

Election profile from October 25, 1996:

SHERIFF'S RACE TURNS FRIENDS INTO RIVALS CLEGG, THOMPSON LEAVE LONGTIME FRIENDSHIP BEHIND IN ROUGH RACE Winda Benedetti Staff writer

They have been neighbors, co-workers, and, for 17 years, good friends. But now, Pierce Clegg and Karl Thompson are rivals. Each is vying to become the top law enforcement officer in Kootenai County.

It's a race that pits current Sheriff Clegg against his former captain; a race that has cleaved the department into two camps.

Clegg is known for being a strong manager who brought professionalism and credibility to a department once riddled with scandal. Thompson presents himself as an innovator with the drive and fresh ideas to invigorate a lackluster department.

Although the campaign has remained more polite than past sheriff's races, it has battered a long-standing friendship. Family camping trips and horse rides have been replaced by biting newspaper ads and dart-laced campaign brochures.

Thompson and his supporters criticize Clegg for being out of touch with his deputies and weak on juvenile crime. Clegg and his backers say Thompson is a poor manager with little knowledge of budgeting.

Still, many law enforcement insiders say both men are honest, hard-working and sincere.

``The voters are not going to lose no matter who wins this race,'' said Barry Black, a deputy prosecutor. ``What matters is the philosophy.''

A barbed-wire fence and five acres separate Clegg's Hayden Lake home from the log house Thompson built next door. The two families have been neighbors since 1979 when Thompson moved from Los Angeles to the pine-sheltered neighborhood.

Robin Thompson, Karl's 22-year-old daughter, remembers playing with her brother and Clegg's stepson Johnny. ``We used to hang out all the time together when we were younger,'' said the University of Idaho student. She remembers Christmas caroling, taking horse-drawn carriage rides and camping trips to Lake Pend Oreille with the Cleggs.

Pierce Clegg, 43, spent seven years as a deputy, working his way up to sergeant. He said he left the department in 1981 after finding the then-sheriff passed out in a patrol car. He ranched and opened The Alpine County Store and R.V. Park.

Thompson, 49, also spent time as a deputy from 1979 to 1981 when he quit to do private arson and fraud investigating. He spent three years with the Idaho Department of Law Enforcement investigating terrorism, motorcycle gangs and drugs.

In 1984 Thompson helped Clegg run an unsuccessful bid for office against Sheriff Floyd Stalder. He helped his neighbor again in 1988 when Clegg finally unseated Stalder, who was embroiled in scandal. He had been accused of drinking on the job and carrying on an extramarital affair during work hours.

Long-time deputy John Wheelock, now retired, said Stalder's management severely damaged the department's credibility. Other police agencies

``didn't want to talk to you because of who you worked for.'' But,

``under Pierce's administration we got 100 percent cooperation.''

Clegg often is credited with cleaning up the department, while implementing better deputy training and fairer hiring practices.

``He wants his deputies on the streets to be very professional,''

Wheelock said. ``He runs the office like a business.''

During his eight-year tenure, Clegg started a DARE program, a canine patrol and an inmate labor program in which low-security jail inmates do roadside cleanup. He also started the district deputy program which put six deputies in outlying areas.

When Clegg was elected, he hired Thompson as a captain to oversee the jail, patrol, and detectives.

Thompson said he quit the department last year, in part, to preserve his friendship with Clegg. ``He had a vision I shared'' when he first took office, Thompson said during a recent debate. ``I think that vision has been lost.''

Thompson said communication between the sheriff and his deputies has ``broken down grossly'' in recent years. He said he tried to tell the sheriff about the employee discontent before he left but said the sheriff has isolated himself from the officers and fresh ideas.

But Clegg and others in the department said Thompson quit after he was criticized for being a poor manager. ``I think Karl was in over his head,'' Clegg said.

A deputy in the department, who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation, said Thompson was known for micromanaging and caused morale problems of his own when he was captain.

``Karl is a very nice person,'' said Wheelock, who worked under Thompson. But ``Karl is not an administrator or supervisor.''

But Black, who prosecutes juvenile cases, said parents and school officials are frustrated with Clegg's poor response to juvenile issues. He criticized the sheriff for not supporting a county-wide law against runaways - a program the sheriff said put too great a burden on his already-overloaded deputies.

``I think a good sheriff has to have the philosophy that crime doesn't start when you're an adult,'' Black said.

Thompson has spent the past year as a juvenile probation officer. He started the ``100 mile'' program in which he and other probation officers take troubled youths running.

Black said he has seen Thompson's program change young hooligans into athletes. ``He's able to put his hands on the pulse of what makes these kids tick,'' he said.

Thompson said he would assign a deputy to youth crimes and try to encourage other deputies to donate their time with troubled kids.

Thompson also said he wants to implement a crime victim's program like the one in Post Falls for domestic violence victims.

``There are all kinds of things we could be doing that we're not,'' he said. ``These are more than touchy-feely ideas. They go to the heart of effective policing.''

But Clegg points out there is a whole county division assigned to dealing with youths, and that his officers share the juvenile crime load.

As for the domestic violence worker, Clegg said that would duplicate the prosecutor's victim's program.

``It sounds fluffy, it sounds cute, it sounds politically correct,'' Clegg said. ``It's very easy to sit on the outside with grandiose ideas. But he's going to be under the same budgeting constraints that I've had to deal with.''

Robin Thompson sums it up this way: ``They were always good friends ... but they haven't always agreed on how things should be run.''

No matter what the voters decide, she said her father and Clegg's relationship will remain civil if no longer close.

``There are always going to be hurt feelings,'' she said. ``But no more so than there are now.''

