

1st Day at the Court

August 3, 1981

By Thomas A. Dickson

Our quarters were segregated at that time. The Justices remained upstairs in their old chambers, kitty-corner from the old courtroom on the second floor.

The Clerk of Court Luella (Lu) Dunn and her staff had earlier moved into the new judicial wing. We, the six new law clerks, reported to Lu. As we would come to learn, the Justices wrote the opinions. Luella Dunn ran the Court.

Our first day of work was the first Monday in August, after the Bar Exam. We law clerks, Craig Campbell, Jack Kennelly, Don Rysavy, Jerry Schimmelpfennig, Ce'Ann Wikenheiser, and I, checked into Lu's office. Our introductions to the Justices would come later that afternoon. We were also introduced to Elmer DeWald, the law librarian. Elmer made it very clear there would be no monkey business in his library. We were never quite clear on what he meant by that. Jim Harris, a law clerk from the previous year, stopped in to say hello. Jim was staying on.

Lu dispatched Marla, Carla, and Darla to show us to our new offices. The secretaries, Alice, Mary, Irene, Evie, and Rosaleen, were already working. Brand-new, giant word-processing screens blinking in their faces. Real-time editing allowing for last minute changes and corrections. Revolutionary, technology for some...but not for all. Mary was still wedded to her trusty old Smith-Corona typewriter. Justice Paulson wrote his opinions in one draft. Straight from the typewriter's front rollers to the Northwest Reporter. No runs, no hits, no errors...and no changes.

Rosaleen also stayed true to her IBM Selectric. She was reluctant to make the change to a word processor; they lacked the "snap" of her IBM.

The chambers were designated by Seniority: Chief Justice Erickstad, Alice, and Craig; Justice Paulson, Mary, Don, and Jack; Justin Pederson, Irene, Ce'Ann, and Me; and Justice Sand, Evie, and Jim. Then, last but not least, was the newest member of the Court: Justice VandeWalle, Rosaleen, and Jerry.

On that first Monday, as Ce'Ann and I were settling in, the outgoing law clerk, Robin, was moving out. He had finished his clerkship and was packing up and moving on. As he folded his



The 1981 North Dakota Supreme Court Justices, from left to right, Justice William Paulson, Justice Vernon R. Pederson, Chief Justice Ralph J. Erickstad, Justice Paul M. Sand, and Justice Gerald W. VandeWalle.

year-long clerkship into a small cardboard box, Ce'Ann and I started quizzing him about his clerkship.

"So, Robin, what are you going to do?"
"Oh, I've got some leads in Minneapolis."

"Minneapolis? Well, that's pretty cool."
"Yeah, it's really cool."
"Yeah..."

The kibitzing went back and forth for a while. As he got ready to leave, we had one more question.

"So, what are they like?"
"What is who like?"
"The judges...what are they like?"

"Four old guys and a kid."

The kid was Justice VandeWalle. That kid later became Chief Justice VandeWalle, the longest serving Chief Justice in North Dakota history. He received the Rough Rider Award. Today, he continues to serve; a long, distinguished, and substantive career in public service.

A lot of time has passed since that first Monday in August, 1981. Lots of water under the bridge. Everything seemed more casual then. Croquet at the Erickstad's. Dinner at the Dunn's. Christmas party at the Mandan Elks. And security... there was no security. I am not even sure they locked the Capitol at night.

We law clerks ate lunch together every Friday. Some of them even went back to work. Lifelong friends, wonderful colleagues, and interesting work. Supreme Court Clerkship, 1981-82; best job I ever had.

Thomas A. Dickson has extensive experience in a variety of areas including criminal defense, plaintiff's personal injury, and oil field personal injury. He has tried more than 100 cases to jury verdict in North Dakota courts over the past 30 years. Since 1992, Dickson has been listed in The Best Lawyers in America. He has also been listed in Super Lawyers. In 2017, he received the Light of Justice Award from the NDAJ. Dickson is a member or officer in many organizations and is also active in the community.