HAL HOLBROOK
BIOGRAPHY

Hal Holbrook was born in Cleveland in 1925, but raised mostly in South Weymouth, Massachusetts. His people had settled there in 1635 and were, according to his grandfather, “some kind of criminals from England.” His mother disappeared when he was two, his father followed suit, so young Holbrook and his two sisters were raised by their grandfather. It was only later he found out that his mother had gone into show business.

Holbrook, being the only boy, was sent away at the age of 7 to one of the finer New England schools to make a man of him. He was beaten regularly by a Dickensian headmaster who, when forced to retire, committed suicide saying “he could no longer live without boys.” When he was 12 he was sent to Culver Military Academy, where he discovered acting as an escape from his disenchantment with authority. He was not the model cadet, but he believes the discipline he learned at Culver saved his life.

In the summer of 1942 he got his first paid professional engagement playing the son in The Man Who Came To Dinner at the Cain Park Theatre in Cleveland at $15.00 per week. That fall, he entered Denison University in Ohio, majoring in Theatre under the tutelage of his lifelong mentor, Edward A. Wright. World War II pulled him out of there and put him into the Army Engineers for three years.

The Mark Twain characterization grew out of an honors project at Denison University after the War. Holbrook and his first wife, Ruby, had constructed a two-person show, playing characters from Shakespeare to Twain. After graduation they toured the school assembly circuit in the Southwest doing 307 shows in thirty weeks and traveling 30,000 miles by station wagon. On winter mornings in the Texas panhandle they opened their trunks to find frost on the costumes. Their audiences ranged widely in age, were often unruly, and they learned to survive on stage or perish.

Holbrook’s first solo performance as Mark Twain was at the Lock Haven State Teachers College in Pennsylvania in 1954. While hunting for a job in New York, the show was his desperate alternative to selling hats or running elevators to keep his family alive. By then he had a daughter, Victoria.

That same year, fortune struck by way of a steady engagement on a daytime television soap opera, The Brighter Day, but the following year Holbrook pursued the Twain character at night in a Greenwich Village night club while doing the soap daytimes. In seven months at the club he developed his original two hours of material and learned timing. He memorized lines for the soap opera on the rear platform of the 7th Avenue subway train between 104th Street and Sheridan Square. Finally, Ed Sullivan saw him and gave his Twain national television exposure.

In 1959, after five years of researching Mark Twain and honing his material in front of countless audiences in small towns all over America, he opened at a tiny theatre off-Broadway in New York. His overnight success was as stunning to
Holbrook as everyone else. “The critics went wild.” *(Associated Press).* “Mr. Holbrook’s material is uproarious, his ability to hold an audience by acting is brilliant.” *(New York Times).* “Uncanny. A dazzling display of virtuosity.” *(The New Yorker).* “One of the treasures of the American Theatre.” *(Life Magazine).*

The white hope of the family had finally arrived.

Holbrook quit the soap opera. After a twenty-two week run in New York he toured the country again, performed for President Eisenhower and at the Edinburgh Festival. The State Department sent him on a tour of Europe, during which he became the first American dramatic attraction to go behind the Iron Curtain following World War II. He was a star who had never appeared in a Broadway play, a nighttime television show or a movie. He was 35 years old and had to jump start a new career.

When David Merrick offered him co-star billing with Robert Preston playing an 80-year old Mexican bandit in a new Broadway musical, Holbrook turned it down in favor of younger roles, concerned that he would be typecast as an old man. He played Hotspur in *Henry IV, Pt.I* at the Shakespeare Festival Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut; then Lincoln in *Abe Lincoln In Illinois* off-Broadway. In 1963 he joined the original Lincoln Center Repertory Company in New York appearing in *Marco Millions, After the Fall, Incident at Vichy* and *Tartuffe*. Word got around that he could act his own age. Starring roles on Broadway came along: *The Glass Menagerie, The Apple Tree, I Never Sang For My Father, Man of La Mancha, Does A Tiger Wear A Necktie?* with the young Al Pacino.

