

Anatomy of a U.P. Lawyer on the Road



Ronald D. Keefe

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Every fall, the new State Bar president tours the Upper Peninsula. Over three days, the new Bar president, the executive director, the chair of the Bar's Representative Assembly, and a few Bar staff members drive across the U.P. and have lunch or dinner with several of the local bar associations. I've had the pleasure of traveling on the tour as the area's Board of Commissioners member over the past several years, and I'm excited to make the trip as a U.P. State Bar president.

Looking back on past tours, there was always a moment in the trip when the president—a "downstate" lawyer who typically hadn't spent much time in the U.P. before then—would come to two surprising realizations. First, U.P. lawyers do a lot of driving. There is simply a *lot* of ground to cover: more than 300 miles and a time zone separate Sault Ste. Marie from Ironwood, which itself is as far west longitudinally as St. Louis, Missouri. Second, a lawyer in Ishpeming, St. Ignace, or Houghton has a lot of the same concerns about practicing law as his or her counterpart in Lansing, Grand Rapids, or Metro Detroit. We all have to deal with difficult opposing counsel. We all have to figure out how to keep overhead down. We all have to manage staff, squeeze in hours for family and community, and yes, serve

our clients. The U.P. tour reaffirms for me every year that far more unites us as Michigan lawyers than divides us by geography.

This year, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the achievements of two prominent U.P. lawyers, starting with one whose name is tied to the physical symbol of Michigan's united peninsulas: Mackinac County lawyer Prentiss Brown, the "father of the Mackinac Bridge." Brown grew up in St. Ignace overlooking the Straits of Mackinac. As a young man, he saw the dense ferry traffic of the Straits in the summer and their near impassability in winter, and dreamed of seeing this distance connected with a bridge. After a career as a Mackinac County prosecutor, then as a U.S. congressman and a U.S. senator, Brown was appointed by the Michigan legislature in 1950 as chair of the new Mackinac Bridge Authority to develop and implement plans for a bridge across the Straits. Under Brown's leadership, the Authority designed, financed, and completed the Mackinac Bridge in just under eight years at a cost of under \$100 million—amazing by today's standards. Brown's achievement was honored as the State Bar 32nd Michigan Legal Milestone during the Bar's Annual Meeting. I encourage you to read the cover story in last month's *Michigan Bar Journal* if you missed it, and to look for the bronze plaque celebrating Brown's contributions that will be placed near the bridge.

We also celebrate the 50th anniversary of John Voelker's great courtroom novel, *Anatomy of a Murder*. Voelker spent most

of his life in Ishpeming, first as a Marquette County prosecutor and defense attorney and then as a writer of stories based on his experiences. *Anatomy of a Murder* is his best-known work, thanks in part to the movie based on the story made in 1959 starring Jimmy Stewart, Lee Remick, George C. Scott, and others, which was filmed entirely in Marquette County and featured many locals as extras. Voelker was later appointed a Michigan Supreme Court justice, but left the bench after three years to pursue writing. As he observed in his letter of resignation, "while other lawyers may write my opinions, they can scarcely write my books."¹ In his later years, Voelker was famous for turning down speaking invitations, preferring to stay in the U.P. where he could be close to the lake, write, and pursue his other passion, fishing. I can relate.

Everyone connected with the State Bar has been gracious and helpful during the week of my inauguration. My wife, Marilyn, and I enjoyed seeing colleagues and meeting new friends in Grand Rapids. But we couldn't wait at the end of the week to see the U.P. again. As for the U.P. tour, save me a seat on the bus. ■

FOOTNOTE

1. Frederick M. Baker, Jr., *John Voelker: Justice, Author, Fisherman, Friend*, Society Update, p 1, Summer 2005, available at <<http://www.micourthistory.org/news-events/newsletters/summer2005.php#1>> (accessed October 15, 2007). *Society Update* is the newsletter of the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society.