HISTORICAL SOCIETY
DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
UNITED STATES

The Court Legacy

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"He Served with Distinction, Courage and Dignity."[1]

By Philip P. Mason -- Distinguished Professor of History, Wayne State University

For nearly twenty five years, from 1946 to 1970, Judge Theodore Levin served on the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan, the thirteenth judge to be appointed since the Court was established in Michigan in 1837. From 1959 to 1967 he served as Chief Judge and during those years, Theodore Levin left his mark on the Court imprinted by his leadership, his innovative changes in court procedures, and the quality of justice administered by his court.

Theodore Levin was born in Chicago, on February 18, 1897 — one of eight children — to Joseph and Ida (Rosin) Levin. He remained with his family, which moved to London, Ontario in 1905, until 1913 when he moved to Detroit at the age of sixteen. As a young boy he sold newspapers on the streets of Detroit and later, to earn money for college, he worked in a machine shop.

Theodore Levin, like two of his brothers, chose law for a career, graduating from the University of Detroit Law School in 1920 with an LLB, and in 1924 with an LLM. After admission to the Michigan State Bar in 1920, he opened a law firm with his brother Saul, joined later by Morris Garvett and Louis Dill. One of the firm's special interests was Immigration Law, assisting immigrants entering the United States from Europe and Canada. In 1931 Theodore Levin was one of the leaders along with Fred M. Butzel, Maurice Sugar and Frank Murphy, of a successful campaign against the repressive Michigan Alien Registration and Fingerprinting Act. He later served on the Executive Board of the National Refugees' Service Administration and as Vice President of the Michigan Commission on Displaced Persons.

Theodore Levin's public service expanded in 1933 when he was appointed Special Assistant Attorney General to conduct a grand jury investigation into the events surrounding and leading to the Michigan Bank Holiday. From 1944 to 1946, during the war years, he was a member of the Selective Service Appeal Board.

In 1946, President Harry S. Truman appointed Theodore Levin to be a judge of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan. Judge Levin, upon assuming office, rose quickly to prominence as an able and dedicated judge. In 1959, he became Chief Judge, a position he held until 1967. He carried a full caseload until his death in 1970, and he was, for nearly a quarter of a century, a towering figure on the Court. During his tenure, especially during his years as Chief Judge, he achieved national renown for his work on the Judicial Conference of the United States.

Theodore Levin also won high praise for his role as a leading innovator in the field of criminal sentencing. During his years as a judge he became aware of, and was increasingly concerned about, disparity in sentences. His solution: the Sentencing Council, a committee comprised of judges and probation officers who jointly discussed sentences to be imposed by the sentencing judge. Although this Council's work was advisory, it had a decided impact upon the sentencing practices of the Court. It not only resulted in more fair and uniform sentences, but it also fostered collegiality among judges. Several state and federal courts — including the United States District Courts in Brooklyn and Chicago — followed Judge Levin's enlightened sentencing practices.

Judge Levin was recognized for his leadership of the Court during a period of rapid expansion. He was an able administrator and skillfully resolved conflicts among judges and court staff, which gained him great respect. He had a remarkable talent, too, for resolving difficult legal cases with "practical and often unorthodox solutions."

He was also admired and revered by his colleagues on the Court. The late Judge Wade McCree summed up his views on Judge Levin: "He was very much a gentleman with a courtroom decorum that was the epitome of what a courtroom should be." Another judicial colleague, John Feikens, admired Judge Levin for "...his qualities of kindliness, human sympathy, depth of conscience, patience, and sagacity. He was an ideal judge in both temperament and ability."

Judge Levin's understanding of human nature as well as his sense of humor was shared by his son, Joseph.

He liked to tell the story of an immigrant client of his who, while facing deportation, wrote him a letter saying that, at the time he was mailing the letter, he was standing near the Brooklyn Bridge and that, by the time my dad would receive the letter, he would be at the bottom of the East River. For weeks after receiving that letter, my father could not locate this client. Finally, sadly, he took the letter to the District Director. The District Director told my father how sorry he was that this man had taken his life, found the relevant file and closed the case.

Years afterwards, a man stopped my father on a street in downtown Detroit and said, "Mr. Levine, Mr. Levine, don't you remember me?"

