CACTUS JACK GARNER AS FOLK HERO, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES 1933–1940

by Lora B. Garrison

Born on November 22, 1868, in a log cabin at Blossom Prairie, John Nance Garner IV, became Uvalde’s most famous citizen. His political career began as Uvalde County Judge in 1894 when he won out over three opponents. Garner said of a debate in Sabinal between Judge Fenley and himself, “Judge Fenley was the biggest man I thought I had ever seen, and I felt like a feist by the side of a St. Bernard. Yes he was a big man, big in more ways than one. But I won the election.”¹

Mr. Garner went on to become State Representative, Member of Congress, Speaker of the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C., and Vice-President of the United States. Mr. Garner had the distinction of serving with seven presidents and made laws with the eighth. The presidents were Theodore Roosevelt, Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. He made laws with Harry Truman and was vice-president when Truman was a senator. Mr. Garner said Truman would go down in history as one of the greatest presidents. Harry Truman was the only one that Garner treated as an equal. Garner is the only Texan to have been nominated twice for president, the first time in 1943 and the second time in 1948. He was elected to Congress from his district in Texas at the same time he was elected as vice-president.²

As a young boy, life on the farm in Red River County was a struggle; his desire for an education was a driving force. While
attending school at Blossom Prairie, young Garner discovered he was adept at baseball. Nearby was Possum Trot, with a team of strong youngsters who had a habit of defeating and humiliating both Blossom Prairie and nearby Coon Soup Hollow. So, the two underdog communities merged their teams and formed a tough challenge; and to this day the score remains tied.³

Young Garner would go with his father to Jefferson for provisions once or twice a year. They carried cotton, hides, and other farm produce in a wagon pulled by a four-mule team. On the return, Garner would bring seed, salt, and staples for the household. In addition, remembered the son, his father would include a half-barrel or a barrel of whiskey, an annual purchase—the amount depended on his farm yield for the year. John Garner later described the liquor supply as a part of his father’s hospitality custom: “The barrel stood in an unlocked house; any neighbor who cared to, might stop and have a drink, if he wished. Some did and some didn’t. So far as I know the idea was original with my Father. I never saw or heard of anyone else doing it.”⁴

When John Garner left his home in Red River County after studying for the law in Clarksville, his father advised, “Always tell the truth, and try to be a gentleman.” Garner recalled of that advice, “I don’t know whether I lived up to the Gentleman part or not, but I have never told an untruth to any person.”⁵ Others recalled his commitment to honesty. “Mr. Garner was always honest with everyone. He always told the truth and therefore he didn’t have to explain anything later.”⁶ With this integrity came a high level of conviction. “Mr. Garner was decisive; there were no gray areas, it was yes or no and never maybe.”⁷

Garner came to Uvalde for his health, like many others. He found the dry climate a cure for lung infection that was so dreaded at that time. Mr. Garner slept outdoors in a tent the first two years he lived in Uvalde, as his doctor had ordered. The choice was a wise one, for he regained his health and put his energies and knowledge to work in business and politics, which brought him fame and fortune.
Arriving in Uvalde January 9, 1893, Mr. Garner recalled, “I started playing poker in about three weeks after I got here.” He soon joined the law firm of Clark and Fuller, as a junior partner. Mr. Garner rode the judicial circuit horseback or in a buckboard and brought in fees from the outlying area he served. He found himself owner of Uvalde’s only newspaper, which he took in on a fee, and for which he was the reporter, editor, and publisher.8

While he was County Judge, John Nance Garner married Miss Mariette “Ettie” Rheiner, daughter of Peter Rheiner of Sabinal. She was an alert business woman and proved her worth and ability as her husband’s secretary throughout his public life. “In 1896,” Mr. Garner said, “Dr. Cummings beat me for County Judge and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. If he hadn’t beat me, I probably wouldn’t have run for the Legislature or for Congress.”9

When Mr. Garner got the nomination for Congress he campaigned over several counties, driving a gray mare and a little mule hitched to a buckboard. It was hard campaigning, but Garner won out and went to Congress in 1903. The next twenty-eight years of his life were spent as a congressman from Texas, whose constituents were well pleased with his service to them. Mr. Garner was adored by the conservative wing of the Democratic Party. When Mr. Garner was elected as Speaker of the House in 1931, he stated, “I made no promises to secure this preferment, and I make none now. The oath of office I am about to take carries with it the only promise it is necessary for any American citizen to make, to assure the country that he expects to devote his efforts to its service.”10

