

# Michigan Lawyers in History

## Fred Magnus Butzel

By Steve Savickas



*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 early twentieth century, when Detroit was burgeoning into “the industrial capital of the United States,”<sup>1</sup> the city’s “most valuable citizen”<sup>2</sup> was an attorney named Fred Magnus Butzel.

As the chief architect of a network of charity programs, Butzel laid the groundwork for making the citizen-support system better and set a high standard for the vaunted variety of “non-profit organizations [our society] takes for granted today.”<sup>3</sup>

Butzel was a great humanitarian, focusing his life on a unique blend of multifaceted pro bono and public service. He personified world-class community service and civic leadership. For more than five decades, he provided free legal advice to many Detroiters, ranging from indigent immigrants to chairmen of the boards of auto industry corporations. “He had his finger in almost every community pie and held practically all posts of leadership in Detroit’s Jewish community”<sup>4</sup> and “it was said that he knew more about social organization than most social workers.”<sup>5</sup>

However, Butzel did more than hand out checks.<sup>6</sup> He was a dynamic public figure and

a social engineer. While he spent a fortune in money, he more than equaled that largesse in giving his time and energy to help the less fortunate by “attacking the social problems of an industrialized community.”<sup>7</sup> In so doing, he evolved into “a vanguard”<sup>8</sup> for the city, the state, and the nation. By his 60th birthday, he was a household name “revered for his absolute conviction to aiding the less fortunate.”<sup>9</sup>

After receiving his education from Ferris Institute (the forerunner of Ferris State University), the University of Michigan, and the Detroit College of Law,<sup>10</sup> Fred and his brother Henry co-founded Butzel & Butzel in 1899. It was a successful Detroit-based business law firm. Henry would later serve more than a quarter-century as a Michigan Supreme Court justice. The trailblazing brothers<sup>11</sup> also jointly founded the Detroit Legal Aid Bureau.

Fred had an “open-door policy” and invited “countless people who streamed in [to his law office] for free legal advice [on any matter from money to marriage].”<sup>12</sup> He would advise “regular folks on establishing businesses to help strengthen Detroit and bring dreams to life.”<sup>13</sup>

A corporate transaction attorney by day, by night Fred “sat on the board of directors for a host of Detroit entities—foundations, banks, African-American hospitals, and automotive-related businesses.”<sup>14</sup>

He also served as “a one-man legal aid bureau, and for years gave his assistance and legal skill to the problems of scores of individuals who required a lawyer’s help, but were unable to retain one in the course of practice.”<sup>15</sup> At a time when top wages at Ford Motor Co. were \$5 a day, Butzel’s “philanthropy ranged from handing \$100 bills to storefront church leaders, to chairing the Jewish Welfare Federation’s Allied Jewish Campaign,”<sup>16</sup> to boosting college scholarships for underprivileged minority students.<sup>17</sup>

Butzel was known affectionately to thousands of area youths as “Uncle Fred.” His uplifting guidance and benevolence epitomized an alternate definition of the word “uncle” as “one who counsels.” To masses of grateful European immigrants flowing into the city as part of a workforce wave, he was known by another term of endearment often mispronounced in a thick Russian accent—“looyer Bootz[ule].”<sup>18</sup>

Photo by John Hardwick, Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit

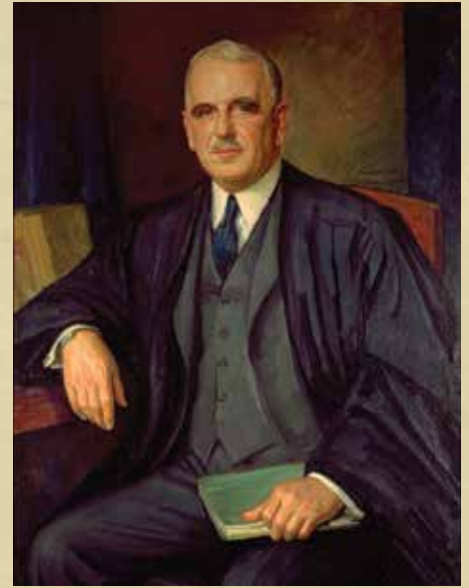


Photo courtesy of the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society

Brothers Fred (left) and Henry (right) Butzel cofounded the Detroit-based firm of Butzel & Butzel and the Detroit Legal Aid Bureau. Fred operated as the bureau's one-man pro bono band, laid the groundwork for the American-style network of nonprofit organizations, and helped craft a law establishing the state's first juvenile court system. Henry later served 26 years as a Michigan Supreme Court justice.

