

A bad day for Spreen

By Monica F. Farnham
Staff writer

Law Day hit Johannes Spreen hard. If the atom bomb drops, I wouldn't be surprised," said the Oakland County sheriff wearily after running into a series of legal problems Tuesday — Law Day.

Tuesday morning, Spreen talked to county teens and senior citizens about his 45-year law enforcement career.

That afternoon, he turned over office records requested under the Freedom of Information Act, lost an appeal of a \$2 million damage suit, and saw his wife's pending divorce become public. Oakland County Circuit Court Judge John N. O'Brien had allowed Mona Spreen's divorce suit to be suppressed until the sheriff replied to her charges. The Farmington Hills couple's file was opened Tuesday.

"EVERYTHING COMES in at once," said Spreen, 54, announcing he is taking his first vacation in years to "recharge my batteries and do some thinking about the future."

But the controversial Democrat stressed that he is "not running for cover." Instead he will decide whether to run again for sheriff or take on Oakland County Executive Daniel Murphy, a Republican, this fall.

"I could retire, but I have an unfinished job to do. I care about Oakland County and what happens to it."

Charging that the Oakland Press is doing a "political autopsy" on him, the sheriff released to all media the items requested by the Pontiac paper.

The paper's city editor asked Spreen to supply all memos relating to command staff reassignments within the past two years. He also asked for records — including appointment books — that documented the sheriff's time in and out of the office.

"I have nothing to hide," said Spreen, showing notebooks full of information he gathered during professional seminars.

"But I'm a little disgusted by this and ask, Why me? Is it just that I'm a Democrat? I guess I'm fighting back."

TUESDAY THE state Court of Appeals upheld a \$2.25 million damage award against Spreen for allowing Peter Lazaros to leave a Pontiac hospital in 1976.

Lazaros, who claimed to be an underworld informant, left St. Joseph Mercy Hospital while in police custody to enter a Cleveland hospital.

The Bloomfield Hills law firm of Paul G. Valentino charged Spreen's actions kept it from collecting a \$1.4 million libel judgment against Lazaros.

BUT SPREEN seemed most upset by the unveiling of his wife's divorce suit, which he is asking be dismissed. Mona

Spreen filed suit Feb. 15, and her husband replied to it March 3, but it was not made public until Tuesday.

"It just occurred to me it had been more than a month since the case started," said Judge O'Brien. "So I had the clerk bring me the file and unrepresented."

The papers were filed with the court clerk, and Spreen's reply did not come automatically to the judge's attention. O'Brien said no one asked him to lift the suppression order. "They wouldn't. No one knew I had the case because it was suppressed."

At the request of Mrs. Spreen's attorney, Leonard Lemberg, O'Brien suppressed the divorce file until her husband could reply through his lawyer, Robert A. Kozlow. Both attorneys practice in Southfield.

When a file is suppressed there is no public record of it. Instead of having names, it is filed as "Suppressed" vs. "Suppressed." O'Brien said he told the plaintiff's attorney he doesn't believe in suppression and would allow it only until Spreen could reply.

In 13 years on bench, the judge has suppressed only one other file — and that was just for a day until he read all about the case in the newspaper. "Both sides were holding press conferences," he recalled.

"I believe everything should be open, but in a case where you have formal orders and pleadings still sits behind his desk. I have no comment whatsoever to make," Spreen said.

Mona Hemmerling, a former restaurant owner, and Spreen, a widower, were married Nov. 16, 1980. They lived together until Jan. 16, 1984.

The sheriff was married to Elinor Spreen for 30 years when she died of a long illness.

Spreen did say he believes Mona Spreen was maligned by his political opponents. In 1981, the sheriff asked law enforcement agencies to investigate her former business dealings to clear up questions about a closed 1979 Michigan state Police liquor charge against the former Mona Hemmerling.

"On my political career and professional career, I will make statements — and I say that with sincerity. But my personal life is my own."

The sheriff said he did not request the suppression. "My wife's lawyer did that."

CLAIMING SHE has no income, the plaintiff is asking for support and alimony.

She also charged he imposed restraints on her personal liberty and

"otherwise interfered with her ordinary and individual activities, including a physical assault occurring on Feb. 19, 1984, at the former marital home, and the plaintiff fears that unless restrained by an order of this court, defendant will continue to so conduct himself."

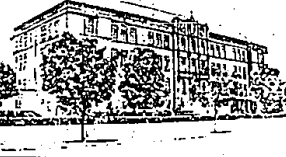
In his March 5 reply, the sheriff said the plaintiff has substantial real estate and income in her own name. He also denied the other charges, saying that an injunction is unnecessary. His lawyer asked that the divorce request be dismissed.

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