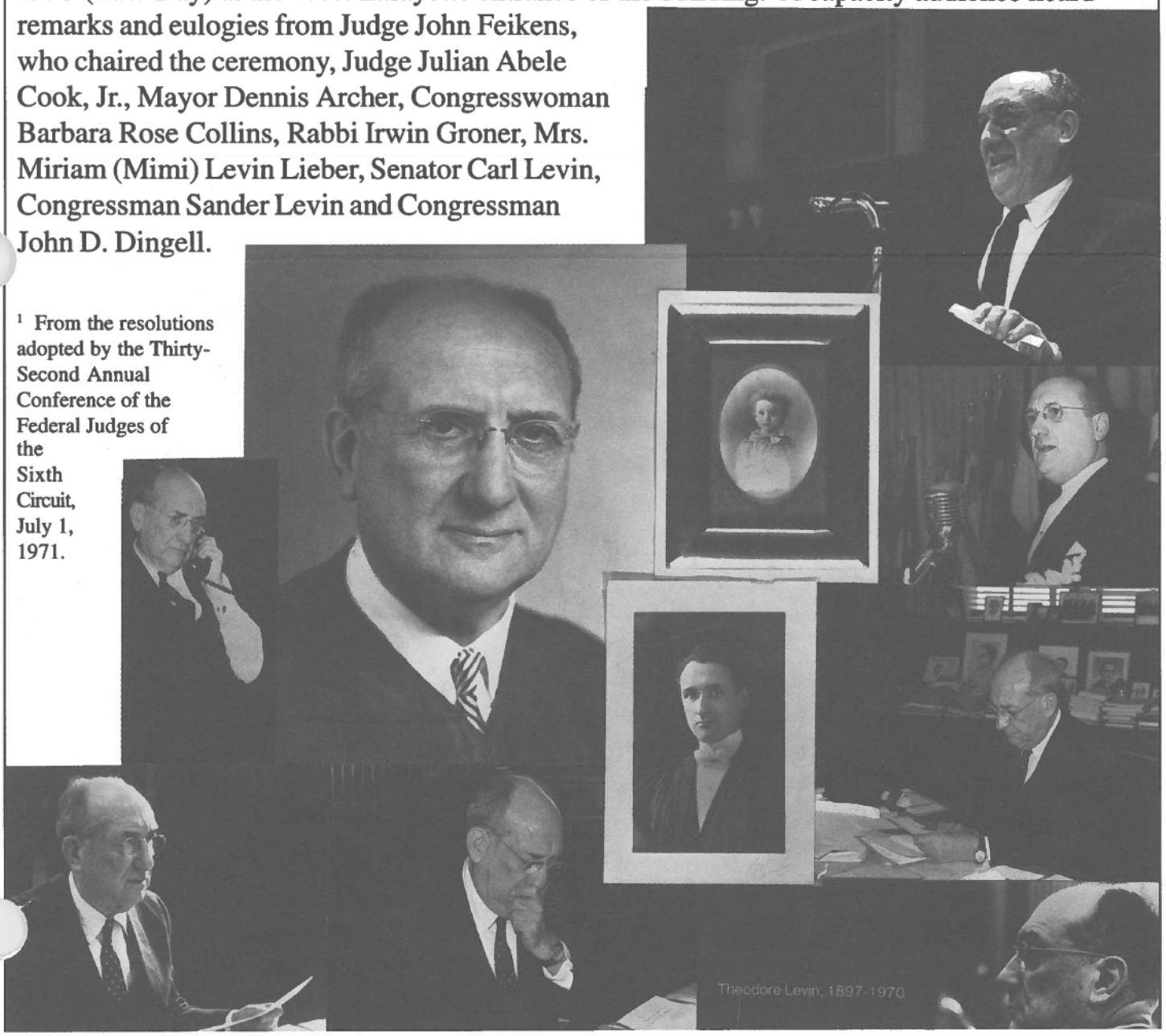
My father looked at him quizzically, and said, "No, I don't think I do recognize you, but you do look an awful lot like a guy who wrote me a letter, years ago, that he was about to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge and that, by the time I received that letter, he would be at the bottom of the East River. If the Immigration authorities ever thought that guy was still alive, he would go to jail for the rest of his life." As my dad related it, "This guy had the most frightened look come over his face and then, white as a sheet, he turned around, ran down the block and around the corner like a jack rabbit. I never saw him again."

Judge Levin was revered in the Detroit Jewish community for his numerous philanthropic activities. He served as president of several major organizations: the Jewish Welfare Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, the United Jewish Charities of Detroit, the Jewish Social Service Bureau, and the Resettlement Service. He was an active member of the Detroit Round Table of Catholics, Jews and Protestants. He was in the Scottish Rite of Free Masonry and a 33rd degree Mason.

