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Once Elected, Palin Hired Friends and Lashed Foes

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WASILLA, Alaska — Gov. [Sarah Palin](#) lives by the maxim that all politics is local, not to mention personal.

So when there was a vacancy at the top of the State Division of Agriculture, she appointed a high school classmate, Franci Havemeister, to the \$95,000-a-year directorship. A former real estate agent, Ms. Havemeister cited her childhood love of cows as a qualification for running the roughly \$2 million agency.

Ms. Havemeister was one of at least five schoolmates Ms. Palin hired, often at salaries far exceeding their private sector wages.

When Ms. Palin had to cut her first state budget, she avoided the legion of frustrated legislators and mayors. Instead, she huddled with her budget director and her husband, Todd, an oil field worker who is not a state employee, and vetoed millions of dollars of legislative projects.

And four months ago, a Wasilla blogger, Sherry Whitstine, who chronicles the governor's career with an astringent eye, answered her phone to hear an assistant to the governor on the line, she said.

"You should be ashamed!" Ivy Frye, the assistant, told her. "Stop blogging. Stop blogging right now!"

Ms. Palin walks the national stage as a small-town foe of "good old boy" politics and a champion of ethics reform. The charismatic 44-year-old governor draws enthusiastic audiences and high approval ratings. And as the Republican vice-presidential nominee, she points to her management experience while deriding her Democratic rivals, Senators [Barack Obama](#) and [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), as speechmakers who never have run anything.

But an examination of her swift rise and record as mayor of Wasilla and then governor finds that her visceral style and penchant for attacking critics — she sometimes calls local opponents "haters" — contrasts with her carefully crafted public image.

Throughout her political career, she has pursued vendettas, fired officials who crossed her and sometimes blurred the line between government and personal grievance, according to a review of public records and interviews with 60 Republican and Democratic legislators and local officials.

Still, Ms. Palin has many supporters. As a two-term mayor she paved roads and built an ice rink, and as governor she has pushed through higher taxes on the oil companies that dominate one-third of the state's economy. She stirs deep emotions. In Wasilla, many residents display unflinching affection, cheering "our Sarah" and hissing at her critics.

"She is bright and has unfailing political instincts," said Steve Haycox, a history professor at the University of Alaska. "She taps very directly into anxieties about the economic future."

"But," he added, "her governing style raises a lot of hard questions."

Ms. Palin declined to grant an interview for this article. The McCain-Palin campaign responded to some questions on her behalf and that of her husband, while referring others to the governor's spokespeople, who did not respond.

Lt. Gov. Sean Parnell said Ms. Palin had conducted an accessible and effective administration in the public's interest. "Everything she does is for the ordinary working people of Alaska," he said.

In Wasilla, a builder said he complained to Mayor Palin when the city attorney put a stop-work order on his housing project. She responded, he said, by engineering the attorney's firing.

Interviews show that Ms. Palin runs an administration that puts a premium on loyalty and secrecy. The governor and her top officials sometimes use personal e-mail accounts for state business; dozens of e-mail messages obtained by The New York Times show that her staff members studied whether that could allow them to circumvent subpoenas seeking public records.

Rick Steiner, a University of Alaska professor, sought the e-mail messages of state scientists who had examined the effect of [global warming](#) on polar bears. (Ms. Palin said the scientists [had found no ill effects](#), and she has sued the federal government to block the listing of the bears as endangered.) An administration official told Mr. Steiner that his request would cost \$468,784 to process.

When Mr. Steiner finally obtained the e-mail messages — through a federal records request — he discovered that state scientists had in fact agreed that the bears were in danger, records show.

“Their secrecy is off the charts,” Mr. Steiner said.

State legislators are investigating accusations that Ms. Palin and her husband pressured officials to fire a state trooper who had gone through a messy divorce with her sister, charges that she denies. But interviews make clear that the Palins draw few distinctions between the personal and the political.

Last summer State Representative John Harris, the Republican speaker of the House, picked up his phone and heard Mr. Palin’s voice. The governor’s husband sounded edgy. He said he was unhappy that Mr. Harris had hired John Bitney as his chief of staff, the speaker recalled. Mr. Bitney was a high school classmate of the Palins and had worked for Ms. Palin. But she fired Mr. Bitney after learning that he had fallen in love with another longtime friend.

