

Romney as prophet

Former governor reflects on state of

By Suzie Rollins Singer
staff writer

George Romney said he has been talking about the high cost of Michigan labor for years, but no one listened.

Even before he was elected governor in 1962, he complained that the state was pricing itself out of business. No one listened.

"If you look at the testimony I gave before the old War Committee after World War II, you'll see that I said we were progressively pricing ourselves out of the market," the silver-haired, 74-year-old former governor said.

"We can take a look at any aspect of the state's economic picture, and it's more costly to do business here than in almost any other state in the union. The conditions I've been talking about for the past 35 years are here."

FROM HIS secluded Bloomfield Hills home nestled on a densely treed lot, George Romney — former president of American Motors Corp., governor from 1963-69, secretary of Housing and Urban Development from 1969-72 — talked about Michigan's financial plight and its chances for recovery.

The state needs a leader, a businessman, to pull it out of economic misery, he said. It needs more labor concessions, lower welfare payments, better management and decreased unemployment benefits.

"Michigan has suffered as a result of the shortcomings of the national government. Michigan and the auto industry simultaneously became the focus of the national government and state government's mistakes," he said.

"At the same time, we're suffering from the impact of the Japanese doing things we should have been doing for years. They forged ahead of us in their ability to produce high-quality vehicles economically, while we lagged behind."

WHEN ROMNEY arrived in Lansing as chief executive, he was fresh out of an eight-year presidency at American Motors. He was a respected businessman who made AMC a contender with the "Big 3," when he introduced the first small car of the '50s — the Rambler.

"When we introduced the Rambler, the situation was different than it is now. Back then, the American people generally were of the opinion that only big cars were worth having."

"By the late '50s when a large number of families had more than one car, the economic benefits of car ownership was more important than what kind of car you had."

"So we were able to convince people that their needs were better met with a small compact car," he said.

ROMNEY HAD BEEN a maverick at AMC, negotiating labor contracts with the same principles being revived today.

"I worked out with American Motors, way back in 1960, a profit sharing program that Walter Reuther described as the most significant contract in the history of collective bargaining," he recalled.

"Now the unions are talking about profit sharing and teamwork instead of class conflict and confrontation. We need more contract concessions and more teamwork like the Japanese have. One reason they're licking us is that they have teamwork, which cuts costs and contributes to quality," he said.

Romney has lived through decades of change and was instrumental in bringing Michigan to its feet following an economic downturn in the late '50s and early '60s.

AS AN issue-oriented Republican governor, Romney earned a reputation among colleagues and critics as non-partisan. Today Romney said he was always a fiscal conservative.

"The big reason I was labeled a liberal is because I fought hard to shift the Republican Party's position with respect to civil rights. The Republican Party was against civil rights and supported restrictive zoning in Grosse Pointe. As a result of me shifting their lines, people have called me a liberal," he noted.

Romney's life is charted by the books and pictures that line the walls of his small den. Time magazine cover portraits are framed beside family portraits, including with a dozen of George and Lenore Romney's 22 grandchildren making ice cream.

Its light atmosphere, decorated in blues, yellow and peach, are the colors of the soft-spoken, supportive Lenore. Springtime fills the room despite the bare trees peering in the windows. The first light is still covered with cardboard to keep the winter winds out, and unopened mail is piled high after a winter trip to Hawaii.



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HE APPEARS relaxed, dressed in a cardigan sweater and gray flannel slacks.

Romney spends most of his time at home, when he's not busy as chairman of a volunteer organization he founded in 1970 — the National Center for Citizen Involvement. He flies frequently to Washington for national meetings.

"It's a network of local volunteer action centers that gives technical assistance to volunteer organizations. By using computers, the people help match collected information about programs on drug abuse or child abuse with local organizations that need the information," he said.

"I set this program up when I was in the Cabinet and was asked to develop a program to help strengthen American life. I created the National Center for Volunteer Action, and two years ago it merged with the National Information Center on Volunteerism to become what it is today," he added.

Romney also serves as a Wayne State University trustee. The ex-governor's adventures led him across the country. When he was a young boy, his family was forced to flee a Mexican revolution. They lost their properties, and he watched their status go from substantial to penniless.

"Being poor isn't the worst thing. We got kicked out of Mexico with nothing," he said.

AT 11 YEARS OLD, Romney took his first job as a sugar harvester. From 1922-26 he worked his way through Latter-

Day Saints University in Salt Lake City, then served two years in England and Scotland as a Mormon missionary.