Butzel was also a groundbreaker in juvenile jurisprudence. In 1907, he lobbied state lawmakers and helped draft landmark legislation "to establish the Juvenile Division of Probate Court"<sup>19</sup> as a place "where young offenders could be kept apart from adult criminals"<sup>20</sup> and have their specific needs met. It was even his "suggestion [that] brought about a change in Detroit's method of handling truants. Responsibility was switched from the Police Department to the Board of Education so 'children won't have to be arrested by a cop.'"<sup>21</sup>

Years after he passed, others would be overheard in juvenile court mourning the

loss of Butzel's expertise: "Too bad Fred Butzel isn't still alive. He could have helped that kid."<sup>22</sup>

Butzel "continued to provide financial and emotional support to countless immigrants, be it with money, free legal advice or jobs."<sup>23</sup> He "provided college loans to dozens of aspiring attorneys who always paid him back upon graduation"<sup>24</sup> and sponsored college educations in the fields of arts, science, and varsity athletic letters for African Americans, and "many young musicians who were helped to careers with advice and funds."<sup>25</sup> He believed "that one of the most beneficent things that can be

done is to prepare youth for future duties and responsibilities,"<sup>26</sup> and he did his best to follow that philosophy.

His brand of virtuosity—always ready to offer a helping hand—gained fame as "The Fred Butzel Institute."<sup>27</sup> He even opened a night school to teach immigrants how to speak English.<sup>28</sup>

Butzel sought harmony in his community, whether in entertaining or improving the city's infrastructure. Paraphrasing what Butzel said when he was fundraising for construction of Detroit's first Jewish center: "Every group desires to see a place, especially where the newcomers of the city can [acclimate and experience] the best features of our life, and where our young people of both sexes and of all cultural shades and economic stations may come together."<sup>29</sup>

Butzel was a pragmatist and aimed to do good deeds "for the best possible solution—under the circumstances."<sup>30</sup> To help every group find a place, he spearheaded various Detroit nonprofit groups and adopted causes. He worked with the Tri-Square Club, which led to Detroit's first Boy Scouts of America

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troop; the Ford Republic, the city’s first juvenile detention center;<sup>31</sup> and the House of Corrections, which separated the non-violent offenders. He assisted in pioneering mass transit by promoting the first Detroit Bus Company, the African-American Detroit Parkside Hospital,<sup>32</sup> the Urban League, and the Mayor’s Inter-Racial Committee. Via the Chamber of Commerce, he established Detroit’s first recreational parks and public playgrounds.<sup>33</sup> He worked with various funds providing financial aid to refugees and assisted veterans of both World Wars and their families through the Red Cross, USO, and fundraising.<sup>34</sup>

After a life of devotion to Detroit, Butzel died on May 20, 1948. The city mourned; American flags flying half-mast dotted the metro Detroit landscape, and his obituary was front-page news. “Tributes...from the city’s leaders poured into local [media] offices” and “[t]housands of people of different faiths, ages, and races [lined] his funeral [procession] where a Boy Scout honor guard stood [vigil].”<sup>35</sup>

Even though he was gone, Butzel wasn’t done giving. In his will, he bequeathed cash to his secretary, a maid, social workers, and an “aged invalid”<sup>36</sup>; set up trust funds for his nieces and a nephew; made bequests to agencies he founded; and requested donations be made to charity in lieu of funeral flowers.<sup>37</sup>

His home was deeded to Parkside Hospital and repurposed as a residence for nurses at four neighboring Detroit medical centers. There was a dedication ceremony concert featuring symphony overtures<sup>38</sup> for the Jewish Welfare Federation Headquarters, a “monument of stone.”<sup>39</sup> On East Grand Boulevard, a new wing was added to the main Magnus Butzel Library. There was a Fred

Butzel Month exhibit at the Detroit Historical Museum<sup>40</sup> honoring “one of the builders of this great city,” with proceeds from the sale of original paintings donated by Jewish artists at the Detroit Art Institute/Archives of American Art going to charity.<sup>41</sup>

But “perhaps the most enduring memorial” was set forth by fellow Ferris alumnus Nate S. Shapero, president of Cunningham Drug Stores. Shapero established the Fred Butzel Award for Outstanding Community Service—“considered the Detroit Jewish community’s highest honor” since 1951. The coveted award, explained Fred’s brother Henry, signifies “outstanding contributions to Jewish as well as non-Jewish causes...giv[ing] not only a large part of his income but, what is still more important, almost his entire time to public causes.”<sup>42</sup>