In 1995, twenty-five years after his death, the United States Congress honored Judge Levin by naming the U.S. Court House in Detroit the "Theodore Levin United States Court House." The Congressional Act, signed by President Clinton was spearheaded by Judge John Feikens and Congressman John D. Dingell, who was a law clerk to Judge Levin from 1952 to 1953.

The formal public ceremony announcing the naming of the Court House took place on May 1, 1995 (Law Day) at the West Lafayette entrance of the building. A capacity audience heard remarks and eulogies from Judge John Feikens, who chaired the ceremony, Judge Julian Abele Cook, Jr., Mayor Dennis Archer, Congresswoman Barbara Rose Collins, Rabbi Irwin Groner, Mrs. Miriam (Mimi) Levin Lieber, Senator Carl Levin, Congressman Sander Levin and Congressman John D. Dingell.

[1] From the resolutions adopted by the Thirty-Second Annual Conference of the Federal Judges of the Sixth Circuit, July 1, 1971.



Society Sets Date for Third Annual Meeting

The Officers and Trustees of the Historical Society for the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan are pleased to announce that the Society will hold its Annual Meeting on Thursday, November 16, 1995 at the McGregor Memorial Conference Center on the campus of Wayne State University. A reception will begin at 4:30 p.m. followed by the featured speaker and the annual meeting of the membership and election of the Board of Trustees.

John Hope Franklin, James B. Duke Professor of History Emeritus at Duke University, will deliver this year's Annual Lecture, "Witnessing for Justice." The Annual Meeting is open to all members of the Society without charge. Non-members and guests are $10.

The invitations will be mailed to all members twenty-one days preceding the meeting, and responses should be received by November 2, 1995.

Historical Society Calendar of Upcoming Events

Friday and Saturday, October 13 - 14	Annual Meeting: Oral History Council, Michigan Historical Museum
Tuesday, October 24	Historical Society, Board of Trustees Meeting
Thursday, November 16	Historical Society, Third Annual Meeting and Election of Trustees and Officers
Thursday, November 30	Woman Suffrage Amendment Convocation, Wayne State University

