

# Michigan Lawyers in History

## Regene Freund Cohane

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.*

**F**or the first time in state history, Michigan's governor, attorney general, secretary of state, and Supreme Court chief justice are all women.<sup>1</sup> Michigan's congressional delegation includes six women, and 54 women are members of the state legislature.

In a *Detroit Free Press* interview approximately 70 years ago, Regene Freund Cohane discussed the Inter-Group Council for Women as Public Policy Makers, for which she served as membership chair.<sup>2</sup> She remarked that she didn't expect the group to be long-lived "since its purpose, to get women appointed to policy-making posts, ought to be achieved in a few years."<sup>3</sup> It was a fairly idealistic viewpoint.

However, the country had changed dramatically since Regene's family first arrived in the United States. In 1875, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Minor v Happersett* that the Constitution "does not confer the right of suffrage upon any one, and that the constitutions and laws of the several States which commit that important trust to men alone are not necessarily void."<sup>4</sup> Around that same year, Regene's grandfather Philip lost the vast majority of his fortune in the financial crash that followed the Franco-Prussian War and decided to leave Vienna for the United States.<sup>5</sup> He and his wife, Katherine, settled in New York with their five children, the youngest of whom was Regene's father, Henry. The Freunds opened a pawnbroker business in New York, and Philip served in various organizations.<sup>6</sup> Henry continued with the

pawnbroker business and eventually married Gussie Robinson. The couple had four children—a girl, Regene, and three boys.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after Regene was born, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that Merrie Hoover Abbott could not serve as an elected county prosecutor because she couldn't vote in the election; the opinion defined her as being in "want of capacity" and "classed with children, idiots, lunatics, and aliens."<sup>8</sup>

Despite this designation of the female sex, Regene was, by all accounts, an excellent student. When her family moved from Manhattan to Vancouver, British Columbia, she attended Fairview High School;<sup>9</sup> in 1912, she was the highest scorer in her division and third highest in her school.<sup>10</sup> With an eye on a college education, Regene moved back to New York to live with her grandparents and attended Wadleigh High School.<sup>11</sup> She earned a scholarship to Cornell University;<sup>12</sup> that same year, Montana voters elected Jeanette Rankin to become the first woman to serve in the United States Congress, even though women weren't allowed to vote in federal elections.<sup>13</sup>

Regene's Cornell scholarship covered four years of college at \$600 a year.<sup>14</sup> At the time, she was considering either chemistry or law as a future profession. In the end, the law won out because of timing: law courses ended at noon and chemistry classes were in the afternoon,<sup>15</sup> and the self-proclaimed "activity girl"<sup>16</sup> and social butterfly may have wanted her afternoons free for extracurricular activities, including

hockey and drama club.<sup>17</sup> She also served on Cornell's Junior and Senior Honorary Societies and the college newspaper staff, participated in a number of committees, and was president of the Intercollegiate Vocational Guidance Association.<sup>18</sup> Regene and six friends also founded a new sorority after they were denied admission to Cornell's existing sororities—not because they were women, but because they were Jewish.<sup>19</sup>

By 1920, there was success on several fronts: the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote; female lawyers were achieving some recognition (the American Bar Association counted at least two as members);<sup>20</sup> and Regene hung her shingle in Detroit.<sup>21</sup>

The same year that the Sheppard-Towner Act provided "federal funding for maternity and child care,"<sup>22</sup> Regene met her future husband at a funeral. Louis Starfield Cohane, another local attorney, spoke at Judge Charles T. Wilkins's memorial service.<sup>23</sup> If the circumstances surrounding their introduction were unconventional, so was their marriage. The couple eloped on December 9, 1924, and celebrated their nuptials by arguing before the United States Supreme Court.<sup>24</sup> And while Regene took her husband's name, she was frequently known as Regene Freund Cohane.

The couple formed a law practice and were constantly in court. They handled employment cases,<sup>25</sup> garnishment issues,<sup>26</sup> divorces,<sup>27</sup> probate matters,<sup>28</sup> and injury

claims.<sup>29</sup> Unlike law school, the docket didn't end at noon, but Regene found time to join myriad organizations, often in leadership positions. She was president of the Detroit chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women<sup>30</sup> and a member of the national organization's board;<sup>31</sup> president of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan;<sup>32</sup> a member of the National Association of Women Lawyers Board;<sup>33</sup> chair of the Detroit Federation of Women's Clubs Legislative Division; a member of the United Jewish Appeal's Speakers Committee;<sup>34</sup> and, of course, membership chair for the Inter-Group Council for Women as Public Policy Makers.<sup>35</sup>

The Inter-Group Council was mentioned in a Michigan newspaper at least as late as 1971,<sup>36</sup> lasting longer than Regene probably expected and by which time there were 15 female members of Congress, including Michigan's Martha Griffiths.<sup>37</sup>

Regene Freund Cohane passed away in 1992, which was known as the "Year of the Woman." That year's congressional elections ended with 27 new women serving in Washington, D.C., bringing the total number of females in the 103rd Congress to 55.<sup>38</sup> It was unprecedented—until now. ■

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## ENDNOTES

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