

Sacred Grounds and Holy Waters— Frenchman's Pond and Beyond



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My journey to the north woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula as SBM president began on Thursday, June 22. Visiting the secretive and secluded Frenchman's Pond had always been more than just a fleeting thought; it just so happened to be on my personal bucket list.

However, the first stop was in Mount Pleasant at Bucks Run Golf Club to deliver the keynote speech at the Isabella County Bar Association's annual summer dinner, where the association awarded its Liberty Bell Award. Bar association president David Barberi put together a wonderful event recognizing a layperson who had contributed to the efficiency of the county's justice system.

I left that wonderful reception and dinner around 8:30 p.m. with SBM President-Elect Don Rockwell and my law clerk, second-year WMU-Cooley Law School student A. J. Moore, and headed toward the Mackinac Bridge to spend the night in St. Ignace. We checked into our rooms around midnight and awoke Friday morning to a beautiful dense fog that completely obliterated any cherished view one might've hoped to have of Mackinac Island and the Mackinac Bridge. But there was no time to waste if we were to make it to Marquette in time

to speak to the SBM Young Lawyers Section for an event it was hosting at the Marquette Regional History Center on the history of legal practice in northern Michigan and the UP.

At the center, we were warmly welcomed by Erica Roell, a young Marquette County lawyer who was president of the local bar association. The meeting was to begin with registration and then move on to the program involving retired Escanaba Circuit Court Judge Stephen Davis.

The program hadn't finished before we had to be on our way again. I made my remarks on behalf of the State Bar and then excused myself, Don, and A. J. to begin the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Houghton-Hancock for dinner with Copper Country Bar Association President Carolyn Weissbach, Secretary Dianna Langdon, and other association members. The dinner meeting began around 5:30 p.m. and lasted approximately three hours. Afterward, we got in my Suburban and headed back to Marquette, arriving at the hotel well after 11 p.m.

I retired for the evening knowing I had been invited to attend the 29th annual meeting of the John Voelker Foundation. I have been a member of the Foundation for many years, and attending the annual meeting in the hallowed halls of the beautifully restored and preserved Marquette County Courthouse where *Anatomy of a Murder* was filmed was almost too much to imagine.

John Voelker, the former Michigan Supreme Court justice, wrote the book of the same name under the pen name Robert Traver. The pseudonym came from his family—Robert was the first name of Voelker's brother, who had died while serving in the United States Navy in World War I, and Traver was his mother's maiden name.

Voelker's father, George, owned a bar in Ishpeming, where John grew up. His mother, Annie, was a music-school teacher who encouraged John to pursue his education. It is reported that George would have preferred that his son not pass the bar, but rather take over the bar he had established in Ishpeming.

Voelker attended Northern Michigan University before moving to Ann Arbor to attend the University of Michigan Law School, graduating in 1928 with a juris doctorate.

Although he practiced law in Marquette for the firm of Eldredge and Eldredge and later served a short time as a Marquette County assistant prosecutor, he eventually moved to Chicago to be with his future wife, Grace, whom he had met at the University of Michigan. The two married, and Voelker worked for Meyer Austrian and Platt in Chicago for three years before returning to the UP, where he successfully ran for Marquette County prosecuting attorney in 1934.

The Voelkers had three daughters: the oldest, Julie Voelker Cullen, now lives in Oak Park, Illinois; middle daughter Elizabeth

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(Bea) lives in Petoskey; and Grace, the youngest, married Ernest “Woody” Wood and still resides in the UP.

Voelker used the “irresistible impulse” defense in defending Coleman Peterson, a veteran of both World War II and the Korean War, for killing Maurice Chenoweth, a local bar owner who had raped Peterson’s wife. This 1952 case helped Voelker earn his reputation as a defense attorney and became the basis of his novel, *Anatomy of a Murder*, which later spawned the movie of the same name. Hollywood came to the UP as director Otto Preminger cast stars Jimmy Stewart, Lee Remick, Ben Gazzara, and George C. Scott in the film.