“I understood from the call that Todd wasn’t happy with me hiring John and he’d like to see him not there,” Mr. Harris said.

“The Palin family gets upset at personal issues,” he added. “And at our level, they want to strike back.”

Through a campaign spokesman, Mr. Palin said he “did not recall” referring to Mr. Bitney in the conversation.

Hometown Mayor

Laura Chase, the campaign manager during Ms. Palin’s first run for mayor in 1996, recalled the night the two women chatted about her ambitions.

“I said, ‘You know, Sarah, within 10 years you could be governor,’ ” Ms. Chase recalled. “She replied, ‘I want to be president.’ ”

Ms. Palin grew up in Wasilla, an old fur trader’s outpost and now a fast-growing exurb of Anchorage. The town sits in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, edged by jagged mountains and birch forests. In the 1930s, the Roosevelt administration took farmers from the Dust Bowl area and resettled them here; their Democratic allegiances defined the valley for half a century.

In the past three decades, socially conservative Oklahomans and Texans have flocked north to the oil fields of Alaska. They filled evangelical churches around Wasilla and revived the [Republican Party](#). Many of these working-class residents formed the electoral backbone for Ms. Palin, who ran for mayor on a platform of gun rights, opposition to abortion and the ouster of the “complacent” old guard.

After winning the mayoral election in 1996, Ms. Palin presided over a city rapidly outgrowing itself. Septic tanks had begun to pollute lakes, and residential lots were carved willy-nilly out of the woods. She passed road and sewer bonds, cut property taxes but raised the sales tax.

And, her supporters say, she cleaned out the municipal closet, firing veteran officials to make way for her own team. “She had an agenda for change and for doing things differently,” said Judy Patrick, a City Council member at the time.

But careers were turned upside down. The mayor quickly fired the town’s museum director, John Cooper. Later, she sent an aide to the museum to talk to the three remaining employees. “He told us they only wanted two,” recalled Esther West, one of the three, “and we had to pick who was going to be laid off.” The three quit as one.

Ms. Palin cited budget difficulties for the museum cuts. Mr. Cooper thought differently, saying the museum had become a microcosm of class and cultural conflicts in town. “It represented that the town was becoming more progressive, and they didn’t want that,” he said.

Days later, Mr. Cooper recalled, a vocal conservative, Steve Stoll, sidled up to him. Mr. Stoll had supported Ms. Palin and had a long-running feud with Mr. Cooper. “He said: ‘Gotcha, Cooper,’ ” Mr. Cooper said.

Mr. Stoll did not recall that conversation, although he said he supported Ms. Palin's campaign and was pleased when she fired Mr. Cooper.

In 1997, Ms. Palin fired the longtime city attorney, Richard Deuser, after he issued the stop-work order on a home being built by Don Showers, another of her campaign supporters.

Your attorney, Mr. Showers told Ms. Palin, is costing me lots of money.

"She told me she'd like to see him fired," Mr. Showers recalled. "But she couldn't do it herself because the City Council hires the city attorney." Ms. Palin told him to write the council members to complain.

Meanwhile, Ms. Palin pushed the issue from the inside. "She started the ball rolling," said Ms. Patrick, who also favored the firing. Mr. Deuser was soon replaced by Ken Jacobus, then the State Republican Party's general counsel.

"Professionals were either forced out or fired," Mr. Deuser said.

Ms. Palin ordered city employees not to talk to the press. And she used city money to buy a white Suburban for the mayor's use — employees sarcastically called it the mayor-mobile.

The new mayor also tended carefully to her evangelical base. She appointed a pastor to the town planning board. And she began to eye the library. For years, social conservatives had pressed the library director to remove books they considered immoral.

"People would bring books back censored," recalled former Mayor John Stein, Ms. Palin's predecessor. "Pages would get marked up or torn out."

Witnesses and contemporary news accounts say Ms. Palin asked the librarian about removing books from the shelves. The McCain-Palin presidential campaign says Ms. Palin never advocated censorship.

