

Michigan Lawyers in History

Cora Mae Brown

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.

Shortly before Christmas in 1933, a mob forcibly removed Corde Cheek from a relative's house a few blocks from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. He'd been accused of attempted rape, and even though the evidence against him was "so inconclusive that the prosecutor wouldn't issue a warrant" and the grand jury refused to indict him, he was lynched.¹ The students at the historically black university were horrified and protested: they "waded through the rain into the chapel, where they staged one of the greatest mass meetings ever held upon the campus."² It was something Cora Brown, then a sophomore at Fisk studying sociology, never forgot.

Cora Mae Brown was a native Alabamian turned Detroiter. Her parents, Richard and Alice, moved the family from Birmingham to Detroit when Cora was seven,³ following several relatives who had already ventured north in search of better opportunities.

Once settled in Detroit, Richard Brown worked as a tailor out of the family home and Alice Brown found work as a cook. Cora went to school, "diligent in her pursuit of an education."⁴ She was confident

and not one to back down from a fight, especially when provoked. When a classmate called Cora a derogatory racist term, she "wheeled around and punched him in the face."⁵

Cora graduated from Cass Technical High School at 17, and even in the midst of the Great Depression when neither minorities nor women were steered toward higher education, her family, friends, and a YWCA employee encouraged her to go to college.⁶ She found a job at a Detroit Urban League summer camp to earn money for tuition, and by 1932, she was at Fisk.⁷

It was an excellent choice. The 66-year-old university had recently gained accreditation from the prestigious Southern Association of Colleges and Schools,⁸ and

among its alumni were NAACP cofounder W. E. B. DuBois and Ida B. Wells, a leader in the crusade against lynching.⁹

At Fisk, Cora studied under noted sociologist E. Franklin Frazier.¹⁰ In the aftermath of Cheek's murder, Frazier and other professors "told the students about the facts of the case and impressed upon them the necessity for student as well as a group solidarity against this barbarous form of terror."¹¹ Those students would lead the fight for freedom in the future. Cora recalled the incident as the beginning of her "lifelong campaign against injustice and inhumanity."¹²

After graduating from Fisk, Cora returned to Detroit, and over the next 15 years, worked for the Old Age Assistance

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Bureau, the Children's Aid Society, the Works Progress Administration,¹³ and the Detroit Police Department. These jobs allowed her to work closely with the community and see how it defined injustice and inhumanity.¹⁴

Eventually, Cora enrolled in Wayne State University Law School, graduating in 1948.¹⁵ She briefly practiced after passing the Michigan bar, but became more interested in politics. Nearly 20 years after the Fisk protest, Cora became the first African-American female in the country elected to a state senate seat.¹⁶

Once again, she was supremely confident and unwilling to back down from a fight. In her first term in the senate, Brown developed a reputation as both the “perennial thorn in the conscience” of the party¹⁷ and “a champion of the underprivileged.”¹⁸ She supported legislation for “community betterment, education, public health, mental health”¹⁹ and civil rights. She challenged a veteran senator who was championing a bill requiring “defense attorneys to disclose the [contact information] of character witnesses for trials,” arguing that such legislation would do more harm than good, and the bill failed.²⁰ She proposed a bill “to increase penalties for hotels, restaurants, and motels that discriminated against people of color,”²¹ and the measure ultimately passed.

Cora refused to follow the party line for the sake of the party, especially if it clashed

with what she felt was right. This was essentially how she lost her seat in the legislature and any chance at higher elective office when she backed Republican presidential candidate Dwight Eisenhower over her party's nominee, Adlai Stevenson, in 1956, believing Eisenhower would do a better job with civil rights.²²

In 1957, Cora moved to Washington, D.C., and was appointed by President Eisenhower to serve as “Special Associate General Counsel of the Post Office”²³—another ground-breaking role as the first African-American female on the legal staff—where she concentrated in prosecuting postal fraud and the distribution of obscene material through the mail.²⁴

Cora eventually returned to Michigan, after practicing law in California for a decade,²⁵ and was appointed as referee for the Michigan Employment Security Commission.²⁶

Cora Mae Brown was just 58 when she died in 1972, nearly 39 years to the day of the Fisk University student protest against the lynching of Corde Cheek. ■

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ENDNOTES

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11. *Tragedy Occurs in Shadow of Fisk Univ*.
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14. *Cora Brown*.
15. *Successful Bar Applicants*, 28 Mich St B J 41 (1949).
16. *Women Who Make State Laws*, Ebony (September 1967), pp 27, 32.
17. *Pioneering Legislator is Dead*, Detroit Free Press (December 19, 1972), pp 3-A, 6-A.
18. *Friends to Honor Senator Cora Brown*.
19. *Id.*
20. *Bold Women in Michigan History*, p 104.
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23. *What Courier Readers Think: Cora M. Brown Sends Us Thanks*, The Pittsburgh Courier (October 19, 1957), p 39.
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26. *Notable Black American Women*.