

We won't see Griffiths' equal any time soon

When I founded the company that owns this newspaper back in 1966, Martha Griffiths had already served six terms in the United States House of Representatives.

I had worked with her before then and had wondered at her remarkable career. How she and her husband, Hicks, had been friends with G. Mennen "Soapy" and Nancy Williams and how they had created the modern Michigan Democratic Party and elected Soapy governor in 1948. It was in that same election that Martha had won a seat in the Michigan House, becoming one of only two women state representatives from 1949 to 1952. And how Williams had appointed her to the Detroit Recorder's Court bench.

In 1964, I had been asked by a newly elected Congressman from Kalamazoo, Paul H. Todd Jr., to be his administrative assistant in Washington. Paul was interested in a seat on the Agriculture Committee, and he assigned me the task of figuring out how to get it for him. It was easy. "Go see Martha Griffiths. She's on Ways and Means, which is the 'Committee on Committees,'" everybody told me. "If she likes Paul, he'll be on that committee in no time."

"We did. And she did. And neither Paul nor I ever forgot those sharp eyes, the fierce concentration, the tough questions. And, finally, the big smile written all over her face. 'We'll do it,' she said, and then immediately set to working out how best to maneuver Paul's candidacy adroitly through the political thickets.

Martha's district at the time included Livonia, Redford Township, Westland and Garden City — communities served by my first few newspapers — together with neighborhoods in northwest Detroit. So in a very real sense, she was the first representative in Congress of my publishing career.

And she was a terrific one! She'd drop by my office from time to time when she was in the district to talk — my, how she could talk! — about the Congress, the president, the country, the issues, the gossip.

One day, the big news was how Wilbur Mills, the then-chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, had got caught cavorting in a Washington fountain with Fannie Faye, a woman of dubious reputation. Of course, he had made a fool of himself, and everybody expected he would soon lose his very powerful chairmanship.

"Don't you laugh at Wilbur Mills!" she snorted.

"He may have done something very silly, but there is no human being alive who understands the tax code of the United States as well as he does." It was perfect Martha.

Of course, Martha was famous for wedging women's rights into the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act and for forcing the Equal Rights Amendment out of a House committee, where it had languished since 1923. But her other accomplishments, less well-noted, were certainly enormous. She went after the way Social Security gave the short stick to women and children, worked to better regulate pension funds and close tax loopholes. She thought the insurance industry was profoundly and unfairly stacked against women, and her study of how the welfare system actually treated women and children was a landmark.

In 1982, then-Congressman James Blanchard recruited Martha Griffiths to be his running mate for lieutenant governor. Most observers felt this pick guaranteed Blanchard's election as governor. Martha served for two terms. By the time Blanchard was gearing up to run for a third term in 1990, Martha was 78 and had lost several steps to ill health. Worse, she had lost her sparkle and good humor and had become suspicious and crabby.

Probably egged on by her husband, Hicks, Martha announced to the astonishment of all that she was "available" for a third term. Blanchard did the hard thing but the right thing, picking Libby Maynard to be his running mate against John Engler. Blanchard lost narrowly, and some still think that the ill will that came out of the Martha situation contributed to the losing margin.

I remember going out to Martha's old, white farmhouse in Armada in the mid-1980s. She was going to sign her will, leaving her papers to the University of Michigan. We had a couple of drinks, told a few stories. Then she said, "Well, let's get at it." And she abruptly sat down and signed the papers. Typical Martha.

Martha — in my mind, it has always been "Martha," not "Mrs. Griffiths" or "Congresswoman Griffiths" — was just like that: direct, forthright, funny, generous. Passionate for the right. Concerned about history and her place in it, and certainly deserving of it. We are not likely to see her equal soon again.

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at ppower@hometownpr.com.

International Workers' Day has its roots in U.S. history

Today is May Day, the International Workers' Holiday.

Well, it is pretty much everywhere else in the world, but not in the United States. Here some people celebrate Law Day, which is laudable as such a day might be in reality a slap at the origins of the day.

Of course May Day goes back centuries to pagan celebrations of the spring. Once many years ago, children danced around a May pole and wore flowers in their hair.

But the modern May Day begins with American unionism and the push for the eight-hour day. According to a May Day Web site, May 1, 1886, was the target day set by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions for making the eight-hour day a legal day's work.

This was a particularly brutal period in American labor history. Pay was low, working conditions were dangerous and political and legal power were in the

hands of the owners.

On May 3, 1886, police fired into a crowd of strikers at the McCormick Reaper Works Factory, killing four and wounding many others. The next day, anarchists held a meeting in Chicago's Haymarket Square. When police moved in to disperse the crowd after a peaceful assembly, someone tossed a bomb at the police, killing one and injuring 70. Police responded by firing back, killing one and wounding others. The person who actually threw the bomb was never identified.

Eventually eight Chicago anarchists were arrested in connection with the bombing. One committed suicide and on Nov. 11, 1887, four were hanged. The remaining three were finally pardoned in 1893.

It is highly questionable whether the law was fairly applied in this incident. Many believe that the anarchists were convenient scapegoats.

In time, the labor movement would win its eight-hour day, a fairer share of the profits of business, health care, safer and cleaner working conditions and a prohibition against child labor. In addition, the labor movement would take a leadership position in extending the rights of women and minorities, instituting Social Security and Medicare and promoting other socially progressive causes. Also, the benefits they won for themselves would become the standard for those who did not join.

But the modern May Day begins with American unionism and the push for the eight-hour day.

Our September Labor Day was started in 1882 by the Knights of Labor, marked sporadically but later adopted by the more conservative and established trade unions as preferable to May Day.

May Day continued to be labor day for the more radical elements in the labor movement and was taken up by the international socialist movement. In the heyday of the Soviet Union, it was second only to November's celebration of the revolution. But the day has spread to most countries of the world and its roots are really in the ongoing American struggle for freedom and justice, concepts alien to the former Soviet Union and other Communist countries.

Those freedoms were not handed to us from on high. They were attained through struggle. Sometimes that struggle was violent. It was often contentious.

Law Day was established in 1958 by President Dwight Eisenhower to celebrate our legal heritage. Many communities hold special programs to inform the public about our legal and court system. It's a day for speeches about the glory of the law.

But as it falls on the International Workers' Day, it seems to imply a criticism of labor union activities. The Haymarket incident is just one of many trials and court decisions that used the power of law against those who fought for their economic and political rights. The law is not always fair, not always even-handed, not always impartial. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the law was rarely on the side of unionized workers (or suffragists or activists for African American rights or any progressive movement).

Law Day is a commendable idea. Without the law, we have no structure, no chance to make a case.

But we need to remember that May Day is also an American holiday and a celebration of the struggle to make the law meaningful for everyone.

Anybody have a May pole?

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