But in 1995, Ms. Palin, then a city councilwoman, told colleagues that she had noticed the book "Daddy's Roommate" on the shelves and that it did not belong there, according to Ms. Chase and Mr. Stein. Ms. Chase read the book, which helps children understand homosexuality, and said it was inoffensive; she suggested that Ms. Palin read it.

"Sarah said she didn't need to read that stuff," Ms. Chase said. "It was disturbing that someone would be willing to remove a book from the library and she didn't even read it."

"I'm still proud of Sarah," she added, "but she scares the bejeebers out of me."

Reform Crucible

Restless ambition defined Ms. Palin in the early years of this decade. She raised money for Senator [Ted Stevens](#), a Republican from the state; finished second in the 2002 Republican primary for lieutenant governor; and sought to fill the seat of Senator [Frank H. Murkowski](#) when he ran for governor.

Mr. Murkowski appointed his daughter to the seat, but as a consolation prize, he gave Ms. Palin the \$125,000-a-year chairmanship of a state commission overseeing oil and gas drilling.

Ms. Palin discovered that the state Republican leader, Randy Ruedrich, a commission member, was conducting party business on state time and favoring regulated companies. When Mr. Murkowski failed to act on her complaints, she quit and went public.

The Republican establishment shunned her. But her break with the gentlemen's club of oil producers and political power catapulted her into the public eye.

"She was honest and forthright," said Jay Kerttula, a former Democratic state senator from Palmer.

Ms. Palin entered the 2006 primary for governor as a formidable candidate.

In the middle of the primary, a conservative columnist in the state, Paul Jenkins, unearthed e-mail messages showing that Ms. Palin had conducted campaign business from the mayor's office. Ms. Palin handled the crisis with a street fighter's guile.

"I told her it looks like she did the same thing that Randy Ruedrich did," Mr. Jenkins recalled. "And she said, 'Yeah, what I did was wrong.'"

Mr. Jenkins hung up and decided to forgo writing about it. His phone rang soon after.

Mr. Jenkins said a reporter from Fairbanks, reading from a Palin news release, demanded to know why he was "smearing" her. "Now I look at her and think: 'Man, you're slick,'" he said.

Ms. Palin won the primary, and in the general election she faced Tony Knowles, the former two-term Democratic governor, and Andrew Halcro, an independent.

Not deeply versed in policy, Ms. Palin skipped some candidate forums; at others, she flipped through hand-written, color-coded index cards strategically placed behind her nameplate.

Before one forum, Mr. Halcro said he saw aides shovel reports at Ms. Palin as she crammed. Her showman's instincts rarely failed. She put the pile of reports on the lectern. Asked what she would do about health care policy, she patted the stack and said she would find an answer in the pile of solutions.

"She was fresh, and she was tomorrow," said Michael Carey, a former editorial page editor for The Anchorage Daily News. "She just floated along like Mary Poppins."

Government

Half a century after Alaska became a state, Ms. Palin was inaugurated as governor in Fairbanks and took up the reformer's sword.

As she assembled her cabinet and made other state appointments, those with insider credentials were now on the outs. But a new pattern became clear. She surrounded herself with people she has known since grade school and members of her church.

Mr. Parnell, the lieutenant governor, praised Ms. Palin's appointments. "The people she hires are competent, qualified, top-notch people," he said.

Ms. Palin chose Talis Colberg, a borough assemblyman from the Matanuska valley, as her attorney general, provoking a bewildered question from the legal community: "Who?" Mr. Colberg, who did not return calls, moved from a one-room building in the valley to one of the most powerful offices in the state, supervising some 500 people.

"I called him and asked, 'Do you know how to supervise people?'" said a family friend, Kathy Wells. "He said, 'No, but I think I'll get some help.'"

The Wasilla High School yearbook archive now doubles as a veritable directory of state government. Ms. Palin appointed Mr. Bitney, her former junior high school band-mate, as her legislative director and chose another classmate, Joe Austerman, to manage the economic development office for \$82,908 a year. Mr. Austerman had established an Alaska franchise for Mailboxes Etc.

To her supporters — and with an 80 percent approval rating, she has plenty — Ms. Palin has lifted Alaska out of a mire of corruption. She gained the passage of a bill that tightens the rules covering lobbyists. And she rewrote the tax code to capture a greater share of oil and gas sale proceeds.

