

There's a New Sheriff in Town

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Suzanne Somers attempted to rejuvenate her television career by starring in *She's The Sheriff*, a short-lived comedy where she played widowed mother Hildy Granger. In an unlikely turn of events, Hildy replaced her husband as Sheriff of Lakes County, Nevada, after he passed away. While most of the male deputies accept her, she regularly clashes with Deputy Max Rubin, who feels Hildy didn't earn the job so he constantly tries to humiliate her.

In one episode, Hildy runs out of patience with Max's antics so she suspends him from the force. Max then takes a temporary job at a trendy beauty salon, and he is so popular with the customers that he quits police work for good.

That episode portrayed a comedic version of how firing a sheriff's deputy can go horribly wrong. The events surrounding the firing of 27 sheriff's department employees in Clayton County, Georgia, was anything but funny.

On his first day on the job, newly elected sheriff Victor Hill called the 27 employees into his office, terminated them, stripped them of their badges and escorted them out the door as rooftop snipers watched on. Deputies that used squad cars to commute to work were then driven home in vans normally used to transport prisoners.

Hill explained that waited until he was officially in office before taking these drastic actions to avoid the situation that occurred in neighboring DeKalb County. In 2000, three days before he was to be sworn in, DeKalb County Sheriff Derwin Brown was murdered. Former sheriff Sidney Dorsey was found guilty of plotting to kill him and sentenced to life in prison. Brown had sent letters many employees letting them know they would not be re-appointed when he took office.

Hill claimed that he fired the deputies because he had a right to shake up the department. Needless to say, he succeeded. There hasn't been this much drama in Jonesboro, Clayton's county seat, since it served as the setting for Tara, the plantation in *Gone With the Wind*.

The suddenly unemployed and outraged deputies approached Eldrin Bell, the newly elected county commission chairman and former Atlanta police chief about their dilemma. Bell determined the move was illegal and filed for a 30-day restraining order to mandate the rehiring of the employees. Judge Stephen Boswell granted the order, citing the employees were fired without cause, in violation of Clayton County's civil service rules.

Hill has defended the firings, stating that the deputies are not governed by those civil service rules. Rather, Hill claims the deputies are employees at will and can be fired for no reason at all, and he elaborated by saying, "my research shows the employees work at the pleasure of the sheriff."

If the deputies were, in fact, employees at will and not covered by Clayton County's civil service rules, Hill would be correct that he could fire them without having to prove it was 'for cause.'

The fired employees included four of the highest-ranking officers, and all of them were white. Hill, an African-American, told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that the white deputies were fired so he could replace them with black officers.

Even Chrissy Snow, the dizzy blonde character Suzanne Somers played on *Three's Company*, would know that firing an employee based on race violates numerous state and federal employment discrimination laws. Accordingly, the deputies are expected to be fully reinstated.

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