

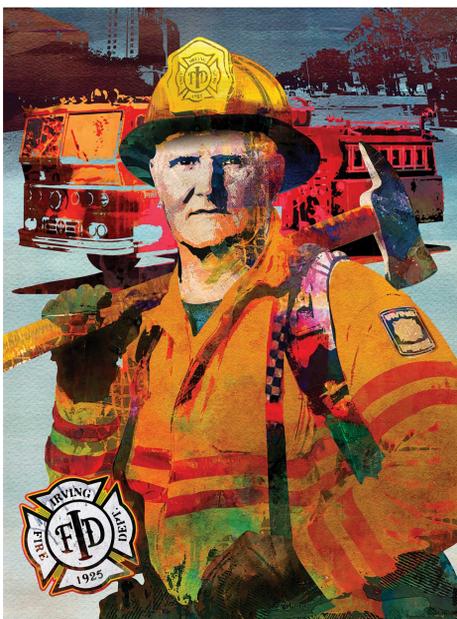


TEXAS USA

Unshakable

New book tells of the man who spent more years than anyone fighting fires—and life's other challenges

BY JAN ADAMSON • ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC KITTELBERGER • FEBRUARY 2025



ERIC KITTELBERGER

Billy Gene "Shakey" Holder can't help but smile when he thinks about the more than 50 years he worked as a firefighter. "I loved that job," he says. "You were helping people, and they were always glad to see you when you showed up."

When Holder retired in 2011, at age 77, he still passed the Irving Fire Department's agility test even though he was six years into a battle with Stage 4 cancer. He was the country's oldest active full-time firefighter when he hung up his boots after 56 years with the department.

Holder is the subject of a 2024 book written by his friend and fellow fireman Clif Clifton. Holder and his wife, Ginger, who live in McKinney, contacted Clifton about putting to paper Holder's story when they discovered Clifton had written poetry, journals and stories about his own career.

Turns out, Holder was one of Clifton's heroes. They had worked at different stations in the same fire department.



Holder was born in 1934, during the Great Depression, in Grayson County in North Texas. He was one of seven children and a scrapper almost from birth. With his family, he picked cotton as a child while they moved repeatedly to chase work. He had dyslexia, making learning difficult, and was picked on by other children.

That's when he learned to fight.

The family moved to Cartwright, Oklahoma, just over the Texas border, where Holder earned a reputation for settling matters with his fists, especially when defending an underdog or going up against a bully.

"I used to like to box, and everybody at work, I used to test. I used to tell them not to hit me in the face and then I'd hit them," he says with a laugh. "Then they boxed pretty good. I was a good ducker."

After a series of low-paying jobs throughout his youth, Holder's sister encouraged him to apply to become an Irving firefighter. After a long period of waiting anxiously for some positive word, Holder finally got the call and went to work as a fireman.

When he first joined the department in 1955, he was paid \$265 a month. He went on to join the swift-water rescue and hazardous materials teams.



Telling the story of how he got his nickname—Shakey—makes his eyes twinkle.

On his third day as a firefighter, some of his colleagues were preparing lunch, and Holder was trying to stay out of the way in the tiny kitchen they used. He bumped into the refrigerator and an electrical cord slipped down, touching his neck and startling him into knocking cooking utensils, pans and appliances to the floor.

The other firemen rushed to try to catch the falling items, but Holder believed they were trying to escape whatever danger had snaked around his neck. He took off at a run, knocking one of the men down.

When things calmed, he apologized. "I'm sorry guys, I've always been a little shaky about stuff," he told them. One of the firemen painted the accidentally misspelled word on the nervous fireman's car. And thus, Shakey was born.

At a recent signing for Clifton's self-published book, *The Legendary Story of Shakey*, a few of his fellow firefighters dropped by. Their admiration for Holder was clear as they exchanged stories about their service.

"I really liked working with those guys back then," Shakey says. "We had to learn to get along with each other."



Holder's long life has been full of adventure. At age 70, he went to Pamplona, Spain, and ran with the bulls. He says he has made and lost millions of dollars through assorted business deals but pretty much came out ahead.

At 91, he remains bright and amusing, though his cancer returned in 2023.

Holder's biographer, Clifton, is retired himself, having served for 34 years with the Irving department.

Clifton, who lives in Lewisville in North Texas, has been doing periodic mission work in Montenegro since 2007, and it was a mission friend who encouraged him to write more real stories of real heroes. He's been writing other books about firefighters as well as an autobiographical novel.

"I never thought I could be a writer," says Clifton, a Farmers Electric Cooperative member.

For the biography of Holder, he spoke with many friends of the legendary firefighter. He remains awed by the man and the life he has led.

"Every once in a while, you get a gift," Clifton says. "We got a gift in Shakey."



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