

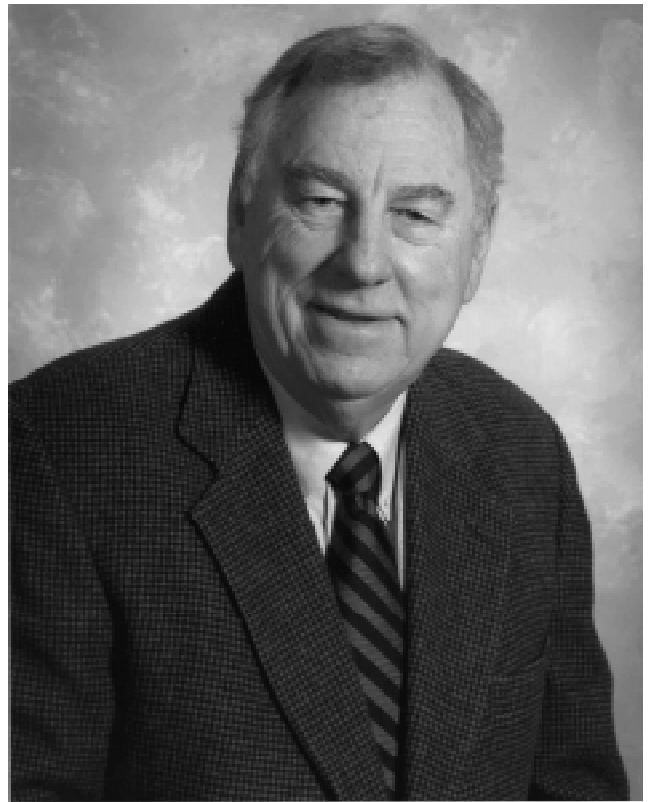
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2003 OZARKS AMBASSADOR AWARD RECIPIENT

Jack Holt is down on the farm after a career up at the courts. He is a smart cookie with a soft heart.

By Kyle Brazzel
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

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Jack Holt Jr.

On a leafy farm tucked away off Arkansas 10, Jack Holt coos soothingly to two horses, three dogs and a black cat. He is an all-around animal whisperer, and the grandfatherly grativas in his voice carries rewards equivalent to sugar cubes, ham bones and warm saucers of milk.

The shambling, sweet-talking demeanor that Holt affects reflects nothing of the lightning-tongued trial lawyer who chomped hard at the court martials he argued as a young Air Force judge advocate general. That was his first of many legal posts in a career that culminated as chief justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court from 1985 to 1995.

"I'd get pretty wound up, especially in closings," the 73-year-old Holt recalls, gingerly shooing Snoop the cat from his lap as he sits surveying his 26 acres.

"We had a lady court reporter, Miss Alice. She was up in years, taking notes

in old pen and ink. She had one of these old bells sitting on the table, and every time I'd go too fast, she'd start banging that bell. The first time she did that, I jumped six feet."

Today, Holt jumps only for his menagerie, his three grandchildren, and his wife, Jane. In his legal career, he grabbed headlines as a trial lawyer, first a prosecutor and later a defense attorney whose practice ran toward cases that demanded media and public attention.

As the state's chief justice, he grabbed his share of a family political dynasty crafted by his father, Jack Holt Sr., a former Arkansas attorney general and senatorial and gubernatorial candidate, and his uncle, former state Supreme Court Justice Frank Holt.

Within the past year, with Holt living more as animal handler than political animal, friends within the state

Democratic Party encouraged him to run on their ticket for a gubernatorial nomination of his own. He told callers if he received three letters suggesting a run, he'd call it a mandate and make a run. He received no letters.

Holt believes a position of repose becomes him. Besides, though he professes a childlike love of souvenirs, he isn't holed up with his. He has an operation to run. It's Forestwood Farm, the Tennessee racking horse breeding and showing business into which he stepped to fill the void left by Tom Lovett, Jane's late husband.

Jane Holt is a red-headed spitfire who paints, serves as the resident horse

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Jack Holt to be Honored

expert and tolerates her husband's bird dogs Freddie, Billie Sue and Sam, while she initiates him to the racking arena, where that equine gait is showcased. Jack Holt was set to ride the horses in their competitions (the farm has birthed many a grand world champion) but back problems sidelined him. "I was looking forward to being in a show ring," he says, sounding a bit forlorn.

Holt has also inherited a surrogate father role to Lady Jane and Cold Steel, retirees like him. Cold Steel is a former grand world champion racking horse; Lady Jane has given birth to several. While young up-and-comers owned by the farm train for shows at stables in other states, these two are kept around out of respect, deference for past glories.

