



1920's Tommy Gun

Associated with Important Firsts

Kendal Lothman, sheriff of Kiowa County in Southwestern Kansas, has a really neat historical artifact atop a display cabinet in his office.

That's really neat as in awesome, bodacious primo.

It is a 1921 Thompson submachine gun, the first to be issued to a Kansas law enforcement agency -- the Kiowa County Sheriff's Department.

And the sheriff was the first woman to be elected sheriff in the United States, Mabel Brown Chase.

There had been female sheriffs before Mabel Chase, but they were appointed, in most cases to serve the remainder of terms left by their husbands when they died in office.

Mabel was elected sheriff in 1926 at age 52, succeed-

ing her husband, Frank, who had served two two-year terms, which was then the limit. That policy went by the board in the 1970s, and today, a sheriff is elected to a four-year term, and can serve as many terms as the voters want.

When Frank was sheriff, Mabel was his undersheriff, mostly doing the books and keeping records. When Mabel was elected sheriff, she appointed Frank her undersheriff.

"That kind of thing was pretty common back then, maybe not necessarily for a husband and wife," said Sandy Horton, head of the Kansas Sheriffs' Association. "But you'd see the sheriff and undersheriff switching jobs back and forth because the sheriff could serve no more than two consecutive two-year terms. Historically, you

could see a person being sheriff for several terms but not in a row. Having a two-year term made it difficult because you'd have an election every two years."

In the state's early days, a sheriff's wife was often involved in sheriff's work, if unofficially, Lothman said.

"Being the sheriff could be a family deal, with the wife doing some of the work, maybe being the jailer, cooking for the prisoners. Oftentimes, the jail and sheriff's house were one building, with the sheriff and family living in front and the prisoners locked up in back."

Frank and Mabel had been a popular team as sheriff and undersheriff, so when Frank was no longer eligible to run, some folks urged Mabel to seek the job, assuming that she would appoint Frank undersheriff. She filed to run in the Democratic primary, evoking predictable howls from her opponents. "This is no job for a woman!" they bellowed.

Nonetheless, Mabel won the primary by 75 votes and went on to face Republican Edward R. Hubert in the Nov. 2 general election. Again, she faced opposition based on her gender. But she bested Hubert by a tally of 1,197 to 1,079, or 118 votes.

This was a good story. Her election received newspaper coverage throughout the U.S., and even abroad. But, other than election results in all races, very little from the local paper, the **Progressive Signal**, the news columns of which were devoted to mainly to social doings ("Warren Mills of south of Mullinville was a visitor in the county seat Saturday"), birth and wedding announcements, obits, health tips and odd facts.

Finally, in its Nov. 18 issue, the **Progressive Signal** noted: "The county commissioners, Engineer Atkins, Mrs. Chase and Miss Kittie Peck are in Topeka this week attending the state meeting of county officers."

A few weeks later, the newspaper was moved to observe: "A woman sheriff has gained Kiowa Coun-

ty quite a widespread notoriety. A friend of the paper just phoned that in a San Diego daily that had been sent her, there was noted that Mrs. Chase had appointed her husband undersheriff."

There really isn't a whole lot known about Mabel's career as sheriff, since



Kendal Lothman, sheriff of Kiowa County with the 1921 Thompson submachine gun, the first to be issued to a Kansas law enforcement agency – the Kiowa County Sheriff's Department.

the **Progressive Signal** wasn't big on actual news. About Mabel or anything else, it seems. But she probably didn't mind.

"Mama wasn't much for publicity," Carrie Foree of Wichita told Forrest Hintz, reporter for the **Wichita Eagle-Beacon** (now the **Wichita Eagle**) in 1980. "She just didn't like that sort of thing."

Since information about the Chases is sparse, early history buffs assume that although Mabel was sheriff, Frank continued to do most of the enforcement. In 1928, for instance, he joined a posse in pursuit of the Fleagle Gang, killers and bank robbers.

Three facts about Mabel, however, are known:

- She drove an armor-plated Hudson Super-Six patrol car with bullet-proof glass, this thanks to husband Frank who wanted to make sure she

was protected.

- She convinced the county commissioners to buy the Thompson submachine gun.

- During her first year in office, she led a raid on a suspected bootlegger's lair and confiscated a still, 52 gallons of mash and a quantity of recently distilled booze stashed in a cellar. Whether she toted the 'tommy gun' is not known.

