

Three Men Named Holt

By Jacqueline S. Wright Walker



Three men named Holt have served at various times on the Arkansas Supreme Court. James Seaborn Holt was the first. He was followed by his first cousin, Joseph Franklin Holt; then Frank's nephew, Jack Wilson Holt, Jr., served. All were originally from Boone County. But the yen for statewide office was felt first by Frank's older brother, Jack Wilson Holt, Sr. Although Jack Holt, Sr., never sought office on the state Supreme Court, he was the political trailblazer for the others; therefore his story also will be told.

Each of these four men received his undergraduate education at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. Three received their law degrees there. Seaborn took his J.D. at the University of Virginia. They each practiced law in Arkansas. Seaborn practiced in Ft. Smith, and the others ended up in Little Rock.

Jack Wilson Holt was born in Harrison, Arkansas, in 1903. In 1928, the year after he was admitted to the bar, he was elected prosecuting attorney of the 14th judicial district and served in that office until 1935. During that time there was a feud in Searcy County between two families. A member of one family bushwhacked a member of the other family and killed him. The murder case was to be tried before Circuit Judge J. F. Koone at the Searcy County Courthouse in Marshall. On the day of trial the defendant's family rode in with their horse pistols and dismissed the jury. They saw no need for a trial. Judge Koone could not get cooperation from local law enforcement; therefore the trial ended.

Prosecuting Attorney Jack Holt did see a need for a trial in this case and announced that he would run for circuit judge to restore law and order to Searcy County. After he was elected in 1934, he called on the governor for help from the National Guard. The Harrison guard unit did not have any ammunition, so the governor mobilized the Clarksville Guard, which came to Marshall by train. The defendant was convicted with

Judge Jack Holt presiding.

In the next general election Jack Holt ran for Attorney General. A popular candidate, he served for six years from 1937 until 1943. Although he never won another statewide office, his early popularity with the voters set the stage for the other members of his family.

The next Holt to seek statewide office was Jack Holt's first cousin, James Seaborn Holt, who ran for the Arkansas Supreme Court and was elected in 1938, the year after Jack took office as Attorney General. Little known outside northwest Arkansas, Seaborn took with him the unanimous endorsement of the Ft. Smith bar. Nineteen years Jack's senior, Cousin Seab had a distinguished career in Ft. Smith. He served as Assistant U.S. Attorney of the Western District of Arkansas for three years, 1917 to 1920, and was given a temporary appointment as U.S. Attorney for 1920 to 1921. He campaigned hard for the state high court, visiting all but two counties. But he also had the Holt name. Listed on the ballot, not as James Seaborn, but as J.S. Holt, he won a narrow victory over his opponent, Justice W. R. Donham, who was serving on the Supreme Court by appointment to fill an unexpired term.

The timing of Seab's appearance on the political scene may have been precipitated by his cousin's success, but his decision to seek judicial office was not a new idea. As a college student he was befriended by one of his professors, Charles Hillman Brough, an economist, who remained his friend throughout their lifetimes. Brough, who entered politics and served as governor from 1917 to 1921, presented him with a book in 1930, with the inscription, "To James Seaborn Holt, a future Arkansas Judge. From his friend, Charles Hillman Brough."

Seaborn was a studious, intellectual man of slight build. He was quiet but outgoing and generous. He and his wife had no children of their own, but they mentored many young men. Five of them at various times lived

in the couple's home while attending high school and college. Seaborn also gave office space and legal coaching to a number of young lawyers just starting out in the legal profession.

J. Seaborn Holt retired from the Arkansas Supreme Court in 1961, after serving as Associate Justice for 23 years. An *Arkansas Gazette* editorial praised his intelligent conservatism. He died in an automobile accident in 1963.

[The legal careers of Joseph Franklin Holt and Jack Wilson Holt, Jr., will be covered in the next issue.]

Sources:

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