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Global clients, young attorneys counted on Fitch

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Morgan L. Fitch Jr., former managing partner of Fitch, Even, Tabin & Flannery LLP, was one of the longest-serving partners at one of Chicago's oldest law firms.

As "captain of the ship" at Fitch Even, he helped expand the intellectual property law firm's size for more than 50 years and maintained strong relationships with the firm's longtime clients.

Fitch died Nov. 18 in Kalamazoo, Mich., just three days before his 91st birthday.

The captain label was a fitting one for a World War II naval veteran who dedicated much of his post-war life to developing young people into naval leaders.

"It's probably the way he'd put it too," said [Joseph T. Nabor](#), a Fitch Even partner.

His colleagues remember him for his work mentoring young attorneys and for his part in helping major global brands, such as Kraft Foods, obtain patents for the products they invented.

Born and raised on the South Side in 1922, Fitch graduated from the Illinois Institute of Technology in 1943 with a degree in chemical engineering before enlisting in the Navy, where he served as a radar officer in the Pacific Theater from 1943 until 1946.

After the war, he earned a degree from the University of Michigan Law School in 1948. That same year, he joined the firm that would eventually include his name.

Fitch's role at the firm was primarily in patent prosecution — counseling clients on patent laws for their inventions; filing applications with the United States' and foreign countries' patent offices; and then working with those offices to ensure patents were granted.

To get a patent, the offices must see in specific detail how and why a proposed idea was a new one.

"They put you to task to prove that this is really an invention," Nabor said. "Morgan's expertise was succeeding in getting through that process and getting patents for clients."

Nabor said Fitch's background in chemistry served him well in understanding the creation and production of clients' products inside their research laboratories.

“They worked to develop the product and he would stand there elbow-to-elbow and learn what it is the inventor discovered so he could explain it to the rest of the world,” Nabor said.

Fitch eventually added Kraft Foods as a client. The firm was a small business selling cheese out of a horse-drawn wagon in Chicago in the 1910s. Kraft and its corporate offshoots remain clients today.

During Fitch’s time with the firm, he helped Kraft secure patents for some of the most recognizable products in the world.

“He went right down into the labs and worked with them on Miracle Whip, Philadelphia Cream Cheese and (Jet-Puffed) mini marshmallows,” said Ruth White, Fitch’s daughter. “He really enjoyed that. I think he liked the chemistry almost better than the law.”

Among hundreds of other clients Fitch worked with were Cargill and the Institute of Paper Chemistry.

White said her father enjoyed mentoring others the most.

“He did a lot of working with young people in various venues of his life,” she said.

In 1950, Fitch joined the Chicago Council of the Navy League of the United States, a civilian support group to support sailors and veterans.

Within a few years, he helped the organization create the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps, a program that offers leadership development and maritime training to teenagers across the country.

In the Sea Cadets’ congressional charter from 1962, Fitch was listed as a director alongside another influential Chicago Navy veteran — Bears patriarch George S. Halas.

Fitch served as the Navy League’s national president from 1965 through 1967.

Nabor said Fitch’s passion for mentoring extended to his legal practice as well.

“He didn’t let you rest on the easy way,” he said. “He drove people to do their best all the time.”

Fitch was never one to bask in acclaim for his work, Nabor said.

“He would rather you develop your own talents, and he’d watch and guide you even at his own expense,” he said.

Partner [Joseph E. Shipley](#) joined the firm in 1982 and now handles many of Fitch’s former clients.

“I took my first deposition at his side,” Shipley said. “He was very demanding — everything had to be done right, but he would teach you how to do it right.”

Another partner, [Timothy P. Maloney](#), remembers working as a law clerk for Fitch in 1991 and being called into the managing partner’s office. Fitch simply wanted to check in, he said.

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program," Maloney said. "He would allow you to really see what it takes to provide good service to a client."

Clients also benefited from his guidance, Maloney said. Fitch worked for so many years with some clients that he preceded many clients' in-house attorneys. Maloney said Fitch often knew more about products than the companies themselves.

"He truly was sort of a historical resource for some of these in-house folks," he said. "You could sense how much the clients were aware of that deep knowledge of their business."

Fitch retired in 2006. He is survived by his wife Helen, four children, eight grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren.

Memorial visitation will be held on Saturday at the Tews Funeral Home, 18230 Dixie Hwy., in Homewood, from noon until a 2:30 p.m. memorial service.