"My cohorts," Holt calls them. "The old woman and the old man. We understand each other."

But Holt, the man who used the bench to revolutionize drug-offender and juvenile adjudication, understands something else about the molasses pace of life on the farm, and his place in it. "I'm in a transition phase," he says.

"I've had a career as a trial lawyer, a career as a judge, a career in the Air Force, a career as a Reserve officer. Since all that, I've been more or less a gentleman farmer, bird dog man. I've been blessed. But I'm not one to sit still. It's trite, but there's the old expression: you stop, you drop."

Becoming Jack

From his birth in Harrison, Holt was called Sam Wilson. But that name stuck only until the stubborn boy was old enough to comprehend that the neighbor girl up the street was called Sammy.

"Everybody teased me and told me I had a girl's name," he says. "When we moved to Little Rock, I told the folks, 'I ain't going to school with no girl's name.'

Best I can recall, I walked out of the back door of the school because they were calling me Sam. The only male I really knew was Dad, so I picked 'Jack.' "

The move to Little Rock stemmed from Jack Holt Sr.'s 1936 election to the office of Arkansas attorney general. The "new" Jack Holt Jr. was 7. Answering to his idea of an appropriately masculine name did little to soothe his tempestuous spirit.

"I had somewhat of a stormy disposition," he recalls. "The reason I say that, I remember at Pulaski Heights Junior High, they had a paper called the *Tiptop Times*, and they had a little profile of people, like a weather profile. They'd list 'sunny,' things like that. There was my name, as 'stormy.' "

Football tamed Holt—indirectly. Around high school age, he moved with his family to Louisiana, where he enrolled in a sprawling high school. Holt felt like a mere face in the crowd.

What's worse, he feared that his anonymity at such a large school would leave him benched during football season. "Then I ran into two Pennsylvania Dutch Catholic brothers," he recalls. "They were going to a smaller school. They said, 'Come on over here, man, we're a small school, you can play!'"

Holt switched his enrollment to the school, operated by Jesuits: "I got over there and all these guys were running around in their black robes. I thought, 'This is going to be a push.' I had been there about a week and I found out who was in control. I found out the Jesuits and the Brothers of the Sacred Hearts are real disciplinarians. The robes are very deceiving, to say the least."

Holt's path to a black robe of his own straightened further at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, where he roomed with North Little Rock native Stanley

Bradshaw, who now owns Rye Fine Furniture.

Bradshaw recalls the postwar sentiment on college campuses—returning soldiers with wives and children studying on the GI Bill—as having a sobering effect on the fresh high school graduates. He and Holt were not immune to this influence, he recalls.

After his graduation from the University of Arkansas' School of Law, Holt applied for the Air Cadet Program to serve in the ongoing Korean War, but was rejected due to his corrected vision. Instead, he served the Air Force as a judge advocate general, practicing military law. He would remain a reservist throughout his career.

Returning from military service, he worked as a deputy prosecutor and as chief deputy in the office of the Arkansas attorney general. But he became known in the first leg of his career as a fire-and-brimstone trial lawyer.

Emotional Defense

In his memorabilia-laden home office, Holt shuffles through old newspaper clippings—he has reams—to find an early description of his courtroom demeanor. He reads it aloud: "Holt has been described as a country-preacher lawyer who makes fiery, emotional final statements."

In his own defense, he says, "I always felt like, particularly in criminal cases, it is an emotional happening. Dad was the same way. He and I are emotional people."

"Jack taught me to speak up in the courtroom," says Sam Perroni, a trial lawyer whose name has become as well-known as those of his defendants.

"His daddy was an old orator, an old school attorney back when they didn't have sound systems," Perroni continues. "He was literally a stumper, a guy who

would stand on a tree stump to get high enough to talk to people. If you're going to do that, you have to learn to speak up. Jack had this booming voice in the courtroom."

Perroni became an instant protégé of Holt's in the mid-1970s when he located the legal research that helped Holt acquit Susan McMillian, a defendant accused of poisoning her doctor husband with arsenic. A young lawyer new to Arkansas, Perroni was serving as a legal researcher for hire when he found a precedent declaring the prosecution's exhumation and autopsy of the body unlawful. Holt's client, aided by Perroni's skilled research, was given a directed verdict of innocent.

"Jack had an uncanny knack of being able to develop a defense theme and stick with it through the trial," Perroni recalls. "I also owe him my cross-examination techniques. He taught me how to find a rhythm."

