

By Daryle Salisbury

Your P Number

What's It All About, Arnold Aach?

When permanent member numbers, also known as professional or P numbers, were first assigned to Michigan lawyers in January 1974¹ and first published in the *Michigan Bar Journal* in March 1975,² apprehension about any information-gathering and record-keeping functions was pervasive among practicing attorneys.

ALTHOUGH P NUMBERS

seem innocuous to us today, many practitioners in 1974 regarded the number assignment as another step toward the authoritarian state described in George Orwell's novel, *1984*, and a prelude to George Orwell's "Big Brother" technology replacing "brother counsel" congeniality. Additional concerns about "Big Brother" creeping into our professional lives contributed to P numbers initially being equated with the gears prominently featured in the classic Charlie Chaplin movie, *Modern Times*. However, in this Michigan Supreme Court-mandated version of Man versus Machine, the unique personalities and one-of-a-kind characters populating our legal community were metaphorically being funneled into a spindled, punch-carded, computerized database. The overriding impression among 1974 practitioners was that P numbers were the slippery slope upon which the personality of practice was giving way to the sterility of technology.

Those concerns were intensified by widely circulated rumors that the Michigan Supreme Court, under the guise of protecting the public from overburdened attorneys, would use P numbers to track the cases each attorney was handling. The information obtained would then be used to establish rules restricting attorneys from filing and handling too many cases. Additional rumors were that P numbers would be used to locate and track attorneys' court appearances on any given day.

The very thought that "someone" could keep tabs on them was too authoritarian for many 1960s protest-era attorneys to accept without objection. Rebelling against this technological intrusion into their professional lives, many attorneys regarded the P number assignment as an affront to their reputations and an infringement on their freedom.

Adopting Charlie Chaplin's humorous and resolute protest against the perceived mechanization of Man portrayed in *Modern Times* to this perceived intrusion into practicing law, it was common for attorneys to not state their names when addressing the court, but to simply say, "May it please the court, P number _ _ _ _ on behalf of so and so." Such subtle protests raised awareness within the profession that challenges to becoming "just a number" were widespread.

Judges, recognizing that technology, for good or bad, was also changing the judiciary, generally greeted those court salutations with a wry smile.

Thirty-two years later, the previously rumored uses of the P number remain future possibilities. What, then, is the present purpose of our P numbers?

It has been suggested that using one's P number today unintentionally invokes status considerations. In support of that proposition, consider how many times you have heard something similar to, "Well, I don't know her, but then her P number is only 60,000 something." Or, "I couldn't believe anyone would take such a case until I noticed his P number, and that explained everything." Or perhaps, "I'd say by his P number he's been around long enough to know that requiring white shirts in the courtroom went out when Judge Thorburn retired."

Your P number's importance in pleadings³ also contributes to status assessments. Consider, for example, how law-firm letterhead historically established one's basic status within a firm, i.e., Was that lawyer new, mid-level, or a partner in the opposing firm? Today, lawyers are often provided stationery listing only the firm name and the individual lawyer's name. Professional recognition for putting in your time in the corrals, corridors, and courtrooms has been lost from law-firm letterhead, but replaced, in part, by one's P number on pleadings.

Perhaps most importantly, we may all take pride in the fact that, like true stars in any competitive field of endeavor, we will one day have our P numbers retired. The effect, although unintentional, recognizes that the efforts, sacrifices, and contributions we have made to this noble profession will be honored in perpetuity by the Bar, whether we are an ex-president of the United States (Gerald R. Ford, P13563) or a sole practitioner. Is that not the ultimate status statement?

Of course, any discussion relating to status considerations first requires the establishment of a sought after, or respected, ideal. Or, resorting to a popular dictionary definition, as our state Supreme Court is wont to do today, we find that "status" is defined as "[a] condi-

FAST FACTS

Many 1960s protest-era attorneys regarded the assignment of P numbers as an affront to their reputations and an infringement on their freedom.

It has been suggested that using one's P number today unintentionally invokes status considerations.

We may all take pride in the fact that, like true stars in any competitive field of endeavor, we will one day have our P numbers retired.

tion or position *with regard to law*."⁴ (How apropos). While there may be desirable, or coveted, P numbers,⁵ the ideal P number status reaffirms the adage that size matters; when considering P numbers, however, smaller is better. A low P number is equated with experience, knowledge, and automatic admission to the "good old boys" network, even if the holder is a woman.

But what constitutes a low P number, and how were those numbers first assigned? The answer is that P10001 is the lowest, or first, number. Beginning in January 1974, P numbers were simply assigned, in alphabetical order, to the 12,763 lawyers practicing at that time, without regard to how many years an attorney had been practicing.⁶ That straightforward process for assigning numbers explains how Arnold K. Aach, who was admitted to practice in 1953, received P10001 and Abraham Zwerdling, who was admitted in 1939, received P22764.

For a few years after 1974, newly admitted attorneys were no longer assigned P numbers alphabetically, but as their applications were received. That assignment system, for lack of a better word, became corrupted around 1995 when the State Bar's financial department began assigning the five-digit numbers (minus the "P") to companies and organizations that were conducting business with the State Bar of Michigan, although that bookkeeping practice was discontinued in 2005. In addition, between 1995 and July 2005, affiliate numbers were assigned to law students, some of whom never became

lawyers admitted to practice in Michigan. The affiliate numbers would become the students' P numbers when they passed the Michigan bar exam and joined the State Bar of Michigan. This was an assumed practice, not dictated by a Supreme Court rule. When additional changes were made to the State Bar database after July 2005, this practice was discontinued. The overall effect of this hodgepodge assignment of P numbers makes it difficult to correlate a particular P number with the year an attorney was admitted to practice.