“When I was elected Vice-President of the United States, It was the worst thing that ever happened to me . . .” Mr. Garner stated, “as Speaker of the House, I could have done more good than anywhere else. As Vice-President about all I could do was stand and preside at the head of the Senate and watch proceedings that I could do nothing about. Becoming Vice-President was the only demotion I ever had.” For years, newsmen recalled Cactus Jack’s observation that the Vice-Presidency “isn’t worth a bucket of warm spit.”
This story is told about how Mr. Garner got the name “Cactus Jack.” As the Texas House debated the matter of choosing an official state flower, Mr. Garner was reminded of the brilliant blooms of the hardy cactus plant seen in his legislative district. Although his idea was defeated by one vote in favor of the bluebonnet, reporters and cartoonists especially enjoyed referring to the man from Uvalde as “Cactus Jack” Garner. Back home in Uvalde, though, rather than use the “Cactus Jack” nickname, people called him “Mr. Garner,” a propriety that is still preferred.

Mr. Garner built low-cost housing during the Depression for the homeless and low-income families, an idea long before its time. I first became aware of the Garner Houses when I went with a friend to visit her older sister who was living in a Garner House back in 1937. The fact that many of these houses are still in use today shows that they were well built.

A tribute was paid to Mr. Garner in June of 1984, when an impressive symposium on “The Personality and Politics of John Nance Garner” was presented in the Uvalde Opera House. The Symposium was moderated by T. R. Fehrenbach, and attendees included former Senator Ralph Yarborough, former Representative O. C. Fisher, former Governor Dolph Briscoe Jr., Judge Ross E. Doughty Jr. (former Justice of the Supreme Court of Texas), and Professor Lionel Patenaude, who all recalled the humor, wisdom, and accomplishments of Mr. Garner.

“Mr. John Nance Garner was a Great American,” Judge Doughty told us. “He was Mr. Rugged individualism himself. He was the representative of an era of rugged individuals. Mr. Garner never had to sue anyone who owed him money; he didn’t have to sue. When word came from Washington that the Old Man was coming home it made anyone in Uvalde who owed him money nervous. Anyone in Uvalde who owed the old man, they’d sell their wives to get the money to pay up, rather than face the old man.”

“He sent me word,” is how Dolph Brisco explained his summons from his mentor, Vice-President John Nance Garner. Mr. Garner could, literally, verbally destroy another man if he set
out to do so; or he could turn on the charm and charm a person or a group absolutely beyond belief. . . . “Mr. Garner, after a couple of Blows for Liberty, was never really very short of criticism.” Mr. Garner had a way of summing things up. According to Briscoe, Garner said, “There are just two things to this government as I see it. The first is to safeguard the lives and the property of our people. The second is to insure that each of us has a chance to work out his destiny according to his talents.”

Red Wright, who retired to Leakey, Texas, to raise pecans, told of two incidents that took place in Uvalde during the summer of 1938, while Red was working in the area with a seismograph survey crew. The small West Texas town of Uvalde had two main claims to fame in 1938: being the home of John Nance Garner, Vice-President of the United States, and also of the most humming rattlesnakes in Texas. The area ranch land, densely covered with mesquite brush and prickly pear, was well populated with rats, and rats being sirloin steak to a hungry rattler, the rattlesnake population was a natural consequence. During that hot summer, cutting survey lines and roads through dense brush, with the brush providing shade for Mr. Rattler to relax under during the heat of the day, was somewhat akin to playing Russian roulette. “We killed six to eight rattlers a day as they disputed our right of way.” Rattlesnakes usually mind their own business, which is hunting rats, mice, and rabbits. But they won’t be pushed around either.

Engineering field crews are a boisterous lot, playing many practical jokes on each other. One of Red’s buddies named Carl had recently played a devilish prank on him that had caused Red great embarrassment. And Red was eager to get revenge. He hit upon a plan aimed at Carl’s deathly fear of rattlesnakes. After swearing all the field crew to secrecy, Red caught a five-and-a-half-foot rattler by pinning him to the ground with a forked stick. Red carefully grasped Mr. Rattler firmly behind the head and holding him securely, he proceeded to sew his lips together with a strong thread. Red said, “The process was painless to the rattler but slightly nerve wracking to me. Although it did little to improve Mr. Rattler’s ill temper, it did at least render him harmless.” Red put
him in an empty dynamite box in the back of his truck, and at the end of the day returned to Uvalde with his captive.

Red’s next problem was how to get the rattler through the Kincaid Hotel Lobby, and up to his room. A strong paper bag from the neighborhood grocer solved this problem, and Red walked right through the lobby with Mr. Rattlesnake and no one paid him a bit of attention. When Red reached his room on the third floor he looked into Carl’s room through the bathroom, which they shared. Making sure Carl wasn’t in, Red eased Mr. Rattlesnake out of the bag and shoved him under Carl’s bed. Returning to his own room he waited for the fun to begin.

