

# Independence & Country Kids

*John Q. Barrett\**

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In the United States, July 4, 2012, marks the 236<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence Day. This national holiday embodies enduring American and human values, including “unalienable Rights” to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>1</sup>

For many of us, our happiness and our life paths rise from early, formative places, people and experiences. Robert H. Jackson, for example, became a legal profession leader, a national leader, a man of world capitals, a life of lasting significance.

Before and inside all of that, Jackson also was, in his phrase, a “country boy.”<sup>2</sup> For his entire life, he lived in and returned to fields, woods, small towns and open spaces, experiencing great independence and developing the autonomous outlook and considerable skills that defined his work and are parts of his legacies. A Jackson high school friend, writing decades later, traced very directly one dimension of the connection between Jackson’s background and his accomplishments: “It is the simple, human factors in our American way of life that made Bob a great Supreme Court Justice.”<sup>3</sup>

I was reminded of this, in the context of Independence Day, when I read a recent speech by the Honorable John M. Cleland. Judge Cleland is a

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\* Professor of Law, St. John’s University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York ([www.roberthjackson.org](http://www.roberthjackson.org)). An earlier version of this essay was posted to my Jackson Email List on July 3, 2012.

For an archive of selected Jackson List posts, many of which have document images attached, visit [www.stjohns.edu/academics/graduate/law/faculty/profiles/Barrett/JacksonList.sju](http://www.stjohns.edu/academics/graduate/law/faculty/profiles/Barrett/JacksonList.sju).

To subscribe to the Jackson List, which does not display recipient identities or distribute their email addresses, send a note to [barrettj@stjohns.edu](mailto:barrettj@stjohns.edu).

<sup>1</sup> To view and read the Declaration of Independence, see [www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration.html).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Robert H. Jackson, Washington, D.C., to Elizabeth Gibson, Jamestown, NY, no date (est. Feb. 7, 1934, the postmark date on the envelope containing the letter), in Elizabeth Gibson Papers, Fenton History Center, Jamestown, NY. Miss Gibson and Jackson were childhood friends in Frewsburg, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Clyde F. Fish, Fredonia, NY, to Irene G. Jackson, McLean, VA, Oct. 10, 1954 (letter of condolence following Justice Jackson’s death), in Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., Box 6, Folder 5.

Senior Judge of Pennsylvania's Superior Court.<sup>4</sup> He spoke on June 8, 2012, at his *alma mater*, Kane Area High School in northwestern Pennsylvania. I am pleased to share his excellent remarks.

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**“UNFINISHED BUSINESS”**

KANE AREA HIGH SCHOOL  
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

JUNE 8, 2012

REMARKS OF THE HON. JOHN M. CLELAND

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Before I get started tonight I'd like to tell you something about what your parents are thinking right now. I have sat out there a couple of times myself.

They are straining to get a good view to see you. They are fiddling with their digital cameras, nervous they might forget how to use them and miss the picture they really want. They are excited for you.

And in a moment of quiet reflection, they will look at you sitting up here through a veil of tears—mothers and fathers, too—...and ask in the quietness of their souls as only a parent can: where did the time go?

Before this night is over, find your parents, your grandparents, your stepparent, your foster parent, whoever it is that is with you here tonight—tell them you love them. Give them a hug. It is a nice thing for you to do. And they will need it.

And they will appreciate it more than you will ever know.

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<sup>4</sup> For Judge Cleland's biography, see [www.pacourts.us/T/SuperiorCourt/SuperiorCourtJudges/JudgeCleland.htm](http://www.pacourts.us/T/SuperiorCourt/SuperiorCourtJudges/JudgeCleland.htm).

Forty-seven years ago, in 1965, I sat on the stage of the old Kane High School Auditorium at my high school graduation.

I will tell you I don't remember much about it, except thinking, "when will this guy be finished talking? I've got things I want to do tonight." Let me just say on that point, it is an honor to be standing in front of you tonight, but I don't want to see any of you standing in front of a judge in the morning.

