

More Than Just Portraits on the Wall

The Supreme Court Historical Society piques interest in our constitutional judicial heritage

By *Naseem Stecker*

A metamorphosis is in the works that will transform a largely “invisible” organization—the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society—into an energetic institution ready to capture people’s attention and imagination.

Embracing more than portraits, archives, artifacts, and historical photographs, the society’s new buzzwords as it charts its course for the 21st century will be “public programming,” “website,” “education,” and “presence.”

The catalyst for change comes in various forms: enlightened leadership, a resourceful new executive director, and an opportunity for the society to be housed in the new \$87 million dollar complex, the Michigan Hall of Justice, currently under construction in Lansing.

Established in 1988 at the suggestion of then former Supreme Court Chief Justice Dorothy Comstock Riley, the historical society is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving documents, records, and memorabilia relating to the Michigan Supreme Court.

“I always believed we should have a historical society because the history of the court should be preserved,” Justice Riley said. “We had to do it, and I asked Wally [her husband, Wallace Riley] because he was the best person I knew in the state to lead this effort, which he’s done for 13 years.”

As president of the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society, Detroit attorney Wallace D. Riley has worked hard to establish the society as an organization and to achieve the level of respect it currently holds. He has also overseen many projects: the

commissioning, restoring, and cataloging of all the portraits of former justices, putting out an ambitious reference guide with biographical details and photographs of the first 100 justices since the early 1800s, as well as obtaining oral histories of living justices over the past 20 years.

One of the highlights of Wallace Riley’s years at the helm has been the rededication of the old Supreme Court Chambers in the Capitol building, where the Supreme Court originally sat.

“We got the Supreme Court to rededicate the chambers; those were all done over when they redid the Capitol,” Riley said. “They restored the chambers and put the original bench and everything back, just like it was except for the gas lamps in the Supreme Court Chambers. To carry out that tradition, each year when the court opens its session in October, it’s done in the old Supreme Court Chambers. The first case is argued there. That’s pretty much attributable to the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society.”

Riley would like to see the historical society become a more visible presence and be bigger and better than it is today. “If we can become better known among the members of the Bar, I think we’ll have their support. That will help us fund projects, but also more importantly, we’d have the interest of the Bar and the other judges of the state.”

In retrospect, Riley feels that the society has fulfilled the purpose for which it was begun. “The problem is that now there are a lot more things to do. One of the reasons for this is that we’ll have a Michigan Supreme Court building, which this state never had before. That was one of the things that the society argued for—so in some small part

because of the society and because of Chief Justice Riley, followed by Chief Justices Cavanaugh, Brickley, Mallett, and Weaver, we finally got the governor to support the idea and the legislature to appropriate the money to build the building.”

Approved by the legislature in 1998, the Hall of Justice will consolidate the Supreme

MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Memberships to the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society is available at the following levels:

Annual Memberships

- Student \$15
- Contributing \$100
- Sustaining \$250
- Patron \$500

Corporate and Law Firm Membership \$1,000

Life Memberships

- Sponsor \$1,000
- Major Sponsor \$2,500
- Benefactor \$5,000

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Court, court of appeals (Lansing office), and State Court Administrative Office into a functional, state-owned facility. The six-story complex will be located at the corner of Ottawa and Butler, west of the Capitol Building. Included in approximately 280,000 square feet will be two courtrooms, centralized administrative offices, a first-floor public education center, and a 460-space parking structure. The expected date of completion is the fall of 2002.

Angela Bergman, who was hired as executive director of the historical society last September, says she will be part of the planning team for the Hall of Justice Learning Center. "I'll have an office in the building and may have a specific exhibit set up, but we'll also assist in developing other exhibits for the center," Bergman said.

Bergman is taking on a number of new initiatives this year, including an education

project that will involve the hiring of one junior high and one high school teacher who will help to develop two-week lesson plans on the history, role, organization, and function of the Michigan Supreme Court. This project will be conducted in close cooperation with the new Learning Center Coordinator for the Hall of Justice building and will be used as a lead-in to the displays there.

Although most of the 300 members of the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society are judges and lawyers, this is not a prerequisite for joining. Membership is open to anyone with an interest in things historical. Bergman, who has an English teaching background, said she did not start out as a history buff, but after all her research into Michi-

gan history, she's brimming with ideas and thrilled about her job. "We have a list of every justice who sat on the court. But there's so much more to it than that. We want people to know that this justice was also a person who came from this place and who made a really important decision on this matter. To know something personal about the justices so that people become connected to them instead of just seeing a picture on the wall. Now that picture becomes the person who decided a case that made a difference in your life."

Under Bergman's direction, the new Coleman intern, Melissa Witcher, will be researching eight to twelve topics, which will be used in the society's public programming efforts. The research will cover important Michigan cases that have affected issues like civil or minority rights. Other topics will highlight women in the law and justices as writers.

"I'll continue to record what is happening now but will also re-delve into things that happened a long time ago, issues that weren't properly recorded or weren't made as big of a deal as they probably should have been," Bergman said. "So, not only are we continuing to commission portraits of retiring justices and gathering oral histories of those who are still living, we are also going back in history so that we can start developing former justices as rounded characters."

"I'd like to make us more informational," Bergman adds. "We have a website that has a lot of interesting information on it but it's not something that a student can go to and do some research on the history of the Michigan Supreme Court. They can get bits and pieces of information, but not as much as I'd like."

Bergman says her "two biggest goals personally are to increase visibility and through that to increase membership." She has a target of at least 50 new members this year.

"We are a worthy cause," Bergman emphasized. "There are not that many states that have a Supreme Court Historical Society. It's just a shame to see that history and the work of all those justices get lost and not have people understand or know them." ◆

Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal.



Wallace, Dorothy Riley and Angela Bergman



Since dedicating the old Court Chambers in 1988, the society invites the court to hold its opening session every October in the old Court Chambers, as a ceremonious and significant reminder of court history.

