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The un-celebrity president

Jimmy Carter shuns riches, lives modestly in his Georgia hometown



Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter walk home with Secret Service agents along West Church Street after having dinner at a friend's house in Plains, Ga. The former first couple, who were born in Plains,

returned to the town after leaving the White House.

Story by **Kevin Sullivan** and **Mary Jordan**

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PLAINS, Ga.

Jimmy Carter finishes his Saturday night dinner, salmon and broccoli casserole on a paper plate, flashes his famous toothy grin and calls playfully to his wife of 72 years, Rosalynn: “C’mon, kid.”

She laughs and takes his hand, and they walk carefully through a neighbor’s kitchen filled with 1976 campaign buttons, photos of world leaders and a couple of unopened cans of Billy Beer, then out the back door, where

three Secret Service agents
wait.

They do this just about every
weekend in this tiny town
where they were born — he
almost 94 years ago, she
almost 91. Dinner at their
friend Jill Stuckey's house,
with plastic Solo cups of ice
water and one glass each of
bargain-brand chardonnay,
then the half-mile walk home
to the ranch house they built
in 1961.

On this south Georgia
summer evening, still close to
90 degrees, they dab their
faces with a little plastic
bottle of No Natz to repel the
swirling clouds of tiny bugs.
Then they catch each other's
hands again and start
walking, the former president
in jeans and clunky black
shoes, the former first lady
using a walking stick for the
first time.



TOP: The Carters have dinner at their friend Jill Stuckey's house, where they drank ice water out of plastic Solo cups and each had a glass of bargain-brand chardonnay. LEFT: Carter enjoys his Saturday night dinner at Stuckey's house on a paper plate. RIGHT: The Carters hold hands as they walk home. The couple — he, almost 94, and she, almost 91 — have been married 72 years.

The 39th president of the
United States lives modestly,
a sharp contrast to his
successors, who have left the

White House to embrace
power of another kind:
wealth.

Even those who didn't start
out rich, including Bill
Clinton and Barack Obama,
have made tens of millions of
dollars on the private-sector
opportunities that flow so
easily to ex-presidents.

When Carter left the White
House after one tumultuous
term, trounced by Ronald
Reagan in the 1980 election,
he returned to Plains, a speck
of peanut and cotton
farmland that to this day has
a nearly 40 percent poverty
rate.

The Democratic former
president decided not to join
corporate boards or give
speeches for big money
because, he says, he didn't
want to "capitalize financially
on being in the White

House.”

Presidential historian Michael Beschloss said that Gerald Ford, Carter’s predecessor and close friend, was the first to fully take advantage of those high-paid post-presidential opportunities, but that “Carter did the opposite.”

Since Ford, other former presidents, and sometimes their spouses, routinely earn hundreds of thousands of dollars per speech.

“I don’t see anything wrong with it; I don’t blame other people for doing it,” Carter says over dinner. “It just never had been my ambition to be rich.”



LEFT: Carter's handprints mark a sidewalk on the grounds of the Jimmy Carter Boyhood Farm in Plains. RIGHT: The former president arrives at Stuckey's house for dinner wearing a casual shirt, jeans and a belt buckle with "JC" on it.

'He doesn't like big shots'

Carter was 56 when he returned to Plains from Washington. He says his peanut business, held in a blind trust during his presidency, was \$1 million in debt, and he was forced to sell.

"We thought we were going to lose everything," says Rosalynn, sitting beside him.

Carter decided that his income would come from writing, and he has written 33 books, about his life and

career, his faith, Middle East peace, women's rights, aging, fishing, woodworking, even a children's book written with his daughter, Amy Carter, called "The Little Baby Snoogle-Fleejer."

With book income and the \$210,700 annual pension all former presidents receive, the Carters live comfortably. But his books have never fetched the massive sums commanded by more recent presidents.

Carter has been an ex-president for 37 years, longer than anyone else in history. His simple lifestyle is increasingly rare in this era of President Trump, a billionaire with gold-plated sinks in his private jet, Manhattan penthouse and Mar-a-Lago estate.

