

Michigan's "Eternal General" Finishes Glorious Feats on Earth



Rob Buchanan

In March, Michigan's "Eternal General" Frank Kelley, P15818, finished his gleeful slide down life's banister. Any one of us would be proud to achieve even a fraction of Kelley's accomplishments. He was both our state's youngest and oldest attorney general, spending an incredible 37 years on the job between those two milestones. His career is notable for both its longevity and its substance. Kelley made tremendous strides jumpstarting consumer and environmental protections for Michigan, and he did so long before it was cool (his office's Consumer Protection, Charitable Trusts and Charities Division predated the federal Consumer Product Safety Act by several years). No elected official tops Kelley's record of productive government service, working across party lines with five governors — Democratic and Republican. And Kelley advocated for civil rights and embraced diversity in hiring when it was unpopular. He was "The People's Lawyer."

For those of us lucky enough to spend even a few minutes with Kelley, you heard a

captivating and well-told story about Michigan, the law, or a legendary public figure. If you were really lucky, he dazzled you with tales even farther afield. Who would have guessed Steve Allen, original host of

"The Tonight Show," and Kelley were once freshman buddies at Arizona State University? Kelley, son of a Detroit saloon keeper, went to college in Tempe and palled around with one of the few humans on earth as charming as he was. There was no malarkey in Kelley's stories, and he delivered each one with such joy. The toasts raised to honor him would float a fleet of ships, including the Great Lakes freighter he toiled on as a scrawny merchant seaman after fibbing about his age to get the job (he was only 15.)

This summer, we will celebrate Kelley once more, this time by installing a historic plaque at the Library of Michigan and History Center in Lansing. It will be the State Bar of Michigan's 42nd Legal Milestone.

I hope a hundred years in the future, a tourist family, weary after hovering around the state Capitol and exploring treasures in the museum store, will find a crowd gathering around the marker and overhear someone say, "Let me tell you a wonderful story I heard about Frank Kelley..."

R.I.P., Eternal General. You will not be forgotten. ■



The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the installation of the 42nd Michigan Legal Milestone. It will be placed this summer.

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Milestones Celebrate Legal History Across Michigan

Our state has a rich history of incredible and gifted attorneys, and the State Bar wants everyone who lives in Michigan or travels here to know their names and contributions. Here are just a few examples of the Michigan Legal Milestone plaques capturing the public's attention with amazing stories about our profession across the state:

- Next to the entry of Fifth Third Center in downtown Grand Rapids, the **Ending "Jim Crow"** marker celebrates the Michigan Supreme Court's 1927 decision enforcing a civil rights law against racially discriminatory practices of a movie theatre that allowed Black people to sit only in the balcony.
- Six miles north, in the West Michigan Whitecaps' ballpark in Comstock Park, the **Baseball's Reserve Clause** marker describes the 1914 federal court decision in Grand Rapids upholding professional baseball's contract "reserve clause" binding a player to one team for life. The player was Bill "Reindeer Bill" Killefer of Paw Paw, a star catcher for the Philadelphia Phillies.
- The **Sojourner Truth** plaque in front of the First Methodist Church in Battle Creek highlights that the famed abolitionist and women's rights activist chose to live in the Michigan town for the last three decades of her life.
- In Harbor Beach, tourists find the **Murphy's Dissent** marker in front of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Frank Murphy's boyhood home. It celebrates his powerful dissent to the *Korematsu* decision that upheld the internment of 112,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. Murphy condemned the majority's "legalization of racism."
- The **Ossian Sweet Trial** plaque in Detroit's Frank Murphy Hall of Justice recognizes Murphy's service as a trial judge. In 1925, he presided over a trial where the jury acquitted a Black physician charged with murder for defending his home against a white mob. When the mob swarmed, a person in the crowd was shot and killed. Sweet's criminal defense attorney was Clarence Darrow. The book "Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Era" vividly captures the incredible story and won the 2004 National Book Award.
- The **Rose of Aberlone** historic marker in Plymouth's Kellogg Park explains that a local pregnant cow, thought to be barren, shaped American contract law with the doctrine of mutual mistake in *Sherwood v. Walker* 66 Mich. 568 (1887). The landmark is so wildly popular that a few years ago someone stole the original plaque and it had to be replaced.

See a map and full list of Michigan Legal Milestones at michbar.org/milestones.

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