Since we are well past the original 12,763 P numbers that ended with P22764, and since the State Bar of Michigan does not publish records delineating the year a P number was issued, Appendix A is presented for your use as a relatively accurate gauge for establishing when today's 38,000+ attorneys were admitted to practice.

What does the future hold? Perhaps the future holds honorary P numbers being granted to legislators, or others, who significantly contribute to our profession. Perhaps

special numbers will be assigned to judges, justices, and State Bar presidents, etc. Are special "vanity" numbers in our future? Or perhaps the state will consider raising funds by issuing actual "vanity" license plates for State Bar members.

This whimsical retrospective review of our P-number system should not be misconstrued as the musings of an old codger questioning the intent of technocrats who viewed practicing law as an archaic "business" in dire need of progressive change. Rather, it is to acknowledge those visionaries who recognized that the advent of P numbers had nothing to do with establishing an Orwellian Society, but was simply a progressive prelude to nonlawyer office managers, computerized legal research, word processing, fax transmissions, database management, video depositions, cameras in court, real-time court reporting, electronic court filings, and the ubiquitous cell phone. Technology may have prevailed, but fears about "Big Brother" have subsided as 1984 (and 1974) fade from memory and into history. ♦



Daryle Salisbury, P19852, is a 1970 Wayne State University Law School graduate and sole practitioner who still appreciates the challenges, learning, and fun associated with practicing law. Daryle is an MTLA sustaining member and

ATLA member whose previous publications include contributions to the Michigan Bar Journal, ATLA Exchange Quarterly and Michigan Workers' Compensation Section Newsletter.

The author would like to thank Joan Kreutzman, member records clerk at the State Bar of Michigan, for her contributions to this article.

Footnotes

1. "A new permanent member number will appear on your 1974 membership card. This number—a five digit figure preceded by the letter 'P' (P00000)—will be used in the computerized case information systems now being developed for Michigan's Courts under direction of the Michigan Supreme Court." 52 Mich B J 573 (1973).
2. 54 Mich B J 4r (1975).
3. "[T]he first part of every pleading must contain a caption stating . . . (f) the name, business address, telephone number, *and state bar number* of the pleading attorney . . . and (g) the name *and state bar number* of each other attorney who has appeared in the action." MCR 2.113(C)(1). See also Michigan Supreme Court Administrative Order No. 1983-5: "All pleadings should follow this format example: . . . A. *State Bar Number of Attorney. Defendant attorney number* is not normally available for the complaint but *should appear on all subsequent pleadings*. If there are multiple attorneys for plaintiffs or defendants, at least one attorney name *and number* must appear for plaintiff's attorney and at least one for defendant's attorney." (Italics added.) 417 Mich cxxiv–cxxv.
4. *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, Second Edition* (1983).
5. Desirable P numbers:
 - P10001 (which is now retired), held by Arnold K. Aach.
 - P12345, held by the Honorable George W. Crockett, III.
 - P19852, just because I have become used to it.
 - P24680 (which is now retired), held by William Brashaer.
 - P11111 (which is now retired), held by John F. Brady.
 - P22222 (which is now retired), held by Philip Waley.
 - P33333 (which is now retired), held by Cyrell Lynch.
 - P44444, held by Sonya L. Leibowitz.
 - P55555, held by Catherine H. Finn.
 - P66666. Fortunately (so that no Michigan attorney could officially be associated with such a "devilish" number), 66666 was a billing number assigned to a Texas corporation.
 - P77777, tentatively assigned to a very lucky person.
 - P88888, tentatively assigned to a very enthusiastic eater.
 - P99999, tentatively assigned to a very dapper person—the end of an era.
6. 54 Mich B J 4r (1975).

Appendix A

P NUMBER ADMISSION YEAR LIST

(First a disclaimer. The following list is approximately 94.44 percent pure. The list may be off by one year for some P numbers because of the vagaries of the assignment process over the years. Please note the numbers do not reflect the number of lawyers admitted in any given year or in total.)

1973 and before: P10001–P 22764	1990: P43194–P44245
1974: P22765–P24643	1991: P44246–P45614
1975: P24644–P25772	1992: P45615–P47504
1976: P25773–P27034	1993: P47505–P49266
1977: P27035–P28297	1994: P49267–P52053
1978: P28298–P29583	1995: P52054–P54042
1979: P29584–P30873	1996: P54043–P56047
1980: P30874–P32184	1997: P56048–P57559
1981: P32185–P33571	1998: P57560–P59038
1982: P33572–P34814	1999: P59039–P60493
1983: P34815–P36017	2000: P60494–P62167
1984: P36018–P37225	2001: P62168–P63407
1985: P37226–P38521	2002: P63408–P65007
1986: P38522–P39706	2003: P65008–P66470
1987: P39707–P40958	2004: P66471–P67870
1988: P40959–P42072	2005: P67871–P69061
1989: P42073–P43193	2006: P69062–P69234+