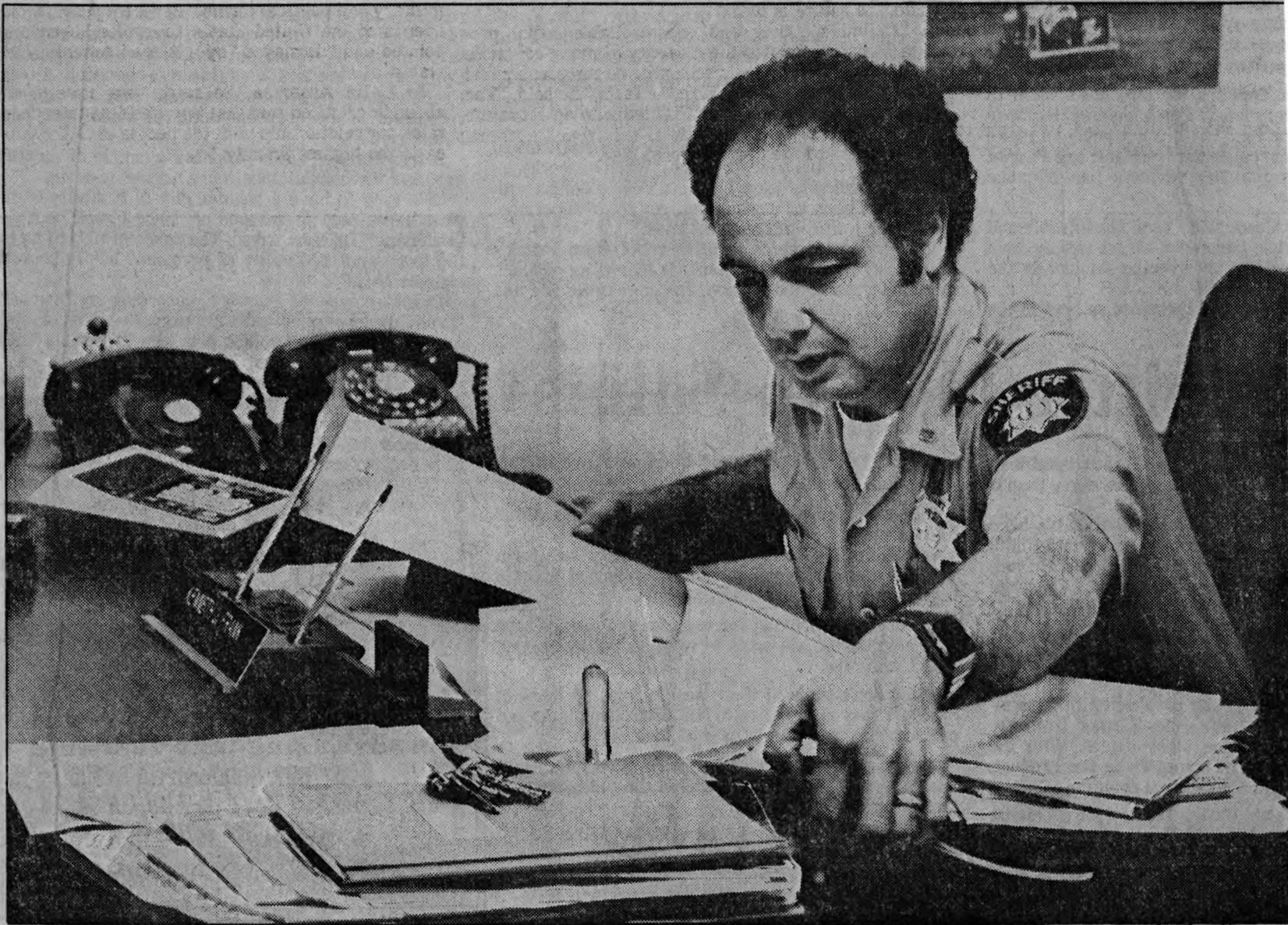


North County

Sunnyvale • Mountain View • Palo Alto • Los Altos • Los Al



Richard Wisdom — Sunday Mercury News

San Mateo County Sheriff's Lt. Ken Frank does paperwork in East Palo Alto substation he commands

A cop's balancing act in E. Palo Alto

By Katherine Ellison
Staff Writer

Lt. Ken Frank radioed for back-up and ambled from his squad car and through the all-black crowd in the parlor of the Cosy Corners club in East Palo Alto.

He greeted some and joked with all, glancing at the goings-on.

"Ahah! I saw that money!" he chided one crap-player, who closed his hand over some coins on a green baize table.

"I'm just giving you respect, officer," the gambler countered with a grin.

