Hal Holbrook was born in Cleveland in 1925, but raised mostly in South Weymouth, Massachusetts. His people had settled there in 1634 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 grandparents. It was only later he found out that his mother had gone into show business.

Holbrook, being the only boy, was the “white hope of the family.” Sent away at the age of seven to one of the finer New England schools, he was beaten regularly by a Dickensian headmaster who, when forced to retire, committed suicide. He was sent next to Culver Military Academy, where his lifelong disenchantment with authority deepened, but it was at Culver that he discovered acting as an escape.

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 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 after the war. Holbrook and his first wife, Ruby, had constructed a two-person show, playing characters from Shakespeare to Twain. After graduation, the 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 and were often unruly; 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. The show was his 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 job on a daytime television soap opera, *The Brighter Day*, but the following year Holbrook pursued the Twain character at night in a Greenwich Village club. In seven months at the club he developed his original two hours of material and learned timing. He learned lines for the soap opera and the club act en route to the Village on the rear platform of the 7th Avenue subway train between 104th Street and Sheridan Avenue. Ed Sullivan saw him and finally gave his Twain national television exposure.

In 1959, after five years of researching Mark Twain and honing his material in front of audiences in small town all over America, he opened at a tiny theatre Off-Broadway in New York. It was a stunning success, as stunning to Holbrook as to anyone 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 and performed for President Eisenhower at the Edinburgh Festival. The State Department sent him on a tour of Europe, during which he became the first American to go behind the Iron Curtain since World War II. He was a star who had never appeared in a Broadway play, major television show, or a movie. He was 36 years old and had to jump start a new career.

When David Merrick offered him co-star billing playing an 80-year old Mexican bandit in a new Broadway musical he turned it down in favor of younger roles. He turned to Shakespeare at Stratford, Connecticut, then Lincoln in *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* Off-Broadway. In 1963 he joined the original Lincoln Center Repertory Company in New York. 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*, and *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, a Drama Critics’ Circle Award, and a
ninetynine-minute CBS television special of “Mark Twain Tonight!” which was nominated for an Emmy Award and seen by an audience of 22 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. However, his new career had taken off. In the 30-plus 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.

Holbrook’s movie career began with The Group in 1966 when he was 41 years old. Since then, moviegoers have seen him in over 30 films, including Magnum Force, Midway, All the President’s Men, Julia, Capricorn One, The Fog, Star Chamber, Creepshow, Wall Street, Eye of God, The Firm, Carried Away, The Bachelor, Waking the Dead, and Men of Honor with Robert DeNiro and Cuba Gooding, Jr. In 2001, he completed shooting the feature film, Purpo$e; CBS miniseries, Haven, and the feature film, Majestic, with Jim Carrey.

Throughout his long career, Holbrook has continued to perform Mark Twain every year, including his third engagement in 1977 at The Imperial Theatre and a world tour in 1985, the 150th anniversary of Mark Twain’s birth, beginning in London and ending in New Delhi. He has also consistently 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), and a national tour of Death of a Salesman.

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, making 2008 the 54th consecutive year for this remarkable one-man show. “Mark Twain Tonight!” has become one of the longest running shows in theatre history. Holbrook adds to his Twain material nearly every year, editing and changing it to fit the times. After more than 2000 shows, he has mined over fourteen hours of Twain with more coming all the time. He has no set program but chooses it 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, he has sailed through the South Pacific to Tahiti, Samoa, the Tongas, New Zealand, and the Fiji Islands.
Holbrook has received the honorary Doctor of Humanities Degrees from Ohio State and the University of Hartford, and Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Ursinus College, and Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degrees from Kenyon and his alma mater, Denison University. In 1996, he received the Edwin Booth Award and in 1998 the Williams Shakespeare Award from The Shakespeare Theatre. He was recently inducted into the New York Theatre Hall of Fame. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, actress/singer Dixie Carter. Together, they have five children.