

Crime connoisseurs relish courtroom fare

Fred Fisher wandered over to the schedule board, bent close and regarded it as though it were a television schedule: attempted murder in court No. 1, a theft in No. 2, child neglect in No. 3, and arson in No. 4. It looked like a slow day.

He joined a cluster of other old men who sat nearby, discussing fishing poles. "I haven't had many like it; it was sensitive," said one man. "I mean you could feel a mosquito lighting on the end..."

When the courtroom doors opened at 10 a.m. the men leisurely divided up according to their tastes. Fisher chose the child neglect — Jones the arson and Pete Whitney the murder.

Each day these retired store owners,

"I'm going to the opera Sunday night," she said. "But I don't believe it will be more entertaining than some of the divorce cases I've seen. They're better than any comedy."

If not the quality, the morality of court-watching sometimes bothers Irene.

"When I was young, we were trained to stay out of other people's business," she said. "But I've always been nosy. I didn't feel too good about myself after coming to Bruno's trial, but I couldn't stay away. Excuse me," she said, noting that intermission was over. "I want to see what's cooking in No. 3."

On Tuesday morning the court-watchers perform what has become a ritual. They gather on a bench in front of



The court roster, posted just outside the courtroom, is the place to go for a rundown of daily activities.



Story by JOCK HATFIELD

Photos by JIMMI HARRIS

Fred Fisher, Lewis Jones and Harriet Washburn take a lesson from the horseplayers in their courtwatching. It's like betting on the jockey rather than the horse by choosing the trials they attend by judge and lawyer instead of by the crime.

salesmen and stenographers come to the court sidelines and root for the judicial system. Some have been following the courts for 20 years, others are rookies. Together Lane County's eight or 10 court watchers attend more trials than the worst criminals or the best lawyers.

The courtrooms offer a drama not found in other public gathering places. While other old people wait in parks or shopping centers for their life insurance to pay off, the courtwatchers pass their time rooting for or against murder, rape and assault defendants.

"I don't like divorces," said Jones, who started court watching last year after he retired. "I prefer crimes, dope and murder."

It's the off-season for top-quality murder trials now, said Jones, who boasts he has been in the spectator's gallery for some of the county's most infamous cases. When John Bruno was charged with murdering his wife last year, Jones was there.

"Well, after they killed her," he recalled, "they took her into the bathtub to cut her up. Bruno was going to make his friend do it alone but his friend wanted help. He called out 'get in here'..."

Irene also prefers murder trials. It's the drama and procedure she enjoys. "The Bruno case was murder at its best," she said. "I had to come."

Irene, who uses only her middle name, began court-watching in the 1950s and has attended every major murder trial since.

Although she prefers major crime trials, Irene occasionally will take in a divorce.

the court docket like birds on a telephone wire, waiting for the day's court roster.

When the day's docket arrives, the court fans select trials as much by the lawyer and the judge as by the crime. The court fans know them as others know the players on their favorite basketball team.

"In a horse race, the smart bettor picks the jockey, not the horse," explained Irene.

They rank Ken Morrow, an aging criminal lawyer with a calm, mechanical style, as the court superstar.

Inside the court, Fisher and Jones sat on the edges of the benches, studying intently the witnesses in the child neglect trial.

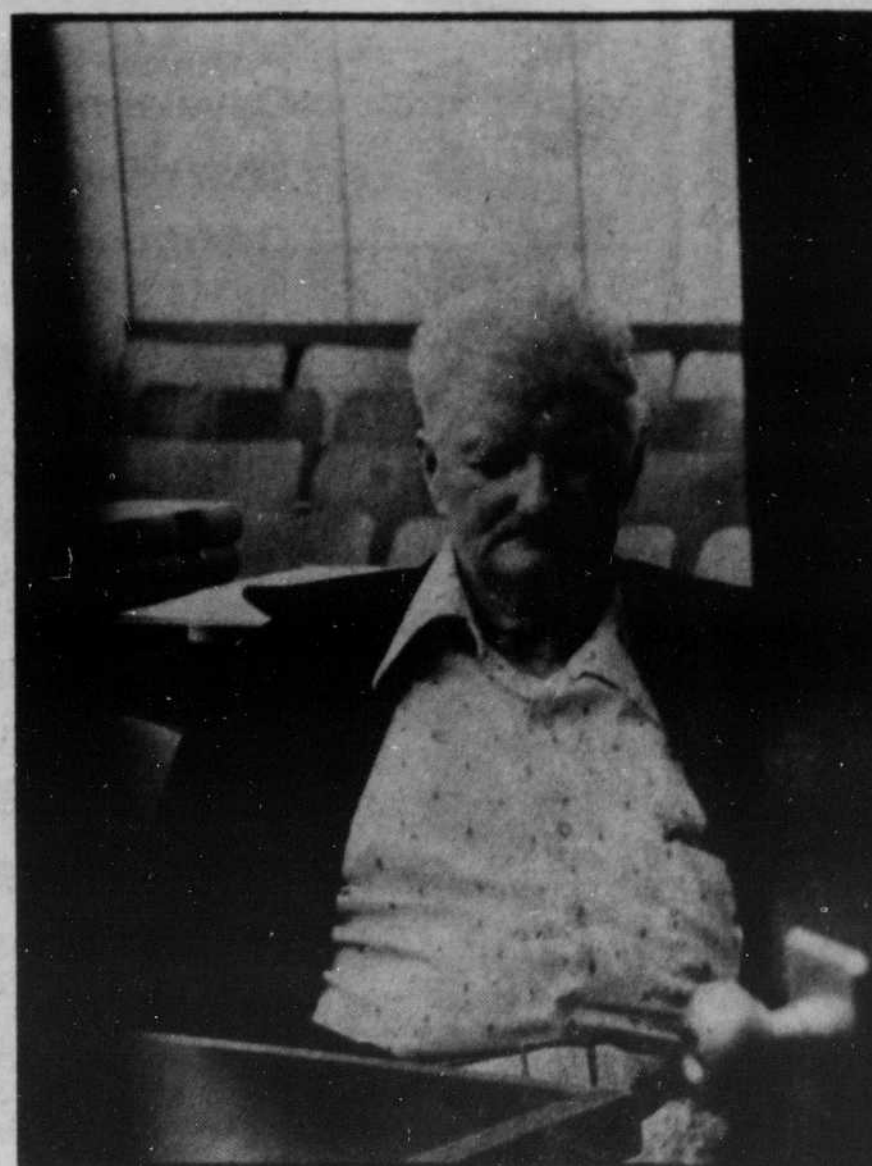
"And you saw her feeding the baby rotten food?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes," the witness said. Jones passed a piece of candy to his companion and unraveled his own noiselessly. Fisher glanced back toward Jones knowingly.

"This ain't a bad case," he said. "Don't you worry about Judge Edwin Allen. He'll see through 'em."

During intermission the crime connoisseurs debated the guilt and innocence of other defendants. "The guy in that one looks a little nutty," observed Jones of a man on trial for food stamp fraud. "You can tell. You know — that wild look."

The bailiff called an end to intermission. Jones noticed Harriet Washburn, another court watcher, who had just migrated in. "Come on beautiful," he said, calling her over. "Let's get back inside before the closing arguments. They'll have that old woman in jail before we get in there if you don't hurry."



This man takes advantage of a lull in the action to catch a few quick winks before the pace quickens.