Red heard Carl come down the hall and enter his room. The bedsprings creaked as he sat down to remove his shoes. Carl dropped the first shoe to the floor about eight inches from the snake’s head and was reaching for his other shoe, when Mr. Rattler decided to make his presence known by sounding his nerve chilling warning. Carl leaped about three feet into the air, giving a terrified yell, and leaped out the door barefoot and ran down the hall. Carl stopped suddenly when he reached the elevator door. Then it dawned on him that rattlesnakes do not ride elevators to pay calls on third-floor hotel guests.

Carl knew immediately how the snake had gotten up there, and the next order of business would be to skin Red alive. Storming into Red’s room, Carl initiated his battle plan. But by some snake-like maneuvering of his own, Red managed to escape Carl’s fury, while reminding Carl what a fine sport he was and how he thought he could take a joke with the best of them. Carl finally agreed to let Red go, but not before issuing strict orders for Red to gather up that “blankety blank” rattlesnake and get out before he reported him to the hotel management, who would throw Red, and his friend, both out into the street. Without delay Red gathered up Mr. Rattler and put him back in the paper bag, and walked out through the hotel lobby. Nobody paid him a bit of attention.

Red thought, I can’t just turn this rattlesnake loose in the street; even in Southwest Texas ranch towns folks don’t take kindly to having rattlesnakes turned loose in their street. Red decided it
would be better to take his reptile friend back out to the country. As Red headed for the country he made a stop at Ross Brumfield’s filling station and garage, which in 1938 was located on the corner of Oak and Getty Street. He was loading the snake into his pickup and holding his sides laughing, when the attendant asked Red what was so funny. When Red told his story, the attendant asked what he intended to do with his close-lipped reptile friend. “Why don’t you let me have that old snake? I might find a use for him. You just dump him in that large tub in the back of the garage. I would kinda like to keep him if you don’t mind.” So Red did as the attendant requested and returned to the hotel.

Red explained that just past dusk he strolled back to the garage to get a notebook out of his pickup. “As I entered the front of the gas station I could hear strange music coming through a partition door that led to the storage section in back of the building.” This part of the garage served the dual purpose of storage and recreation room. Almost hidden in a corner was an area equipped with an ancient and scarred poker table, cowhide bottom chairs, gun racks, and a large variety of hunting trophies. The room was the meeting place and favorite rendezvous of Vice-President John Nance Garner and his hunting and poker playing cronies, when the vice-president was in town. A bottle of bourbon was usually close at hand.

“I could hear the wail of a fiddle, the whang of a guitar and an unrecognizable staccato beat as I headed to the back of the building to investigate. There was Garner’s closest crony ‘Ol’ Ross’ playing the Guitar, ‘Ol’ Herb’ fiddling furiously, and a huge grizzled rancher with a tin cup, banging out the rhythm on the scarred wooden table. The usual bottle of ‘Old Busthead’ bourbon graced the table, just in case Mr. Garner wanted to ‘Strike a Blow For Liberty.’

“As the last strands of ‘Red Wings’ died out the group eyed me closely, before ‘Ol’ Ross’ finally greeted me. I knew ‘Ol’ Ross’, who was owner of the garage, and after his cordial greeting, the grizzled rancher decided I must be okay. He picked up the bottle, handed me the tin cup, poured it brimful, and commanded in a tone easily heard for a quarter mile: ‘Have a Drink!’ Not wanting
to be unsociable, and realizing that an invitation to drink from a
gentleman of this caliber is not to be taken lightly, I downed the
bourbon and listened as the group launched into a rendition of
‘Over the Waves.’

“During a brief intermission and another cup of 100 proof
bourbon, the rancher suddenly and roughly demanded of me,
‘Pardner can’t you play something too?’” The bourbon had begun
to give Red delusions of prowess far beyond his ability. And it was
then he remembered Ol’ Mr. Rattlesnake. He had him an idea.
Going over to the tub that held his old friend, Red grasped him
behind the head with his left hand and behind the tail just above
the rattles with his right hand. “I started keeping time with the
music by using my right thumb to mute Mr. Rattler’s outraged
buzzing rattles. Everyone quickly agreed that my ingenious instru-
ment entitled me to a place in the band, and we resumed the pro-
gram of western style chamber music.”

They were all playing their western style music when a big,
long, black limousine with a Massachusetts license plate pulled up
outside. A short, rotund, little man dressed in a Brooks Brothers
suit and wearing a derby hat, got out and walked about. He heard
the music and asked the attendant, “What is that music-like sound
I hear?” When the attendant told him that it was just some of the
locals having a little Saturday night fun, the little man tip-toed over
to the partition and looked in just as they were beginning another
rendition of “Over the Waves.”

