

# Sheriff bears wide variety of responsibilities

**By Sean Scully**  
**Record News Writer**

*This is the second in a six part series on the Constitutional officer system in Virginia and the people who fill those jobs in Greene County.*

To the people of central Virginia, William L. Morris is perhaps the best known resident of Greene County.

Often simply saying "Willie" is enough to identify him, even though he prefers the name "Will," at least professionally.

Morris has gained this fame since his election as Sheriff of Greene County in 1983.

Since then, he has become known for his flamboyant style, his willingness to challenge his annual funding from the state, and his willingness to talk to the media.

Under his leadership, the department has gone from four deputies to nine.

The deputies have discarded the revolver in favor of semiautomatic pistols.

The department has purchased a drug detecting dog and an elaborate radio system.

As one of the 125 sheriffs in Vir-

ginia, Morris has three main responsibilities.

First, the sheriff is responsible for the maintenance of law and order in an area that has not established a police department.

In areas with established police departments, the sheriff does not bear any responsibility for routine maintenance of law and order.

The primary difference between a police department and sheriff's department is accountability.

A police chief is hired by, and therefore answerable to, the board of supervisors.

The sheriff, although he receives some money from the board of supervisors, is answerable to the voters.

The sheriff does not act on the orders of or at the pleasure of the supervisors.

While many counties and all the independent cities in the state have done away with the law enforcement duties of the sheriff in favor of a police department, the switch is unlikely in Greene, Morris said.

If for no other reason, he said, the switch is unlikely because founding and funding a police department would cost a large

amount of money -- a luxury Greene cannot now afford.

Also, in a rural area, Morris said, a sheriff's department seems to function well as a law enforcement organization.

The second duty for a sheriff is to act as an officer of the local courts.

As an officer of the court the sheriff or one of his deputies acts as bailiff, bearing the responsibility for order and security in the courtroom.

"I really enjoy that," Morris said. "By being in court, I learn a lot as bailiff, and I can keep a pulse on what's going on in the county."

The sheriff also bears the responsibility for the delivery of official court papers, and serving subpoenas and warrants.

The sheriff also carries out court orders, such as executing sheriff's sales.

In this case, the court orders that the personal property of an individual or company be sold publicly to settle debts.

"It's not an enjoyable experience," Morris said.

He pointed out, however, that sheriff's sales are always the last resort for a creditor. The sale

comes only after the creditor and the court have exhausted all other means of collecting the debt.

The sheriff also bears the responsibility for the delivery of official court papers, like delivering subpoenas and serving warrants.

The third main duty for a sheriff is to be responsible for security in any jail in the county.

Morris does not bear that responsibility, however, because Greene County only has two temporary holding cells, in which prisoners may only be held a few hours.

With the opening of the new regional jail in Orange, the building of a jail in Greene seems very unlikely anytime soon.

To help him with these broad and varied responsibilities, the sheriff may appoint deputies.

These officers act on the personal authority of the sheriff himself and serve at his pleasure.

The number of these deputies is limited only by state and local funding.

Like all Constitutional officers, the Sheriff is funded at the state level by the Compensation Board.

The board consists of three

**See Sheriff, page 14**

# ★ Sheriff

Continued from page 1

members, the state auditor of public accounts, the state tax commissioner, and a chairman appointed by the governor.

Every year, the board determines the number of deputies for a county based on the size of the locality and the requests of the sheriff.

The board will provide funds for salaries, benefits and expenses for that number of positions in the department.

This determination may be appealed by the sheriff to a three judge panel named by the state Supreme Court.

Morris has managed to obtain all five of the new positions for the department in the last six years through that method.

Local governments are specifically permitted to supplement the salaries of existing deputies or fund new positions with local tax dollars.

Due to the tight financial times in Greene County, said Morris, it seems unlikely that the supervisors will be able fund any local positions in the next few years.

Morris said his day is often taken up with paperwork and the administrative affairs of the office.

Much of his time is spent reviewing incident reports and the monthly summary reports submitted by the deputies.

"I guess you could say I'm a report fanatic," he said.

Every month, he said, he meets with each deputy to discuss concerns and strategies for the next month.

Morris also makes up the schedule for his deputies and the dispatchers who coordinate the calls coming into the office.

That may not sound like a difficult task, he said, but taking into account not only vacations but special schools, assignments outside the county, and court days, the scheduling becomes a huge task.

Moreover, Morris said, the Compensation Board only allocates a small amount of money for overtime.

Unless the department can come up with other money to pay overtime, he said, the total deputy hours must be watched very carefully.

"I find the department normally runs more efficiently with me doing this (office work)," Morris said.

Morris also makes a point to answer all his phone calls and meet with all his visitors.

Often, he said, local people feel comforted by talking directly to the sheriff rather than deputies. They come to him with personal problems or with concerns about events in the county.

"A lot of the calls I take are related to drugs," Morris said. "That's getting to be one of the biggest things I do here -- I receive information about drugs and decipher it."

Sometimes, he said, people even drop by his home to discuss business. While he does not encourage that, he said, he makes a point to talk to everyone who comes by.

Morris still answers incident calls as well.

He will help his deputies with crowd and traffic control at traffic accidents.

He will also answer routine calls when the deputies are tied down with other calls.

He makes a point to follow up drug tips. Especially, he said, tips about marijuana patches.

