



Women Lawyers Association of Michigan Who, How, Why

By Elaine Frost & Karen Colby Welner

On March 24, 1919, 48 years after Sarah Killgore became the first woman admitted to practice law in Michigan,¹ five women attorneys met in the Detroit Federation Building and organized the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan (hereafter WLAM or the Association). Its stated purpose was "to advance the interest of women members of the legal profession and to promote a fraternal spirit among lawyers." The charter members, Theresa Doland Cornelius, Mabel G. Rix, Henrietta E. Rosenthal, Mary Wetsman and Harriet A. Marsh, four of whom were graduates of Michigan law schools, recognized early in their careers the need for solidarity in what was and for close to half a century, continued to be a predominantly male profession.²

Discussion at the first meeting emphasized the reality that women attorneys were at a tremendous disadvantage because they had no clearing house for their problems, as did their male counterparts. Not only was free and serious discussion not open to them, but the attitudes of their supposed male peers ranged from condescension to contempt.³ As noted recently by Michigan Supreme Court Justice Patricia Boyle:

"These women . . . were confronted with the widely held conviction of

their brothers at the Bar that they were simply constitutionally incapable of good lawyering. They were also confronted by the equally tenacious belief held by many women who were not professionals, that women lawyers were somehow peculiar for having opted for a life role beyond that of wife and mother."⁴

By February, 1921, when WLAM had grown to 18 members,⁵ its first President, Theresa Doland Cornelius, recalled the underpinnings of the Association as "cooperation, [sharing] general information, social benefit and preservation of a high standard of ethics."⁶

Among the early members only nine were engaged in the actual practice of law. Since most legal positions were closed to women, they practiced in association with brothers or husbands, and in one case with a male attorney who had previously employed the woman attorney as a secretary.

An example of the employment dilemmas women faced in the early 1920s is the personal experience of Regene Freund (Cohane), still a practicing attorney in Southfield. When she was graduating from Cornell Law School in 1920,⁷ Cohane contacted the Detroit Bar Association requesting information about employment oppor-

tunities. An officer of that group responded that he knew of no openings in general and "certainly none for women."

To better understand the social and political climate with which these early members had to deal, it is helpful to recognize that most were licensed to practice law before the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution enfranchised women. Many in fact were active in securing that right.

Among these was Phoebe Munnecke (WLAM President 1938-39), one of four suffragists arrested January 5, 1919 for kindling a watch-fire in front of the White House. Munnecke served a ten-day jail sentence, and later served another four-day sentence for applauding the speech of a suffragist in a courtroom.

After the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified she started a campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment, a battle carried forth more recently by another WLAM member, Martha Griffiths, presently Michigan Lieutenant Governor, who in 1972 would continue the fight as a member of the United States House of Representatives.

WLAM received belated recognition from the State Bar of Michigan,

WOMEN IN THE LAW

which carried news of "local bar associations" in its early records but did not take such note of WLAM until 1937. At the September, 1940 State Bar Convention, WLAM held its first breakfast meeting, a tradition which has continued through the past 44 years.

The first monthly meetings of the Association were held in the homes of members on the first Tuesday of each month, September through June. While the group was small, the social contacts served to strengthen professional ties; members came to know each other, to share each other's triumphs as well as acquired knowledge and experience. Inexperienced lawyers could seek help from WLAM members who recognized that the need for knowledge was customary among novices, not attributable to incapacity inherent among women.

The monthly meeting format soon expanded to include speakers on topics ranging from specific professional concerns to those of general interest. Meetings generally were held in the Detroit area, probably most at the Women's City Club.⁸ By the 1930s and 1940s a small number of meetings were held at locations outside the Detroit area, including Grand Rapids (during State Bar Conventions), Windsor (at the Manor House), and in Ann Arbor at the Michigan League. Examples of speakers include a 1938 meeting in Detroit in honor of Lydia Zamenhof, a law graduate of the University of Warsaw, and 1939 meeting in Ann Arbor with a speaker who had recently returned from the war zone in China. During the 1960s, Lansing was also added as an occasional meeting site.

During World War II the Association worked on various programs to support the war effort. By its October, 1943 meeting, the Association could report that it had sold approximately \$200,000 in bonds during the Soap Box Campaign of the Third War Loan Drive.

Interesting programs, of course, required considerable effort. For instance, in June, 1947 Martha Griffiths was WLAM's Program Chair. Among the professional topics recommended for year-long discussion and research was "Labor restrictions against Women. The Purpose— to determine what discrimination against women exists in the field of labor and to bring about some remedial action if possible."