In several published articles and books, Voelker’s personal “Golden Pond” was a place referred to as Frenchman’s Pond. This is where he would retreat to immerse himself in the total solace and serenity that only the great northern woods of Michigan’s UP could provide. It was the ideal location to write and pursue the environs where this state’s native brook trout resides. Stalking this most beautiful species (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) was not as important to Voelker as being at total peace in the great wilderness of the North. It is best summarized in his “Testament of a Fisherman.”

I fish because I love to; because I love the environs where trout are found, which are invariably beautiful, and hate the environs where crowds of people are found, which are invariably ugly; because of all the television commercials, cocktail parties, and assorted social posturing I thus escape; because, in a world where most men seem to spend their lives doing things they hate, my fishing is at once an endless source of delight and an act of small rebellion; because trout do not lie or cheat and cannot be bought or bribed or impressed by power, but respond only to quietude and humility and endless patience; because I suspect that men are going this way for the last time, and I

for one don’t want to waste the trip; because mercifully there are no telephones on trout waters; because only in the woods can I find solitude without loneliness; because bourbon out of an old tin cup always tastes better out there; because maybe I will catch a mermaid; and, finally, not because I regard fishing as being so terribly important but because I suspect that so many of the other concerns of men are equally unimportant—and not nearly so much fun.¹

The Voelker Foundation, comprised of lawyers, judges, and lay people, was established in 1989, the brainchild of Voelker and a couple of young lawyers named Rich VanderVeen III and Fred Baker. It was founded in large part to provide scholarships to Native American students who might eventually pursue careers in the law, preserve and restore the natural trout habitat, and establish a literary contest for authors to spin yarns about fly fishing and other topics. Over the years, the Foundation has awarded more than 25 scholarships and has recently helped in the restoration of the Dead River, which was damaged about five years ago. The Foundation has also sponsored several writing contests.

Voelker’s daughters Grace and Julie both attended the Foundation’s annual meeting with the current members of the board of directors. Afterward, Don, A.J., and I were all invited to a lunch at Frenchman’s Pond, hosted by Grace, Julie, and John’s son-in-law, Woody. I couldn’t believe I would actually visit the mysterious and mythical Frenchman’s Pond.

The pond’s exact location remained a secret. The only instructions were “Just follow us!” We were spared only the blindfolds to preserve the whereabouts of this sacred land and the holy waters of Frenchman’s Pond. Even the name is fictitious so as not to reveal its real location. After what seemed like a never-ending ride on a UP two-track, we arrived at our destination.

We eventually approached a large decline that ended at the foot of the iconic cabin that Voelker had revered, called home to his writings, and where he developed his art of fly fishing. I immediately knew why he loved this place. It wasn’t more than five minutes before a torrential downpour fell from the skies, only to continue for the duration of our visit. It was not enough, however, to dampen our enthusiasm for Frenchman’s Pond.

Woody prepared a wonderful lunch as we wandered the camp and sipped Old Fashioneds, Voelker’s favorite drink. Voelker often said there was nothing better than drinking bourbon from a tin cup while fishing for the elusive brook trout, the native fish of Frenchman’s Pond.

Voelker wrote more than 11 books at this sacred site while fly fishing the holy waters of Frenchman’s Pond, and we were there. I felt it would be almost sacrilegious to not cast a line to see if I could at least catch a brook trout while I was there. Although I casted several times in the rain, I would eventually succumb to the fact that I was not going to catch one on this trip.

Voelker died March 18, 1991, but his works and his legend live on. His was a life well lived. He is best characterized by the often-cited quote, “It was better to starve in Ishpeming than to wear emeralds in Chicago.”

He definitely lived his passion for fly fishing, writing, and the law—something we should all respect and thank him for.

We finally packed up and headed back to Okemos around 4:30 p.m. We arrived home around midnight, knowing that the 48-hour trip to the North Country had exceeded all our expectations.

The experience of having been just a small part in the workings of lawyers from Lansing to Houghton-Hancock reaffirmed my pride in the great things lawyers do every day all over this great state of Michigan. It’s another reason I am so proud to have practiced law for 42 years, and why I am so proud of all the lawyers of the State Bar of Michigan.

Maybe the trip was an irresistible impulse, but it’s one I would love to take again. ■

ENDNOTE

1. Traver, *Trout Magic* (New York: Simon & Schuster Publishing, 1974).