

Michigan Lawyers in History

Lila M. Neuenfelt

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.

In 1940, the 38-year-old justice of the peace in Dearborn ruled that the city's "anti-union ordinance prohibiting the distribution of handbills"¹ in congested areas—particularly around the Ford Motor plant—was unconstitutional.² The law went against the First Amendment right to freedom of speech³ and the ruling went against the establishment of the city and business, but Justice Lila Neuenfelt had already made a lifelong choice to go against the grain.⁴

Lila Neuenfelt was born on March 2, 1902, to an immigrant and a native Michigander. Her father, Herman, arrived in the United States from Germany when he was 20 and settled in Michigan.⁵ He married Eveline Richmond in 1892, and over the next 22 years, the couple had six children.⁶ Lila appears to be the only one who went to college; her brothers worked for railroads and in saloons and her sisters married and settled down.

Lila Neuenfelt wanted none of that.

In an early form of school of choice, Neuenfelt left home to live with her older sister to complete her high school education at a better institution.⁷ After high school, she started classes at the University of Detroit Law School, graduating in 1922.⁸ There was one problem, however: she was too young to be sworn into the

Michigan bar, which required members to be 21. Neuenfelt had to wait six months. In 1923, she celebrated not by going to a bar but by joining it, along with registering to vote and becoming a notary.⁹ She was proclaimed the youngest female lawyer in the country.¹⁰

Neuenfelt was "a female lawyer in days before female lawyers"¹¹ and got a job clerking for Judge Leo Schaefer.¹² The two would spar for years in elections, much to the enjoyment of the newspaper-reading public.¹³

If Neuenfelt was a female lawyer before female lawyers were commonplace, she was a female politician before that was conventional, too. When she won her first election in 1926—becoming the youngest justice of the peace—people couldn't get over the fact that she was a female! Her win was featured in a full-page article in the *Detroit Free Press* with the headline "Girl Judge's Small, Soft Voice Awes 'Bad Men.'" The article didn't mention her education or skills but noted the 25-year-old "girl" weighed 117 pounds and had a new, attractive hairstyle. The author obviously missed the point when Neuenfelt said she didn't want to be "recognized as a 'woman judge,'" believing a judge's gender would "make no difference with the administration of the law."¹⁴ Her words didn't matter; she would have to get used to the con-

stant references in newspaper articles to the new "woman justice" or "girl justice."

A problem arose when people assumed that the newly married female justice of the peace would use her husband's name professionally. Being called a "girl justice" was insulting but didn't necessarily affect elections, and Neuenfelt was nothing if not practical. She might be Mrs. Dr. William Purves in private,¹⁵ but she had built a fine legal reputation as Lila Neuenfelt and she would "run under any name" she wanted!¹⁶ In a world that viewed her as a "girl justice" at age 31, Neuenfelt had to petition both the court and the state attorney general to continue to use her maiden name in elections, but she succeeded.¹⁷

So perhaps it was a bit tongue in cheek that when Neuenfelt chaired the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan annual banquet in 1940, the night's entertainment included a skit entitled "What's in a Name?"¹⁸ But she won the last laugh: when her handbill ruling was publicized across the country, newspapers got her last name right (if not her first).

By the time that ruling was upheld on appeal and Ford signed a contract with the union,¹⁹ Neuenfelt—after winning several elections for justice of the peace and losing at least one for Congress—ran for circuit court judge. As with her first win in 1926, she became the first woman elected



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to the office; she was also the only woman in the race.²⁰ Still, people were amazed that a woman was a judge. Headlines screamed “Justice Dons a Skirt”²¹ and newspapers asked, rhetorically, “[H]ow is it that a woman can be so illogical sometimes and so completely to the point at others?”²² They should have asked the more than 7,000 voters who chose Neuenfelt over the male incumbent.²³

Neuenfelt was sworn into office before a packed court.²⁴ Not yet 40, she already had the titles of “youngest female lawyer in the United States,” “Michigan’s youngest justice of the peace,” and the state’s “first female circuit court judge” under her belt. And some of her decisions had been publicized across the state. Even so, when she married a second time in 1943 after divorcing Dr. Purves, Neuenfelt had to once again petition the court “for the right to use” her maiden name rather than her husband’s.²⁵

As Neuenfelt approached retirement, she was still known as a “woman jurist,” if a veteran one.²⁶ But by that time, she had been joined by others: Elza Papp, “the second female circuit court judge”²⁷; and Cornelia Kennedy on the Wayne County Circuit Court.²⁸

Lila Neuenfelt died on October 8, 1981, 13 years after her retirement. Fellow Circuit Court Judge James Montante remembered her without any hint of the “girl jus-

stice” moniker: she was simply a “masterful, masterful judge...[who] knew where justice was.”²⁹ ■

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