Meanwhile, he continued to do Mark Twain every year and in 1966, on Broadway, his second New York engagement won him a Tony Award and a Drama Critics’ Circle Award followed in 1967 by a ninety-minute CBS television special of *Mark Twain Tonight!* which was nominated for an Emmy Award and seen by an audience of 30 million.

In 1970, after a dozen plays in New York, he was brought to Hollywood to star in a controversial television series, *The Senator*, which won 8 Emmy Awards and was cancelled in one year. But his new career had taken off. In the 42 years since then Mr. Holbrook has done some 50 television movies and mini-series, been nominated for 12 Emmys and won 5 for *The Senator* (1971), *Pueblo* (1974), Best Actor Of The Year (1974), *Sandburg’s Lincoln* (1976), and as host and narrator of *Portrait Of America* (1989). He has appeared in two sitcoms: *Designing Women and Evening Shade*, and has made guest appearances on *West Wing*, the sitcoms *Becker* and *Hope & Faith*, *The Sopranos, NCIS, ER, Sons of Anarchy* and *The Event*.

Holbrook’s movie career began with *The Group* in 1966 when he was 41 years old. Since then, moviegoers have seen him in more than 40 films including *Magnum Force, Midway, All The President’s Men, Capricorn One, The Fog, Creepshow, Wall Street, The Firm, Men of Honor, The Majestic, Into the Wild* for
which he received an Academy Award nomination, *That Evening Sun, Flying Lessons* (premiered at the 2010 Santa Barbara Film Festival), *Good Day For It* (premiered at the 2011 Sonoma International Film Festival), *Water for Elephants*, in December 2011 he completed filming on Steven Spielberg’s latest project on Abraham Lincoln and more recently on *Promised Land* both due out at the end of 2012.

Throughout his long career, Holbrook has continued to perform Mark Twain every year, including his third and fourth New York engagements in 1977 and 2005; and a world tour in 1985, the 150th anniversary of Mark Twain’s birth, beginning in London and ending in New Delhi. And he has constantly returned to the stage: in New York (*Buried Inside Extra*, 1983; *The Country Girl*, 1984; *King Lear* 1990; *An American Daughter*, (1997); at regional theatres (*Our Town, Uncle Vanya, Merchant Of Venice, King Lear, A Life In The Theatre, Be My Baby and Southern Comforts*, the last two with his wife Dixie Carter); and a National Tour of *Death Of A Salesman*.

But Holbrook has never been able to quit Mark Twain and probably never will. He has toured the show in some part of every year since 1954 – giving his 2234th performance in November 2011 – making 2012 the 58th consecutive year for this remarkable one man show. *Mark Twain Tonight!* has become perhaps the longest running show in theatre history. Holbrook adds to his Twain material every year, editing and changing it to fit the times and has mined over sixteen hours of Twain with more coming all the time. He has no set program – he chooses material as he goes along.

Holbrook is a sailor. In June 1980, he competed in the Single-handed Transpac Race from San Francisco to Hawaii in his 40-foot sailboat, Yankee Tar, sailing 2400 miles alone. With one or two friends or his wife, Dixie, he has sailed through the South Pacific to Tahiti, Samoa, the Tongas, New Zealand and the Fiji Islands.

Holbrook has received Honorary Doctor of Humanities Degrees from Ohio State and the University of Hartford, an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Ursinus College, an Honorary Doctor of Letters from Elmira College and Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts Degrees from Kenyon and his alma mater, Denison University. In 1996 he received the Edwin Booth Award; in 1998 the William Shakespeare Award from The Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, DC; in 2000 he was inducted into the New York Theatre Hall of Fame; in 2003 received the Nat’l Humanities Medal from the president; and in 2010 a medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In September 2011, *Harold*, the first of two volumes of Holbrook’s memoirs was published. He continues to work on the second volume, covering the years since *Harold* ended.

He lives in Los Angeles and Tennessee, and with his late wife, actress/singer Dixie Carter, has five children.

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