"I enjoy just going out looking for it, trying to find it," he said. "That really excites me more than anything."

"I really feel like drugs are such

a problem for the county that any time spent doing investigations will pay dividends down the road," he said.

Even with all the demands on his time, Morris still finds time every morning to make a quick patrol of the county.

"It's a buffer between you and going to work," he said.

It also serves to keep him in touch with places and events in the county.

Morris does manage to find some moments for himself.

Three or four times a week he finds time to work out, either at a regular gym or with his home weights.

"That helps me mentally. That really helps relieve the tension," he said.

Although his parents are Greene County natives, Morris himself was born and raised in Baltimore.

His two children, a daughter, 29, and a son, 21, both still live in Baltimore.

Morris said he has been interested in law enforcement since his days in Baltimore.

After moving to Greene in 1970, he spent several years as a house painter.

Eventually, Morris applied for a sheriff's deputy position in Albemarle, where he had several friends.

The job prospects looked good, he said, except that he was unwilling to move to Albemarle county.

Choosing instead to remain in Greene, he settled for becoming a special deputy in Albemarle, a position that does not require the

applicant to be a county resident.

Special deputies have many powers of a regular deputy, including arrest, but they are not regular patrol officers.

As a special deputy, he served as a private security guard in Albemarle for nearly five years.

In the early eighties, he attended Piedmont Virginia Community College, seeking a degree in law enforcement.

Ironically, his pursuit of a law enforcement degree was interrupted by his election as sheriff of Greene County in 1983.

"I've thought about going back and finishing up," he said.

Although his law enforcement experience was limited, Morris chose to run for sheriff in 1982. He said he wanted to change the poor image of the county.

"I think (the public also) wanted a change," Morris said. "That's why they voted me into office, I offered them a change."

"I don't want to say I was that confident of being elected," he said. "I didn't think I had that much of a chance."

His election to a second term was more personally satisfying, he said, since it was a vote for him rather than a vote against the old order.

Morris said he plans to run for a third term next year, but beyond that his plans are uncertain.

"This (job) is what I want to do," he said. "On the other hand, I don't want to grow old on this job either."

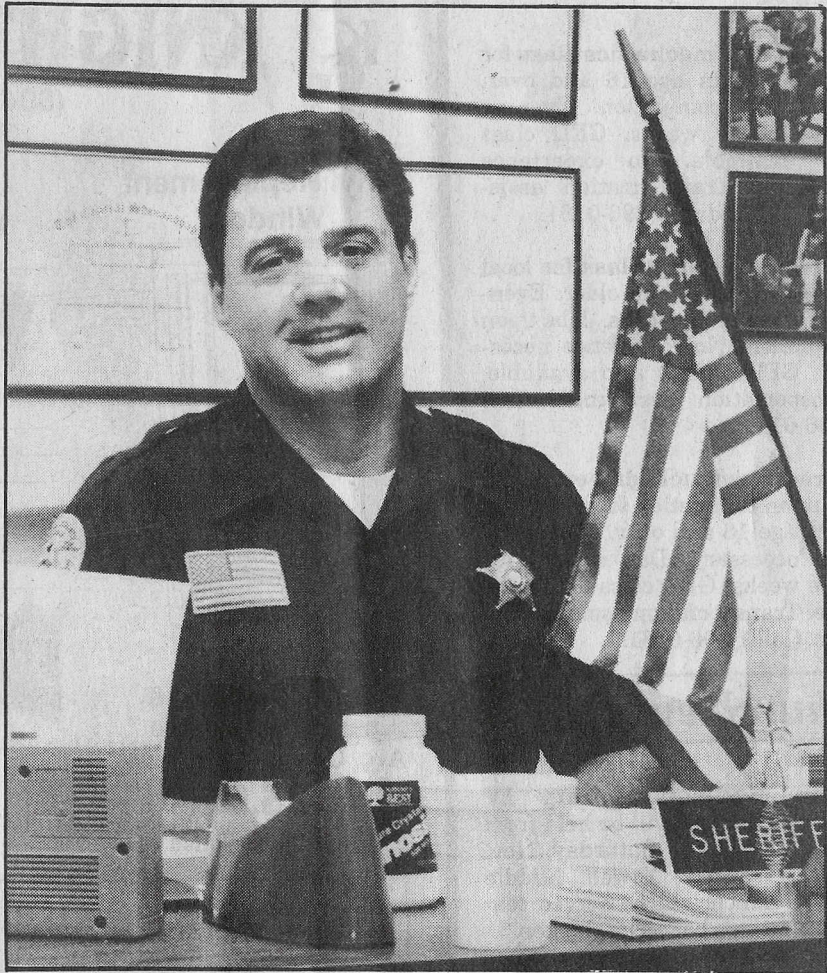
Morris said he is not certain what he would do if he were to be

defeated in an election or if he decided to retire.

The most important thing for a sheriff isn't being reelected, Morris said. It's worrying about keeping the department running smoothly.

For the moment, he said, that job takes all his time, and, even so, he likes it.

*Next week: County Clerk, Marie C. Durrer.*



**Sheriff William L. Morris is one of 125 sheriffs in Virginia. His department, however, is one a dwindling group of departments that retain primary law enforcement responsibility in the counties. All of Virginia's independent cities have established separate police departments.**

*Staff photo, Sean Scully*