

Always the man from Plains

Jimmy Carter, like Plains, is enjoying a second renaissance

BY PAGE HURLEY SHUGRUE

Once upon a time, international diplomat, Nobel Prize nominee, Habitat for Humanity activist and American President James Earl Carter Jr. was also a kid. Growing up in Plains, Georgia (population 700,) he is this Southern town's most famous lifelong resident and staunch advocate. In fact, no one can truly understand Jimmy Carter without seeing Plains.

With its authentic, 19th-century architecture, the small, Georgian village looks like Main Street, USA. Plains, like former President Carter himself, is also enjoying a second renaissance. As the former president explains, the town has much to offer. "Several years back, Congress passed a law establishing Plains as an historical site. This was for two reasons: One, because I was born here and became president; second, because this is the only town in the entire U.S. Park Service being preserved basically as it was in 1900-1930...Plains is a remarkable little town which hasn't changed since then."

President Carter's birthplace was originally called Biblically inspired "Plains of Dura" and was gradually settled throughout the 1800s. Officially chartered in 1896, the first town ordinances decreed that "1. A house could not be used for immoral purposes; 2. A slingshot, bow, arrow or any kind of firearm [would be illegal] in the City or Cemetery," according to the town's centennial report, "History of Plains, Georgia: 1885-1985." The same document states that farming was the locals' primary livelihood here, where peanut crops gradually replaced cotton as the major industry. Jimmy Carter's father, farmer and entrepreneur James Earl, Sr., was no exception.

Yet the town's long, agrarian roots



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▲ *Jimmy Carter and brother Billy share some brotherly humor.*

► *Jimmy's boyhood home.*

often disguised its other attributes, like an early, innovative commitment to education and health care.

The Georgia Department of Education cited Plains High School, under principal Julia Coleman's 50-year tenure, as a model institution, one of only three statewide. Meanwhile, the Wise Sanitarium, where Carter's mother, Miss Lillian, worked as a nurse, was a forerunner in medical technology and radiation therapy. It was here on October 1, 1924, that Jimmy Carter was the first president born in a hospital.

By 1928, the Carters had purchased



ROBB HELFRICK

► *The 13-foot-tall chicken-wire and styrofoam peanut, on Hwy. 45 north, was a gift from an Indiana political rally in '76.*



GEORGIA MUSEUM



Jimmy, age one, with cousin, Hugh Carter.



Six-month-old Jimmy sits on mother Lillian's lap.



Jimmy while a Midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy.

their farm, a half mile from Plains, where they solidly embraced the family work ethic. Young Jimmy's chores included hog-butchering, black-smithing, sugar cane-threshing, cow-milking, cotton and watermelon-picking.

Jimmy also manned the family commissary, just beside their farmhouse, and marketed homemade products, including ketchup, bottled milk and his father's own "Plains Maid" brand cane syrup.

Jimmy Carter's youth wasn't all drudgery and work, however. Only four years his senior, cousin Hugh Carter, nicknamed "Beedie," recalls that he and Jimmy (or "Hot") were like "two Tom Sawyers, barefoot and happy." In his memoir, *Cousin Beedie and Cousin Hot*, Hugh reminisces about their thoroughly American childhood and the delightful, natural array of pastimes they enjoyed.

Cat-fishing and arrowhead sleuthing, as well as 'coon, possum and rattlesnake hunting were particular favorites, with an occasional pond swim or jump on freshly piled hay.

Their biggest and most successful joint venture was the weekend food stand,

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where the boys sold homemade ice cream, hamburgers, hot dogs and boiled peanuts. Hugh remembers: "The hotter the weather, the better the sales. After paying all expenses and

turning the five dollars change to our personal banker (my much-amused dad), we would divide the profits. On a really good day, we would make up to five dollars each." But when business slacked off, Hugh assumed command and ordered the younger Jimmy to "run up and down the street hollering, 'I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream! Rush on down to Carter's ice cream stand and get three dips for a nickel.'" According to Hugh, his cousin Hot particularly resented this duty.

The rest of Jimmy Carter's immediate family was an assorted mix of rugged individualists. His stern but loving father, Earl, for example, always helped the children with their homework. Fiercely competitive, "my father was an excellent athlete," says Carter, "a fine baseball and mean tennis player, who'd never let his son win once." Miss Lillian, the avid reader, future Peace Corps volunteer and

full-time nurse, often ignored local segregation customs, and tended sick, black neighbors and invited their children into her home.

President Carter calls the family home, surrounded by pecan, pear and mulberry trees, as "nothing fancy but nice for a house back then." Built in the early 1920s on a red, dirt road, the pale yellow structure was more than adequate for the rambunctious Carter clan. The house, all on one floor, included a living room, kitchen, breakfast nook, dining room, and three large bedrooms, but no electricity, indoor plumbing or central heating. Despite certain hardships, however, the Carters did have fond childhood memories of haunted hallways, overnight birthday parties, Christmas celebrations and various ponies, bikes and toys.

Indeed, the simple house and difficult farm life did not mean the Carters were poor. According to Bonnie Blaford, the Jimmy Carter site supervisor, the president's father was land-rich, even during the Depression, and owned an insurance agency, mercantile business and bank.

Thus, with few financial concerns, Jimmy Carter attended the U.S. Naval Academy, married a local girl, Rosalynn Smith, and served in World War II. But psychologically, he never left Plains and insisted on settling there in the early 1950s. Rosalynn did not agree. In his memoir, *Why Not The Best?*, President Carter remembers: "When I came back to Schenectady and told her that I would like to resign from the Navy, she disagreed violently. She did not, she protested, wish to go back to the restrictive life of our home in Plains...where our married freedom might be cramped or partially dominated by relatives, particularly her mother and my mother."