Carter is the only president in

the modern era to return full-time to the house he lived in before he entered politics — a two-bedroom rancher assessed at \$167,000, less than the value of the armored Secret Service vehicles parked outside.

Ex-presidents often fly on private jets, sometimes lent by wealthy friends, but the Carters fly commercial. Stuckey says that on a recent flight from Atlanta to Los Angeles, Carter walked up and down the aisle greeting other passengers and taking selfies.



Carter is pictured at his house after teaching his 800th Sunday school lesson at Maranatha Baptist Church since leaving the White House. Every other Sunday morning, he teaches at Maranatha, on the edge of town, and people line up the night before to get a seat. The painting at right was done by Carter.

“He doesn’t like big shots, and he doesn’t think he’s a big shot,” said Gerald Rafshoon, who was Carter’s White House communications director.

Carter costs U.S. taxpayers less than any other ex-president, [according to the General Services Administration](#), with a total

bill for him in the current fiscal year of \$456,000, covering pensions, an office, staff and other expenses. That's less than half the \$952,000 budgeted for George H.W. Bush; the three other living ex-presidents — Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama — cost taxpayers more than \$1 million each per year.

Carter doesn't even have federal retirement health benefits because he worked for the government for four years — less than the five years needed to qualify, according to the GSA. He says he receives health benefits through Emory University, where he has taught for 36 years.



The Plains general store, once owned by Carter's Uncle Buddy, sells Carter memorabilia and scoops of peanut butter ice cream in honor of Carter, who was a peanut farmer.

The federal government pays for an office for each ex-president. Carter's, in the Carter Center in Atlanta, is the least expensive, at \$115,000 this year. The Carters could have built a more elaborate office with living quarters, but for years they slept on a pullout couch for a week each month. Recently, they had a Murphy bed installed.

Carter's office costs a fraction of Obama's, which is \$536,000 a year. Clinton's costs \$518,000, George W.

Bush's is \$497,000 and George H.W. Bush's is \$286,000, according to the GSA.

"I am a great admirer of Harry Truman. He's my favorite president, and I really try to emulate him," says Carter, who writes his books in a converted garage in his house. "He set an example I thought was admirable."

But although Truman retired to his hometown of Independence, Mo., Beschloss said that even he took up residence in an elegant house previously owned by his prosperous in-laws.

As Carter spreads a thick layer of butter on a slice of white bread, he is asked whether he thinks, especially with a man who boasts of

being a billionaire in the White House, any future ex-president will ever live the way Carter does.

“I hope so,” he says. “But I don’t know.”



A customer leaves the Plains Mtd convenience store in Plains. About 700 people live in the town, 150 miles south of Atlanta, in a place that is a living museum to Carter.

‘A good ’ol Southern gentleman’

Plains is a tiny circle of Georgia farmland, a mile in

diameter, with its center at the train depot that served as Carter's 1976 campaign headquarters. About 700 people live here, 150 miles due south of Atlanta, in a place that is a living museum to Carter.

The general store, once owned by Carter's Uncle Buddy, sells Carter memorabilia and scoops of peanut butter ice cream. Carter's boyhood farm is preserved as it was in the 1930s, with no electricity or running water.

The Jimmy Carter National Historic Site is essentially the entire town, drawing nearly 70,000 visitors a year and \$4 million into the county's economy.

Carter has used his post-presidency to support human rights, global health

programs and fair elections worldwide through his Carter Center, based in Atlanta. He has helped renovate 4,300 homes in 14 countries for Habitat for Humanity, and with his own hammer and tool belt, he will be working on homes for low-income people in Indiana later this month.

But it is Plains that defines him.

After dinner, the Carters step out of Stuckey's driveway, with two Secret Service agents walking close behind.

Carter's gait is a little unsteady these days, three years after a diagnosis of melanoma on his liver and brain. At a 2015 news conference to announce his

illness, he seemed to be bidding a stoic farewell, saying he was “perfectly at ease with whatever comes.”

