

Michigan Lawyers in History

Richard C. Van Dusen

By Carrie Sharlow



The state of Michigan was built by the lumber and auto industries, agriculture, and the lawyers who lived, studied, and practiced here. The articles in this occasional series highlight some of those lawyers and judges and their continuing influence on this great state.

In the mid-1980s, Richard Campbell Van Dusen—impending chair of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce and vice chair of government affairs for the Chamber—invited a recent Michigan Supreme Court appointee to speak before the Chamber in connection with his election campaign. This was no small measure.¹ The new justice was only the second minority in the Court's history, and the upcoming election was gearing up to be legendary given the number of candidates.

At the time of the invitation, Van Dusen possessed a remarkable résumé, one few could hope to match. After passing the bar in 1949, he:

- was elected to the Michigan House of Representatives for the 21st District;
- was elected as a delegate to the 1961–1962 Michigan Constitutional Convention;
- appeared before the Michigan Supreme Court numerous times in defense of clients;
- was appointed legal advisor to Governor George Romney;
- was confirmed in his appointment as undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under Secretary Romney;
- served on the boards of directors of the Automobile Club of Michigan, the Detroit Bar Association, the Kresge Foundation,

the United Way, and the Detroit Chamber of Commerce; and

- was appointed to Wayne State University's Board of Governors.

In addition, he served on the State Bar of Michigan's Junior Bar Section Council (focusing on relations with law students), the Labor Relations Law Section, and the Committee on Judicial Selection, and presented at several State Bar Annual Meetings. He also had lengthy terms on the Council of the Administrative Conference of the United States and the Michigan Law Revision Commission.

On the personal front, he was a few years away from celebrating his 40th wedding anniversary with his wife, Barbara, with whom he had raised three successful daughters, including one lawyer.²

At this point in his career, Van Dusen—who had “a reputation as a diligent researcher”³ and a “forceful, able, and articulate advocate”⁴—was known as an “elder statesman”⁵ despite his youth (he was only 61). When he spoke, people listened, and what he supported, people seriously considered. He had intelligence and a prominent position, but he was also a kind and civil individual. Even his opponents admired him.⁶

He was a member of the Van Dusen clan—a family of wealth, prestige, and social status. They proudly proclaimed to be descended from one of the first settlers in Manhattan, and the family lineage included presidents, presidential advisors, American war veterans, and businessmen.⁷ Richard's

father was Bruce Buick Van Dusen, son of Charles Belding (C. B.) Van Dusen and Minnie Thornton Buick. C. B. Van Dusen was chairman of the Kresge Company, where Bruce worked after graduating from the University of Michigan in 1922.

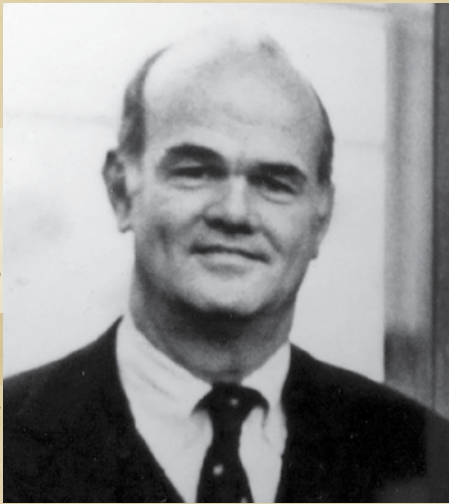
Bruce Van Dusen married Helen Campbell, the daughter of a state legislator, in 1924, and the couple eventually had four children: three boys and one girl. Richard was the eldest of the bunch, born July 18, 1925. In 1943, the same year Richard graduated from Deerfield (Mass.) Academy, his father died of a stroke at age 43.

Richard was 15 when he decided he would be a lawyer. He started his higher education at Central Michigan University before transferring to the University of Minnesota, courtesy of the U.S. Navy. He played for the Gophers' football team for two seasons and graduated cum laude in 1945. After graduation, he served in the Navy for a little less than a year. By that time, his mother had married her former husband's older brother, Charles, merging two sets of cousins—Charles also had three sons and one daughter—into one large family.⁸

Van Dusen graduated from Harvard Law School in May 1949, married in June, and sat for the bar exam in September.⁹ He joined what would become his lifelong firm, now known as Dickinson Wright PLLC; before long, he was practicing before the Michigan Supreme Court.

His lifelong involvement with the Michigan Republican Party eventually led to his

Photo courtesy of Dickinson Wright PLLC



Richard C. Van Dusen, former chairman of Dickinson Wright PLLC

chairing the party's committee for the 3rd Legislative District. He was later elected to the state House of Representatives, which led to his serving as delegate to the state constitutional convention, where he connected with George Romney. He ran Romney's successful campaign for governor, became the governor's legal advisor, and was ultimately appointed HUD undersecretary.¹⁰ A host of other opportunities can be read about in any number of sources, including the public papers of President Richard Nixon and innumerable newspapers. Years later, he summarized his involvement in public affairs by saying, "One perhaps backs into things or is just lucky."¹¹

Regardless of what he backed into, Van Dusen always returned to the law. Several times over the years, a newspaper would report that Van Dusen, having completed his most recent endeavor, was returning to private practice.¹² The law wasn't just a job for him: it was a calling. He always returned to Dickinson Wright.¹³

As he practiced law and served in various capacities, Van Dusen encouraged and mentored the next generation of lawyers. His daughter Amanda mentioned that her father was genuinely "nice to everybody" and it was something he learned from his father.¹⁴ Along the same lines, Van Dusen decided years earlier that a good lawyer was a good lawyer regardless of the individual's race, gender, or anything else, and everyone needed equal opportunities to succeed. Everyone was better off when given the opportunity to prosper.¹⁵ While this viewpoint did not often mesh with the world's view, Van Dusen was persistent. He led by example.