Years of representing clients from all stations left Holt coming across as a man of the people. In fact, his folksy nature, slow drawl and kind, creased face project an image of guilelessness, a man-child helpful to the point of bumbling intrusion.

Don't be fooled, says Chris Thomas, who apprenticed under Holt as a young lawyer before following him to the Supreme Court staff.

Thomas had assisted Holt in preparation for a murder trial in Jefferson County and rode with his mentor to the courthouse for trial: "We're getting out of the vehicle, and of course I, being the dutiful younger lawyer, grabbed the big old box of exhibits and files and started to carry them in for the esteemed trial lawyer. Jack said, 'You can't do that! I'll carry my own boxes. There might be some jurors watching.' "

Holt made a name for himself handling sensational cases like McMillian's and that of lawyer Bill McArthur, accused of conspiring with former client Mary "Lee" Orsini to kill his wife, Alice McArthur. Orsini is serving a life sentence for her part in the crime. A grand jury declined to indict McArthur in 1983.

There were run-ins with then-Pulaski County Sheriff Tommy Robinson, who investigated the crime and doggedly pursued McArthur. Holt and fellow attorney Jack Lassiter traveled in pairs, saying that they feared sheriff's deputies would plant cocaine on them during staged traffic stops. But it isn't headlines that leave the most lasting portrait of Holt the lawyer.

Bradshaw, a nonlawyer, says it best: "He's like a big old shaggy dog. Everybody likes him."

In his early practice, Holt administered several adoptions for childless couples he knew from Little Rock Air

Force Base, even driving newborn twins in his car to make a Christmas Eve delivery to the adoptive parents.

"Those are some of the great memories I have," he says, chuckling.

In the course of Holt's defense work, he—like his father—cultivated a reputation as a bleeding-heart rehabilitation advocate. The reputation began when he and Philip Kaplan represented inmates in a lawsuit that eventually saw the operating system of Arkansas' prisons declared unconstitutional. It continued as he later lobbied for probation for first-time offenders, a position his father had adopted in his later-in-life career as a Little Rock municipal judge.

"Years ago, Jack's secretary was explaining how you knew Jack would always be a good lawyer," recalls Thomas. "Because he's just plain nice. I always thought that was a good summary of Jack Holt Jr."

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ROBING CEREMONY - Jack Holt Jr. is shown with his father, Jack Holt Sr. (left), and his two daughters, Kelly and Candace, during his robing ceremony in 1985 as Chief Justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court. Also watching is Justice Darryl Hickman.

Hometown to Fete Holt

The High Court

Arkansas Supreme Court chief justices are born, by electoral process, rather than made. So all Holt had to do was throw his hat in the ring to put another Holt on the state's highest bench.

Jack Holt Sr. was a campaign veteran whose colorful—and ultimately unsuccessful—bid against Sid McMath for governor found him leading hymns and handing out bags of flour. By contrast, “my campaign was very low-key,” Holt recalls. “Mostly it was speaking on my background and training as a lawyer.”

Although the younger Holt's causes in the court would eventually brand him a reformer, elected judges are prohibited from running issues-oriented campaigns. “Mother and Dad were able to get out,” he remembers. “Mother loved to politick, too. They'd go to rallies and picnics in places like Portia, Corning and Piggott, on the Fourth of July.”

Having worked as a lawyer under Holt, Thomas signed on as campaign manager for the 1964 chief justice race. “Jack's biggest strength is an inexhaustible sense of energy,” says Thomas. “At the time he was running for office, he was 55 and I was 35 and he just ran me into the ground.”

Unopposed for the Democratic nomination, Holt faced Jim Johnson in the general election. Johnson had been a Democratic nominee for governor, but flip-flopped to the Republican Party to run against Holt. He was a noted segregationist of his day. Holt handily defeated him.

Immediately following his own 1985 swearing-in ceremony as chief justice, Holt swore in Justice Tom Glaze, who still sits on the court.

“Jack was an outstanding chief in the way that he not only had a full understanding of the law, he was also in essence a reformer,” says Glaze. “Judges are pretty staid, but you can take on issues

involving the administration of justice. And under that umbrella authority, he acted.”

Holt never believed matters of juvenile justice should fall under the jurisdiction of county judges, for whom the title of “judge” is a courtesy rather than a strict reflection of legal expertise. He wrote the opinion that placed juvenile matters with municipal courts, the forum his father cherished, essentially rendering those courts specialists in family law. He was also instrumental in creating the drug diversion courts, lightening caseloads and creating more opportunities for drug rehabilitation for first-time offenders.