"Does anybody doubt that she's a tough negotiator?" said State Representative Carl Gatto, Republican of Palmer.

Yet recent controversy has marred Ms. Palin's reform credentials. In addition to the trooper investigation, lawmakers in April accused her of improperly culling thousands of e-mail addresses from a state database for a mass mailing to rally support for a policy initiative.

While Ms. Palin took office promising a more open government, her administration has battled to keep information secret. Her inner circle discussed the benefit of using private e-mail addresses. An assistant told her it appeared that such e-mail messages sent to a private address on a "personal device" like a BlackBerry "would be confidential and not subject to subpoena."

Ms. Palin and aides use their private e-mail addresses for state business. A campaign spokesman said the governor copied e-mail messages to her state account “when there was significant state business.”

On Feb. 7, Frank Bailey, a high-level aide, wrote to Ms. Palin’s state e-mail address to discuss appointments. Another aide fired back: “Frank, this is not the governor’s personal account.”

Mr. Bailey responded: “Whoops~!”

Mr. Bailey, a former midlevel manager at Alaska Airlines who worked on Ms. Palin’s campaign, has been placed on paid leave; he has emerged as a central figure in the trooper investigation.

Another confidante of Ms. Palin’s is Ms. Frye, 27. She worked as a receptionist for State Senator Lyda Green before she joined Ms. Palin’s campaign for governor. Now Ms. Frye earns \$68,664 as a special assistant to the governor. Her frequent interactions with Ms. Palin’s children have prompted some lawmakers to refer to her as “the babysitter,” a title that Ms. Frye disavows.

Like Mr. Bailey, she is an effusive cheerleader for her boss.

“YOU ARE SO AWESOME!” Ms. Frye typed in an e-mail message to Ms. Palin in March.

Many lawmakers contend that Ms. Palin is overly reliant on a small inner circle that leaves her isolated. Democrats and Republicans alike describe her as often missing in action. Since taking office in 2007, Ms. Palin has spent 312 nights at her Wasilla home, some 600 miles to the north of the governor’s mansion in Juneau, records show.

During the last legislative session, some lawmakers became so frustrated with her absences that they took to wearing “Where’s Sarah?” pins.

Many politicians say they typically learn of her initiatives — and vetoes — from news releases.

Mayors across the state, from the larger cities to tiny municipalities along the southeastern fiords, are even more frustrated. Often, their letters go unanswered and their pleas ignored, records and interviews show.

Last summer, Mayor Mark Begich of Anchorage, a Democrat, pressed Ms. Palin to meet with him because the state had failed to deliver money needed to operate city traffic lights. At one point, records show, state officials told him to just turn off a dozen of them. Ms. Palin agreed to meet with Mr. Begich when he threatened to go public with his anger, according to city officials.

At an Alaska Municipal League gathering in Juneau in January, mayors across the political spectrum swapped stories of the governor’s remoteness. How many of you, someone asked, have tried to meet with her? Every hand went up, recalled Mayor Fred Shields of Haines Borough. And how many met with her? Just a few hands rose. Ms. Palin soon walked in, delivered a few remarks and left for an anti-abortion rally.

The administration’s e-mail correspondence reveals a siege-like atmosphere. Top aides keep score, demean enemies and gloat over successes. Even some who helped engineer her rise have felt her wrath.

Dan Fagan, a prominent conservative radio host and longtime friend of Ms. Palin, urged his listeners to vote for her in 2006. But when he took her to task for raising taxes on oil companies, he said, he found himself branded a “hater.”

It is part of a pattern, Mr. Fagan said, in which Ms. Palin characterizes critics as “bad people who are anti-Alaska.”

As Ms. Palin’s star ascends, the McCain campaign, as often happens in national races, is controlling the words of those who know her well. Her mother-in-law, Faye Palin, has been asked not to speak to reporters, and aides sit in on interviews with old friends.

At a recent lunch gathering, an official with the Wasilla Chamber of Commerce asked its members to refer all calls from reporters to the governor’s office. Dianne Woodruff, a city councilwoman, shook her head.

“I was thinking, I don’t remember giving up my First Amendment rights,” Ms. Woodruff said. “Just because you’re not going gaga over Sarah doesn’t mean you can’t speak your mind.”