



Remembering "Big Jim" Holohan

The memory of James B. Holohan, a beloved and respected citizen of this county and an outstanding public servant, was perpetuated Monday when the new Green Valley Road bridge near Freedom was dedicated to him... Josephine Holohan, the Senator's daughter, lifted the bunting which covered the plaque. She then placed at the foot of the marker a wreath sent by the organizations to which Sen. Holohan belonged—Knights of Columbus, Elks, Native Sons and Daughters, Historical Association and Rotary Club. Representatives of all these organizations were present...

—Register-Pajaronian,
Jan. 31, 1949

As the Southern Pacific was laying track through Chittenden Pass into Pajaro, and the Mansion House Hotel in Watsonville was under construction, a baby boy was born on June 18, 1871, to Richard and Catherine Holohan on their ranch in the Amesti district just outside of Watsonville.

James Bernard Holohan was the oldest of five children and was to become the "man" of the family when his mother and father died in 1884. Although he never finished high school, he did attend business school in Santa Cruz, which helped in managing the large family ranch.

Jim Holohan served as a school trustee in Watsonville for many years, and in 1906 he campaigned for the office of Santa Cruz County Supervisor but lost out to incumbent Jim Linscott. Friends persuaded him to run for the State Senate in 1908 on the Democratic ticket and he won the seat, serving for a term. The year 1912 saw Holohan entering the race for the

State Assembly and though he lost, it was certainly not to be his last brush with politics by any means.

President Woodrow Wilson appointed Holohan United States Marshal of Northern California in 1914, choosing him out of a field of sixteen men. His salary was \$4,000 a year and he was required to post a \$2,000 bond upon taking office.

In 1918 a trial was being held at the United States Federal Court building in San Francisco where thirty-three men were being tried for a conspiracy to violate the neutrality laws of the United States by planning a revolt against the British rule of India. Marshal Holohan was present. During the last day of the trial, one of the Hindu defendants jumped to his feet, whipped out a gun and shot to death a leader of the Hindu revolutionaries. Pandemonium broke out as people screamed and scrambled but Marshal Holohan drew his gun and shot the assailant through the heart, thus, said many, saving other lives in the crowded courtroom.

Holohan held the office of Marshal until 1924 when he resigned and retired to his home in the Pajaro Valley.

Sometimes called "Big Jim", Holohan stood over six feet tall, was well built and handsome, and had a commanding appearance and blue eyes that reflected courage and strength. He had a directness about him, a quiet sense of humor, and many old-timers remember him as a kind and generous person with some of the old world charm about him.

In September of 1925, Sheriff Howard Trafton, another Watsonville man, was killed in a gun battle with a crazed hermit at Seacliff. Holohan was appointed by the county supervisors to fill this vacancy. He was elected to the position the next year but resigned in 1927 when Governor C.C. Young appointed him warden of San Quentin prison.

Holohan faced this new challenge with a real concern for the prisoners. Ronald Wagoner, United Press staff correspondent wrote:

"The warden believes in recreation for men with good records, baseball, track sports, flower gardens, vaudeville entertainment and a large library are provided...He also refuses continually to express himself on the matter of capital punishment, but newspapers and other friends of Holohan know the great strain he suffers when an execution day comes to San Quentin..."

Holohan witnessed fifty-seven hangings during his nearly ten years as warden and he was later to introduce a bill in the State Legislature, which was passed, for the use of gas as the means of inflicting the death penalty instead of hanging.

In 1931, he married Helen Quilty (his first wife having died sometime earlier) who was for forty years the very popular manager of Tassajara Hot Springs, where many Watsonvillians spent their vacations.

Warden Holohan came close to losing his life at San Quentin. In 1935, four convicts burst into Holohan's house during a Parole Board meeting and told everyone to "put your hands up." The warden made a dash for the phone but was stopped and brutally beaten until he fell unconscious to the floor, suffering a frontal skull fracture and cuts about his head. The board members were herded into the warden's car by the escapees and sped out of the prison yard heading north. They were finally stopped and one prisoner was killed. One served a life sentence and the other two were executed by hanging.

Holohan resigned as warden in 1936. He had never fully recovered his health and wanted to get back to Watsonville. But his return was not for long, as he was drafted to run again for the State Senate later that year and served until 1940 when he did not seek re-election.

When "Big Jim" died on January 31, 1947, he was mourned not only by his friends and family in the Pajaro Valley but throughout the State. All business houses in Watsonville closed down to pay tribute to his memory. ♣