

“At Home” Obligation & Opportunity (1940)

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When Robert H. Jackson became Attorney General of the United States in January 1940, his wife Irene became, by definition, a “Cabinet wife.”

Irene Alice Gerhardt Jackson was a woman of her time and place. She was very smart and capable but had only a secretarial school, not a college or university, education. She was mother of two and, as her husband built his law practice and then rose in public office, she focused primarily on raising their children. She did volunteer work but she was not employed outside the home. She was “Mrs. Robert H. Jackson” in fact and in function. She enjoyed the status that conferred, first in western New York and then across New York State, in national circles connected to bar associations and Robert’s growing stature in his profession, and then in Washington beginning in 1934. Social scene activities there filled much of her time, especially in the “empty nest” years that began for the Jacksons in Fall 1938.

As Irene Jackson knew well by 1940, the duties of a Cabinet wife included hosting “at homes.” These events were scheduled, well-publicized gatherings for tea and light food in the private residence of a hostess (and her husband) of social prominence. Invitations were not limited—the hostess simply would be home to receive guests. In Washington in the 1930s and later, at homes were gatherings of women and some men who were important in political, government and business circles.

On January 18, 1940, Robert Jackson took the oath of office and received his commission as the 57th Attorney General of the United States.¹

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¹ His Department of Justice biography page: <http://www.justice.gov/ag/bio/jackson-robert-houghwout>.

The next week, Washington newspapers announced that Mrs. Jackson, “wife of the newly appointed Attorney General,” would hold “her first official at home” from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. on January 31st, in the Jacksons’ apartment in the Wardman Park building.² (They had lived there on and off since 1934.) The papers also announced that, apparently as a courtesy to their new colleague, both Mrs. Cordell Hull, wife of the Secretary of State, and Mrs. Charles Edison, wife of the Secretary of the Navy, were postponing at homes that they had been scheduled to host on the same date.³

At homes also were topics of “day-of” press, apparently to remind people of the event and entice their attendance. On January 31st, Washington’s morning newspapers reported that Mrs. Jackson would be assisted at her at home that afternoon by thirteen friends: the wife of Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace and the wives of DOJ officials and high level attorneys Francis Biddle, Justin Miller, Thurman Arnold, Samuel O. Clark, Francis M. Shea, O. John Rogge, James W. Morris, Newman A. Townsend, Matthew McGuire, James V. Bennett, Gordon Dean and Frank Wideman.⁴

The details of Mrs. Jackson’s at home were well-reported, beginning the next day, on newspaper society pages. Columnists reported that hers was the biggest gathering of the afternoon. The line of visitors—more than one thousand, all told—filled the corridor outside the spacious apartment and circled back into its foyer. For the scheduled two hours and longer, guests filed into the drawing room to meet her. As one story noted, male guests “were in the minority...” Mrs. Jackson dressed “informally”—she wore a dark green crepe gown with a gold collar. With her stood Mrs. Biddle, a known figure in Washington society whose husband, Solicitor General Biddle, now was Attorney General Jackson’s principal deputy. The dining room table, site of the tea-pouring and food, was covered with flowers and surrounded by people three-deep. Notable guests included Canada’s minister to the U.S., Loring Christie; Secretary Edison and his wife; Brigadier General Albert L. Cox and his wife; and wives of many international diplomats. Robert Jackson’s sisters, cousins and aunts also attended.⁵

² See, e.g., *Mrs. Jackson To Hold At Home On Wednesday*, WASH. POST, Jan. 26, 1940, at 18.

³ See *id.*

⁴ See, e.g., *13 Will Assist Mrs. Jackson in First ‘at Home’*, WASH. POST, Jan. 31, 1940, at 12.

⁵ See Hope Ridings Miller, *Big Day for Capitalites With 2 Cabinet ‘At Homes’ and Reception for Wertzes*, WASH. POST, Feb. 1, 1940, at 12; Jean Eliot, WASH. TIMES-HERALD, n.d., *quoted in First Affair Held by Mrs. Jackson*, JAMESTOWN EV. JOURNAL, Feb. 3, 1940, at 9.

The newspapers do not mention that Robert Jackson attended the at home in his home. It seems quite apparent that he did not.

Of course the event occurred during a work day, on a Wednesday afternoon, and Jackson had a new, demanding job that might have made it difficult for him to attend.

More likely, Robert Jackson did not attend for personal reasons. He was close to his wife, spent considerable time with her, and often attended events that mattered to her more than they did to him. (He was no fan of the Washington social scene—he said that “[t]he best thing about ... Washington parties is that you see, for a few minutes, a lot of people with whom a few minutes is enough.”⁶)

As prominent men did in that time, Jackson stayed away from his wife’s at home because it was exactly that. It was her social debut as a spouse of Cabinet rank. It was her opportunity to shine in person and through the public reporting of the event.

⁶ James M. Marsh, *The Genial Justice: Robert H. Jackson*, 68 ALBANY L. REV. 41, 41 (2004) (originally published in 60 A.B.A. JOURNAL 306 (1974), which is available at <http://www.roberthjackson.org/the-man/speeches-articles/speeches/speeches-related-to-robert-h-jackson/the-genial-justice/>). Mr. Marsh was Justice Jackson’s law clerk from 1947-1949.

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Irene Jackson at another "at home," in February 1941.