



PHOTO BY JORY SCHWEERS/DAILY SUN STAFF

Judge William Colwell celebrates turning 100 with a party in the Pawnee City courtroom where he served until retiring in 1981.

Judge celebrates 100th birthday

William Colwell recognized for decades of work

By JORY SCHWEERS

Daily Sun staff writer

For one Pawnee City judge, Thursday was the first time entertaining in the city's district courtroom, despite living for nearly a century.

A happy 100th birthday was celebrated in Pawnee City Thursday afternoon as town and state officials came to celebrate with Judge William Colwell.

The gathering grew from a small judges' get-together to a full-blown party.

Colwell will turn 100 in November, but Nebraska Supreme Court Chief Justice Mike Heavican wanted to help celebrate while he was visiting the city on a summer tour.

Heavican, State Court Administrator Corey Steel and key staff members of the Administrative Office of the

Courts and Probation are visiting several southeastern Nebraska communities between Aug. 18-21.

A special feature of the tour is the early celebration for the retired judge.

"He is a great judge and it's a great honor he is still around with us," Heavican said.

Cupcakes, cake, balloons and the like filled the courtroom, accompanied by nearly 75 people celebrating Colwell turning 100.

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“It makes you feel special,” Colwell said while eating a cupcake. “I am happy and a little overwhelmed this many people came to recognize me.”

Colwell earned his law degree in 1938 from the University of Nebraska.

In 1940, he entered duty as an agent, followed by field service as a special agent with the FBI. He resigned from that in 1946 to re-enter his law practice at Pawnee City. He was appointed as a state district court judge in 1963, fulfilling that position until he retired in 1981.

After his retirement, he stayed within court walls for the following twelve years helping with Supreme Court appointments in the state judicial system.

“He enjoys being near the courts,” friend and retired Judge William Rist said. “Since his retirement, he stayed in touch with the judiciary and court systems.”

Rist and Colwell have been friends for over 50 years.

“He was very crisp and direct in the courtroom,” Rist said. “He has his own sense of humor.”

As Colwell was celebrated, he laughed and joked with the audience in attendance.

“This feels older than 99, I’ll tell you that much,” he laughed.

Friends, neighbors, community members and officials all had nice things to say about Colwell.

“Everyone has tremendous admiration for him and the years he put in with integrity and work ethic and the high bar he set with his legal profes-

sion,” Heavican said.

It’s a rare event to have anyone reach a 100 year milestone, he continued, saying this is a tribute to Colwell and to the court systems as well.

“He has become a symbol of the longevity of the courts and the court history,” he said.

Colwell will officially turn 100 Nov. 21.

“He deserves all the accolades he has received,” attorney Joe Stehlik said. “He is a fantastic gentleman when you get to know him.”

Born in Pawnee County and growing up in the small town, Colwell said his job wasn’t easy.

“It’s hard to be a judge when you work with people you already know,” he said. “But I’ve enjoyed it



PHOTO BY JORY SCHWEERS/DAILY SUN STAFF

Judge William Colwell, left, celebrates turning 100 with long-time friend Judge William Rist.

and I enjoyed my time here ... now I’m going to enjoy this cupcake.”



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Retired Judge William Colwell, left, is joined by Nebraska Chief Justice Mike Heavican, right, to help celebrate his 100th birthday. Heavican and key staff members are on a tour of southeast Nebraska.