

Robert Van Pelt was born on September 9, 1897, in West Muddy Precinct, Gosper County, Nebraska. That was right next to Frontier County. During most of the 1890's, Robert's parents, Sarah and Francis Van Pelt, lived in a sod dugout on a 80-acre timber claim in southeast Frontier County. In the spring of 1897, Sarah informed Francis she was expecting a child. His response was that they were too poor to support themselves, let alone a child. Shortly thereafter he left, never to return. Sarah went to the home of her sister, Amanda, where the family assisted in Robert's delivery. Not long after, Sarah purchased a building in Stockville, Nebraska, where she operated the Stockville House, a boarding house and restaurant near the Courthouse Square across the street from the community windmill. For more than thirty years, Sarah Van Pelt thus supported herself and her son without any assistance.

Even though she had very little formal education, Sarah knew the value of education. Robert Van Pelt attended the Stockville Public School through the tenth grade, Franklin Academy from 1912 to 1914, and Doane College from 1916 to 1920. He graduated from the Nebraska Law School in 1922. He practiced law in Lincoln for 35 years. For four years during that period, he was Assistant United States District Attorney. As mentioned earlier, President Eisenhower appointed him a United States District Judge in 1957, and he served in that office until his death at age 90 on April 27, 1988.

He never forgot how important his single mother was in his life. He enjoyed telling about his mother's send-off when he went to college. She said, "Always tell the truth, Robert, because they can't take that from you, and always be clean because soap is cheap."

Stockville is still the County Seat of Frontier County. It has now a population of 32, and has the only existing wooden frame courthouse in the state and maybe the nation. It was built in 1889. It has the distinction of being the last in the nation to get indoor plumbing in the 1960s. When Frontier County put running water in the courthouse, a major item before the commissioners was whether to install a drinking fountain in the downstairs hall. The County Clerk opposed the \$65 fountain expenditure as a waste of taxpayer funds. After all, he provided a pail of water with a dipper for anyone who was thirsty. The commissioners approved the fountain because the County Clerk's dog also drank from the bucket.

Incidentally, Robert Van Pelt not only grew up there but tried his first case as a young attorney in the Stockville Courthouse.

Young, Reach Out and Live at 178-179 (J&L Lee 2008)

U.S. Chief Justice Warren Burger said, "This man is one of the greatest jurists in this country."

Young, Reach Out and Live at 178 (J&L Lee 2008)