

JURY DUTY GIVES A CITIZEN A FEELING OF SATISFACTION 3/19/96

The O.J. trial, thankfully, is behind us and I apologize for bringing it up. It did cause me to reflect on my own experiences with the court system. Over the years I have had several stints of jury duty or serving as a witness.

The first occasion was in 1960, Herkimer County Court with Judge Edmund Port presiding – if my memory serves me right.

I was a Forest Ranger at the time and it proved to be a boon to me. I received \$27 a day for mileage and a flat rate per day for being present. It was more than my state pay at the time and of course, I was allowed time off from my work with no loss of salary.

I was very impressed with the first day's proceedings. There were at least 80 jurors and 25 or so attorneys present. After the usual greetings and thanks to one and all in appreciation for serving, the Judge got down to business.

His opening remarks to the attorneys were succinct and to the point. "These cases are either ready for trial or they are out; there will be no exceptions." I was duly impressed, but not for long.

One after another every single attorney rose to his/her fee to "beg the court's indulgence," and make entreaties for myriad reason why their particular cases were not ready for trial. Every plea was accepted and they were granted continuances. In obvious embarrassment, the Judge thanked all the jurors and excused us for the day.

To make a long story short, we had to report for the entire two-week period and for the most part cooled our heels and returned home every day.

The system has improved I am glad to say. You may now call in the evening before and a recording informs you as to whether you need to report or not. It can be an inconvenience and financial burden on most people. There are many good and valid reasons for one to be excused and some can be very innovative.

For the first three days of one particular session, one person failed to respond to roll call. The Judge directed the Sheriff to find out the reason for this individual's absence.

The rest of the jurors, including myself, were curious as to the outcome, which I was able to learn. An old retired State Trooper friend of mine, Lew Johnson, was a court attendant and he told me the story.

The subject was a farmer who had been excused from a previous court session for the same reason. It seems he showed up in his barn clothes, which were long overdue for a wash.

Jury duty can be a rewarding and somewhat enjoyable experience and after it is over you can leave with a smug self-assurance that you have done your civic duty. Try it, you'll like it.