

Michigan Lawyers in History

Roberts P. Hudson

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.

If you remember only one name in Michigan's legal history, remember Roberts P. Hudson.

With his family tree, Roberts—or Bob, as he was often called—was almost predestined to enter the legal profession. His maternal great-grandfather and namesake, Elijah Jackson Roberts, was the first appointed prosecuting attorney in Chippewa County. Years before, when William A. Fletcher became chief justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, he had asked Elijah and another attorney to prepare the code of laws for the newly created state.¹ Elijah's only surviving son practiced as an attorney before dying at the Second Battle of Bull Run. George Griswold, Elijah's son-in-law and Hudson's grandfather, rose from county register of deeds to president pro tem of the state senate before his untimely death at age 45.

Bob was born on September 9, 1872, to Edwin Hudson, a successful merchant and the first secretary of the United Commercial Travelers of America,² and Frances Griswold.³ The eldest of five children, his four younger siblings all moved west as they came of age and married. Bob, however, was a lifelong Michigander.

After graduating from a Flint high school in the 1890s, Hudson became a reporter for the city's *Evening Journal*. Whether through

his job or because his grandfather had served in the state legislature, he gained an interest in politics. By age 22, he was in Lansing, serving as bill clerk in the Michigan Senate. Evidently, he made an impression on the right people, because the next year he was appointed clerk at the State Board of Health, where he compiled Michigan's public health laws and edited papers for the board on sanitary statistics, among other duties.⁴ He also compiled what could be considered an example of a nineteenth-century "Pure Michigan" campaign—*Michigan: A Summer and Health Resort State*, highlighting the state's "resorts, mineral springs and sanitarium" as directed by the state legislature.

While living in Lansing, Bob met Ella Porter Bowen, the only child of Lansing legislator and land office commissioner Ozro Bowen. They married on October 16, 1899. It was a happy marriage, although the couple endured the loss of their only child shortly after his first birthday.⁵ Hudson, who studied law in his off hours, eventually went to the University of Michigan Law School and passed the bar on April 13, 1900.⁶

Though Bob was born in Howell, pioneering was as much in the family blood as the law, and one year after his admission to the bar, the Hudsons moved to the Upper Peninsula. They settled in Sault Ste. Marie, where Hudson would become known as

the well-respected and beloved "dean of Sault Ste. Marie attorneys."⁷

He formed a firm with Albert B. Davidson. The two practiced together as Davidson & Hudson for more than 25 years, arguing at least 40 cases before the Michigan Supreme Court.⁸ They served as counsel for Central Savings Bank, Sault Ste. Marie Gas & Electric, Barlett Lumber, Michigan Pulpwood, Michigan Northern Power, and Richardson & Avery Companies.⁹ Davidson retired in 1928—particularly good timing for Hudson, whose life was about to become busier than ever.

It's virtually impossible to estimate Hudson's influence on the legal profession in Michigan, but it began on August 31, 1908, with his voluntary membership in the Michigan State Bar Association. Who knows why he joined. The bar association wasn't particularly successful, and Sault Ste. Marie only counted a handful of members. There was finally going to be a leader from the UP (Arch Eldredge from Marquette), but the meetings were hardly ever held in the north.

Nevertheless, he joined the association, and the rest of the state soon found out what Sault Ste. Marie attorneys already knew: Hudson was a born leader. He quickly rose through the ranks into leadership positions, first representing his district on the Board of Directors in the 1920s and later chairing the Upper Peninsula District Committee.



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After Davidson retired and Hudson formed a firm with Claude Coates, the integrated bar movement started by the American Judicature Society in 1913 gained steam in Michigan. At age 62, Hudson became vice president of the Michigan State Bar Association. At the same annual meeting where he was elected to office, the association vowed to obtain success with a bill to create a mandatory bar in Michigan, something they had previously attempted three times over 14 years to no avail.

This time they succeeded. On May 15, 1935, Governor Frank Fitzgerald signed into law Public Act 58, creating the State Bar of Michigan to be governed by the state Supreme Court. Once the bill passed, the Michigan State Bar Association formed a committee to draft proposed court rules necessary for the bar. As the association's last vice president, Hudson served as a member on this final committee,¹⁰ and the rules were adopted on November 12, 1935.