From there he studied at the University of Utah in 1929, then went to Washington to finish his education at George Washington University. He studied taxation and tariffs and had his first bout with politics at 21, when he worked as a stenographer for Sen. David Walsh, D-Mass.

His tax expertise landed him a job as a lobbyist for Aluminum Co. of America (ALCOA).

When he was 32, in 1939, the Automobile Manufacturers Association offered him a manager's position at its Detroit office, earning \$12,000 a year.

HE SERVED on numerous boards and committees involved in auto production. He was also appointed by President Truman as an employer delegate to the Metal Trades Industry Conferences of the International Labor Office in 1946 and '47.

As a result of this experience, he was offered the vice-presidency of Packard as well as post of executive assistant to the president at Nash-Kelvinator. He opted for the job at Nash, eventually merged with Hudson and became American Motors Corp. in 1954. He became chairman of AMC later that year.

During his last term as governor in 1968, he made an unsuccessful bid for the Republican presidential nomination but lost to Richard Nixon. President Nixon took Romney to Washington as HUD secretary during his first term, 1968-72.



DICK KELLEY/staff photographer

A relaxed George Romney sits under family portraits in the den of his Bloomfield Hills home.

INSIDE ANGLES

IF YOU'RE DISSATISFIED how you performed on that run or you're preparing for another, you might want to jog on down to the Providence Hospital clinic on 10 Mile and Haggerty for a runner's clinic on May 1, 7-9 p.m. Two local marathoners and a physician — Doug Kurits, Gary Wolfram and Dr. Bruce Deschere — will speak and answer questions. Kurits is winner of the 1982 Mardi Gras Marathon in New Orleans and took second place in the 1981 Free Press Marathon. Wolfram is winner of the 1981 Dixboro Run and the 1981 Livonia YMCA Run for Youth. Deschere, a member of Providence Hospital's family practice staff, has an interest in sports medicine. He will instruct on nutrition for runner and injury prevention. The clinic is free but reservations should be made by calling 424-3068.

FOREIGN TRAVEL is on the mind of Farmington Hills resident Robert Wesolowski. He presently is making arrangements to accompany an adventure-seeking group on an exciting travel experience abroad. The trip is organized by the American Institute for Foreign Study. Group members of Traditional England will spend three weeks in Cambridge, England, then visit London, Paris, Switzerland and Rome. The trip will be five weeks. Time still exists to sign up. Members of youth, civic, church and social groups are welcome to join this travel group. Those interested should write Wesolowski at 24323 Buchanan Ct., Apt. 1963, Farmington Hills 48018.

JUST AROUND THE CORNER is the North Farmington Fun Run sponsored by the senior board. Scheduled for April 3, it will begin at 11 a.m. in the North Farmington High School student parking lot. The run will be for 3.1 miles. Cost to enter is \$3 for those who register by 2:15 p.m. on April 2 and \$5 for those who register after that. Registration forms may be obtained from the front office at North. Medals and ribbons will be given in four classes: novice, 15 and under; open, 30 and under; master, 45 and under; and senior, 46 and over. Re-

freshments and aid stations will be provided throughout the course. Profits will be put toward the prom costs for the senior class.

LOUIS AND PAN LAN of Farmington Hills have been named go-getting chairmen in that area and Farmington for the 14th annual Chime 56 Auction which will be April 16-24. The Lan family has been active with the auction for five years. The auction will need 8,000 items to insure its success, say the Lans. Merchandise should be new and valued at \$50 or more. Almost any type of items can be donated including appliances, cameras, hardware, jewelry, sports equipment, toys, furniture, artwork. To donate, call auction central at 873-7200.

STILL TIME for those who want to become politically involved in the Oakland Community College scene. Nominating petitions are being sought for election to two seats on the college's board of trustees. The terms are for six years. The election will be June 14. An additional temporary term expires on the same date. Another member therefore will be elected to serve for the two-year balance of the term. Nominating petitions containing the signatures of not less than 50, nor more than 200, registered and qualified voters of the community college district must be filed with Sylvia Escosson, administrative assistant to the president, at the George Bee Administrative Center, 2480 Opdyke Road, Bloomfield Hills, on or before April 27. Nominations must be registered voters of the community college district.

DON'T FORGET about those beard and long locks you'll want to grow for the upcoming Farmington Founders Festival. The Founders Committee is conducting the contest. Those interested must be registered by April 15. Those interested in registering should call Festival Chairman Bob Christ at 476-1324. The committee also welcomes any volunteer help it can get for other events during the Festival.

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