From the earliest years of the Association, in addition to monthly membership meetings, four annual functions served a social purpose and provided an opportunity for WLAM to increase its recognition in the legal and general community:

One was a reception for women law students. The first "student tea" was held soon after the Association was formed, in Spring, 1919, at the Federation of Womens Clubs. Among the student guests in attendance were Anne Davidow, Regene Freund (Cohane), Stella Gramer, Marjorie Baumgarten (Bacon) and Anne Hackett.

For many years the receptions continued as teas. In her June, 1956 Annual Report, however, President Esther A. Morden noted that "certain facts cannot be ignored . . . including the fact that students take a dim view of teas." Despite this observation, tradition prevailed and the format remained unchanged until the early 1970s, when the teas were transformed into wine and cheese tasting receptions. Student participation increased noticeably.

In addition to student receptions, early traditional WLAM events included a winter holiday party, an annual banquet and a summer outing. Beginning in the mid-1920s, Ann Davidow and her husband invited WLAM members and their guests into their home for a Christmas party. Such parties continue to be held in homes of members today.

The third traditional event was the WLAM Banquet, one of the most elaborate of the annual functions. It was held nearly each year from 1919 through 1969. State, county and local officials, judges and other guests were invited. Entertainment featured skits and songs by WLAM members and remarks by various distinguished speakers.

At the June 9, 1953 Anniversary Dinner the entertainment included a Henrietta Rosenthal skit entitled "Court's in Session" or "Give the Lady Your Seat." Comelia Groefsema (Kennedy), Helen Bryant and Mildred Vlach were part of a large cast. The skit was so successful that a sequel was presented at the 1954 Banquet. Many of the cast from the original skit reappeared, along with some new faces, including Dorothy Comstock (Riley).

Among the featured women

speakers were Judge Florence Allen,⁹ who spoke both during her tenure on the Ohio Supreme Court and again after ascending to the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit; Federal Judge Genevieve I. Cline of New York; Judge Emma Falls Scofield of Boston; Agnes McPhail, a Canadian Member of Parliament and Ruth Bryan Owne, America's first woman diplomat. These functions were followed by more court assignments for women lawyers, more recognition by other groups and a growing realization that women lawyers were here to stay.¹⁰

The fourth special WLAM annual function was the summer outing. In the early years this was typically a picnic at a member's house. In her Annual Report, President Morden referenced the 1956 summer outing, commenting that the "membership apparently takes a dim view of picnics . . ." Heeding her advice, the summer outing in August, 1957 was a "Day at the Races" held in cooperation with the Michigan Racing Association, and was noted as a great success. But in 1961 the group returned to the picnic/tea party format which it followed through 1966, after which the social summer outing was abandoned.

Educational activities have expanded since 1970. In addition to seminars and workshops for WLAM members, a prominent addition has been the Women and the Law Conference, held either bi-annually or annually since 1974, presenting speakers of national and local prominence on topics of current interest to women and women lawyers. The Conference draws attendance from throughout the state.

The focus of WLAM has always included political efforts as well as its social and educational events. As early as 1920, WLAM's legislative committees were active individually and in conjunction with other women's organizations in endorsing and lobbying for legislation relevant to women. In 1977, recognizing the importance of constitutionally assured equality, WLAM became a member of ERAmerica.

Currently, the WLAM Legislative Committee is extremely active performing the crucial functions of drafting and reviewing proposed legislation of particular significance to women and women lawyers, testifying at public hearings and corresponding and meeting with local, state, and federal office

WOMEN IN THE LAW

holders. The Legislative Committee also formulates policy, subject to the approval of the WLAM Board of Directors, in regard to public issues such as the right to choice on abortion, ERA, the rights of women in the labor force and legal protection for battered spouses.

Among the gratifying aspects of the growth and increased recognition of the Association in the 1970s and the 1980s, has been the frequent solicitation of its views and drafting assistance by members of the Michigan Legislature.

WLAM has also steadily supported the advancement of women into public and professional positions of importance. In 1926, with active support by several WLAM members, Lila Neuenfelt was elected Justice of the Peace in Fordson (now the eastern part of the City of Dearborn). At that time she was the youngest person in the state to hold such a position.

In 1932, when the Legislature authorized additional judicial seats in Wayne County, WLAM petitioned the Governor for appointment of a woman, suggesting several names. Although this request went unheeded, as did many similar requests in those years, the situation was partially corrected in 1941 by the election of Neuenfelt as the first woman Circuit Court judge in Michigan.

