

# A Lasting Legacy

By Samantha Meinke

**W**hen John P. Keusch earned a law degree from the University of Michigan, he worried more about finding a job than passing the bar exam.

Keusch had a personal recommendation from the dean, and his friends introduced him to connections at every law firm from Detroit to Grand Rapids. But the U.S. economy had collapsed. Vast numbers of people lost their homes to foreclosures and there was a mortgage moratorium. More than half of Keusch's law school class dropped out before earning a degree because they couldn't afford to continue.

Keusch lived at home in Chelsea with his parents for nearly a year after law school before an elderly attorney in town retired and Keusch took over his practice.

It could have been last year.

But Keusch became an attorney in 1933—the year of the bank holiday, the year before the University of Michigan dedicated its law school, and two years before the State Bar of Michigan existed.

At 102, he is the oldest living active member of the State Bar.

And he looks back at his inauspicious start philosophically.

"The Depression period was a blessing in disguise," Keusch said. "I had to learn to live with limited resources, so it made decisions for me. It checked any illusions of grandeur. It was a great educational experience."

Despite his slow start, Keusch has fashioned a remarkable career and left an indelible mark on his hometown, state, and nation.

In 1934, Keusch became project attorney for the National Park Service, helping to acquire the land that would become the Waterloo Recreation Area in Chelsea. He went on to become a regional attorney for the National Park Service, overseeing the creation of national parks in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Kentucky. He helped procure land that became the Huron-Manistee National Forest in northern

Michigan, the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge near Saginaw, and the Yankee Springs Recreation Area near Middleville.

He served his country as a U.S. Navy legal officer during World War II and met Gerald Ford while the two were stationed in Glenview, Illinois. They became lifelong friends.

After the war ended, Keusch returned home and became a well-respected local attorney. He also served as president, vice president, and secretary of the Washtenaw County Bar Association.

He represented a number of municipalities in southeast Michigan and gained a reputation as a strong advocate of property rights. As Chelsea village attorney, he made certain that the community's sewage treatment plant was constructed with a Public Works Administration grant and a local bond issue.

Keusch's greatest legal accomplishments came from defending landowners against condemning authorities. He ensured that landowners throughout Washtenaw and Livingston counties received fair compensation when the state took their land to construct

I-94, and he protected landowners in federal court when Edison and Consumers Power needed land to build transmission lines.

He has tended to the legal needs of generations of neighbors. And he has become such a beloved fixture at his firm that his clients and law partners, Peter C. Flintoft and Patrick J. Conlin Jr., won't let him retire.

"There are clients and grandchildren of clients and great-grandchildren of clients who will come in here and will want to speak with John," Flintoft said. "He has this memory that just goes back, and people love to talk to him."

These days they can still find him right where he belongs: behind his desk in his law office. ■

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## Fun Facts about John P. Keusch

He's a Christmas baby, born December 25, 1909.

Keusch's great-grandfather, Martin Keusch, settled in Washtenaw County in 1837, the year Michigan became a state.

Keusch had to wait seven years before he could afford to marry his wife, Madeleine Boilore. They have been married more than 71 years and still live in the dream home they built soon after they were married.

He remembers when Washtenaw County was solidly Republican.

He is a rampant University of Michigan football fan and watched his first U-M game on Ferry Field in 1920. He went to seven Rose Bowls and attended the game on his wedding day and the day his daughter was born.

He watched War Admiral win the Kentucky Derby in 1937.

When Keusch became an attorney, there was no integrated state bar association and he paid \$2 for admission to practice law. He worked all day for approximately \$10. A filing fee was \$6; it cost \$3 to have a summons served and \$9 to start a lawsuit.

In 1939—a "good year" in his law practice—he grossed \$9,000, which paid for him, a full-time secretary, and his wedding.