

Michigan Lawyers in History

Kim Sigler

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 know your Michigan governors, you might recognize the name Kim Sigler. Of course, if you've ever read about the Purple Gang or the Michigan legislative corruption scandal of the 1940s, it will be a familiar name. But are you aware of Sigler's close connection to the State Bar of Michigan?

Kimber Cornellus Zeigler was born on May 2, 1894, in Nebraska. His father was a cattle rancher and veterinarian; his mother hoped her son would be a doctor or a lawyer. Somewhere along the way, Kimber became Kim and Zeigler became Sigler. Kim later said he changed his name because of a fondness for Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, focusing on the quote, "Live each day that you can look any man in the eye and tell him to go to hell."¹ Apocryphal or not, Kim lived his life by that statement.

After a childhood of roping steers and boxing—his broken nose never healed properly—Kim came to Michigan for his secondary education. He obtained his bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan and then studied law at the University of Detroit. Between studies, he met and married Goodrich native Mae Pierson and started a family: Betty was born in 1919, Beverly in 1923, and Madalon in 1927.

After Kim graduated from law school, the family settled in Hastings, where Kim would shortly be known as "the best-dressed man in Hastings."² Eventually, his style of dress coupled with his personality would earn him the nickname "Hollywood Kim."

His first taste of politics was a successful run for Barry County prosecuting attorney; he was elected for three consecutive terms in the 1920s. His second was an unsuccessful run for state attorney general on the Democratic ticket in 1928.

As he built his practice, Kim also became involved in the local bar associations and the State Bar of Michigan. He served as director of the Calhoun County Bar Association in 1936. Later, he served on the Attorney Grievance Committee, a perfect foundation for his eventual prosecution of corrupt legislative officials.

In 1940, Kim was appointed commissioner-at-large to the State Bar of Michigan Board of Commissioners by the state Supreme Court, filling the seat vacated by State Bar President Julius H. Amberg.

That same year, Kim presented a memorial from the State Bar at Chief Justice William Potter's funeral services in October.

In 1942, Kim was reappointed commissioner-at-large for a four-year term. Shortly

after, his busy life became even busier. He ran unsuccessfully for 8th District state senator on the Republican ticket, moved his practice from Hastings to Battle Creek, served on the local draft board, and became special prosecutor in the 1943 corruption cases involving bribery of the members of the legislature.³

The corruption cases were familiarly known as the Carr-Sigler grand jury, after presiding Judge Leland W. Carr (who would later serve on the Michigan Supreme Court) and Sigler. The grand jury investigated the legislative sessions from 1939 to 1943 and the buying of votes. The corruption cases resulted in 34 indictments, 15 guilty pleas, 66 dismissals,⁴ the execution-style murder of a state senator,⁵ the acquittal of the man who most likely had him murdered, a Pulitzer Prize for the *Detroit Free Press's* coverage, and a legislative investigation into the expenses of the grand jury!

The State Bar republished a 25-page article on one-man grand juries, focusing on the "investigation of alleged graft and corruption in the legislature"⁶ that later led the way to correct "apparent faults of the one-man system."⁷

But all of that is another, much longer story.

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1947 press photo of Governor Kim Sigler in his office at the state capitol.

Telling corrupt officials to “go to hell” had made Sigler’s name recognizable throughout the state, and flamboyant Kim ran for Michigan governor as a Republican in 1946, beating incumbent Murray Van Wagoner.⁸

As Sigler ran the state, he continued his involvement with the State Bar. He had planned to speak at the 1947 Annual Meeting, but canceled because of illness. He was invited back the following year and on September 29, 1948, he “challenged lawyers to take an active part in bringing about needed reforms in state government.”⁹

Unfortunately, Kim’s personality and policy alienated members of both political parties, and in the 1948 gubernatorial election, he lost to another successful Michigan lawyer, G. Mennen “Soapy” Williams.

Sigler returned to his law practice, forming a partnership in 1949 with Victor C. Anderson, his former legal advisor. Indulging his hobby as an aviator, Sigler began serving on the State Bar’s Committee on Aeronautical Law. In 1951, he served as defense attorney in a mock trial before University of Michigan students; the case based on *MacDonald v Skornia* ended in a hung jury.¹⁰ A photo highlighting the participants in the program shows Kim dressed to the nines.

Kim Sigler died in 1953 in a plane crash near Battle Creek. His portrait in the Capitol was draped in black. Funeral attendees included the members of the Michigan Supreme Court and a State Bar official. Paul Morrison eulogized him, saying Sigler was “colorful in personality, full of imagination, eloquent in speech,” influencing wherever he served.¹¹

He remains one of only two Michigan governors who served on the State Bar Board of Commissioners. ■



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State Bar history or have a suggestion for “Michigan Lawyers in History,” please e-mail her at csharlow@mail.michbar.org.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Weddon, *Michigan Governors: Their Life Stories* (Lansing: NOG Press, 1994), p. 145.
2. Baulch, *Gone Now are the Forty Thieves* (Calabasas: Calabash Press, 2005), p. 33.
3. When the grand jury convened on August 26, 1943, the prosecutor was Michigan Attorney General Herbert J. Rushton. On December 7, Jay W. Linsey was appointed special prosecutor. Before the end of that month, both Rushton and Linsey were out and Sigler was in.
4. Rubenstein, *Payoffs in the Cloakroom: The Greening of the Michigan Legislature, 1938–1946* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), p. 225.
5. For a fictional telling of the murder of Warren G. Hooper, see Whitbeck, *To Account for Murder* (New York: Permanent Pr Pub Co, 2010). For the full story, read Rubenstein, *Three Bullets Sealed His Lips* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1st ed 1987) or Rubenstein, *Payoffs in the Cloakroom*, n 4 *supra*.
6. Winters, *The Michigan One-Man Grand Jury*, 24 Mich St B J 279 (1945).
7. Bannister, *The Journalists Judge the Carr-Sigler One-Man Grand Jury, 1943–1948: A Study* (East Lansing: Michigan State University School of Journalism, 1971).
8. Berthelot, *Win Some, Lose Some* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 30.
9. *Report of 13th Annual Convention*, 27 Mich St B J 30 (1948).
10. *Despite Hung Jury... Boys Give Ovation to Lawyers’ Oration*, 30 Mich St B J 46–47 (1951).
11. Green, *White Knight is Laid to Rest in Home Town*, Ironwood Daily Globe, December 4, 1953.