I grew up in Kane and went to Kane High School. As I sat on that stage at my graduation I was keenly aware that this is a small place in a very, very big world.

I would not have admitted it then, cocky as I was, but I'll confess it now: I was a little scared.

Some of you are off to the military, some off to college, some off to technical schools, some are off to start a job, some are off to a year of just trying to figure out what it is you want to do next.

Deep down I felt it, and deep down I suspect you feel it too: a little bit scared. And for good reason: You have grown up in a very small corner of a very, very big world.

So let me tell you a story about someone you probably never heard of. His name was Robert H. Jackson.

He went to Washington during the Great Depression of the 1930s as a lawyer for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1941 Roosevelt appointed him to the Supreme Court of the United States. Jackson was a powerful person, a big time guy.

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, he was appointed as the Chief Prosecutor at the Nuremburg War Crimes Trials. The Allies—the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union—had to decide what to do with the captured Nazi German government leaders. For the Russians the solution was easy: they wanted to take them into a field and shoot them.

Robert H. Jackson saw things differently. He believed that even someone accused of being a Nazi, of being a notorious criminal, even a

person accused of heinous crimes, was entitled to a fair trial, and should be treated with dignity.

He believed that no government should be able to use its power to punish a citizen, even a Nazi, without first proving in a court of law that the citizen had committed a crime.

Robert H. Jackson said to the world that power should defer to reason—that the strongest should not have their way just because they are strong, and the law should be applied to protect the weak from the powerful.

You probably never heard of Robert H. Jackson, but because of him we all live in a safer world.

So why am I telling you that story about someone you never heard of?

Because Robert H. Jackson, who was one of the most influential men of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was born not even 50 miles from here, in Spring Creek, over in Warren County. He was born and raised on a small farm, near a small town, along a country road and a trout stream. He was a country kid too. He applied as an adult the lessons he learned walking those fields, hunting those woods, fishing those waters, and living with those people.

He started out in life with the advantage of being a country kid. And so do you.

He learned some important lessons as a country boy.

You have learned them too. But it will take a while for you to figure it out. You can travel the world; you can live far away; you can leave Kane, or Mt. Jewett, or James City or Ludlow or Lamont; but they will never leave you. They are a part of what you are. You have learned important lessons here.

Jackson, for example, taught the world an important legal lesson he learned on the country playgrounds of his youth: we don't put up with bullies—not in the schoolyard, not in the market place, not in world politics.

You have learned, as Robert Jackson learned, that we have to live together, for better or worse; and get along, for better or worse.

The person I might have a disagreement with over coffee in the morning might be the very same person I need to call that afternoon to fix my furnace, or who might take care of me that night as the emergency room nurse. I might think someone's religious beliefs are odd, but I have to admit she makes a great leek dip. If I have had a prosperous year, I give a little more to my church or to the United Way. And if I have had a bad year, well maybe someone will help me out. You get the idea.

It seems so obvious to you, doesn't it? Of course it does. But try explaining that to our friends in Harrisburg and Washington, or to the shouting heads on network television. It is not a lesson they have learned. Too bad more of them did not grow up in the country like all of you did.

You, who have grown up in the country have learned, I hope, like Robert Jackson learned, that when we live together in small communities we understand that there is a little bad in the best of us, and a little good in the worst of us. And the breath of God in all of us.

As my mother used to remind me: If you don't like a person, you just don't know them well enough.

Another country lesson that, like Jackson, you will eventually realize you have learned is that you know how to do stuff. I know that is not very articulate, but I don't really know how to express it any differently.

Because Kane High School is small you have had opportunities to become both leaders and followers. You have learned how to fix things, organize things, play games, hunt, fish, pitch a tent, tie a knot, hem a skirt, paint a poster, act in a play, march in a band, entertain yourselves—stuff you don't even realize other people may not know how to do.

Ed Kocjancic, the father of one of our school board members, was one of the best-known foresters in the United States. He was a country boy from Mt. Jewett. He once told me that when he went to the forestry school at Penn State he was amazed to learn that he was the only one in the class who actually knew how to run a chain saw. A country boy, but he got ahead fast.