Colleagues remembered Fred Butzel fondly, deeming him the “Dean of Detroit Jewry”<sup>43</sup> and a “charming, brilliant, passionate, helpful friend, an advocate for the underdog. He never hesitated to provide advice and [constructive] criticism....” “His leadership [arose] from the extraordinarily keen qualities of his mind and the broad and deep sympathies of his heart,” said friend Julian H. Krolik. “He [understood] men and women and the motives that influence them as few people do.”<sup>44</sup>

“Mr. Butzel,” said a rabbi eulogizing the pro bono virtuoso and Motor City motivator extraordinaire, “made a significant and whole-hearted contribution to the welfare of humanity.”<sup>45</sup> ■

*Steve Savickas, a criminal defense attorney in Grand Rapids, is an alumnus of Ferris State University and Western Michigan University Cooley Law School. He can be reached at ssavickas@sbcglobal.net.*

## ENDNOTES

1. Bice, *Fred M. Butzel... The Man Behind the Name*, 48 Michigan Jewish History 7.
2. *Tribute to a Detroit Leader*, Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle (August 29, 1947), p. 8.
3. *Fred M. Butzel...*, 48 Michigan Jewish History 7.
4. *Tousman, I May Be Wrong*, Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle (May 28, 1948), p. 8.
5. *Id.*
6. *Detroit Pays Last Tribute to Butzel*, Detroit News (May 25, 1948).
7. *Id.*
8. *Stirring Tribute Will Mark Butzel’s Birthday This Week*, Detroit Free Press (August 22, 1937), p. 7.
9. *Fred M. Butzel...*, 48 Michigan Jewish History at 9.
10. He also received an honorary doctor of laws from Wayne (State) University in 1935.
11. Their cousin, Leo Butzel, was a partner at a separate preeminent Detroit corporate law firm, Butzel & Long.
12. *Fred M. Butzel...*, 48 Michigan Jewish History at 8.
13. Gallucci, *Telling the Stories of Detroit Parks*, *A Digest* (2013), p. 2, citing Detroit Free Press (1947).
14. *Id.* at 3.
15. *Fred M. Butzel...*, 48 Michigan Jewish History at 8.
16. *Id.* at 5.
17. *Citizen of the Month: Accent on Youth a Way of Life for Fred Butzel*, Detroit Free Press (March 6, 1955), p. 19.
18. *Fred M. Butzel...*, 48 Michigan Jewish History at 5.
19. *Id.*
20. *Id.*
21. *Id.*
22. *Id.*
23. *Id.* at 5.
24. *Id.* at 10.
25. *Callaghan, Lovers of Music Pay Respects to Fred Butzel*, Detroit Free Press (January 15, 1952), p. 23.
26. *Burton, History of Wayne County and the City of Detroit, Michigan* (Chicago: S. J. Clark Publishing Co, 1930), vol III, pp 53–54; Fred M. Butzel Junior High School dedicated in 1960.
27. *The Helpful Hand*, Detroit News (August 25, 1937).
28. *Id.*
29. *Asks Jews Aid in Fund Drive*, Detroit Free Press (April 29, 1930).
30. *Birthday of F. M. Butzel*, Detroit Jewish News (August 25, 1932).
31. *The Butzel Memorial*, Detroit Free Press (January 8, 1952), p. 6.
32. *Slomovitz, Fred M. Butzel—Great Man and a Great Jew*, Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle (May 28, 1948).
33. *Citizen of the Month*, p. 19.
34. *Id.*
35. *Fred M. Butzel...*, 48 Michigan Jewish History at 5.
36. *Butzel Will Give Funds to Charities*, Detroit Free Press (May 29, 1948), p. 5.
37. *Obituaries*, Detroit Free Press (May 22, 1948), p. 4.
38. *Lovers of Music*, p. 23.
39. *The Butzel Memorial*, p. 6.
40. *Citizen of the Month*, p. 19.
41. *Rosenberg Presents Painting to Center in F. M. Butzel’s Memory*, Detroit Jewish News (October 13, 1961), p. 8.
42. *Fred M. Butzel...*, 48 Michigan Jewish History at 12.
43. *Id.* at 4.
44. *Damon*, Detroit Public Library, Burton Historical Collection, Detroitite Magazine (1928).
45. *Detroit Pays Last Tribute to Butzel*, Detroit News (May 25, 1948).