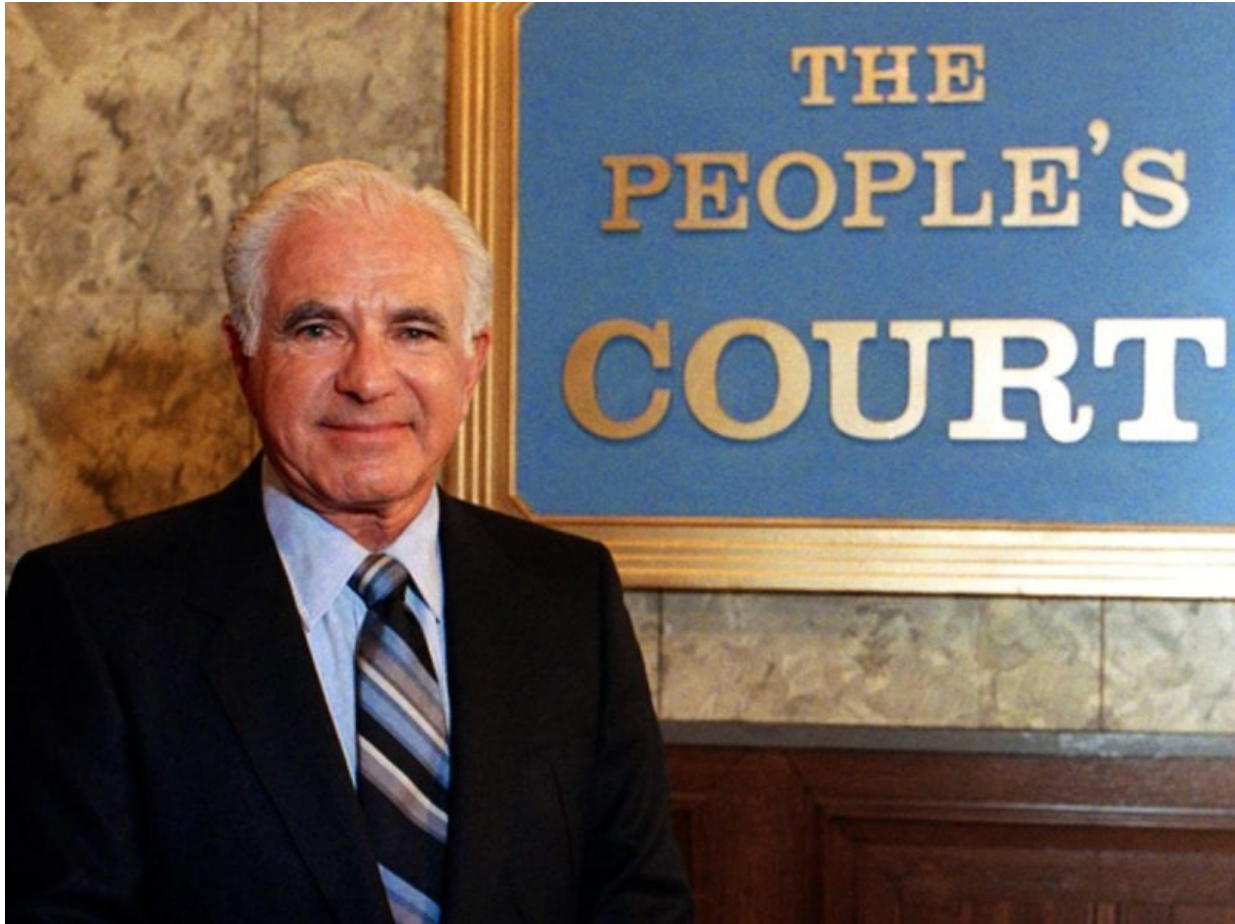


"The People's Court" Judge Joseph Wapner Dies



Summary: Influential TV judge Joseph Wapner died this week at the age of 97.

"I know you've been sworn. I've read your complaint..." Judge Joseph Wapner would say at the beginning of each case on *The People's Court*, a popular syndicated legal show that ran from 1981-1993. The show has since seen a reboot with a new judge, Judge Marilyn; but Wapner's version was still well-remembered for taking small claims and making them big entertainment.

On February 26, Wapner died at his home in Los Angeles. While the cause is still unknown, the 97-year-old had several strokes over the years, according to *The Washington Post*.

The People's Court attracted almost 20 million viewers, and in a 1989 *Washington Post* survey, 54% of Americans could identify Judge Wapner compared to Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist, whom only 9% of those polled could identify. In each segment of the show, small claims plaintiffs and defendants would appear on television to dispute their real cases, which they agreed beforehand would be settled on-air in a binding arbitration contract. Each person who appeared received \$250.

Wapner had a gruff, serious demeanor, which was an entertaining contrast to the lying, hapless, or naive people who stood before him. Robert Thompson, a scholar at Syracuse University, told the *Washington Post* that Wapner's schtick was memorable and a model for future TV judges such as Judge Judy or Judge Joe Brown.

"It turns out regular people are whiny, petty, annoying folks, so Judge Wapner's crotchety grouchy thing was just what we wanted — to shut them up now and then," Thompson said.

Wapner received a law degree from USC in 1948. Before that, he had served in the military, earning a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart.

Survivors include his wife of 70 years, Mildred "Mickey" Nebenzahl; their two children; four grandchildren; and a great-granddaughter. Wapner also has a surviving sister.

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What did you think of Judge Joseph Wapner and *The People's Court*? Let us know in the comments below.