“Jack always kept his mind open,” Glaze adds. “He was tough on the issues, but he also has a sensitive side. He can get his feelings hurt. We meet twice a week, in opinion and decision conferences, and cast votes. Sometimes he would get very sensitive, but that was the good part about Jack, too.”

As a Supreme Court member, “I had to put my showmanship aside,” says Holt, the former courtroom firebrand. As an alternative to his earlier image, he developed a personal, conversational style, favoring participants' actual names in his writings over the traditional labels “appellant” and “appellee.”

“To the average guy on the street, these issues were not barnburners,” he says. “Being on the court is very cloistered.”

That cloistered existence—a phrase Holt has used repeatedly in describing the life of a justice—is what ultimately led to his decision to retire in 1995, six years shy of his second term's expiration.

“Had I been able to turn the role of chief over, I probably would have stayed on,” he says now. “It was a Herculean task.”

End of an Era

Unless Holt makes an unforeseen return to politics, his familial association with that arena may have expired. Neither Candace nor Kelly, Holt's daughters from

an earlier marriage, are interested in politics. Likewise for their husbands or the myriad cousins who come from his father's family of seven Holt children. (A cousin, J. Seaborn Holt, also served on the state Supreme Court.)

Holt wouldn't mention the family's redirection if it didn't bother him a little. In a hallway in his home, he has a framed letter from President Kennedy. Holt has nearly worn a hole in the glass where he runs his fingers over the spot where Kennedy's assistant mistyped, and rather than ordering a new copy typed, the president scratched out the erroneous word and corrected it by hand.

“What does that say?” Holt wonders aloud, reading between the lines of the scribbling. “It says he was economical. He didn't want to waste anything.”

Famously, it was Holt who sent Bill Clinton packing for his first gainful employment in Washington. After working for Frank Holt's unsuccessful campaign for governor in the summer of 1966, Clinton had no money to return to school at Georgetown. So Holt offered to call his friend Lee Williams, chief of staff for Sen. J. William Fulbright.

Williams said he didn't have any full-time job opportunities, but he did have two part-time jobs open. Clinton, the story goes, said he'd take both of them. “Every once in a while,” Holt recalls wistfully, “the president [Clinton] says, ‘You're the one that got me into all this mess.’”

A stretch of life's road still lies before Holt, and he's staying in shape. Afternoon visitors departing from his home are often entreated to drop him off at the mailbox so he can collect the mail. He insists on covering the half-mile back on foot for the exercise. The final view of Holt is from behind, disappearing behind his gate and up the bend, with a long, scenic walk ahead of him.



Holt's Harrison Roots Run Deep

Near the end of his father's life, Jack Holt Jr. says, "Dad was infirm and had shades of senility." His parents' home in Little Rock is situated where it overlooks a golf course, the Arkansas River, and the cliffs of Fort Roots Hospital. "People would come to visit my dad," Holt continues with a sad smile, "and he would point to the golf course and say, 'There's the pasture.' He would point to the river and say, 'There's Crooked Creek,' and he would look at the cliffs and say, 'There's Gaither Mountain.' He thought he was home."

Holt's family ties are strong in Boone County. "I selected Harrison as the place to open my campaign for Chief Justice," he points out. "I've always thought of Harrison as my roots—not only because of my dad, but my aunts, uncles, and cousins."

Born May 18, 1929 in Harrison, Holt moved to Little Rock with his parents in 1937, following his father's election as Attorney General. However, young Jack returned home each summer to visit relatives until the start of World War II.

"I would stay with the J.B. Holt family or the Claude Holt family," Holt says, "and we would swim at Sims Hole on Crooked Creek."

Holt usually rode the bus on his return to Little Rock, but once his father arranged for him to catch a ride with the sheriff, who was taking an inmate to Cummings Prison. "I can remember being scared," he says. "I had never seen an inmate before."

Although his trips to Harrison were less frequent in later years, local connections continued in Holt's life.

"When I was in the Air Force in the early 1950s, I was stationed near Tucson," Holt reports. "My roommate came in one day and told me, 'Man, you have it made! You have a cousin who is the base commander's secretary. The only thing is, she called you Sammy.'"

Holt, who later had his name changed to Jack Wilson Holt, Jr., was born Samuel Wilson Holt and known in Harrison as Sammy. Although he quickly became acquainted with his cousin, Mary Lee Holt, he had a good excuse for not immediately remembering her. After all, she was his second cousin, and he had 32 first cousins.

After leaving active service as a JAG officer, Holt frequently was appointed by Federal Judge J. Smith Henley of Harrison to represent indigent defendants. In those days, the service was rendered without pay.

