



## MICHIGAN CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION

## GEORGE W. ROMNEY – *Businessman, Politician, Volunteer and Civil Rights Hero*

To mark the twentieth anniversary of his passing on July 26, 1995, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission honors one of Michigan's greatest voices for equality. George Wilcken Romney accomplished so much in his 88 years that his enormous contributions to the cause of civil rights are sometimes forgotten. They must not be.

George Romney was born July 8, 1907 in Mexico. US citizens, Romney's parents brought George and his six siblings home in 1912, fleeing the ongoing Mexican revolution. George would later note that this flight from religious persecution placed the family among "the first displaced persons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century."

Life for the Romneys was not easy. They moved often, living in Texas, California, Utah and Idaho. In Idaho, Romney's father became a successful builder until the 1920 depression closed his business. The family returned to Utah and was again prospering when the Great Depression of 1929 left them with nothing but a debt it would take years to pay. Despite attending six different schools and classmates who called him "Mex," George Romney was valedictorian at his grammar school graduation. In high school he lettered in three sports, and met his future wife Lenore. His yearbook described him as "Serious, high minded, of noble nature – a real fellow."

George became a church elder, serving as a missionary in both Glasgow, Scotland where he was exposed to great poverty and the hopelessness it creates, and London where he experienced England's privileged class and high culture. Returning to the states to join Lenore in Washington DC, he worked for a Massachusetts senator, developing the skills and confidence he would later need to deal with state and federal legislatures.

George and Lenore were married in July, 1931 in Washington, DC. In 1939, Romney became manager for the Detroit office of the Automobile Manufacturers Association and moved to Michigan with his wife and two daughters. Their two sons would be born in Michigan.

Spurred by the attack on Pearl Harbor, Romney formed the Automotive Council for War Production. The group joined competitive automakers to work as one in support of the war effort. After the war, Romney encouraged U.S. investments in Europe, testifying before Congress, "We're all like billionaires living in a few mansions in the midst of a vast world ghetto." He led the automobile industry's return to peacetime production, and in Detroit, founded the first ever United Way organization.

By 1955, Romney was president and chairman of the American Motors Corporation. Under his leadership, AMC went from struggling to successful by restructuring itself and redirecting its focus to what Romney coined the "compact car." Romney was the Associated Press "Man of the Year" in Industry for four consecutive years beginning in 1958.

Beginning in 1956, Romney chaired the Citizens Advisory Committee on School Needs in Detroit, a citizen-based group seeking solutions to the problems facing Detroit Schools. CACSND's report, with more than 180 recommendations including better teacher pay, infrastructure improvements and increased efficiency, was largely adopted and George became known as the "spokesman for a better Detroit."

This success emboldened Romney to take on the state's seemingly insurmountable financial crisis. He formed the nonprofit, nonpartisan, Citizens for Michigan with a goal of a similar restructuring of state government. Concluding the only way forward was to change the State's constitution, Romney and Citizens for Michigan led a successful push for a constitutional convention. Romney formally entered politics for the first time as a Republican Delegate to the Constitutional Convention and was elected chairman.

As Chairman, Romney also championed the cause of civil rights. He was among the most effective advocates for including civil rights guarantees and provisions to protect those guarantees. The Michigan Civil Rights Commission, the only state body in the country with constitutional authority, is an ongoing testament to his success.

Romney, who believed restructuring would not be effective if it was not accompanied by new leadership, was persuaded become the Republican candidate for Governor. He took on the sitting governor and won decisively.

In his inaugural speech on January 1, 1963, Romney called residential segregation a "crucial and pressing problem." Among his first acts as Governor was to appoint co-chairs to lead the new Civil Rights Commission - Damon Keith and John Feikens. His appointment of one white and one Black person to serve as equals sent a clear message about what the MCRC stood for. In his first State of the State address, Romney declared that "Michigan's most urgent human rights problem is racial discrimination—in housing, public accommodations, education, administration of justice, and employment."

During his tenure as Governor, civil rights were never far from the public consciousness, and Romney never shied away from his convictions. He personally participated in many civil rights marches. In 1963 he appeared, uninvited, at an NAACP demonstration against housing discrimination in Grosse Pointe. Asked to speak, he proudly described his role in enshrining the Commission in the constitution, stating: "This document is the clearest, strongest, most complete statement of civil rights of any constitution in the land."

As a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1967, Romney, against the advice of his advisors, visited the poorest neighborhoods in 17 American cities. He explained that "We must rouse ourselves from our comfort, pleasure, and preoccupations and listen to the voices from the Ghetto." Civil rights, residential segregation and what we would now call economic disparities were central campaign themes.

President Richard Nixon appointed George Romney as the nation's first Secretary for Housing and Urban Development. Secretary Romney created "Operation Breakthrough," a program to further fair housing, breaking what he called the "white noose" by opening white suburbia to African-Americans. He argued that low income housing should not be built in disadvantaged communities where it only added to existing segregation and placed additional students into schools that were already overburdened.

After leaving the cabinet, Romney focused on promoting volunteerism. He became chair and CEO of the National Center for Voluntary Action and guided it through mergers into the National Volunteer Center. When President Bush created the Points of Light Foundation in 1990, Romney received its first lifetime achievement award. When he was later asked to chair the Foundation, he merged the two organizations. George Romney's final speech promoted this important cause.

Now U.S. 6th Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Damon Keith, who Romney had named to co-chair the newly-created Michigan Civil Rights Commission, stated "I never once thought that anything that Governor Romney did . . . had anything to do with politics. It came from his heart and his belief that everybody should be treated equally."

After Romney's passing, then Governor John Engler said, "I look back in awe at his bold efforts to make state government serve our citizens better. His contributions to Michigan's current constitution were unparalleled; his commitment to civil rights, ahead of its time; his determination to making government more accessible to the people, a model for every chief executive in the nation."

But perhaps George Romney himself summed it up best. In July, 1987, reflecting on his failed White House bid, Romney, in a rare moment of immodesty, offered "You can't be too right too soon and win elections."

George Romney was indeed a man ahead of his time. This Commission honors him today for being right in his belief in the equality of all people, and for tirelessly fighting to make it a reality for all Americans.



Adopted on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of July, 2015, by the MICHIGAN CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION

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