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Retired Sheriff Ogden dies at 70

BY BLAKE HERZOG
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Yuma County officials reminisced Wednesday about retired Sheriff Ralph Ogden, the longest-serving holder of that job in Yuma County's history.

"He will be deeply missed. I worked for him for 20-plus years and I couldn't have asked for a better boss," said District 3 Yuma County Supervisor Darren Simmons, who retired from the sheriff's department just over a year ago and was

elected to the county board last November.

Ogden was 70 years old, and died of natural causes, sheriff's department spokesman Alfonso Zavala said Wednesday. Information about services are pending.

Ogden "brought the department into the 21st century" with on-board computers on vehicles much newer than the 250,000-milers some deputies had been driving, but insisted on higher levels of personal ser-

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FILE PHOTO BY RANDY HOEFT/YUMA SUN

FORMER YUMA COUNTY SHERIFF RALPH OGDEN talks about his career before his retirement in this December 2012 photo. Ogden died Tuesday. He was 70.

OGDEN

FROM PAGE A1

vice as well.

"He led by example. He was dedicated to the community and he was an involved person. Everybody that knew him liked him. It's hard to say, hard to put into words," Simmons added, speaking by phone from Wellton. "He mentored me and I was in charge of the area, he was the sergeant out here in the east county for a long time, and a lot of people out here loved him," he said.

Statements about Ogden's life and legacy were posted on Twitter and Facebook from as far as Washington, D.C., where Sen. Jeff Flake posted condolences on Twitter Tuesday and planned to read a statement about Ogden into the Congressional Record, according to spokeswoman Elizabeth Berry. Most of the statements also offered condolences to Ogden's wife Patty Ogden, as well as friends and family.

The remarks refer to him as "a pillar of the Arizona law enforcement community," who seemed to have stepped straight out of Old West lore.

"With his towering frame and trademark mustache, Sheriff Ogden looked every bit the part. But despite his imposing physical presence, Sheriff Ogden was a kind, compassionate man, beloved by his deputies and celebrated by his community," according to a copy of the text to be submitted by Flake.

It also notes Ogden's practice of writing person-

al birthday cards to each of his employees, numbering about 400 by the time he left four years ago.

Ogden's 42-year career with the Yuma County Sheriff's Department began as a dispatcher and jailer at the Parker jail, before that city and surrounding areas broke off to form La Paz County. He was promoted to deputy a year later, before becoming a sergeant in Wellton and on to the chief deputy position, which he held 12 years until being elected to his first term as sheriff in November 1992.

He was a leader of many law enforcement and government organizations, serving as president or chairman of the Arizona Sheriffs' Association, Arizona County Attorney and Sheriffs' Association, Arizona Association of Counties and the Southwest Border Sheriffs' Coalition. He was often in the middle of the national debate on border enforcement of immigration laws, coordinating with the Bush administration on expansion of federal resources under "Operation Jump Start" and urging the state Legislature to give more consideration to local costs and other issues just before it passed the controversial SB1070 in 2010.

County Board of Supervisors Chairman Tony Reyes said Ogden presented a more moderate tone during conversations about border issues than many other border-county sheriffs. "He seemed to always have an even keel about him. He would make the point, and

then substantiate it with some facts, and he would always take a calmer position, he had a tendency to calm other people, and it was evident when you saw him with other sheriffs and officials of his time.

After serving five terms, he retired in January 2013 after the election of his own chief deputy, current Sheriff Leon Wilmoth, who released a statement Tuesday.

"He was one the finest men and mentors that I have ever known. It was truly an honor for us all to know and work side by side with such an extraordinary leader. His loyalty and intense dedication to his work, personal sacrifice, and uncompromising standards of conduct provided the growth and development of the Yuma County Sheriff's Office. He was truly 'dedicated to service,'" he said, referring to a motto included in the department's official logo.

Simmons said that motto began with Ogden: "He came up with that, and he believed in it 100 percent."

Ogden, who lived in Yuma, was praised by the area's city and county officials alike for his partnership and spirit of community. He was active with local groups including Caballeros de Yuma, Yuma County Fair Board, Yuma County Ag Council and Amberly's Place.

City of Yuma Police Chief John Lekan said, "In the national, state and local law enforcement communities, Sheriff Ogden was literally a 'giant of a man' — not only in stature, but

most importantly in the honor, integrity and professionalism he brought to the noble profession of law enforcement. Sheriff Ogden's positive impact to the local Yuma County communities will be forever remembered for generations to come."

City Administrator Greg Wilkinson said the former sheriff "was a key person in the ongoing countywide law enforcement collaboration and key to the formation of the partnerships we now have through the Yuma Regional Communications System. I personally will miss him as I know how much he loved Yuma and the community."

Ogden himself spoke of the importance of community collaboration to him in a December 2012 Yuma Sun interview, just before his retirement.

"We are far enough away from Phoenix and San Diego that we kind of have to fend for ourselves. And in order to fend for ourselves, we all have to be friends, and we all got to work together. We also all have to have the same goals. We have done that within the departments, and we have done it within the law enforcement society as a whole in Yuma County. I think we have done it in the community as well," he said.

"He was one of the really, really, really good guys," Board of Supervisor's Vice-Chairman Russell McCloud said, easy for the board to work with and always looking for solutions. He added, "He's gone from us way too soon."