

PASSION FOR JUSTICE TELLS HISTORY OF LEGAL AID FOR POOR

It's too late for a Christmas gift but local history buffs would appreciate a history of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland by Carol Poh, local historian. The book is called appropriately "A Passion for Justice" and celebrates 100 years of legal services to those who couldn't afford it.

Cleveland was early to establish legal services to those who had needs but not resources. The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland was a pioneer effort in 1905. Not the first in the nation but an early effort for social justice.

Poh, a friend, notes that in 1925, Newton D. Baker, president of the Cleveland Bar Association wrote that "the law... would fail to be an equal shield for rich and poor" but for the Society.

Too many Clevelanders don't seem to know their history and the book gives some insight into the nature of Cleveland's political culture, which had its progressive streak long before the rise of Dennis Kucinich.

Poh portrays a Cleveland exploding into an "industrial colossus, a magnet for newcomers" to become the sixth largest American city early in the 20th century. Of course, industrialization brought problems that required answers.

"During this period, public-spirited reformers largely rooted in the urban middle class, began to rebel against Victorian individualism and respond, instead to the message of the social gospel. They fomented a revolution – a period of political and social reform that would span the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and come to be known as the Progressive Era," Poh wrote. As she mentions, Tom Johnson, whose statue resides at Public Square's southwest quadrant, became known, thanks to Lincoln Steffens as "as the best mayor of the best governed city" in America during this period.

There are a lot of familiar names of those who toiled to provide legal services to the poor – long-timers as Joe Meissner, Peter Iskin, and the late Lyonel Jones, long-time director. Others served and went on to become legal stars – Gerry Gold, a top defense attorney, Burt Griffin, a Common Pleas Judge and an assistant counsel for the Warren Commission, Merle **Mc Curdy**?, appointed a federal judge by President John Kennedy, and Buddy James who became Cleveland law director under Mayor Carl Stokes. Others will recognize numerous other Cleveland legal names.

Through the years I remember Lyonel Jones had to make an annual trip to City Council for funding purposes. The softest spoken of men, the diminutive Jones usually encountered a hostile reception, particularly from the barbed Fannie Lewis, because Legal Aid represented people who were sometimes troublesome to Council members in their wards.

Jones, however, always got his money and less static than some wanted to give him. What many council members didn't know was that Jones had been a college classmate and friend of Council President George Forbes. Forbes, who is from Memphis, I'm told, spent time with the Jones family. Both attended Baldwin-Wallace College.

One gets a flavor of the times through the century and the understanding that some problems are ubiquitous. An early 1900s report by the agency's single lawyer reports that among the cases were: "Here an installment house foreclosure was held off," and another, "Here the Society found out for a consumptive girl that she was not liable to deportation under the Immigration Laws." Problems of the poor never seem to go away.

Statistics from the past are always interesting. The 1912 report on the nationalities of clients held surprises for me. Four were Finnish, four were Swiss and three Danes of the 1,533 served. Cleveland certainly was a melting pot.

The 1960s and President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society provided federal funding for legal services that could never be matched by private charity. Services expanded from common legal problems to even class action suits as Legal Aid lawyers looked at solving problems that effected classes of the poor, not simply individual cases.

The camaraderie of legal activists at Legal Aid was described as a "MASH unit, and a lawyer had to learn – and learn quickly."

Legal Aid ran into funding troubles as the Reagan era ushered in a time of resentment toward social spending. President Ronald Reagan opposed and tried to shut down the programs that offered aid to those on the lower economic scale. So cutbacks were necessary and "emotionally difficult," as Jones described it.

"A Passion for Justice" portrays 100 years in the life of a Cleveland institution and its participants.

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