But now, after radiation and chemotherapy, Carter says he is cancer-free.

In October, he will become the second president ever to reach 94; George H.W. Bush turned 94 in June. These days, Carter is sharp, funny and reflective.

The Carters walk every day — often down Church Street, the main drag through Plains, where they have been walking since the 1920s.



LEFT: Gene Mattson, who owns Plains Mtd, feeds cats outside the convenience store.

RIGHT: Veterinarian Frank Pierce sits outside his clinic in Plains.

As they cross Walters Street,
Carter sees a couple of
teenagers on the sidewalk
across the street.

“Hello,” says the former
president, with the same big
smile that adorns peanut
Christmas ornaments in the
general store.

“Hey,” says a girl in a jean
skirt, greeting him with a
cheerful wave.

The two 15-year-olds say
people in Plains think of the
Carters as neighbors and
friends, just like anybody
else.

“I grew up in church with
him,” says Maya Wynn. “He’s
a nice guy, just like a regular
person.”

“He’s a good ’ol Southern

gentleman,” says David Lane.

Jimmy Carter shakes hands
with passengers on plane

► 0:42

Carter says this place formed him, seeding his beliefs about racial equality. His farmhouse youth during the Great Depression made him unpretentious and frugal. His friends, maybe only half-joking, describe Carter as “tight as a tick.”

That no-frills sensibility, endearing since he left Washington, didn’t work as well in the White House. Many people thought Carter scrubbed some of the luster off the presidency by carrying his own suitcases onto Air Force One and refusing to have “Hail to the Chief” played.

Stuart E. Eizenstat, a Carter aide and biographer, said Carter's edict eliminating drivers for top staff members backfired. It meant that top officials were driving instead of reading and working for an hour or two every day.

"He didn't feel suited to the grandeur," Eizenstat said. "Plains is really part of his DNA. He carried it into the White House, and he carried it out of the White House."

Carter's presidency — from 1977 to 1981 — is often remembered for long lines at gas stations and the Iran hostage crisis.

"I may have overemphasized the plight of the hostages when I was in my final year," he says. "But I was so obsessed with them personally, and with their families, that I wanted to do

anything to get them home
safely, which I did.”



Visitors watch a video about Carter's life in the theater at Plains High School. Carter attended the school, which served first through 11th grades. Today, the school is home to the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site.

He said he regrets not doing
more to unify the Democratic
Party.

When Carter looks back at his
presidency, he says he is most
proud of “keeping the peace
and supporting human
rights,” the Camp David

accords that brokered peace between Israel and Egypt, and his work to normalize relations with China. In 2002, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

“I always told the truth,” he says.

Carter has been notably quiet about President Trump. But on this night, two years into Trump’s term, he’s not holding back.

“I think he’s a disaster,” Carter says. “In human rights and taking care of people and treating people equal.”

“The worst is that he is not telling the truth, and that just hurts everything,” Rosalynn says.

Carter says his father taught him that truthfulness

matters. He said that was reinforced at the U.S. Naval Academy, where he said students are expelled for telling even the smallest lie.

“I think there’s been an attitude of ignorance toward the truth by President Trump,” he says.

Carter says he thinks the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision has “changed our political system from a democracy to an oligarchy. Money is now preeminent. I mean, it’s just gone to hell now.”

He says he believes that the nation’s “ethical and moral values” are still intact and that Americans eventually will “return to what’s right and what’s wrong, and what’s decent and what’s indecent, and what’s truthful and what’s lies.”

But, he says, “I doubt if it happens in my lifetime.”



The Jimmy Carter National Historic Site draws nearly 70,000 visitors a year and \$4 million into the county's economy.

On Church Street, Carter points out the mayor's house with his left hand while he holds Rosalynn's with his right.

“My mother and father lived in that brick one,” he says, gesturing toward a small house across the street. “We use it as an office now.”

“That's Dr. Logan's over here.”

Every house has a story.

Generations of them. Cracked
birdbaths and rocking chairs
on somebody's great-
grandmother's porch. Carter
knows them all.

