

CULVER CITY GUNPLAY

LA WEEKLY

CHIEF COOKE PROVES A SOFT TOUCH

[By Adrian Maher](#)

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Police Chief Ted Cooke may rule Culver City with an iron hand, but to gun lovers around L.A. he's something of a soft touch. In recent years, even as the state Legislature and others have taken steps restricting access to firearms, Cooke personally issued hundreds of annual concealed-weapons permits, more than any other chief of police in Los Angeles County. Some of the recipients live in Culver City, but many hail from other jurisdictions with tougher restrictions. Hollywood celebrities have been a particular favorite.

Critics say the chief uses the permits to buy favor with city officials who must approve budget and administrative policies affecting the Police Department. A review of police correspondence and public records indicates that permits have currently been issued to 49 city employees, a list that includes two of the city's five City Council members - Albert Vera, an owner of a food market, and Richard Marcus, an accountant.

One of the pistol-packing councilmen says he sees no conflict of interest in obtaining a gun permit from his chief of police. "As someone involved with the general public, it makes sense to want to protect myself and my family - I have been threatened," says Marcus. "I also don't think Cooke will think I will vote for him just because of a permit. Who else can I get one from? There's no other entity. I live in Culver City."

Dan Gallagher, an L.A. city employee and chair of Culver City's Civil Service Commission, which issues recommendations on grievances and rules on disciplinary actions for Police Department employees, has a permit. Another commissioner, Nancy Lee Damron, an attorney, also has one, as does her husband, Roy, a Water Department employee in another city.

Hollywood celebrities can't do much to help Cooke win favor in Culver City, but they do lend a degree of, well, celebrity. "If you were involved in the movie industry, you were pretty much guaranteed a permit," says one ex-officer who used to watch the parade of celebrities ushered into the chief's office. In past years, many non-resident headliners such as Sylvester Stallone, boxer Ken Norton, Sammy Davis Jr., actor Jim Belushi and film director John Milius got their gun permits from Culver City. Until last month, Johnny Carson and his wife, Alexis, carried permits. Currently, actor Gary Coleman and Hill Street Blues television producer Steven Bochco hold permits granted by Cooke.

In March 1994, actor James Caan was arrested for pulling out a gun during an argument with a rap musician, Doc Rapper, in a North Hollywood parking lot. According to an article published at the time in the Daily Breeze, Cooke had granted Caan permission to carry the gun. A few months later, Caan entered a drug-rehabilitation center. Caan's most recent concealed-weapons permit, which was granted by Cooke, was in May 1997.

Caan was also brought to the department in the early '90s, to the widespread perplexity of many officers, to teach self-defense. Caan led the classes with a partner, a martial-arts expert, who taught special control holds, karate moves and defense tactics involving fighting sticks.

"I remember thinking, what the hell is this guy doing here teaching this stuff," said one officer.

Under a 1953 California law, an individual doesn't need a permit to have a weapon at home, but needs one to carry a weapon in a "concealed fashion" on his person or in a car. State law allows police chiefs the right to grant permits to applicants who demonstrate good character and show good cause for carrying a weapon. The state application cost is \$73 plus incidental city charges.

Most cities grant the permits sparingly. The most recent records at the California Department of Justice from 1994 through 1997 show the Santa Monica Police Department granted an average of about five annual concealed-weapons permits, and Beverly Hills just one. Los Angeles, with its more than 3 million residents, granted an average of 63 annual permits. Culver City issued an annual average of 267; as of March 1998, 342 individuals held permits.

A recent state law, which took effect January 1, prohibits chiefs of police from granting permits to nonresidents of their city, but that didn't sever Cooke's Hollywood ties. Baretta actor Robert Blake, whose primary residence is a 4,900-square-foot house in Los Angeles, according to recent L.A. County records, started renting a small studio-apartment unit in Culver City, a block from the Police Department, about nine months ago. His concealed-weapons permit was renewed by Cooke on January 26, 1998.

An assistant manager at the apartment complex confirms that Blake rented the unit in his name and is responsible for utilities, but has never moved in. In April, Blake sublet the unit to another individual, according to the assistant manager. A tenant below Blake's unit says he has never met Blake. "He was rumored to have moved in, but I've never seen him once," says Chuck Carlson, a longtime tenant in the building.

Stanley Lathan, a film producer who, county records show, owns a \$1.5 million, 4,200-square-foot primary residence in Beverly Hills, also received a gun permit from Cooke on January 26. When asked how he got the gun permit and whether he was a resident of Culver City, Lathan refused to comment.

Besides granting permits to celebrities and city officials, sources say, Cooke has also used the issuance of permits as a fund-raising tool. One incident that raised the eyebrows of even Police Department employees occurred in 1986, when Cooke recruited a group of about 15 middle-aged and older men to donate money and equipment to a group called SAFE - Support Alliance for Enforcement. The group then used the money to purchase a van and various tools, and utilized the equipment to assist Culver City's elderly residents with their home-security needs. In return, the men were made honorary reserve officers and all given concealed-weapons permits.

"They gave this big party, with all these older men - each one had donated," says an ex-employee. "After the party, dozens of permits were typed up. Everyone knew what was going on, but you couldn't do anything about it."

But it's hard to discern any particular method, or ascribe any governing motive, to Cooke's wide distribution of gun permits. A review of more than 250 of the current permits issued by Cooke shows haphazard dispersal to a wide range of professionals, all deemed to be in imminent peril. A pool man, a plumber, an electrician, a psychotherapist, an antique dealer, a radio technician, a locksmith and even a dentist have been granted permits.

About four years ago, Lee Warren Smith, a film producer's assistant, wrote to the Police Department requesting a permit. Though he thought "the odds were tall," he easily received a permit and has subsequently received annual renewals. "I work late and drive through many parts of the city stopping at lights where I don't feel safe," says Smith. "As a last resort, I wanted an option if I was attacked. It doesn't make sense for the criminals to carry guns whenever they want and honest citizens shouldn't have guns."

Despite his liberal policy on issuing concealed-weapons permits, Cooke has fanatically guarded the release of any documents, which are public records, relating to the permits.

According to an account in the Daily Breeze, after the Los Angeles Times asked for copies of the department's concealed-weapons permits in 1989, Cooke persuaded a group of reserve officers to fight disclosure in court. The group won a temporary restraining order, but the permits were eventually made public.

In a separate case in 1993, Copley Los Angeles Newspapers, publisher of the Breeze, had to sue to obtain the department's complete permit records and to get a judge to overrule Cooke's request for \$3,000 in copying costs.

In 1998, it's deja-vu all over again. After months of repeated public-records requests, Cooke supplied copies of permits to the Weekly, but going back only two years. All had their addresses blacked out. The Weekly filed suit in July against the Culver City Police Department to compel Cooke to release more than 80 outstanding current permits and hundreds of additional permits from previous years, and to reveal addresses on all permits. That suit is pending.

