The dubious honor of becoming “case number one” in Novato Police Department files goes to Novato resident Roderick Neal Grimes, of 20 Gertrude Lane, a mechanic at Hamilton Air Force Base.

Grimes was arrested at 6:15 p.m. early New Year’s Eve for drunk driving after hitting the rear of a car driven by Erwin Albert Scheller of 1890 Marion Ave, in front of 1936 Novato Blvd. The arresting officers, Glenn Wright and Robert diGrazia, had found a partially empty bottle of cream sherry wine in Grimes’ car. There was no place to hold a man until he sobered up in the leased police quarters at the depot. There really wasn’t much room for anything, just a drafty freight room for the department’s five officers, a small room with a desk for Chief Roy McLaren and a bathroom. So Mr. Grimes was hauled off to the old county jail in San Rafael.

Mayor Womack told the Council “It was a thrill to see our policemen go into action, although I don’t like to see anybody get into trouble.”



This was the first patch for the Novato Police in the 1960's.