Under his tenure as executive of Dickinson Wright, the firm began solidifying its

reputation as an institution dedicated to diversity. By 1985—approximately four years after the firm became Dickinson Wright Moon Van Dusen & Freeman—it had more black attorneys than any other comparable firm in Michigan.¹⁶ There were female partners as well.

So it was no surprise when Van Dusen invited the Supreme Court justice to speak before the Detroit Chamber of Commerce. He didn't care that the justice was a minority or hadn't been a judge before his appointment. Van Dusen had an extraordinary gift to see the potential in people—things they might not see in themselves.¹⁷ He was called not only to the law but to encourage and mentor others.

Van Dusen died too soon; by rights, he should have lived at least 30 more years. When Justice Blair Moody Jr. died of heart issues in 1982, at his funeral it was noted how ironic it was that his heart had failed him when it had never failed anyone else.¹⁸ The same could be said for Van Dusen, who died in cardiac surgery on June 7, 1991. How could his heart fail him when it had never failed anyone else? It was an incredible loss to the state and the legal community.

Less than a week later, nine Michigan senators offered Concurrent Resolution 236, a recap of Van Dusen's remarkable career. After the motion prevailed, Sen. Jack Faxon, a Democrat, "was granted unanimous consent to make a statement" in honor of his late colleague and, rather than highlight Van Dusen's career, he delivered the perfect eulogy.

"He was a kind person; he was a very kind person," Sen. Faxon said. "[He] had a real deep sense of faith in the public and in the public good" and he "believed where rational minds think together, reasonable results would come forward."¹⁹

Even 24 years after his passing, Van Dusen's legacy continues. People he mentored and encouraged continue to make an impact on the state and country.

For example, that young justice who spoke before the Detroit Chamber? He won the contested election in 1986 and stayed on the Supreme Court until 1990, at which point he resigned and returned to private practice at Dickinson Wright, where Van Dusen oversaw his transition to the firm. The former justice was kind enough to speak about Van Dusen's influence and tell the story of the invitation to appear before

the Detroit Chamber of Commerce. Thank you, Dennis Archer. ■

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ENDNOTES

1. Interview with Dennis Archer (November 14, 2014).
2. Amanda Van Dusen is a well-known law partner at Miller Canfield, and was recently named Detroit Public Finance Lawyer of the Year.
3. Pope, *Richard C. Van Dusen*, Detroit Legal News (October 1995), p 85.
4. *Richard C. Van Dusen: Lawyer's Lawyer*, Citizen's Citizen, 70 Mich B J 635 (1991).
5. Pope, *Richard C. Van Dusen*, p 86.
6. See *id.*
7. *The New York Times* published a fantastic article about the extended Van Dusen family on July 22, 2011. See Cowan, *The Van Dusens of Amsterdam*, *The New York Times* (July 22, 2011), p WE1.
8. It was a complete merger. In Richard's obituary, his listed survivors included two sisters and four brothers. His mother's obituary 14 years later listed her six surviving children.
9. Interestingly enough, another law school graduate taking the bar at the same time was Avern Cohn.
10. Richard served as undersecretary of HUD from January 1969 to December 20, 1972. His experiences with George Romney in Washington, D.C., under President Richard Nixon's first term of office included the Open Communities Program and suburban desegregation; the city of Warren situation; sections 235 and 236; Project Rehab; and a host of other matters that have been addressed in other articles.
11. Interview by Morton Schussheim with Richard Van Dusen (May 13, 1991), in *Pioneers in Housing: An Oral History Project Oral History Interviews*, Manuscript Division, Box 3, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., p 1.
12. See, e.g., *Danhof will succeed Richard C. Van Dusen of Birmingham who is returning to private law practice in Detroit; Gov. Romney Shifts Aids*, Traverse City Record-Eagle (December 26, 1963) p 1.
13. Interview with Dennis Archer (November 14, 2014).
14. Interview with Amanda Van Dusen (February 6, 2015).
15. Interview by Morton Schussheim, p 12.
16. See Cooper, *Why Hiring Black Lawyers is Good Business and Makes Good Sense*, 64 Mich B J 527 (1985).
17. Interview with Dennis Archer (November 14, 2014).
18. Campbell, ed, *Michigan Supreme Court Historical Reference Guide* (Lansing: The Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society, 1998), p 203.
19. 1991 Senate Journal 1289 (No. 54, June 13, 1991).