

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

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The “Radio Priest” delivers first sermon in Detroit

It was unlikely anyone predicted that Catholic priest Father Charles Coughlin, who took the pulpit for the first time in suburban Detroit on Oct. 17, 1926 would become one of the most influential men in American politics, hosting a national radio show that spewed his anti-Semitic views.

The same year that he started preaching, Coughlin appeared on radio to reach a wider audience Coughlin turned to radio after Detroit’s bishop asked Coughlin to open a church in Royal Oak in 1926. Coughlin needed to raise money, and he noted that no other priest had taken to the airwaves. He convinced a Catholic manager at WJR to give him a radio show.

Coughlin proved adept at raising money over the airwaves. His fundraising paid for his church, the National Shrine of the Little Flower, a landmark on Woodward Avenue in Royal Oak. At first, Coughlin talked about religion on his show but soon branched into politics as his popularity grew. His message attracted millions of listeners. At the height of his heyday, one in three people in the country tuned in to the weekly broadcast of the Radio Priest

He founded a newspaper, Social Justice, to further spread his views. A new post office had to be built in Royal Oak to handle the 80,000 letters he received each week. His views were complicated, he staunchly opposed communism but he also opposed wealthy industrialists who controlled the means of production, and he was an ardent supporter of unions. He was one of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s staunchest supporters. However, Coughlin decided Roosevelt’s reforms did not go far enough and that Roosevelt was not committed to driving “the money changers from the temple.” Then Coughlin became one of Roosevelt’s loudest detractors.

Although he claimed he was not an anti Semite, Coughlin remained consistent in his anti Jewish views. He cloaked his hatred for Jews in code language, referring to “international bankers” and blaming Communism on “Karl Marx, a Hebrew.” He defended the actions of the Nazis as necessary to stop the spread of Communism and attempted to use his clout to prevent the U.S. from entering World War II. Perhaps the war took the wind out of Coughlin’s demagoguery or perhaps he was silenced by the Catholic Church. The Roosevelt administration took steps to remove Coughlin from the air and prevent the distribution of his publication through the mail.

Coughlin ceased broadcasting in 1942. He remained a priest until his retirement in 1966 and died in 1979 at the age of 88.