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ZITTELL HONORED — Marc Gold, right, president of the Columbia County Bar Association, presents retiring county Judge Warren Zittell with a plaque during a testimonial dinner Wednesday. (Staff photo by Michael McCagg)

Retiring judge lauded, roasted by colleagues

By MICHAEL McCAGG

WEST GHENT — Jurists, lawyers and dignitaries from eastern New York gathered Wednesday to give their best wishes to one of the longest tenured county judge in Columbia County history, Warren Zittell, who will step down from the bench Dec. 31, after 21 years.

Zittell, who has been on the bench since his appointment by the last Republican governor, Malcolm Wilson, in 1974, will be succeeded by Columbia County District Attorney Paul Czajka.

Speaking at the end of the three-hour affair, Zittell said it was difficult to recall all of those who helped him throughout his career, but he did mention two people, who said had perhaps the greatest affect on him —

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former county Board of Supervisors Chairman Ellsworth Weaver and former County Judge William Christiana, his predecessor.

"Ellsworth Weaver, a countryman, store keeper, mechanic, the Copake supervisor and board of supervisors chairman; I probably can't think of anyone with more common sense. Although he was a gentleman of the old school, he was responsible for some of the most farsighted actions taken by the board," Zittell said.

"He got me going as a lawyer fighting the railroads when they were trying to pull the Harlem Railroad out of the area, and we were quite successful for awhile," Zittell recalled.

Of Christiana, Zittell remembered

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...retiring judge

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him as judge "who never said a grumpy word to anybody."

"He was probably the kindest jurist and the most level headed who ever graced the halls of the courthouse," he said.

He went on to say a few words about the six administrative judges he served under and to say that Wednesday's celebration was not for him, but for "all of us who make up the system to sit down, get acquainted and celebrate."

He also thanked career-long secretary Ann Bain, who worked with him as well as Christiana and who is retiring at the end of the year, too.

Leading the list of dignitaries on hand Wednesday, and the funniest speaker of the evening, was U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Roger Miner, who served as Columbia County assistant district attorney under Zittell in 1964.

During a roughly 20-minute speech, Miner endlessly roasted the retiring judge to the delight of the a roughly 125 people in attendance as well as Zittell and his wife Ann. But Miner ended the speech speaking fondly of the years Zittell served and saying how lucky Columbia County was to have a man of his integrity.

The people of Columbia County have been gifted to have such a man serve them...a man with his belief that parties should try their best to solve their problems outside the courtroom, Miner said.

Also speaking Tuesday, was John Couch, Zittell's administrative assistant who served for close to 15 years.

While saying he was "paying back Zittell" for what he described as several long-winded conversations and consultations, Couch spoke for awhile, reading the letters of congratulations the retiring judge received, including one from President William Clinton and numerous other high ranking politicians.

He also cited the very few reversals of decisions Zittell made in his court houses, "about 10 in his 21-year career, of which nine you did not listen to my consultation on," he said to laughter.

As the speeches drew to a close, Zittell called his wife to the podium where he thanked her for her years of dedication to him and his job.