Hudson's term as first president of the State Bar of Michigan began at the first meeting of the Board of Commissioners on December 10, 1935. On January 10, 1936, the Michigan State Bar Association held its last meeting in Detroit, where Hudson delivered its eulogy and announced the birth of the State Bar of Michigan.

State Bar members received the first issue of the *Michigan State Bar Journal* in April 1936. In the inaugural issue, Hudson

wrote the immortal words, "No organization of lawyers can long survive which has not for its primary object the protection of the public."¹¹ It would become the motto of the new mandatory bar.

By April—when all applications for practice in Michigan were due—Hudson must have been instantly recognizable by lawyers and judges across the state. He became the face of the new organization. He spoke to old members and new graduates, newspapers reporters, and government officials, all the time selling the "new self-governing organization."¹² He assured that the public knew where complaints of "shysters"¹³ could be sent and professionals knew of the purpose of the new bar.

Under Hudson's leadership, the State Bar received its first request to fulfill its charge to "aid the promotion of improvements in the administration of justice... in the improvement of relations between the profession and the public, and the promotion of the interests of the legal professional in this State." Gov. Fitzgerald asked the Bar to investigate the Michigan Corporation and Securities Commission. A short-term committee was formed in response, and the commissioner in question was exonerated. It was an auspicious beginning.

At the State Bar's first annual meeting—held in Flint in October 1936—the presidential torch was passed to Roscoe O. Bonisteel. Hudson went back to Hudson & Coates in Sault Ste. Marie. Of course, he continued his service to the Bar, first as a commissioner and later as chair of the Committee for Judicial Selection and Tenure.¹⁴ When the Bar formed a committee to study the Michigan Constitution for revision purposes, Hudson was there. When the Committee on Civil Liberties was formed, Hudson was there.

He never really retired, although he traveled internationally with Ella. He died on May 15, 1947—the birthday of the State Bar of Michigan—at age 74.

Hudson was never forgotten by the Bar he so selflessly served. When the State Bar moved into its own building 12 years after his death, the most beautiful room—the place where the Board of Commissioners and committees would meet—was named

after him. Hudson's widow, Ella, financed the furnishing of the room.

Later, the Bar created the Roberts P. Hudson Award, signifying "unusual and extraordinary help and assistance to the Bar and the legal profession, which has been given generously, ungrudgingly, and in a spirit of self-sacrifice."¹⁵ It is a fitting reminder of a man who embodied that service with his "unselfish rendering of outstanding and unique service to and on behalf of the State Bar of Michigan, the legal profession, and public." It is the highest honor the Bar bestows. ■



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If you are interested in State Bar history or have a suggestion for "Michigan Lawyers in History," please e-mail her at cscharlow@mail.michbar.org.

ENDNOTES

- Ross, *The Early Bench and Bar of Detroit: From 1805 to the End of 1850* (Detroit: Richard P. Joy and Clarence M. Burton, 1907), p 168.
- Sawyer, *A History of the Northern Peninsula of Michigan and Its People: Its Mining, Lumber and Agriculture Industries* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1911), p 1274.
- Id.* at 1273.
- Id.* at 1275.
- Roberts Bowen Hudson was born August 17, 1905, and died August 20, 1906, after a five-day illness.
- Sawyer, n 2 *supra* at 1274.
- Chandler, *Judge Hudson, at 75, an ardent hunter and fisherman*, 26 Mich St B J 29 (January 1947).
- Sawyer, n 2 *supra* at 1274.
- Fifield, *The American Bar: Contemporary Lawyers of United States and Canada* (Minneapolis: The James C. Fifield Company, 1918), p 324.
- Woolfenden, *History of the State Bar of Michigan*, 38 Mich St B J 22 (April 1959).
- Hudson, *Message from the President*, 15 Mich St B J 8 (1936).
- Woolfenden, n 10 *supra* at 23.
- This term is found in various 1936 headlines regarding the Bar and its crusade against the unauthorized practice of law; "Shysters Beware!" is of particular interest.
- See Bonisteel, *A state bar at work*, 16 Mich St B J 552 (1937).
- SBM, Roberts P. Hudson Award <<http://www.michbar.org/programs/hudsonaward.cfm>> (accessed February 25, 2014).