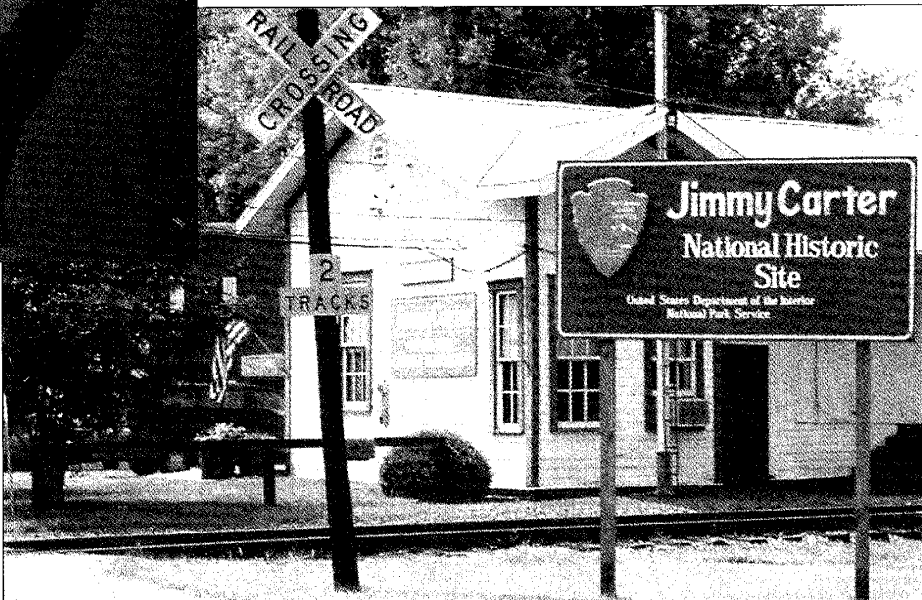
Ultimately, they did return to Plains, which like the rest of the South, still embraced segregation. "Blacks and whites never went to the same church or school," he continues. "We did not sit together on the two-car diesel train. There was scrupulous compliance with these unwritten and unspoken rules." But with civil rights legislation came welcome change, according to the former president.

But the biggest transition for Plains actually occurred in 1976, when native son, Jimmy Carter, became the nation's 39th



◀ Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter display those winning smiles during the 1976 presidential campaign.

▼ The old train depot in Plains saw a lot of action during the campaign as Jimmy Carter's headquarters and was the original site of the smiling peanut.



chief executive. Shopkeepers, in their classic, turn-of-the-century storefronts, suddenly catered to souvenir hunters, secret service agents and news media, instead of simply their fellow farmers. Overnight, Plains was a household word. Centennial book *History of Plains* states: "It was the American dream coming true...It proved over again that a boy raised on a farm near a small town could indeed succeed and become president of this great country."

As thousands of visitors poured into this area, the first truly Southern presidential hopeful since Reconstruction and his family were accessible to their public. "Miss Lillian did not go on many campaign trips [but gave] tirelessly of her time at the local campaign headquarters, [the train depot,]" the same book says. "Her spirit and energy never failed her even when tourists were lined up from the front of the depot all the way to the post office...She answered their questions and posed with them for pictures."

Ever the residents of rural Georgia, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter's White House years became tumultuous for Plains, spawning new businesses, restaurants, souvenir shops, network command centers and tour bus companies.

Many of these establishments disappeared after President Carter's 1980 defeat, as the Carters remained there in relative obscurity. Recently, though, he has metamorphosed into the busy, president emeritus, redefining that role and becoming an exceedingly popular former commander-in-chief. Whenever a troubled world beckons, Jimmy Carter volunteers his well-honed negotiating

skills and hard-won international prominence and respect. At all other times, however, he is always the man from Plains. ○

Page Hurley Shugrue is a Boston freelancer who writes about presidential homes and other historic sites for the Chicago Tribune, Yankee magazine and many others.

If you go...

Plains is 2-1/2 hours south of Atlanta via highways 85-185-280 and offers the Plains Bed and Breakfast Inn (912-824-7252) and an assortment of accommodations and restaurants in nearby Americus, including the beautifully restored, historic Windsor Hotel, 912-924-1555.

Like the Carters themselves, Plains is welcoming and friendly to visitors who can take a leisurely stroll down Main Street and enjoy its Victorian charm. A self-guided car tour (cassette rental \$2, booklet \$1) begins at Plains High School, a vivid example of Depression-era education and now the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site Visitor Center (open daily except Christmas and New Year's, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., admission free; 912-824-4104.)

On Sept. 27, the Depot Museum opened, featuring memorabilia from Carter's '76 campaign.

All along Main Street, shopkeepers like cousin Hugh Carter of Carter's Antiques ply their trades, with plenty of presidential souvenirs to go around. Four highlights include the train depot, where Jimmy Carter announced his candidacy, and the Carter farm, recently purchased by the National Park Service and slated for renovation. Another stop features the Marantha Baptist Church, which also makes a lovely Sunday morning destination and might even offer an hour of Sunday School teacher himself, Jimmy Carter (10-11 a.m., standing room only after 9:30).

Atlanta's Jimmy Carter Library and Museum at the Carter Presidential Center give yet another glimpse of this president. Open Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. Admission: \$4 adult, \$3 over 55 and children under 16, free; 404-331-3942.