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# The Bradbury Years

## Mr. District Attorney reminisces on long career

Published: 11/03/2002  
Ventura County Star

**By T.J. Sullivan**

Ask Michael Bradbury about the covert intelligence files and his face stretches into a tight-lipped grin, the kind of look that could go either way, an expression that might precede a laugh, or a defensive verbal assault.

Ask just about any longtime politician in Ventura County about the same thing and chances are they'll nod cautiously. Most have heard rumors about a cache of information on anybody in the county who's somebody, surveillance data similar to the famous FBI files on so-called agitators like the late Beatle John Lennon.

It's a legend that's as much a part of Ventura County lore as is Bradbury, whose 24 years as district attorney ended Friday when he stepped down to pursue new challenges in private practice. And though his departure is clearly the end of an era, his mark, like talk of the files, will surely be slow to fade.

Described as both a tenacious prosecutor and passionate protector, feared for reasons that are part myth and part reality, Bradbury, 60, changed Ventura County's reputation from a rural outpost to one of the safest communities in the western United States. He helped inspire the unofficial, cautionary motto "Come on vacation, leave on probation," and struck fear into the hearts of anyone arrested within the county's borders.

Along the way he became the county's most powerful politician with friends in very high places, commanding such strong voter support that the county Board of Supervisors frequently granted his wishes for fear of upsetting an electorate.

He counts among his intimates people like former Ambassador Robert Nesen, who was a close friend to both presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, a relationship that helped brand Bradbury from the start as a comer in the Republican party.

Several of his former deputies became Superior Court judges. And in all 24 of his years in office — six terms — no one ever challenged him at the polls after that first election in 1978.

So it seems almost inevitable that somewhere along the way people would begin to speculate about the source of Bradbury's strength.

**The files**

And so comes the question about "the files."

"I think there were files," said former state Sen. Cathie Wright, who was the focus of a couple of highly publicized investigations by Bradbury's office during her 22-year political career, neither of which ever resulted in charges. "I would imagine that they're not there now."

After a brief pause, Bradbury said he found the notion "hilarious."

"When I became district attorney, I was told by our intelligence officer that I ought to look at the files. It was who was doing what to whom, where, why and how. Not the kind of intelligence I had any interest in. And I destroyed all of those files. And law enforcement used to keep all this kind of stuff ... on anybody who was kind of who's who.

"It was if you got a little bit of wood — they called it 'wood' — on somebody, they'll always be thinking 'right' where you're concerned. And to me that was just unthinkable for a law enforcement agency to do. And so we destroyed all of those files. We have never, ever, ever kept a file on anybody who was not investigated, legitimately investigated for a criminal violation or a civil violation that we have jurisdiction over.

"We do not keep political intelligence."

### **Home on the range**

His ideals are rooted in a childhood filled with true tales of cops and robbers.

Bradbury was raised in the rural Northern California town of Susanville as the son of a police chief, and some of his earliest memories are of things most people his age could only dream about as children.

"I can remember jail breaks," he said as he retold some of the adventures of his uncle, Calvin Smith, the Lassen County sheriff, and his father, Frederick D. Bradbury, Susanville's chief of police.

As a teenager Michael Bradbury even joined a posse in pursuit of two inmates who busted out of a third-floor cell by tying white bed sheets together and using them to reach the ground.

"And we went, you know, armed with our .22 rifles and with all these cops and we staked out the railroad," he said. The inmates tried to trace the tracks to Reno but were intercepted by the Bradburys.

It was 1950s rural California, where guns and pocket knives were as popular as wristwatches are today. "And when you'd walk to school you'd take your .22 with you," Bradbury said. "On your way home you'd shoot rabbits — a world away from what we do today."

All three Bradbury boys were influenced by it. Stephen D. Bradbury, who is 8 years younger than Michael, is the immediate past-president of the California Judges Association and the presiding superior court judge in Lassen County. And Frederick "Ron" Bradbury, who is about a year younger than Michael, is a retired police chief in Grays Harbor County, Washington, who teaches criminal justice courses.

Michael Bradbury says there was no question about what he wanted from life.

"I wanted to be a cop like my dad."

But not exactly.

## **A G-Man**

Bradbury's father pushed him toward becoming an FBI agent, which focused him on college -- the University of Oregon, 1964 — and law school — the University of California, Hastings College of the Law, 1967.

And though he had a letter of acceptance from "the bureau" personally signed by J. Edgar Hoover, he changed his mind after meeting the Ventura County district attorney, Woodruff J. Deem.

