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

Photos by Matt McClain

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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
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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.

“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.

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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.
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.
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.”

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.”

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
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.”
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.

“T’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.
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.

**Credits:** Story by Kevin Sullivan and Mary Jordan. Photos by Matt McClain. Designed by Katherine Lee. Photo Editing by MaryAnne Golon.