In 1943 the "Inter-Group Council for Women in Public Policy Making Positions" was formed to deal with the fact that "between 1920 and 1940 inclusive, only eleven women held elective or appointive policy-making positions in government in Michigan." This was the

first organization of its kind in the United States. WLAM became an organizational member, and many of its individual members led the new Council. Through its affiliation, WLAM and its members were kept up-to-date on the efforts to advance the cause of women as public office holders.

In the late 1940s and 1950s more WLAM members sought office, with the support of a still small but growing membership. The December, 1948 WLAM Newsletter congratulated members Martha Griffiths and Dee Edwards on their election to the State Legislature. The following year, in 1949, the Association congratulated Mary Beck on her first election to the Detroit Common Council. In 1953, WLAM sent a letter to then Governor G. Mennen Williams, advocating appointment of Martha Griffiths to Detroit Recorder's Court. He did so, and Griffiths served in that capacity until her election to the United States House of Representatives in 1954.

In her June, 1957 year-end summary, President Ruth Schurgin recommended that: "Our organization . . . take a definite stand in the matter of recommending and endorsing members, where they are qualified, for public office or for service on committees or commissions where no competition between members exists. . . ." Shortly thereafter, in November, 1957, the Association celebrated Mary V. Beck's election as the first woman President of the Detroit Common Council.

The 1960s witnessed further (albeit selected) successes for women attor-

neys. For example, on April 28, 1965, Neuenfelt swore in Elza Papp as the first woman circuit judge on the Genesee Circuit Court bench. A year later, in 1966, Cornelia Kennedy was elected to the Wayne County Circuit Court. Geraldine Bledsoe Ford was elected to Detroit Recorder's Court and Neuenfelt was re-elected to the Wayne County Circuit Court. In 1967 Kennedy was installed by sister Judge Neuenfelt.

Kennedy would distinguish herself with another "first" when on October 23, 1969 she was sworn in as a United States District Judge, the first Michigan woman to serve on the federal bench. In 1968, Alice Gilbert was elected to the 48th District Court.

The 1970s brought continuing achievements, particularly resulting from increasing confidence among women attorneys willing to seek appointive and elective positions. An even more vocal WLAM worked hard for the recognition of such women and appreciated the responsiveness of then Governor William G. Milliken in appointing many women to the bench.¹¹ The percentage of women judges in Michigan had increased to 4.6% by 1979.

The trend has accelerated: In 1984, the percentage is 7.9% and the total is 47. See chart at page 451. In 1972, Probate Judge Mary Coleman of Battle Creek was elected to the Supreme Court, the first woman to serve on that Court in its 137-year history. In 1978, she was selected by her colleagues as Michigan's first woman Chief Justice.

Karen Colby Weiner, J.D. 1977, University of Detroit Law School, was law clerk to then Associate Justice G. Mennen Williams (1977-79) and an associate with Dickinson, Wright, Moon, Van Dusen & Freeman (1979-83). Weiner served as WLAM President, 1981-82, WLAM Treasurer, 1980-81, Vice President for WLAM's Wayne County Region, 1979-80, and is currently enrolled in graduate studies in clinical psychology.

Elaine Frost, J.D. 1970, George Washington University, is currently a labor arbitrator and practicing attorney in Detroit. Frost served as WLAM Vice President, 1977-78 and WLAM Historian, 1974-77.



WOMEN IN THE LAW

In 1974 the WLAM Political Advisory Committee (PAC) was established. According to its by-laws the PAC had exclusive authority to endorse on behalf of WLAM any candidates or potential appointees for judicial or quasi-judicial office. Criteria for endorsement included a "demonstrated interest in advancing the cause of women in general and women in the legal profession."

On October 21, 1974 the first endorsements relating to the 55 judicial candidates then running for office in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties were published. In contrast to WLAM's early years, its PAC endorsements are today actively sought by many candidates, male and female.

By the mid-1970s WLAM experienced an influx of membership from the growing numbers of women entering the profession. Because these women were practicing throughout the state, the membership undertook a major reorganization in 1975. This was completed in 1977 with adoption of a revised Constitution and By-laws, pursuant to which a regional structure was created under the umbrella of the State Association.

The structure permits formation of WLAM regional organizations consisting of ten or more members in a single county or contiguous counties. Each Region is represented on the State Board of Directors in addition to having its own officers and Board. Currently there are eleven WLAM Regions: Bay Area; Genesee, Lapeer and Shiawassee; Livingston; Macomb; Mid-Michigan; Oakland (Women's Bar Association); Southwestern; St. Clair; Washtenaw; Wayne County and Western Michigan.