Cracking down on illicit hooch and Sunday poker games consumed much of a sheriff's time in early Kansas.

"Times were a lot different back then," said Lothman. "A sheriff didn't have to deal with near the crime we have now, but there was a lot of bootlegging going on, and Bonnie and Clyde were seen in southern Kiowa County."

In the aftermath of the 2007 tornado that leveled Greensburg, many assumed that Mabel's tommy gun had been destroyed, but much of the sheriff's building was still standing, albeit battered and damaged. The tommy gun survived intact.

Some wanted Lothman to donate the historic weapon to the new Kiowa County Museum and Historical Society, but in order for it to be displayed publicly, the bolt would have to be welded shut to make the gun non-firing and lead poured into the barrel.

"That would've devalued the gun. It'd have been a terrible shame. It's a really neat gun. Tommy guns were widely adopted by law enforcement agencies after World War I. It was developed for trench warfare during World War I. There's too much history in that gun to effectively destroy it," said Lothman.

So he elected to keep it where it has been since the days of Mabel - in the sheriff's office. The museum has a replica of the 'tommy' along with a display on Mabel.

The gun has a drum magazine and a stick magazine, but is always displayed with the drum. The drum holds 50 rounds of .45 ACP, the gun weighing 30 pounds when fully

loaded. It's fully automatic and fires 600 to 700 rounds per minute with an open bolt. At that rate, the drum would empty in four or five seconds.

Lothman takes the venerable weapon out to the shooting range about once a year, especially to give the new hires a chance to "let 'er rip".

"These young guys have never seen anything like that. It's a blast to shoot."

Not long ago, Lothman met a great, great grandson of Mabel and Frank. He was traveling through Greensburg with his wife and stopped by the sheriff's office to see what had happened to his ancestor's famed tommy gun. He was delighted when Lothman showed him the weapon. His wife took a photo of it.

And today, 86 years after Mabel Chase forged the way for women to occupy the sheriff's office, the number of women sheriffs in Kansas is -- drum roll, please. . . . One, just like in 1927.

A few years ago, three of the state's 105 counties had a woman sheriff, but today the lone woman sheriff is Laurie Dunn of Osage County.

Dunn has worked at the sheriff's office for 32 years, starting out at age 18 as a dispatcher. From there she worked as a jailer, jail manager, road deputy and investigator, and finally ran for sheriff. The voters have elected her three times.



Laurie Dunn, Osage County, Kansas Sheriff.

The first time she ran her gender, like Mabel's decades ago, was an issue.

"Some people had issues with it, especially some in the older generation who aren't used to women doing something of this magnitude. But it's okay now. Things went well the first term, so I ran again, and I ran again after that."

Dunn has seen her share of violent crime in Osage County. At the start of her second term in January,



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2009, she had to be sworn in over the phone because she was at the scene of a triple homicide. Later that year, she dealt with a quadruple homicide. In 2013, the body of an 18-month-old girl was found in Osage County. The child's mother and two men had been found murdered days earlier on a farm in neighboring Franklin County.

Dunn isn't fazed by being the only woman sheriff in Kansas, noting that there are only 38 female sheriffs nationwide.

"Some people don't want the stress that goes with the job, or they're happy with their current work. Plus, there are not as many women in law enforcement as men," she said.

Frank and Mabel were married in Haviland, KS in 1899. Frank was constable in Haviland from 1901 until 1918, when the Chases moved to a farm between Haviland and Greensburg. They had five children, although one died in infancy.

When Mabel completed her term in January, 1929, with the swearing in of a new sheriff, she and her husband retired from law enforcement. Frank was manager of the Greensburg Oil Co. for a few years. Then he and Mabel moved to Pea Ridge, Ark. Mabel died in 1962, Frank in 1965. They are buried in Haviland cemetery.

Mabel's brief service as a county sheriff has resonated down the decades. In 2000, Eleanor Bell, of Topeka, wrote a letter to the Topeka Capitol Journal, congratulating the sheriff of Jackson County who has just won re-election. That was Daina Durham, who resigned a few years later.

Noting that she was a great-niece of Mabel Chase, Bell said: "Gender has nothing to do with qualifications. . . . Before and since (Mabel's election) women have proved effective leaders in every facet of society."

Laurie Dunn would agree.

"As long as a person can do the job, that's what's important," she said. 

