

Sheriff Nichols' heir is not apparent

BY PAT MURPHY
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It's no secret potential successors have coveted the Oakland County sheriff's job for some time.

But the jockeying for position intensified when John F. Nichols was hospitalized and insiders realized the sheriff might not be able to finish out his term.

"The infighting and backstabbing was intense," said one elected official who asked not to be identified.

"The department was in shambles,"

said a police commander who agreed to talk only if he (or she) was not identified.

Others, however, said such assessments are exaggerated, approaching "utter nonsense."

The outgoing president of the Oakland County Deputy Sheriffs' Association, for example, Friday insisted that Nichols had so emphasized discipline within the department that it functioned smoothly and efficiently.

"Everybody did their jobs," said Douglas C. Edgar, who had dealt with Nichols personally on numerous occasions and knew the inner workings of the department and command officers.

"Reports about infighting were overblown," he said.

"We were concerned about the future and the possibility of change," Edgar said, "of course. But it's a tribute to Sheriff Nichols that we continued doing our jobs to the best of our ability."

The process of selecting a replacement for Nichols — who died Friday morning — will officially begin on Dec. 28, when the three elected officials charged with appointing a new sheriff will meet to discuss procedure.

"It's inappropriate to discuss a successor until after Sheriff Nichols is buried," said County Clerk G. William Caddell who, with Prosecutor David Gorceyca and chief probate Judge Eugene A. Moore, constitute what is called the vacancy committee.

Caddell said the committee will discuss details such as advertising the vacancy, establishing the criteria for eligibility and setting a timetable for interviews and, eventually, selecting a successor.

"But there's plenty of time for that after we pay our respects to Sheriff

Nichols and his family," said Caddell.

One of the people most frequently mentioned as a possible successor to Nichols is State Sen. Michael Bouchard, R-Birmingham, who was a police officer prior to being elected to the legislature.

"My thoughts right now are with Jean (the sheriff's widow) and the family," Bouchard said Friday. "All I want to talk about right now is the sheriff's outstanding career of public service."

Others mentioned as possible successors include undersheriff Henry Duffa, Maj. Thomas E. Quisenberry, Capt. Barnett Jones and Capt. Mike McCabe.

Life without him will be hard, and I expect to shed a few tears. But I'm strong.

Jean Nichols

—Sheriff John Nichols' widow

John and Jean Nichols: Love affair lasts 44 years

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In the last moments they shared, Jean and John Nichols joked together and shared a few memories. And he again said he would not retire as sheriff of Oakland County.

"I told him his butt was showing," she said about the man to whom she had been married for 44 years. "He had some crusty response, and we laughed."

That was Wednesday evening, 10 days after the sheriff checked into Huron Valley-Sinai Hospital and about 36 hours before Nichols died from complications related to congestive heart failure and emphysema.

Jean Nichols fully expected her husband to come home Thursday morning, and she was looking forward to being with him again — even though caring for her oxygen-dependent partner wouldn't be easy.

But when she went to the hospital Thursday, there was bad news. John Nichols suffered a "set back." Fluid was again gathering in his chest cavity, and doctors wanted to transfer him to the University of Michigan Medical Center, but their patient was not stable enough.

"He had been doing so well," Jean Nichols said Friday. "But I knew something was seriously wrong. Doctors put him on a ventilator, hoping he would bounce back."

She and her husband had previously talked about the possible need for a ventilator or other life-sustaining measures, Jean Nichols said. She knew her strong-willed husband didn't want to be a vegetable.

Early Friday, any decision about the need to continue life support became moot. Nichols died about 3:25 a.m., according to a hospital spokesperson.

"I knew what the phone call

was about," Jean Nichols said.

"I cried, but I'm glad he's not suffering. Life without him will be hard, and I expect to shed a few tears. But I'm strong."

Jean Nichols was a police officer in the early 1950s when she first met John Nichols, then a lieutenant. She recalls that they worked on a case together, and she was surprised — and encouraged — when she learned he was not married.

Nichols was a widower. His first wife had committed suicide, with his service revolver — something he didn't like to talk about. "She had mental problems, and that's the end of the story," he told reporters in the fall of 1973. That was when Nichols was running for mayor of Detroit, and the media was scrutinizing his background.

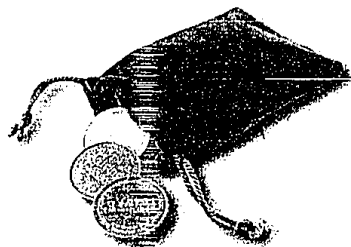
Weeks passed after she first encountered the "sharp and cute" lieutenant, Jean Nichols

Please see JOHN & JEAN, A10



OBSERVER & ECCENTRIC FILE PHOTO

'John loved his job': John Nichols, shown above during his days as Farmington Hills police chief, was described as "a tough old bird who wanted to continue working" by Jean Nichols, his wife of 44 years. John Nichols, Oakland County's sheriff, died Friday at age 80.



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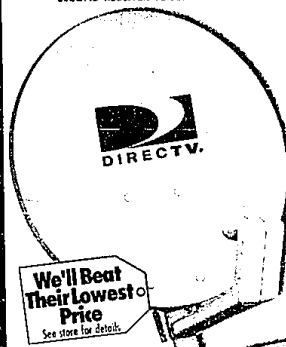
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