This reorganization accomplishes several goals, including facilitation of regular membership meetings at geographically convenient locations and establishment of an effective method of dealing with important local issues as well as statewide issues.

Notwithstanding the foregoing accomplishments of the Association and individual members, the goals of the Association remain unfulfilled. For example, women judges currently sit in only 14 of Michigan's 83 counties. Furthermore, statistics indicate that each year a smaller percentage of women law school graduates, as opposed to their



Anne R. Davidow, shown here upon graduation from law school, is still an active member of WLAM.

male counterparts, succeed in finding law-related employment.¹²

Although progress has been made to increase access to opportunities within and without the profession, WLAM is still needed to provide personal support and as a vehicle through which women attorneys work to achieve recognition not only as equals in their profession, but as an identifiable segment of the profession whose unique experiences serve the goals of a representative and representing Bar.

Just as the history of the activities of WLAM presented in this article was compiled from information, both written and oral, retained and supplied by women with a sense of personal purpose and commitment to others, so, too, the "why" of WLAM, the reasons for its formation in 1919 and its continued existence into the 1980s, involves personal purpose and commitment to others. As Justice Boyle said in her address to WLAM members in 1983:

"... The Women Lawyers Association of Michigan can justifiably be congratulated for having moved the entire legal community toward the realization of true equality of opportunity for women in the profession. In large part, because of this group's efforts it is much more likely that a woman admitted to the State Bar of Michigan today will be treated with dignity and that she will have access to the material, intellectual and influential riches that this profession has to offer. We have not achieved full equality, but we have... perma-

nently altered men's expectations about what women lawyers can be...."

The authors extend particular gratitude to all who have provided information and assistance, including the following:

The late Henrietta E. Rosenthal who, in 1951, took the time to record some of the history of Women Lawyers Association of Michigan in which she played such a significant role.

Anne R. Davidow and Regene Freund Cohane who have shared a wealth of information about themselves and the Association.

Marcia E. Ferrite who volunteered her time and assistance in the preparation of this article.

In addition, the authors express their gratitude and the gratitude of Women Lawyers Association of Michigan to the many members who have made significant contributions to the Association and their profession, but who, by reason of time, research and space limitations, are not personally recognized within this article.

Footnotes

1. Two years after Killgore's admission to the State Bar of Michigan, the United States Supreme Court handed down its opinion in *Bradwell v State*, 16 Wall 130 (1873), in which it upheld the refusal of the state of Illinois to admit Myra Bradwell to the practice of law based solely on the fact that she was a woman. Justice Bradley, in his frequently quoted concurring opinion, cited his belief that, "(t)he nature and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life." *Bradwell, supra*, p. 141.
2. In 1960, only about 3% of the nation's law school graduates were women. "Women in the Legal Profession: A Progress Report," 67 *ABA Journal* 578, 579 (May, 1981).
3. Henrietta Rosenthal, "History of Women Lawyers Association of Michigan," 1951, unpublished essay.
4. Speech before the WLAM at the 1983 State Bar of Michigan Annual Meeting, delivered by Michigan Supreme Court Associate Justice Patricia J. Boyle, September 28, 1983.
5. By November, 1921 WLAM membership had risen to twenty-two. By October, 1930 the membership list revealed sixty-six lawyer members and two associate members. In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s membership was approximately 100, most of whom were practicing attorneys. In 1975 membership grew to 125. In January, 1976 to 150 attorneys plus 15 student members and by December, 1976 membership stood at 175 lawyers plus 50 students. Then, the impact of increased numbers of women in law schools swelled the membership. Current total membership exceeds 800.

(continued on page 506) ▶

WOMEN IN THE LAW

WOMEN LAWYERS: PERSPECTIVES ON SUCCESS. Courle, Emily, editor. N.Y.: Law & Business, Inc.; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 1984.

Women's name rights. *MARQUETTE LAW REVIEW*; 1976; 59: 876-899.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND THE LAW: THE IMPACT OF THE ERA ON STATE LAWS. Brown, Barbara A. [and others]. New York: Praeger; 1977; 432 p.

WOMEN'S SELF-DEFENSE CASES: THEORY AND PRACTICE. Bochnak, Elizabeth, editor. Charlottesville, Va.: Michie; c1981; 312 p.

WOMEN, CRIME AND JUSTICE. Datesford, Susan K.; Scarpitti, Frank R., editors. New York: Oxford University Press; 1980; 376 p.

WOMEN, WORK, AND HEALTH: CHALLENGE TO CORPORATE POLICY. Walsh, D.C.; Egdahl, R.H., editors. N.Y.: Springer-Verlag; 1980.

