

# Law Quadrangle (formerly Law Quad Notes)

---

Volume 51 | Number 2

Article 9

---

Fall 2009

## Feature: Anatomy of an Alumnus

Katie Vloet

*University of Michigan Law School*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/lqnotes>

---

### Recommended Citation

Katie Vloet, *Feature: Anatomy of an Alumnus*, 51 *Law Quadrangle (formerly Law Quad Notes)* - (2009).  
Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/lqnotes/vol51/iss2/9>

This Special Feature is brought to you for free and open access by University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Quadrangle (formerly Law Quad Notes) by an authorized editor of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [mlaw.repository@umich.edu](mailto:mlaw.repository@umich.edu).

## anatomy of an alumnus

50 years later, remembering *Anatomy of a Murder* and the fly-fishing, U.P.-loving, mushroom-hunting state Supreme Court justice who wrote it

by Katie Vloet

If not for a fly-fishing buff with large hands, one of the most esteemed courtroom dramas in the history of film and prose might never have come into existence.

Or so goes one of the many yarns still told about John Voelker, '28, author of the beloved novel-turned-movie *Anatomy of a Murder*. Voelker enjoyed nothing more than fishing for trout in the Upper Peninsula, but long winters presented a challenge. While his fellow anglers tied flies to endure the cold months, Voelker claimed he did not possess the dexterity.

"So far from being able to tie a fly," he often quipped, "I am barely able to zip one."

Instead he wrote during the U.P. winters, and his most famous work (written under the pseudonym Robert Traver) quickly became a bestseller in 1958. The following year—a half-century ago—it was made into a critically acclaimed film starring Jimmy Stewart.

Voelker, who died in 1991, has remained well known and well loved throughout Michigan, in no small part because of *Anatomy*, but also for his efforts to preserve land and assist Native Americans.

The film also has stood the test of time during the past 50 years and continues to rank highly on best-of lists. The American Bar Association named it one of the best trial movies ever made, and the American Film Institute ranked it seventh on a list of best courtroom dramas.

"I believe there are only two great films that were shot in Michigan, *Anatomy of a Murder* and *Somewhere in Time*. ... I also think *Anatomy* was Jimmy Stewart's best performance," said Frank Beaver, Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Communication and professor of screen arts and cultures at U-M.

"Other courtroom dramas manipulate you emotionally, but this is a very serious, engrossing film about courtroom maneuvering and

# FEATURE

human nature,” he said. “Every time I watch it, I see something new, and I think that is one of the signs of a movie’s greatness.”

## Hollywood comes to the U.P.

Voelker’s story began long before the publication of his most famous work. After graduating from Michigan Law, Voelker spent a few unhappy years in Chicago, then returned to the land of brook trout, tin cups of bourbon, and *boletus edulus* mushrooms that he compared to “hamburger buns strewn across the forest floor.”

He settled into U.P. life with his wife, Grace. Voelker served many years as a successful Marquette County prosecutor, then was voted out of office and began working as a defense attorney in 1950.

One case he defended had all the elements of a Hollywood movie: sex, lies, a beautiful woman, a grisly murder. In 1952 he successfully defended Army Lt. Coleman Peterson, who was found to be not guilty by reason of temporary insanity in the killing of the man who owned the Lumberjack Tavern in Big Bay after the barkeep allegedly raped Peterson’s wife.

Years later, that story was reflected in Voelker’s novel and the Hollywood movie that was released in 1959. In the film version, Stewart portrayed defense attorney Paul Biegler and George C. Scott played the prosecutor.

To create an authentic film set, director Otto Preminger brought the cast and crew to Marquette County to film. Voelker smoked cigars with Stewart, drove cast members to his favorite spots in the woods, and jammed with the composer of the film’s crime-jazz soundtrack.

“The highlight of the filming of the movie was, for John, having Duke Ellington up there,” said Fred Baker, secretary/treasurer of the John D. Voelker Foundation and commissioner of the Michigan Supreme Court. “They used to go to the Crow’s Nest restaurant and play duets together on the piano. John was a very good piano player.”

