

Jackson Birthdays 2006, 1946 & 1892

*John Q. Barrett**
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February 13, 2006, marked the 114th anniversary of Robert Houghwout Jackson's birth in Spring Creek, Pennsylvania.

In 1946, Justice Jackson celebrated—twice—his 54th birthday in Nuremberg, Germany. As February 13th approached in that momentous year and setting, Jackson decided to invite the judges of the International Military Tribunal and his fellow prosecutors to his house for cocktails. Because the prosecution cases were winding down, it was a suitable time for social activities. Before Jackson got his invitations out, however, his British counterpart David Maxwell-Fyfe grabbed the date. He invited many, including Jackson, to his house for dinner and dancing unrelated to Jackson's birthday. Jackson accepted that invitation, deciding to let his birthday pass privately. ["His house," by the way, does not refer to something that either Jackson or Maxwell-Fyfe acquired by a voluntary transaction. In Nuremberg following World War II, the leading prosecutors and other Allied personnel inhabited houses on the outskirts of the city—some of which were very fine houses—that the occupying force, the United States Army, had seized from their German owners; Jackson's house was secured by armed guards.]

In this same early 1946 period, Jackson received word that President Truman had, at Jackson's request, nominated Jackson's executive officer Colonel Robert J. Gill for promotion to brigadier general, and that the Senate had confirmed the appointment. Jackson promptly invited about 60 guests, including the British and American judges of the IMT and much of Jackson's U.S. prosecutorial staff, to his house on February 12, 1946, for a buffet supper in honor of the new General Gill.

At that gathering, Jackson toasted Gill and the crowd drank to his health. Then, as all were eating, Justice Jackson's core staff, including his secretary Elsie Douglas, General Gill and supply officer Captain John Vonetes, surprised Justice Jackson by wheeling in a big, one-day-early birthday cake and a tray of gifts. Gill presented to Jackson a placard written

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in German—a language that Jackson, although working in Germany as the chief prosecutor of the surviving Nazi leaders, conspicuously did not know. Over much laughter, Jackson begged off, swearing that he had misplaced his reading glasses.

General Gill, representing Justice Jackson's immediate staff, then gave him a beautiful gold watch with fancy calendar and stopwatch features. Gill described it as the best watch that Captain Vonetes could get away from the Russians, which caused Jackson to remark that if he could learn the time of day from the Russians, that would be the first information he had been able to get out of them. (Jackson suspected, in fact, that Vonetes had gotten the watch from Switzerland, and that he probably had gotten it illegally—Vonetes had very special talents, including in black market procurement.) Jackson's other gifts included a fiddle (so that he could accompany his assistant Sidney Alderman, an accomplished violinist), some books, some neckties and, from his original OSS liaison officer, Major Lawrence A. Coleman, Jr., suspenders to replace the Jackson suspenders that memorably had given out, on his person and in front of his then-new staff, on a trip from New York to London in June 1945.

The following evening, Jackson's actual birthday, he and many of the same group attended Maxwell-Fyfe's dinner. During post-dinner dancing, a British officer called a stop to the music. He announced the discovery of a new document that had been stamped into the Nuremberg evidence files as "R.H.J. 1." He said it demonstrated that Thomas Babington McCauley (Baron McCauley of Rothley), the great British poet, politician and historian, had been a plagiarist, and the officer then read a Jackson-lauding take-off on McCauley's famous poem, "Horatius at the Bridge." British staff then wheeled in another large birthday cake, and Jackson did the cutting.

You will notice that Robert Jackson's birth date was yesterday, February 13th. Record snowfall in the eastern United States delayed your receipt of this note by one day, but deep snow is in the spirit of this occasion. On Saturday, February 13, 1892, deep snow similarly blocked the few roads of Spring Creek and its region in Warren County in northwestern Pennsylvania. On that morning, Angelina Houghwot Jackson, age 25 and in labor, remained in her farmhouse bed. Her husband of seven years, William Eldred Jackson, age 29, went out to their barn, hitched horses to a cutter and drove down the valley to the home of a young aunt. Will Jackson summoned her and drove her back to the Jackson farmhouse to attend to his

laboring wife Lina. Will then set off again in his cutter, this time driving up the valley through six miles of snowdrifts to the town of Columbus, Pennsylvania. He located the local doctor, M.H. Christie, and soon led him, driving his own cutter pulled by two Bays, back down the valley and into the Jackson farm barnyard. Dr. Christie entered the house, warmed his fingers over the kitchen wood stove and then climbed the stairs to assist Lina.

In time, all was well, including for new baby Robert—and later in the many large undertakings, including Nuremberg, in which he played central parts.

As always, please feel free to pass this note along to others who might be interested. I wish you happy Lincoln, Jackson, Valentine and George Washington days. If you are lucky enough to be living in snow country, I also hope that the runners on your cutter are well-sharpened.