

Historical Society Hosts Special Session Acknowledging Loan of the Big Four Portrait

On Tuesday, March 8, the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society and the State Bar of Michigan joined the Michigan Supreme Court in special session to acknowledge the permanent loan of the “Big Four” portrait by the State Bar to the Court. The session marked the culmination of over five years of assistance and negotiations by the Historical Society to see that the painting was properly restored and displayed.

The portrait, which was commissioned by attorney Frank G. Mixer and his wife Grace, was donated to the State Bar in 1967. The painting was hung over the fireplace in the lounge at 306 Townsend Street, home of the State Bar, where it remained until building renovations began in the late 1990s. At that time, the painting was removed by the building contractor, rolled up, and placed into storage.

It was there that Society Executive Director Jill Wright found the painting and recognized both its value and its need for restoration. Working with executives at the Bar, she facilitated the delivery of the painting to restoration specialist Ken Katz in Detroit, who removed bits of glue, dust, and grime from the painting and secured it to new backing.

After the building renovations were completed, there

was no longer space at the Bar building to properly display the 5 foot by 7 foot painting. Work then began to arrange the loan of the painting to the Court so it could be displayed at the Hall of Justice.

Chief Justice Taylor opened the special session with remarks about the special significance of the painting and what it represents to the Michigan’s citizens, and particularly to Michigan’s legal community:

The casual observer would look on this painting, fine as it is, as just an image of four gentlemen who are wearing quaint old clothes and sporting whiskers. What possible interest, they might ask, does this image hold for us today?

Obviously, this painting reminds us of the origins of our court, and also of the distinguished lawyers and scholars who comprised “the Big Four.” Their fair-mindedness and learning not only led to national recognition of this Supreme Court as one of the

best in the country, but also set a very high standard for all the justices who follow them.

Even more importantly, the calm faces of these four justices remind us all how essential a role the law plays in maintaining democracy, especially in



The portrait of the Big Four is unveiled by State Bar President Nancy Diehl and State Bar Executive Director John Berry.

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uncertain times.

Society President Wallace D. Riley, acting as the master of ceremonies at the special session, opened the session with brief remarks about the painting.

The portrait that we will soon unveil has become a somewhat famous part of Michigan's legal history. It is based not on any real moment, but on an artist's idea of how the justices, who have become known as The Big Four, might have looked as they transacted the business of the Court. Copies of the painting in various shapes and sizes can be found downtown on the side of Cooley Law School, in the Learning Center just downstairs, and in the offices of many attorneys around the state.

After today, it will be hung in the conference center on the first floor of this Hall of Justice. Of course we have individual portraits of each one of the Big Four Justices in the Court's collection. But their grouping is unique.

State Bar Executive Director John T. Berry followed Mr. Riley. Mr. Berry talked further about the painting, but



State Bar Executive John T. Berry addresses the Court

spoke specifically about the original donor Frank Mixer. He described Mr. Mixer as a man who “devoted himself to helping

others through his law practice and his involvement with the Lincoln Park city affairs, community organizations, and the Lincoln Park schools. A true community benefactor, he generously gave of his time and of his money to many organizations, including the State Bar of Michigan.” Mr. Berry continued by reading aloud a letter from attorney Kenneth Mixer, Frank Mixer’s son.

Dear Mr. Berry:

I received your invitation to the ceremony acknowledging the loan of the portrait of the Big Four to the Michigan Supreme Court and its new permanent display in the Supreme Court building. I regret that I will be unable to attend as my wife and I will be out of the country on vacation. My father and mother, Frank G. Mixer and Grace D. Mixer,

who commissioned the painting, would be very proud of the fact that the painting will be hanging in the Supreme Court building. On behalf of myself, the rest of the family, we look forward to visiting the building in the future and thank you very much for including us in the ceremony. Sincerely yours, Kenneth G. Mixer.

State Bar President Nancy J. Diehl then addressed the Court, telling the story of the individuals who made up “the Big Four.” She shared some of the well-known facts about the Justices, reminding the Court that they were each from New York, that each was a respected citizen of the State of Michigan in addition to being a judge, and that individually they were all accomplished authors, businessmen, and role models. Ms. Diehl concluded her speech by stating:

CAMPBELL, CHRISTIANCY, COOLEY, and GRAVES, by way of compliment, came to be called the Big Four. They raised the standing of Michigan jurisprudence to a high level. Because of these four jurists, our Supreme Court came to be esteemed by the courts of other jurisdictions as one of the strongest and one of the best. Today, it is fitting that this portrait of four of our state's greatest justices should hang in the Michigan Hall of Justice, where the Supreme Court's history is preserved, while the work of the Court continues in good order.



State Bar President Nancy J. Diehl

After the painting was unveiled, Justice Cavanagh accepted the portrait on behalf of the Court. He opened his remarks with the question, “this four-some is almost a hundred years dead... So why are we here? What makes these four special?” After relaying some facts about the justices, he concluded that the justices were special not because of any great gifts or talents, but because of their hard work and dedication to their duties and their exuberance for life:

Sometimes we let ourselves off the hook a bit as we think about those who have done well in life. We like to imagine that they had some special gift that we lack. But there is a very striking element in the remarks that were made upon the deaths of each of the Big Four. As speaker after speaker rose to offer extravagant praise, many still made a specific point of saying that these men were not geniuses — that they were not unusually brilliant or

gifted men. They were four hardworking fellows, brought together by circumstance and history, and asked to help a fledgling state begin to form its laws and traditions. They became heroes by doing the ordinary parts of their job with integrity and energy. We accept this portrait today so that, every now and then, we will be reminded that that is what made them The Big Four.



Following Justice Cavanagh's remarks, Chief Justice Taylor adjourned the session and invited all of the attendees to join the Justices for a reception in the rotunda outside the courtroom.



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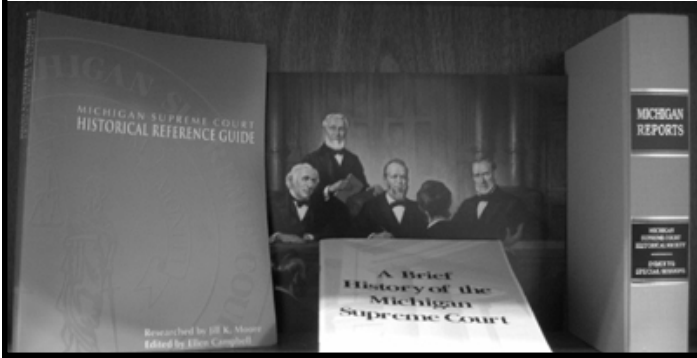
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8x10 Color Photograph of the Big Four Compilation
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The Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) corporation dedicated to preserving documents, records, and memorabilia relating to the Michigan Supreme Court. The Society produces publications, special events and other projects to achieve its goals in education and restoration. Current officers and directors are:

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