Some of the guys I went to high school with used to get together on a Saturday night. Before going out on a date, they would compete to find out which one of them was the fastest in swapping the 3-speed transmissions in '57 Chevys. Seven minutes was the record—and they stayed clean enough that they didn't have to change clothes before they went out. Those country boys got ahead fast. And they are still good mechanics.

You have learned in a small town what it means to be counted on. I like the way Tim Holt, Chief of our Kane Volunteer Fire Department explained it one day: “When we get to a fire or an accident,” he said, “we can't call in the cavalry; we are the cavalry.”

I have been amazed at the stories I have heard about kids from small towns, kids just like you, who go on to be successful in the military, in business, in government. And why: because they are lucky enough to have learned how to do things, and how to get things done.

And one final lesson: As Jackson did, growing up in the country you will someday understand how important it has been in your life that people have taken an interest in you.

Two high school teachers eventually took an interest in Robert Jackson, that rough country boy from out on the farm. They taught him about Shakespeare and poetry. From those two teachers he learned eloquence, both spoken and written, and used his skills to change the world as he found it.

Throughout his life he never forgot those teachers.

Somewhere along the line you have had the benefit of teachers like that. I look back with great appreciation for the teachers I had growing up in Kane. Miss Jackson, my kindergarten teacher. The schools were so crowded we went to kindergarten in the basement of the Methodist Church, and she made do. Violet Swanson, and Theresa Marsh, and Carol Keneske. Helen Bryman, who taught me what a sentence was, and Arlene Heath who taught me how to write one. And Rosanna Eckman who, bless her heart, tried to get me excited about Hamlet and Beowulf. I wish she were still around so I could tell her, after all these years, it finally took. And the list goes on.

Fifty years later and I can still see them all in my mind's eye.

Miss Eckman lived just down the street from us on Pine Avenue. Arlene Heath use to come to my parents' house for dinner. Violet Swanson's husband sold me shirts. They cheered at our games, sang with us in church choirs, came to our class plays, and, if I misbehaved, told my parents.

You are lucky to have grown up in a small town. You have been blessed with teachers like that too.

I know there are down sides to country life. You are a long way from concerts and museums and shopping malls and the bright lights. But let me tell you this: when you get right down to it, when you really think about what makes you happy and successful, that is superficial stuff.

You are luckier than you can ever imagine to have grown up in these mountains, and among these people—to have grown up in this very small place in this very, very big world.

Have no doubt about it: You can go anywhere is this very, very big world and compete against anyone in anything that you are willing to work hard enough to do.

And so, you have some unfinished business.

It is that business of saying thank you—and of living your lives with an enduring sense of gratitude for all that you have been given.

So I hope that some day you will hold your high school diploma in your hand, and you will look at it, and you will think of it not only as an achievement of your own, but as an achievement of so many who helped you along the way.

I tell you that I still hold my diploma and think about Paul Miller, and Vern Johnson, and Vernon VanHorn, and Carly Hilty, and Dalton G. VanOrmer, and Mike Gamble, and Loren Wright, and Monte Montgomery, and Bob Boyer, and Ed Bryant, and Robert Carson...and all the many, many others in school, and in the community, who gave to me a part of themselves then so I could become who I am today.

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*INDEPENDENCE & COUNTRY KIDS*

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And I hope that some day—maybe even 47 years from now, like my classmate Randee Kohler, who quit school in our senior year to join the Navy but who, for all these years, has wanted to hold in his hands a Kane High diploma and tonight gets the chance to do it—I hope that you, too, will hold your diploma in your hands with pride, and understand how important it has been in your life to have grown up in the county—in this small place in a very, very big world—and to have graduated from Kane High School.

And I hope on that day you will remember that:

On the heights of the Alleghenies  
Stands a high school fair.  
There, among great trees abiding  
Pine scent in the air...  
There all nature in its glory,  
Summers green and winters hoary –  
Tells the seasons' wondrous story;

Stamp your feet, and say it with me:

Hail to Old Kane High.

Good Luck to you all.

And Godspeed.