"A friend of mine said, 'You ought to talk to this guy, he's an incredible man,'" Bradbury said. "So as a lark I just interviewed with him."

Bradbury, who was working three jobs and was married with two daughters, had never heard of Ventura County but went for a visit anyway.

He was hooked.

"He said, 'Give me two years, then you can go to the FBI,'" Bradbury said. "And that's how I became a prosecutor."

Bradbury worked as a law clerk at first, awaiting the results of the bar exam, and then was thrust into duty as a deputy district attorney, a position that, at the time, meant visiting fresh crime scenes.

"I can remember as a brand new member of the major crimes team getting called out to a murder in Ojai and showing up and having the police officer say 'thank God you're here' and me being scared to death," Bradbury said. "I went to probably 100 death scenes and probably 50 or 60 autopsies. It was hard to deal with ... The children that had been murdered were always very hard ... and there were some sleepless nights."

For a brief period beginning in 1970, for just a year and eight months, he left the DA's office to try private practice, opening a law office with attorney Scott Dool in Thousand Oaks. But Bradbury soon missed being on the other side and returned.

His mentor, Deem, left Ventura County a couple of years later to become a professor at Brigham Young University's law school. And a few years after that, in 1978, the next district attorney — C. Stanley Trom — did not pursue re-election.

At the age of 36, Bradbury was elected district attorney by a margin of 58 to 42 percent.

No one ever challenged him at the polls again.

## **Conjuring the myth**

Ventura County was different in 1978, considered far more of a rural community.

Occasionally murderers would dump bodies in the canyons, and crooks would travel up the highways from Los Angeles to rob local banks and commit other crimes. Bradbury believed the pattern spinning out of the nearby metropolis promised to expand.

So, with no promise of more money or resources, Bradbury and others decided to do some spinning of their own.

"We had to create this myth, not a total myth because it was based in fact," he said. "I've never told anybody about this before, but it was something that we gave careful thought to at the time, that what we did in terms of our initiatives would also create a tremendous deterrent in terms of crime out of Los Angeles County."

It was like casting shadows on a wall, projecting an image big enough to scare crooks away.

John V. Gillespie, 63, who was sheriff from 1983 to 1993, said the media was a willing participant and helped in the effort — people like the late Ventura Star-Free Press editor Julius Gius, who Gillespie said "was a personal friend."

"It's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy," Gillespie said. "If you keep saying it long enough eventually it's true."

### **More than just talk**

They weren't just words.

Bradbury put cutting-edge law enforcement to use, applying the "Broken Windows" theory of policing authored in the early 1980s by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling.

The theory says an unrepaired broken window will invite vandals to break every pane of glass and, eventually, burn the building down.

"It wasn't that I want to hammer all these people committing minor offenses," Bradbury said. "But the research clearly shows if you do, it prevents more serious crime in the future."

Some still considered it hammering.

One example of that occurred four years ago, when the District Attorney's Office prosecuted a 39-year-old mother of four for having a metal keychain bauble in her purse, a bauble listed as a potential weapon, among other uses, such as a can opener. She went through courthouse security with it, was arrested, found guilty by a jury and sentenced to six months' probation.

Superior Court Judge James Cloninger reportedly asked prosecutor Kevin Suh during pretrial hearings to reconsider wasting the court's time with the case. But the District Attorney's Office persisted because she had done it more than once.

A window had been broken.

A similar outlook was taken with regard to drunken drivers in the early 1980s, when Ventura County began charging drunken drivers as such, an unusual practice in a state where first-timers were frequently convicted of something less, like reckless driving, or speeding.

Bradbury's office adopted a "no-bargaining approach" to felonies, which, he said, increased the number of trials about 100 percent the first year.

"We at times sent more people to state prison than any other county in the state," he said.

Linda Oxenreider, the immediate past state chair of MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, learned of Bradbury's reputation when her 19-year-old son Joshua was one of three people killed in a drunken-driving accident in 1989 on the Conejo Grade. She says Bradbury "went to the mat" to prosecute the driver, Diane Mannes. Although Mannes offered to plead guilty to manslaughter, he pursued charges of second-degree murder up to the point where a mistrial was declared.

In the end, Mannes pleaded guilty to three counts of manslaughter.

Oxenreider stands by Bradbury's choice to pursue the higher charge.

"He has always been tough on DUI," she said.

### **Making enemies**

By the time Bradbury put in his first dozen years as district attorney, law enforcement in Ventura County became a darling of the voters, a direct contrast to neighboring Los Angeles, which spiraled into riots following the police beating of Rodney King.