While the film’s setting was the peaceful expanse of the U.P., the movie’s content was anything but serene. Indeed,

with frank dialogue about rape and sexual topics, the film was one of the first to challenge the Hays Code that governed films made during that era. Take, for example, this exchange:

**Judge Weaver:** *Mr. Biegler, you finally got your rape into the case, and I think all the details should now be made clear to the jury. What exactly was the undergarment just referred to?*

**Paul Biegler:** *Panties, Your Honor. . .*

**Judge Weaver:** *There’s a certain light connotation attached to the word “panties.” Can we find another name for them?*



**Mitch Lodwick:**

*I never heard my wife call ‘em anything else.*

**Judge Weaver:** *Mr. Biegler?*

**Paul Biegler:** *I’m a bachelor, Your Honor.*

**Judge Weaver:** *That’s a great help. Mr. Dancer?*

**Claude Dancer:** *When I was overseas during the war, Your Honor, I learned a French word. I’m afraid that might be slightly suggestive.*

**Judge Weaver:** *Most French words are.*

Upon the release of the movie, the chief of police in Chicago said the film could not be shown there if the word “contraceptive” remained in it, according

to the Foster Hirsch biography, *Otto Preminger* (Knopf, 2007). But a district court judge ruled that the movie could be shown without the cut, and *Anatomy* received a tremendous reception from critics and filmgoers around the country.

In a nod to the real-life legal world, and possibly a smirk toward government interference in the arts, Preminger cast a non-actor as the judge: Joseph N. Welch, the attorney who famously said to Joseph McCarthy during the Army–McCarthy hearings, “Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?”

In the end, either thanks in part to the controversy or in spite of it, the movie grossed more than \$4 million in the United States, and was nominated for numerous Academy Awards, including Best

COURTESY FRED BAKER



*John Voelker inscribes a book at his pond in the U.P.*



Picture. The novel remained on the bestseller list for more than a year.

**“Nearest thing to a great man”**

Around the same time Voelker became renowned for the novel and the movie, he also made huge strides in his legal career. In 1956, the governor appointed him to an open seat on the state Supreme Court. He was then elected to the court, and continued to serve until 1960, when he decided to devote his time to writing.

His range of interests brought many admirers to the U.P., notably Charles Kuralt, the *On the Road* journalist from CBS. After Kuralt did a story about Voelker, the two men became close friends, and Kuralt said that Voelker “was really about the nearest thing to a great man I’ve ever known.”

The legacy of Kuralt’s friend lives on in ways both small and large. Voelker’s daughter, Grace V. Wood, and her husband reside in the house in Ishpeming where her parents once lived. Her husband and his friends have restored Voelker’s cabin in the woods. There, they have renewed a tradition that he loved at the start of trout fishing season.

“They’re still having the opening day party,” Wood said. “He would like that. He loved this area, loved living up here.”

And though Voelker is best remembered for *Anatomy*, it is another novel and passion that may be his most long-standing legacy. Voelker felt strongly about the rights of Native Americans, and in his 1965 historical novel, *Laughing Whitefish*, a young lawyer and a Chippewa woman battle a powerful and corrupt mining company. Their goal is to enforce a promise of shares in the company that was made to the woman’s father in the 1840s, in exchange for his leading the miners to the richest



*Saul Bass, Anatomy of a Murder, 1959, color lithograph, 41 in. x 27 in.*

deposit of iron ore on the planet, which became the storied Jackson Mine.

The John D. Voelker Foundation ([www.voelkerfdn.org](http://www.voelkerfdn.org)) has given out 14 \$4,000 scholarships to Native American students attending law school, Baker notes, and the amount typically is matched by the scholar’s tribe under an agreement between the Foundation and the Inter-Tribal Council. Funding for the scholarships came from the sale of a limited-edition republication of *Laughing Whitefish*, with Voelker’s signature in each of the 300 copies.

One of the scholarships went to Allie Greenleaf Maldonado, ’00, now the assistant general counsel for the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians. Her annual scholarship from the Voelker Foundation arrived just before her first year at Michigan Law was set to start, at exactly the same moment when she wondered how she could afford to get to

Ann Arbor from New York City, pay a deposit on an apartment, and buy books. “The scholarship was the difference between me being able to go to law school and not being able to go,” she said.

When she applied for the scholarship, she learned about the author’s affinity for Native Americans. The dedication of Voelker and his foundation to helping them “was very forward-thinking,” she said. “He saw that the Native American communities were going to need Native American lawyers.”

That’s exactly what Maldonado is doing for her tribe today. Long after Voelker’s passing, she said, “the momentum he created is still going strong.”

*Voelker’s 1928 yearbook photo*



© ESTATE OF SAUL BASS, SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, GIFT OF JEFF GAULPEAUX