



*Judge John Godbold with his wife, Betty,
and the author's daughter, Cate*

“The Finest Man I’ve Ever Known”

By Chad E. Stewart

Several months ago I was talking with a notable Montgomery lawyer who shared several war stories from the Civil Rights era. Judge John Godbold’s name came up and I proudly explained that the judge taught me in law school, befriended me when I lived in Montgomery and mentored me from the day I met him. After patiently listening to me carry on for a while, the older gentleman said, very simply, “John Godbold is the finest man I’ve ever known.”

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that if a poll were taken, the vast majority of people who know John Godbold would honestly say the same thing. In fact, that would be the first thing

out of our mouths although it would be easier to just say that he is:

- Nationally regarded as a legal giant;
- The first and only person to serve as chief judge of two federal circuits;
- A decorated World War II veteran; and
- A remarkable lawyer and judge we are honored to claim as one of our own.

What is more remarkable, however, is the number of lives Godbold has influenced for the good on a personal level. The older I get, the more I come to understand that the latter accomplishment far outweighs the former ones. John Godbold has always understood that and lived his life accordingly. That is why



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this modest tribute is well deserved, and then some.

John Cooper Godbold was born in 1920 on a farm in Coy, Alabama. He grew up during the Great Depression and attended the public schools of Selma. In 1940, he earned his B.S. degree from Auburn University where he was editor of *The Plainsman*. At Auburn, he met his beloved Betty to whom he credits all of his success. Together they raised a large, wonderful family, which he values more than anything else.

Judge Godbold's attendance at Harvard Law School was interrupted by World War II, where he served with honor and distinction. Perhaps the thing that impressed me most about him was when I asked for the "umpteenth" time about his service in the war. With some arm-twisting and refilling of his glass, I persuaded the judge to reveal that he was in fact a true combat veteran who participated in the liberation of Europe. This soft-spoken, skinny little guy actually led soldiers into battle and helped overthrow the Nazi regime. If I had done that, it would be printed in detail on my business cards, but John Godbold told me about his war experience with the utmost reluctance and humility. He was just serving his country and felt no need to boast or even talk about it.

In 1948, John Godbold earned his J.D. from Harvard Law School and was admitted to the Alabama State Bar. He began practice with Richard T. Rives in Montgomery and became a partner in the firm of Rives & Godbold in 1949. Later, Truman Hobbs joined the firm and their accomplishments together are legendary. Rives was the first to be appointed to the federal bench in 1951; then Godbold in 1966; and Hobbs in 1980.

That impressive firm history is surpassed only by the personal stories Godbold shares about his partners. As to Judge Rives, he would always tell me that

"whenever any lawyer had a problem or a question, Rives would immediately drop what he was doing and help him. He was never too busy to be a mentor." As for Judge Hobbs, Godbold said there was one word that best described him—"fearless." Yet, he also remembered another side of Judge Hobbs best depicted when a conflict of interest prevented their firm from prosecuting an egregious civil rights case. Godbold recalled that Hobbs wept when he told the individual he would not be able to help. Judge Godbold would likewise get emotional when talking about his law partners because of the tremendous respect they had for one another. That spoke volumes to me and helped explain the extraordinary success they had.

After leaving private practice, Judge Godbold began his distinguished career on the "old" Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. For more than a decade, he "rode the circuit" between Florida and Texas as a circuit judge and later chief judge of the Fifth Circuit, which was by far the largest judicial circuit in the nation. One of his colleagues described him as "indispensable" in the protracted efforts to divide the Fifth Circuit into two courts, which came to fruition in 1981 when the Fifth Circuit divided into the "new" Fifth and the Eleventh Circuit courts. Godbold became the first chief judge of the Eleventh Circuit and remains the only person ever to have served as chief judge of two federal judicial circuits.

In 1986, Judge Godbold temporarily left the bench when a committee chaired by the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court appointed him director of the Federal Judicial Center in Washington, D.C. The Judicial Center is the research and training arm of the entire federal court system. Judge Godbold served in that prestigious position for three years before returning to the Eleventh Circuit bench.

In 1990, Judge Godbold was named the Leslie S. Wright Distinguished Professor at Cumberland Law School. His classes at Cumberland filled so quickly that students had to sign up a year in advance to get a spot. He went out of his way to make students feel at ease and actually taught by means of a round-table discussion. Godbold always stressed the importance of concise and uncluttered legal writing to his students. His expertise on that subject is summarized in a law review article written more than 30 years ago entitled *Twenty Pages and Twenty Minutes—Effective Advocacy on Appeal*, 30 Sw. L. J. 801 (1976). That article is said to be the most widely reprinted law review piece written in the United States and is regularly reprinted as a teaching and reference tool in law schools, bar associations, CLE programs and law firms.

In the last class of each semester, rather than grill his students about the upcoming exam, Judge Godbold would tell a story about John Adams and what it really means to be a lawyer. His students persuaded him to put that lesson into an article called “*Lawyer*”—*A Title of Honor*, 29 Cumb. L. Rev. 301, 303 (1998-1999). If you ever need encouragement about our profession, read that essay and it will put a spring back in your step.

In 1996, Judge Godbold received the Edward J. Devitt Distinguished Service to Justice Award, which is perhaps the highest honor a federal judge can attain. The selection is made by a committee chaired by a justice of the Supreme Court and annually recognizes an Article III judge of national stature, whose distinguished lifelong career is characterized by:

Decisions that, through their wisdom, humanity and commitment to

the rule of law, make clear that bench, bar and community alike would willingly entrust that judge with the most complex cases of the most far-reaching import; writings, including opinions, lectures or other publications, that reveal scholarship and dedication to the improvement of the judicial process; and activities that have helped to improve the administration of justice, advance the rule of law, reinforce collegial ties within the judicial branch or strengthen civic ties, within local, national or international communities.

See American Judicature Society’s Web site (<http://www.ajs.org/>). Other recipients of the Devitt Award include Warren E. Burger and Frank M. Johnson, Jr.

Judge Godbold was also the first winner of Auburn’s Alumni Award for Achievement in the Humanities. He has been asked to speak, teach and receive honorary degrees from schools across the country. In 2002, John Godbold was inducted into the Alabama Academy of Honor.

While a complete list of Judge Godbold’s achievements would fill up volumes, suffice it to say that he has done pretty well for a farm boy from Coy, Alabama. Throughout his life, he has truly exemplified servant leadership. His contributions to our profession, state and country are simply astonishing. Yet, the people who have been privileged to know John Godbold personally would say that his most significant contributions have been the ones he has made to our individual lives. Those are the things that inspire us to become better people and to say unequivocally that “John Godbold is the finest man we have ever known.”



Chad E. Stewart is a partner with Marsh, Cotter & Stewart LLP in Enterprise, and currently serves as chair of the Advisory Committee for the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama. Following his graduation from Cumberland School of Law in 1999, Stewart was a law clerk for the Honorable Ira DeMent, III, U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama, and then clerked for the Honorable Joel F. Dubina on the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals. He was a member of the 2008 Alabama State Bar Leadership Forum and now serves on the Board of Editors of The Alabama Lawyer.

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