

Even Babies Come In Tide Of People At Wetzel Trial

ROCKINGHAM — Crime is no stranger to Richmond County.

There is no more, no less here than in any one of North Carolina's 89 other counties. And they have had their share of spectacular murder trials in the dingy tower of justice which is the Richmond County Courthouse.

But few trials have provoked the interest, discussion and excitement of the Frank Edward Wetzel murder trial which now awaits a jury's verdict.

The cast of characters is large and the setting is colorful.

Judge J. A. Rousseau is a slight, bespectacled mountaineer who intrigues the spectators. He is a walker, a pacer, a wanderer.

As the evidence drones on, he will pace the wide platform behind the bench, sit in his stuffed chair and listen, walk behind the jury box and lean against it, or even walk into the jury room and catch a quick smoke — all the while not missing a line of testimony.

TIES BRIGHT

He has spent much of his time with his hands jammed in his trouser pockets, pushing aside the black judicial robes — which he carries in a plastic bag — and exposing bright ties with conservative suits.

The courtroom has been filled each of four mornings, the crowds running over into the aisles before the judge's 9:30 a.m. convening time. Spectators have been often in the way, blocking movements, but Judge Rousseau has refused to ask them to give ground.

There has been usually a mid-morning recess for a few minutes, then a lunchtime break about 12:30 until 2 p.m., and then work again until 5:30 or 6.

A chilly early morning courtroom turns into a stuffy, hot room by mid-morning and in late afternoon coal smoke has made a couple of the sessions stifling.

The large, high-ceilinged room has a balcony which has also been packed. People from many surrounding communities have been in attendance, men, women, children and babies. A child's cough is the rule rather than the exception during the proceedings and, Thursday, a woman was asked to leave when her tiny baby cried.

There have been no demonstrations. The crowds have been quiet and orderly. As the afternoons grow colder, youngsters begin to crowd the courtroom, pushing up around the bench and overflowing into the working press sections.

The late afternoon sun has had a habit of breaking through the windows and casting a yellow glow on the table of Solicitor Boyette shortly before recess, as if by signal.

CUTE TO SOME

Teenage boys and girls have stared at Wetzel, some remarking that "he's not so hot" and others that "he is pretty cute."

Boyette, from Carthage, is a friendly, helpful workman out of the courtroom but is deadly serious and humorless in his task.

He is a balding, youthful gray-haired, round-faced, medium-built man. He is a constant meal companion of Judge Rousseau and the court reporter at the Howard Johnson Restaurant on US 1 South.

Boyette's counterpart, chubby, pleasant John T. Page Jr., has supplied what little humor there has been in the trial — and mostly by indirection. His constant, "objection," has been granted mostly by, "overruled, exception" by Judge Rousseau. Often the Judge has asked, "Wait a minute, why are you objecting?" It happens sometimes before it is clear to some

court witnesses why he is objecting.

PEN'S BUSY

Page, assigned the task of defending Wetzel, has done most of his cross-examination while seated. He seldom talks with Wetzel, a yellow legal pad before him and his ball point pen busy.

Page has been on his feet and has examined every piece of evidence submitted by the prosecution and has objected to most of the admissions.

Boyette and Page are seated at two-seat tables in front of the bench facing Rousseau. They are two feet apart. Just before them is the reporter, to the left the working press tables, to the right a table for evidence before the jury box. Behind them is a row of seats in front of the bar — a wooden rail. The seats are filled with witnesses.

In four days the drama has been reeled off without an empty seat in the place. If the trial had gone four more, the seats would have remained hard to find.