



Court Historical Society NEWSLETTER *Eastern District of Tennessee*



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The Hoffa Trial Through the Eyes of a 16-year-old

By *Don K. Ferguson*
Editor

Memories of the 1964 federal court trial of **Jimmy Hoffa** on jury-tampering charges were revived last month for a Hamilton County teacher as she visited the courtroom for the first time in the 53 years since she was there for the trial as a high school student.

“It truly was an honor to be back in that courtroom again,” said **Nancy Huston**, visiting this time as a teacher leading a group of Chattanooga School for the Liberal Arts students on a visit to U.S. District Court. She was referring to the third-floor courtroom in the Joel W. Solomon Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse.

“I saw the portrait of **Judge Wilson** [on the courtroom wall] and knew exactly who it was,” she said. “I pointed to it and told the students, ‘If you ever want a wonderful example of fairness and dignity and knowledge, this man had it.’ I had tremendous admiration for him,” she said. Ms. Huston was referring, of course, to the late **U.S. District Judge Frank W. Wilson**, who presided over the notable trial.

She was unusually lucky to be able to sit in as a spectator at the trial, because seating was extremely limited, plus she was just a lone, 16-year-old high school junior there to gather information

for a school report. Her assignment was to choose a real-life situation on the subject the class was studying, the Constitution and the judicial process.



Nancy Huston

“I noticed that we had an important trial in town,” she said, so she contacted family friend **U.L. McDonald**, the late Chattanooga lawyer, who was a friend of Judge Wilson, and he obtained the judge’s permission for her to get a seat.

“Most of the courtroom was taken up by news reporters and officials. Each person approved for seating was given a number or a badge. And we had to go through security,” she said. [This was more than 20 years before federal courts had security guards or security equipment of any kind. For the Hoffa trial, however, tight security measures and equipment were in place. About 50 deputy U.S. Marshals were assigned to the trial.--EDITOR]

Ms. Huston doesn’t have her class report any longer, since she had to turn it in, but, remarkably, she does have her handwritten notes, which she has held on to all these years. It is from those notes that much of this article is being written, plus our interview with her.

Ms. Huston said, “What I, as a young person, admired about Judge Wilson was his amazing composure, self-control and dignity that he showed, and it took a lot of patience with the

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BACK AFTER 53 YEARS--Educator Nancy Huston addresses her students during their visit to the Chattanooga U.S. Courthouse on February 22. She commented on the portrait of the late U.S. District Judge Frank W. Wilson hanging overhead (on the left) and the judge’s masterful handling of the criminal trial of Teamsters Union President Jimmy Hoffa in 1964, which she, then a 16-year-old high school junior, attended. This was her first time back in the courtroom after all these years. The portrait on the right is of the late U.S. Circuit Judge and earlier U.S. District Judge H. Ted Milburn.

antics of the defense. It seemed that they were doing everything they could to get a mistrial, because they kept asking for a mistrial,” she said.

Her student notes say, “Defense cautioned about constant flapping of legal pads -- distracting.” Explaining today, Ms. Huston said, “The defense attorneys had legal pads, and they liked to flip the pages back and forth, which about drove Judge Wilson to distraction.”

Ms. Huston remembered the courtroom antics of one of the defense attorneys, **Jacques Schiffer** of New York. “He was always very dramatic,” she said. “I always thought he should have been on stage instead of in the courtroom.” Her student notes say of Schiffer, “Shouting and flaying of arms, dramatic reflections of displeasure.”

One incident she recorded in her student notes was the time that Schiffer stood up and threw coins on the table, saying something like “here are your 30 coins, you’ve earned them,” obviously a biblical reference to **Judas’** betrayal of **Jesus** in exchange for 30 pieces of silver.

[Hoffa and three others were found guilty. At their sentencing hearing, Judge Wilson also sentenced Schiffer to 60 days in jail and fined him \$1,000 for criminal contempt of court “for his gratuitous and unconscionable attacks upon the court.”--EDITOR]

Ms. Huston said, “It was fascinating to me to see things I had studied, especially people actually claiming the Fifth Amendment.” Her student notes say, “Witness in orange prison garb in shackles brought in. (In late 40s or 50s) Most questions replied to -- I can’t answer it might incriminate me. I plead the Fifth.”

Ms. Huston said that she attended morning sessions for about a week and a half of the six-week trial. But she was lucky enough to be present on the day that surprise witness **Edward Partin**, a Teamster business agent turned government informant, was brought into the courtroom. “I didn’t know the importance of Mr. Partin at the time, but I was there that day,” she said in her interview.

Her notes say, “Ed Partin called to testify. Hoffa is pale when he sees him. ‘My God, it’s Partin,’” she quotes Hoffa. In recalling that day, Ms. Huston said, “I remember that Mr. Hoffa had been very serious-faced. The only time I saw him look worried was when Mr. Partin came in. It had a pronounced effect on him. The defense was very animated at that point.”

In the book “Justice in the Valley,” published under the auspices of the Court Historical Society, author **Dr. Patricia Brake**

Rutenberg wrote that Partin’s “appearance as a government witness came as a complete shock to defense attorneys.”

EDITOR’S NOTES

The jury-tampering charges against Hoffa grew out of the 1962 trial in Nashville’s federal court in which the Teamsters Union president faced charges of violating a provision of the Taft-Hartley Act. He was indicted for allegedly sharing in a \$1 million payoff from a Michigan trucking concern in exchange for guaranteeing labor peace. The trial ended in a hung jury, and Hoffa and six others were indicted on jury-tampering charges.

A change of venue was granted, and the case was transferred to the Eastern District of Tennessee at Chattanooga. At the time, Judge Wilson had been on the federal bench two and one-half years.

When we learned of Ms. Huston’s connection to the Hoffa trial, we asked her for this interview and for a copy of her handwritten notes. We also suggested that she prepare them in typewritten form, which she has done, and present the handwritten version and the typewritten version to the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Bicentennial Library. She has already given copies to the Court Historical Society.

Ms. Huston has been a teacher for 32 years. She teaches French and Spanish. Asked if she ever met Judge Wilson, Ms. Huston said yes. “I met him in later years at a social event. I was able to say to him how much I admired what he had done, what it had meant to me, as a young person, to see someone with so much self-control in the midst of a rather intense situation.”

Ms. Huston has a modern day connection to our court. She was a friend of the late **U.S. Circuit Judge H. Ted Milburn** and they were fellow church members. “He and I often sang duets together in church,” she said.

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Don K. Ferguson
Executive Director and Newsletter Editor

*Howard H. Baker Jr. U.S. Courthouse • 800 Market Street, Suite 130
Knoxville, Tennessee 37902
865/545-4234, Ext. 2222 • Don_Ferguson@tned.uscourts.gov*