JUDGES OF THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN

Appointed by:	Judge	Birthdate	Comm. Date	Vice	Separated	Chief Judge
Jackson	Ross Wilkins	02/19/1799	01/26/1837	New	02/18/1870	
Grant	John W. Longyear	10/22/1820	02/18/1870	Wilkins	03/11/1875	
Grant	Henry Billings Brown	03/02/1836	03/19/1875	Longyear	??/??/1890	
Harrison	Henry H. Swan	10/02/1840	01/21/1891	Brown	07/??/1911	
Taft	Alexis C. Angell	04/26/1857	07/01/1911	Swan	06/01/1912	
Taft	Arthur J. Tuttle	11/08/1868	08/12/1912	Angell	12/02/1944	
Harding	Charles C. Simons	05/21/1876	02/06/1923	New	02/02/1932	
Coolidge	Edward J. Moinet	07/14/1873	06/13/1927	New	03/01/1946	
Hoover	Ernest A. O'Brien	07/01/1897	04/15/1931	New	10/09/1948	
Roosevelt	Arthur J. Lederle	11/25/1887	03/09/1936	New	07/01/1960	10/10/1948
Roosevelt	Frank A. Picard	10/09/1889	03/30/1939	New	02/28/1963	
Truman	Arthur A. Koscinski	04/01/1887	08/07/1945	Tuttle	11/21/1957	
Truman	Theodore Levin	02/18/1897	08/07/1946	Moinet	12/31/1970	10/19/1959
Truman	Thomas P. Thornton	03/08/1898	02/15/1949	O'Brien	02/15/1966	
Eisenhower	Ralph M. Freeman	05/05/1902	06/29/1954	New	07/01/1973	02/18/1967
Eisenhower	Clifford P. O'Sullivan	12/08/1897	09/11/1957	Koscinski	04/04/1960	
Eisenhower	Frederick W. Kaess	12/01/1910	07/10/1960	Lederle	12/13/1975	05/05/1972
Eisenhower	John Feikens	12/03/1917	10/07/1960	Interim	09/27/1961	
Kennedy	Thaddeus M. Machrowicz, Jr.	08/21/1899	10/12/1961	Picard	02/17/1970	
Kennedy	Wade H. McCree, Jr.	07/03/1920	10/09/1961	O'Sullivan	09/07/1966	
Kennedy	Talbot Smith	10/11/1899	10/10/1961	New	10/31/1971	
Kennedy	Stephen J. Roth	04/21/1908	05/08/1962	New	07/11/1974	
Johnson	Damon J. Keith	07/04/1922	10/27/1967	Thornton	01/22/1977	12/14/1975
Johnson	Lawrence Gubow	01/10/1919	10/11/1968	McCree	03/26/1978	
Nixon	Cornelia G. Kennedy	08/04/1923	10/20/1970	Machrowicz	10/04/1979	01/23/1977
Nixon	John Feikens	12/03/1917	12/01/1970	New	03/01/1986	10/04/1979
Nixon	Philip Pratt	07/14/1924	12/01/1970	New	02/07/1989	03/02/1986
Nixon	Robert E. DeMascio	01/11/1923	07/22/1971	Levin	01/15/1988	
Nixon	Charles W. Joiner	02/14/1916	06/09/1972	Smith	08/15/1984	
Nixon	James Harvey	07/04/1922	12/19/1973	Freeman	03/29/1984	
Ford	James P. Churchill	04/10/1924	12/20/1974	Roth	12/30/1989	02/07/1989
Ford	Ralph B. Guy, Jr.	08/30/1929	06/07/1976	Kaess	10/17/1985	
Carter	Julian Abele Cook, Jr.	06/22/1930	09/23/1978	Keith		12/31/1989
Carter	Patricia J. Boyle	03/31/1937	10/10/1978	Gubow	04/23/1983	
Carter	Avern Cohn	07/23/1924	09/26/1979	New		
Carter	Stewart A. Newblatt	12/23/1927	09/26/1979	New	12/23/1993	
Carter	Anna Diggs Taylor	12/09/1932	11/02/1979	New		
Carter	Horace W. Gilmore	04/04/1918	06/18/1980	Kennedy	05/01/1991	
Reagan	George E. Woods	10/10/1923	11/16/1983	Boyle	11/16/1993	
Reagan	Richard F. Suhrheinrich	08/15/1936	10/04/1984	Harvey	07/12/1990	
Reagan	George La Plata	10/17/1924	04/04/1985	New		
Reagan	Lawrence P. Zatkoff	06/16/1939	03/04/1986	Guy		
Reagan	Barbara K. Hackett	03/17/1928	04/07/1986	Joiner		
Reagan	Patrick J. Duggan	09/28/1933	10/14/1986	New		
Reagan	Bernard A. Friedman	09/23/1943	04/20/1988	DeMascio		
Reagan	Paul V. Gadola	07/21/1929	10/17/1988	Feikens		
Bush	Gerald E. Rosen	10/26/1951	03/12/1990	Pratt		
Bush	Robert H. Cleland	04/26/1947	06/19/1990	Churchill		
Bush	Nancy G. Edmunds	07/10/1947	02/10/1992	Suhrheinrich		
Clinton	Denise Page Hood	02/21/1952	06/16/1994	Woods		
Clinton	Paul D. Borman	01/07/1939	08/10/1994	Newblatt		
Clinton	John Corbett O'Meara	11/04/1933	09/15/1994	Gilmore		

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Annual membership fees:

☐ Student (Must be registered at an educational institution)	$15
☐ Associate	$25
☐ Member	$50
☐ Contributing Member	$100
☐ Sustaining Member	$250
☐ Patron	$500 or more

Please make checks payable to:
Historical Society - U.S. District Court - E.D. Michigan
Membership contributions to the Society are tax deductible within the limits of the law.

Name

_____

Address

_____

City

_____

State/Zip

_____

Phone

_____
Day Evening

This is a gift membership from:

_____

___

QUESTIONNAIRE

We would like to know about your interests and skills. Please fill in this questionnaire and mail it with your membership fee.

Name:_____

Special interests in the field of legal history:

_____

_____

Suggestions for programs or projects:

_____

_____

_____

Indicate interest in Society's activities:

- ☐ Writing articles for the Society newsletter
- ☐ Layout and production of the newsletter
- ☐ Conference planning
- ☐ Oral history
- ☐ Research in special topics in legal history
- ☐ Fund development for the Society
- ☐ Membership recruitment
- ☐ Archival preservation
- ☐ Exhibit preparation
- ☐ Educational programs
- ☐ Other (Please describe) _____

_____

This form may be duplicated and submitted with your membership fee.

The Historical Society
U.S. District Court
133 U.S. Courthouse
Detroit, MI 48226