WOMEN, WORK AND WAGES: EQUAL PAY FOR JOBS OF EQUAL VALUE. Treiman, Donald J.; Hartmann, Heidi I., editors. Washington: National Academy Press; 1981; 136 p.

Women Lawyers Association of Michigan

continued from page 468

6. Rosenthal, *supra*.

7. In 1920, at the age of 20, Cohane had completed all requisites for admission to the State Bar of Michigan save one; she had to await her 21st birthday to be sworn in.

8. In addition to regular meetings and traditional special events, the members of WLAM, the vast majority of whom historically worked and resided in the Detroit area, met informally through the years to provide personal and professional support. From the late 1940s through the mid-1950s this took the form of weekly lunches at a downtown Detroit spot.

9. In 1921, Florence Ellinwood Allen became the first woman to be elected, rather than appointed, to a judicial post in the United States other than justice of the peace. In that year she was elected judge of the Court of Common Pleas in Cuyahoga, Ohio. The following year she became the first woman elected justice of a state supreme court. In 1934, while

serving her second term on the Ohio Supreme Court, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her to the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, and she was again the first woman to serve on a United States Court of Appeals. "Women on the Bench: A Brief History," 65 *Judicature* 286, 291 (1982).

10. Rosenthal, *supra*.

11. Among former Governor Milliken's appointments of women to Michigan courts were: Dorothy Comstock Riley, Wayne County Circuit Court, then Michigan Court of Appeals; Paulette LeBost, Michigan Civil Rights Commission; Sharon Tevis Finch, Detroit Common Pleas Court; Patricia Boyle, Detroit Recorder's Court; Theresa Doss, Detroit Common Pleas Court; Maureen Reilly, Detroit Common Pleas Court, then Wayne County Circuit Court; Clarice Jobs, Detroit Recorder's Court. Among women first elected to judicial office during the 1970s were: Susan D. Borman, Detroit Recorder's

Court; Jessica R. Cooper, 46th District Court; Hilda R. Gage, Oakland County Circuit Court; Lucile A. Watts, Detroit Common Pleas Court; Barbara B. MacKenzie, Michigan Court of Appeals. Furthermore, women were attaining other positions in the Bar theretofore unavailable. In 1974 Kay D. Schloff was appointed by the Michigan Supreme Court as the first woman to serve on the Board of Law Examiners and in 1975 as the first woman to serve on the State Bar Board of Commissioners. In 1976 Willa Mae King became the first woman President of the Wolverine Bar Association. In 1982 Carole L. Chiamp extended special gratitude to the WLAM during her induction as the first woman to become President of the Detroit Bar Association in its 150-year history. In 1983 Beverly Clark became the first woman President of the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association.

12. "Women in the Legal Profession: A Progress Report," 67 *ABA Journal* 578, 582 (1981).

Oakland County Bar Celebrates 50th Anniversary

The following Resolution was adopted by the State Bar Board of Commissioners at its May 4, 1984 meeting:

WHEREAS, On the 20th day of July 1934, five attorneys specifically: Harold E. Howlett, H. Russell Holland, David C. Pence, Clark J. Adams and Lawrence Moloney, all with offices in Oakland County did gather together for the purpose of signing the Articles of Incorporation for a Non-Profit Corporation to be known as the Oakland County Bar Association; and

WHEREAS, The purpose of that Corporation was "to create a permanent organization of certain persons qualified to practice law in the State of Michigan which shall have the power to acquire, hold and dispose of personal and real property, and which organization will foster and promote the ideals of the legal profession;" and

WHEREAS, That organization has been continually in operation since that date and is currently preparing to celebrate its 50th Anniversary in commemoration of that date; and

WHEREAS, During that fifty years the officers and members of this Association have sought continuously to uphold the ideals as set forth in the original purpose of that incorporation; and

WHEREAS, This organization has now grown to be the second

largest bar association in the State of Michigan numbering over two-thousand, five-hundred, seventy-five (2575) members, which number exceeds the population of a number of State Bar Associations; and

WHEREAS, Said Association has continuously had among its members numerous local, State and National leaders; and

WHEREAS, Said Association has produced three Presidents of the State Bar of Michigan; and

WHEREAS, It continues to lead, be innovative and carry out numerous programs for the enhancement of justice and to improve the image of the legal profession;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That the State Bar of Michigan hereby declares June 2, 1984 as Oakland County Bar Association Day and calls upon the other Bar Associations in the State to join in recognizing the achievements and goodwill generated by the Oakland County Bar Association on behalf of the legal profession. And be it further resolved that a copy of this Resolution be printed in the State Bar Journal for June 1984.