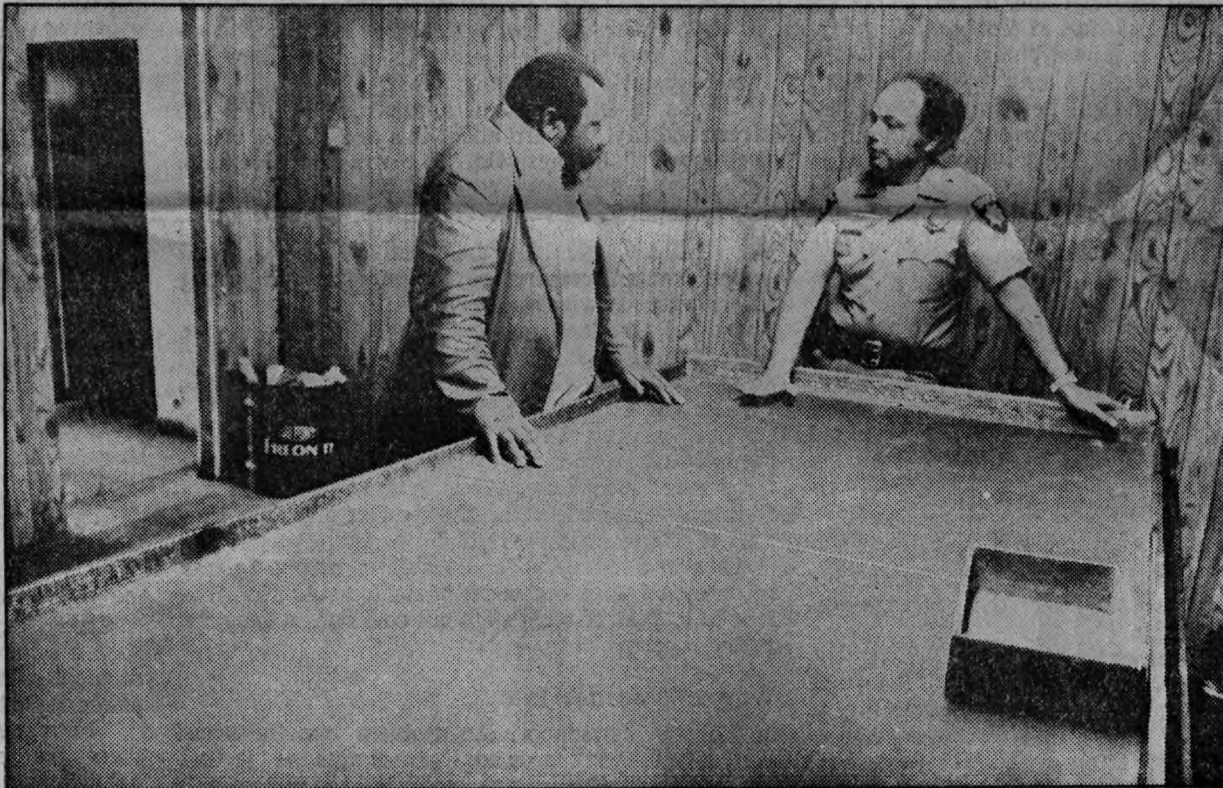
But outside the window, bystanders leaned on their cars and swore. For though Frank talked like a friend, he looked more like a warden.

Frank, who is white, is commander of the San Mateo County Sheriff's substation in East Palo Alto. His 23 deputies, only one of whom is black, police the 19,000 residents of the 60 percent black, 30 percent Hispanic and Oriental community.

Many observers say East Palo Alto is nearing a long-sought goal of incorporation, which would mean new independence from county control.

Proponents of incorporation want East Palo Alto's Municipal Council to have hiring and firing power over its police force, which is provided by the county. The first thing an incorporated city would do, they say, is choose a new police chief, who likely would be black. And that means Frank would have to go.

Frank, 39, has worked in East Palo Alto for 14 years, the last two of them as commander of the station. Brash, sometimes boisterous, he is proud of his ties to the com-



Sheriff's Lt. Ken Frank chats with man known as Cato in cardroom

munity and his accomplishments there.

"Most people don't know what they're talking about when they talk about East Palo Alto," he says. But Frank believes he knows.

The 2.2-square-mile area has more than its share of problems, including a high level of drug traffic and an average of about 2.5 gun calls each day, according to Frank's figures. "But it's basically a hard-working, law-abiding community," he says. "All the problems here are caused by 200 to 250 yahoos — and we can work with

them."

Frank says the pleasant, wide suburban streets have become "the hottest buying area around."

"Young couples are moving in here because they can still afford the houses," he says. "The whole picture is changing." Frank wants to see the residential change occur peacefully, to encourage the law-abiding young couples to feel safe in their new homes.

A wariness born of racial differences separates East Palo Alto residents and their police. And recent cases of alleged brutality by

Frank's officers have increased the tension.

The San Mateo County District Attorney's office this week completed a month-long investigation into police conduct in a February incident in which five of Frank's deputies fired into a carload of suspects allegedly backing toward them. An unarmed black bystander, 35-year-old James Smith, was shot and killed.

Investigators found the shooting to be both "justifiable and excusable," said Deputy District Attorney

Continued on Page 2B