With voter support behind them, Bradbury and then-sheriff Larry Carpenter proceeded to mount a successful campaign to dedicate to law enforcement Ventura County's portion of a state-approved, half-cent sales tax earmarked for public safety. It was a move Bradbury and Carpenter deemed necessary because some counties had loosely defined what was considered public safety.

The money was a windfall and helped build a District Attorney's Office that boasts a staff of 600 and an annual budget of about \$50 million.

It helped other departments too, including the Public Defender, which many county district attorneys sought to exclude from sharing in the sales tax money.

Ken Clayman, who has been the Ventura County Public Defender since 1984, said Bradbury has always been a tough prosecutor but that his action with regard to the funding "suggests he also wants to see a strong defense and see people properly defended."

Nonetheless, district attorneys make enemies easily, and Bradbury made more than his fair share.

Some were enemies made in the course of doing his job, when he issued several "public reports" after investigating alleged wrongdoing.

One such critical report was of a failed 1992 drug raid that left Ventura County ranch owner Don Scott dead. The report said a Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy gave false information to obtain a search warrant and that a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent was either mistaken or lied when he said a flyover revealed marijuana growing on the land.

Then-Los Angeles County Sheriff Sherman Block was outraged by Bradbury's allegations. And Republican state Attorney General Daniel E. Lungren, who was gearing up to run for governor, also got involved on behalf of Block.

"It was the right thing to do so we did it," Bradbury said.

In another public report, Bradbury accused Wright, the former Republican state senator, in 1989 of trying to use her political influence to erase traffic tickets for herself and her daughter. Wright says the allegations weren't true and that Bradbury's release of a public report on the matter was simply an effort to tarnish her image and help a political opponent who worked for Bradbury's friend, former state Sen. Ed Davis.

Bradbury said he "always filed public reports in matters of public interest ... if we didn't file criminal charges."

Bradbury also made enemies when he took sides in political races, especially when he went against his own Republican party.

Early in his career, after Reagan's election to the presidency, Bradbury was considered part of the future of the Republican party. But that kind of talk soon faded after he traveled the state openly campaigning for Democrat John Van de Kamp for state attorney general, a race Van de Kamp won.

"One thing about Mike is he does things that he thinks are right," said Nesen, Nixon's former assistant secretary of the Navy and Reagan's ambassador to Australia.

### **The family**

Bradbury said leaving office will be difficult after working there for nearly 35 years.

At first, he admitted he might shed a tear and then asked that the part about crying be "off the record."

It's all so much of his contradictory image.

Bradbury is at once the sensitive cowboy poet who evokes emotion in his writings, and he's the horseman who lives on a ranch named after a Clint Eastwood western — Hang 'em High — a movie that tells the story of a grudge-bearing rancher who is deputized by a "hangin' judge" to bring his own lynch mob to justice.

Former sheriff Carpenter, who worked with Bradbury throughout the '80s and most of the '90s, speaks fondly of his former colleague and even has a Bradbury poem displayed on a wall in his home. It's a piece written by Bradbury on the occasion of Carpenter's retirement. In it he mentions the only deputy to lose his life during Carpenter's tenure as sheriff from 1993 to 1998.

Though it doesn't name the deputy, Peter Aguirre, the poem explains how he had taped a picture of his wife and child on the back of his badge.

"It was a long time before I could recite that without becoming emotional," Bradbury said.

Though he's feared by many, Bradbury is still remarkably cautious about the safety of his own family. He never publicly discusses the location of his home and does not disclose what kind of car he drives.

"I am obsessive about their safety and security," he said of his wife, Heidi, and two boys, 4-year-old Sean Michael and Michael Don Jr., 6.

It is his second family. He also has two daughters by a previous marriage, Allison, 38, and Tiffany, 36.

"When I stopped defining myself as Mr. District Attorney it became a lot easier," he said. "I am now 'Daddy' and 'Honey' and that's how I define myself ... And so it's not as hard to walk out of here ... But there was a time when it would have been seemingly impossible."

He will become a partner in the business law firm of Weston-Benshoof and serve as a board member of a new bank, Ventura County Business Bank.

He has a compact disc expected to go on sale in December — probably in local feed stores — a recording of him reading about a dozen of his cowboy poems. And he's been approached by a director who has written a television pilot based on his life.

"I have thought a lot about just training horses and working on the ranch and things like that, but I need to be intellectually active and I think if you stop doing that, that's when you start that long farewell and I'm just not ready to do that."