"It was good training and gave me an opportunity to participate in jury trials," Holt notes, "so I enjoyed the relationship."

"After a few years, Judge Henley released me from my bondage," Holt

continues with a chuckle, "then, in the late 60s, he called and said, 'Jack, I have a Christmas present for you, but you might not want it.'"

At the time, Henley was reviewing several lawsuits filed by Arkansas prison inmates. In fact, there were enough cases that Henley decided to appoint one or more lawyers to represent the group as a class.

Henley paired what he considered a good mix: Holt, a conservative, because of his background in criminal practice as both prosecutor and defense counsel, with Little Rock civil rights attorney Phillip Kaplan to handle a case that would last 10 years before the Arkansas Department of Corrections, in Holt's words, finally became "constitutionally tolerable."

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OZARKS AMBASSADOR AWARD

The Ozarks Ambassador Award will be presented to Jack Holt Jr. during the Foundation's annual Evening on the Plaza Dinner Friday, May 9, 2003. The dinner will be held in the conference center of the John Paul Hammerschmidt Business and Conference Center on Northark's South Campus at 6:30 p.m. It will be preceded by a reception on the JPH Plaza at the college from 6 to 6:30 p.m.

Established in 1990, the Ozarks Ambassador Award is presented to someone from northern Arkansas who has represented the area with distinction nationwide in one or more of the following fields: agriculture, finance, medicine, education, politics, law, business, social services, the ministry, or industry. Robert M. Eagle of Dallas, TX., was the 1990 recipient; James H. Jones of San Francisco, CA, was honored in 1991; David R. Banks, now of Fort Smith, received the award in 1992; William P. Stiritz of St. Louis, MO, was the 1993 honoree; James F. Keenan of Palm Beach, FL, received the honor in 1994; Dr. Ronald C. Jones of Dallas, TX, was the 1995 recipient; Tom and Don Salmon of Little Rock were honored in 1996; John Paul Hammerschmidt of Harrison was recognized in 1997; C.D. Wright of Barriington, RI, was the 1998 honoree; Sheridan Garrison of Harrison was presented with the award in 1999; David Perry of Mountain View, Calif., was the 2000 recipient; and University of Arkansas Chancellor Dr. John A. White was honored in 2002. The award was not presented in 2001. Instead, the Foundation recognized retiring North Arkansas College President Dr. Bill Baker at the BBB Bar-B-Que and Blow-Out.

Holt to Receive Ozarks Ambassador Award May 9

Initially, Holt and Kaplan were not paid anything for handling the case as it was civil in nature, but Holt thought he would at least receive expenses. An avid pilot, he called Judge Henley and said, "I know this is going to sound grandiose, but I can fly my plane back and forth to the prison at less expense than it would cost me to drive."

There was a pause on the other end of the line before Henley responded, "Jack, I guess I forgot to tell you, but we don't have any expenses for you at the federal level. I suggest you travel as cheap as possible!"

Holt says he and Henley, who had a wonderful, dry sense of humor, frequently talked about Harrison and its people during recesses in their trails.

As an example of Henley's wit, Holt recalls representing a defendant who insisted on testifying to protest an unfit

psychiatric evaluation he received at the federal prison hospital in Springfield, Mo. Holt asked the man what the staff doctor said about him. It didn't matter, the man replied, because the doctor was an inmate, too.

Holt asked his client if other members of the medical staff had examined him. The man agreed that he had been staffed with other doctors in conference, so Holt asked him what they had to say.

"He shifted his eyes around like a copperhead snake, looked up at the bench, pointed at Judge Henley, and said, 'They ask about Judge Henley!'" Holt says. Holt decided no further questions were necessary. Then Henley asked the prosecutor if he wanted to cross-examine the defendant. "No, your honor," the prosecutor said, to which Henley replied, "I thought you might want to ask him what they thought about you!" Holt's

client was returned to Springfield for treatment.

The last time Jack Holt visited North Arkansas College, he was pulled over by a state trooper for speeding. "The trooper asked me where I was going in such a hurry," says the retired Arkansas Supreme Court Chief Justice, "and I replied, 'To teach a seminar on criminal justice!'" He got by with a warning ticket after promising to behave.

Holt's mother, Margaret Spikes Holt, at age 94, still lives in her Little Rock home overlooking the golf course, Arkansas River, and cliffs of Fort Roots Hospital. When Jack Holt Sr. died Dec. 17, 1998, he was cremated and his ashes were buried in a small family cemetery "near his pasture and crooked creek, and in sight of Gaither Mountain," Jack Holt says. "It just seemed appropriate to take him back home."

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