

JUDGE WALTER H. CROPPER RETIRES FROM THE DOUGLAS COUNTY COURT

By: Michael J. Merrick

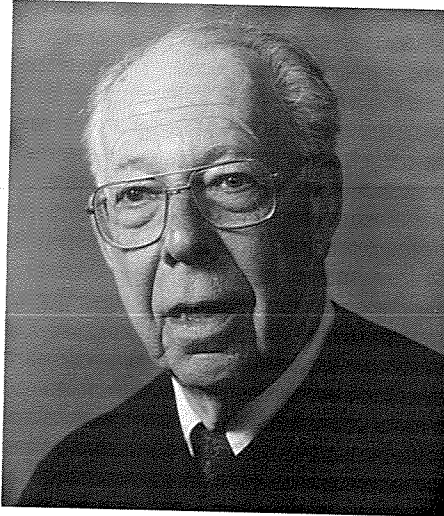
On June 17, 1994 **Judge Walter H. Cropper** retired from the Douglas County Court after serving on the bench for 27 years. He said he will miss kidding with the lawyers and court personnel, but not his heavily scheduled docket.

Judge Cropper, perhaps best known for his boisterous manner in the courtroom, said he "always ascribed to the idea that a judge just shouldn't be an automaton that sits there speechless, emotionless, cracks his gavel, says 'thirty days' and moves on to the next case. I did not believe that was justice. And I had always felt that each individual deserves some attention." Elaborating, Judge Cropper said "when I'm going to die, and we all are, I hope the good Lord isn't one of those guys who says 'purgatory, next case.' I at least want a chance to say something." Parties who appear before him in the County Court knew they had "been before Walt Cropper; it was a personal confrontation," he said.

After graduating from Omaha Benson High School, Judge Cropper attended the University of Nebraska at Lincoln where he earned a bachelor of arts degree in 1941. He then completed only one semester of law school at Creighton University before being summoned to serve in the Army. After completing his combat service, he enrolled in the accelerated curriculum at the University of Nebraska College of Law and graduated in 1948. Before attending law school, he considered several careers, including becoming a singer, a preacher, and a dentist. His decision to pursue a career in law was largely a result of the influence of his father, then an Omaha attorney. He began his career in private practice with this father in 1948.

His public career had its origin in 1958 when his wife, **Betty**, was kidnapped from her mother's home in North Dundee by **Ronald Brewer**. She was released unharmed, and Brewer was arrested and charged with kidnapping, though the charge was later reduced to robbery. After he was sent to a Nebraska mental hospital, Brewer escaped and was subsequently charged with murder. He is now serving a life sentence in Iowa. Judge Cropper, who felt the case had been "totally mishandled," was so upset

that he ran for county attorney against **Donald "Pinky" Knowles** in 1962. After losing that election, Judge Cropper ran for county commissioner four years later. He lost the election, but it was during the county commissioner campaign that he met **Governor Norbert Tiemann** who in 1967 appointed him to the Omaha Municipal Court, since renamed the Douglas County Court. Judge Cropper considered campaigning for public office a "tolerated intrusion" on his family life and said he would not run for office today. "You run the risk of having your head blown off if you say the wrong thing today," he said.



One of Judge Cropper's most memorable cases was when he released Omaha police officer **James Loder** on a \$500 bond after Loder allegedly shot and killed **Vivian Strong**, a 14-year-old black girl who allegedly was participating in the burglary of a North Omaha home. Loder's release prompted several incidents of burning and looting in North Omaha. In addition to receiving many telephone calls protesting Loder's release, a procession of cars slowly circled his neighborhood. He said "it was really a threat." It was a good example of how many people, including some lawyers, don't understand that the purpose of bail is merely to insure a defendant's future attendance at trial, he said. Loder was later acquitted of manslaughter.

Judge Cropper is well known for his black binder notebook bearing the

title "**Dirty Law Poison**" and a skull and cross-bones. The book is a compilation of approximately 3,000 state and federal civil and criminal cases assembled for easy reference. During motions hearings he would cite a case from the book and announce, "I think I'll let that be the law and you can raise (your argument) again in the district court if you're unhappy." He said he was offered a lot of money for it, but it is priceless and he plans to keep it in his personal library.

The most consistent fault observed in lawyers during his years on the bench is that many think they must always say something. He said sometimes the best advocacy is simply sitting down and not saying anything.

"I never intended to sit this long," he said, but when his wife passed away in 1986, he felt "the situation justified it." In retirement, he plans to spend the warmer months golfing and the winter months practicing **ferroequinology** -- iron horsemanship. He builds and operates an extensive model train system in his basement.

He has two daughters, **Cynthia Fontenello**, bailiff for Douglas County District Court **Judge Michael Amde** and **Susan Cropper**, a Millard North High School counselor.

Omaha attorney **Lawrence Barrett** was appointed to fill Judge Cropper's seat on the Douglas County Court bench and began his duties on September 1, 1994.

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