“Mr. Oscar Williams lived
here; his family was my
competitor in the warehouse
business.”

He points out the Plains
United Methodist Church,
where he spotted young
Eleanor Rosalynn Smith one
evening when he was home
from the Naval Academy.

He asked her out. They went
to a movie, and the next
morning he told his mother
he was going to marry
Rosalynn.

“I didn't know that for years,”
she says with a smile.

They are asked if there is anything they want but don't have.

"I can't think of anything," Carter says, turning to Rosalynn. "And you?"

"No, I'm happy," she says.

"We feel at home here," Carter says. "And the folks in town, when we need it, they take care of us."



Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter pose for photographs with anyone who wants one after a

morning church service at Maranatha Baptist Church.

'A heart of service'

Every other Sunday morning,
Carter teaches Sunday school
at the Maranatha Baptist
Church on the edge of town,
and people line up the night
before to get a seat.

This Sunday morning
happens to be his 800th
lesson since he left the White
House.

He walks in wearing a blazer
too big through the
shoulders, a striped shirt and
a turquoise bolo tie. He asks
where people have come
from, and from the pews they
call out at least 20 states,
Canada, Kenya, China and
Denmark.

He tells the congregation that
he's planning a trip to
Montana to go fishing with

his friend Ted Turner, and that he's going to ride in his son's autogiro — a sort of mini-helicopter.

“I'm still fairly active,” he says, and everyone laughs.

He talks about living a purposeful life, but also about finding enough time for rest and reflection. Then he and Rosalynn pose for photos with every person who wants one, including Steven and Joanna Raley, who came from Annandale, Va., with their 3-month-old son, Jackson Carter Raley.

“We want our children to grow up with a heart of service like President Carter,” says Steven, who works on Navy submarines, as Carter once did.

“One of the reasons we named our son after

President Carter is how
humble he is,” Joanna says.

Carter holds the baby and
beams for the camera.

“I like the name,” he says.



An oversized peanut with a toothy grin, made in Indiana as a tribute to Carter, a former peanut farmer, sits outside the Plains Mtd convenience store.

A modest life

When they reach their
property, the Carters turn
right off the sidewalk and cut

across the wide lawn toward
their house.

Carter stops to point out a tall
magnolia that was
transplanted from a sprout
taken from a tree that
Andrew Jackson planted on
the White House lawn.

They walk past a pond, which
Carter helped dig and where
he now works on his fly-
fishing technique. They point
out a willow tree at the
pond's edge, on a gentle
sloping lawn, where they will
be buried in graves marked
by simple stones.

They know their graves will
draw tourists and boost the
Plains economy.

Their one-story house sits
behind a government-owned
fence that once surrounded
Richard Nixon's house in Key
Biscayne, Fla. The Carters

already have deeded the property to the National Park Service, which will one day turn it into a museum.

Their house is dated, but homey and comfortable, with a rustic living room and a small kitchen. A cooler bearing the presidential seal sits on the floor in the kitchen — Carter says they use it for leftovers.

In a remodel not long ago, the couple knocked down a bedroom wall themselves. “By that time, we had worked with Habitat so much that it was just second-nature,” Rosalynn says.

Rosalynn Carter practices tai chi and meditates in the mornings, while her husband writes in his study or swims

in the pool. He also builds furniture and paints in the garage; the paint is still wet on a portrait of a cardinal that will be their Christmas card this year.

They watch Atlanta Braves games or “Law and Order.” Carter just finished reading “The Innovators” by Walter Isaacson. They have no chef and they cook for themselves, often together. They make their own yogurt.

On this summer morning, Rosalynn mixes pancake batter and sprinkles in blueberries grown on their land.

Carter cooks them on the griddle.

Then he does the dishes.



After dinner at their friend's house, the Carters leave, with two Secret Service agents walking close behind. The former president's gait is a bit unsteady these days, three years after a diagnosis of melanoma on his liver and brain. After radiation and chemotherapy, Carter says he is cancer-free.

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