When he peeked in, Red was lustily keeping time with “Ol’ Rat-
tler” and his furiously buzzing rattles. After a quick observation the
little man hastily ran back to his car yelling “Mother, Mother, come
here quick. You won’t believe it, but you have to see this.” A patri-
cian little lady, dressed in the best aristocratic Boston Back Bay fash-
ion frock, stepped out, and followed the wide eyed little gentleman.

“Our little band still didn’t know what was taking place when
they looked in on our musical session.” Red said he could tell by
the expression on the woman’s face that she didn’t believe what
her eyes were seeing. It was like she knew that what she was seeing
was real, but her mind was telling her it had to be an hallucination.
There was Mr. Vice-President John Nance Garner sitting right there, with a bottle of “Old Busthead” bourbon by his side, there was “Ol’ Ross” playing his guitar, “Ol’ Herb” fiddling furiously, and the “Ol’ Grizzled Rancher” still keeping time with his tin cup. And then there was Red, with “Ol’ Mr. Rattlesnake,” holding him up there, muting those rattles while he buzzed away. And they were playing “Over the Waves.” Well, that dainty little lady and the little man in the Brooks Brothers suit rushed out shaking their heads in stunned disbelief and drove hastily away to the East.

Margaret Truman told in her book, *Harry S. Truman*, about the breakfast served to the Truman family when they visited Mr. Garner in Uvalde: “We were served white winged dove, bacon, ham, fried chicken, scrambled eggs, rice with gravy, hot biscuits, Uvalde honey, peach preserves, grape jelly, and coffee.”14 Mr. Garner was a man of simple tastes and plainer words. He found life pleasant living in the cottage at the rear of the large brick home he once occupied on Park Street, and which he gave to the city of Uvalde for a library and museum in memory of his wife and helpmate, Ettie Rheiner Garner. Said Mr. Garner, “If it hadn’t been that my wife was a descendent of pioneers of this county, the city of Uvalde wouldn’t own this home today. Not only was she one of the ‘oldtimers,’ but she was a great woman.”15

Garner money secured the future of Southwest Texas Junior College with donations in excess of one million dollars. Mr. Garner said, “I think of the College as I do the people of Uvalde. These people have made me principally what I am. They built me from a sick man into a successful office holder. This is my way of showing my appreciation in repaying them. Everything I have was obtained in this area and I want to give it back where it came from. . . . I don’t want these kids around here to have to suck on the hind teat, when it comes to getting a good education.”16

Frank Walker, Presbyterian Minister in Uvalde from 1951 thru 1956, told me recently that he became good friends with Ross Brumfield, a poker playing crony of Vice-President Garner. One day Ross asked preacher Walker if he would like to meet Mr. Garner. Of course he would, was Walker’s enthusiastic reply. All the
preachers in town had taken turns trying to convert Mr. Garner, who declared: “I haven’t ever joined anything in my life except the Democratic party.” Preacher Walker said, “I wouldn’t dream of trying to convert Mr. Garner. I had too much respect for that. I just wanted to meet him, because I admired him.”

Ross looked at his watch. It was about 5 P.M., and he declared, “This is a good time.” They went immediately to Mr. Garner’s home. “After we were introduced, we were sitting talking, when the clock struck 5:30.” Preacher Walker told me, “Mr. Garner rose, took out his big gold watch and glancing at it he announced, ‘Time to strike a blow for liberty.’ Mr. Garner said, ‘You fellows can get yours out of that decanter on the table,’ while Mr. Garner reached up to a shelf and got his own drink from a little barrel with a spigot. Mr. Garner’s back was to Preacher Walker when Walker told Mr. Garner, ‘Even if I was a drinking man I wouldn’t drink with you.’ Mr. Garner whirled around, his bushy eyebrows poppin’ up and down, and fire in his eyes. And he demanded, ‘Why not?’ Preacher Walker’s reply was, ‘Any man who won’t let me drink out of the same jug with him, I wouldn’t drink with.’ Mr. Garner slapped his thigh and said, ‘You will do.’ After that they became good friends.”

Some time had passed and Mr. Garner trusted Preacher Walker, when Walker asked Mr. Garner, “How is it with your soul?” Mr. Garner put his hand on Preacher Walker’s shoulder, pointed up and said, “That man up there and I are good friends.”

Endnotes

2. Ibid. 6.
4. Ibid. 3.
5. Ibid. 6.
8. Fenley. 7.
9. Ibid. 7.
10. Ibid. 7.
11. Doughty.
15. Fenley. 8.
16. Fischer. 165.
Bill Stokes hard at work