

Because I knew what the Deep South was like, I was not surprised by what I saw in Plains, Georgia. In effect, this unpublished account of my visit is a tribute to President Carter and his mother for their ability to transcend their environment.

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## NO PLACE LIKE THIS HOME

By  
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Place, not time best characterizes the remote red-earth land of southwest Georgia where President Jimmy Carter has his roots, and keeps his home today.

When you pick up your Hertz Hire-Car at Atlanta International Airport to begin the four-hour drive there, the first impressions are of the New South. Many scenes along the roads emphasize that even the Deep South is now part of late 20<sup>th</sup> century America. The small clapboard churches lit by oil lamps have been replaced by modern cinderblock buildings with electricity. Instead of tumbledown unpainted sharecropper shacks there are many new homes, often 12 x 60 foot demobilized caravans. The green of the countryside is occasionally cut by dusty roads of red earth, but black as well as white farmers drive late-model cars and pickup trucks. No mules are to be seen in the fields, and cropdusting is done by airplanes that fly so low they risk tripping over telephone wires and electricity lines new since Jimmy Carter's boyhood.

The landscape, whether made by God or made again by man, is the first sign that Sumter County is an out of the way place. The combination of green foliage and dusty red earth makes it as exotic as an African landscape to an eye attuned to British terrain. The tallest features in a relatively flat land are pecan trees, which reach up to 50 feet high after a century of growth. A grove of pecan trees planted around a farmer's house not only provides shade against the sun, but also a cash income. About 75 million pounds of pecan nuts are annually harvested by hand in Georgia.

A stop at a roadside layby reveals that the 40-foot high trees with deep green leaves are magnolias, with buds the size of oranges, and in springtime blooms the size of melons. A sign cautioning against poisonous snakes reminds the outsider that this lush landscape can also be fatal. The gnats that swarm in the 90-degree weather that marks the time for harvesting peanuts are a reminder that the climate is more durably inhospitable than the Creek Indians who once lived here.

The radio, worldwide a means of homogenizing cultures, confirms that Sumter County is an alien place. The first voice is that of Brother Harold Leatherwood, a Baptist preacher who, in a rising and falling voice, sings and keens about the wearisome troubles of this world. It is only after a minute or two that one realizes that Brother Harold is white. The black preachers—different stations, same religion—chant their lessons with far greater rhythm, and even less audibility. It takes a few minutes to understand that a pair of women preachers are preaching women's lib; collectively men have replaced the Devil as the object of these preachers' scorn.

Secular programs also emphasize the social distance of Southern Georgia. A country singer laments his lowly status in a song entitled, "I'm just a Red Neck in a Rock & Roll Bar". A smalltown radio announcer cautions children not to play Hallowe'en tricks on neighbours, for many people keep guns and might shoot at anything moving in their garden at night.

Andersonville is the first stop for anyone approaching Sumter County from Atlanta. It is a cemetery from The War, that is, the War Between the States. During the 14 months that Andersonville served as a Confederate prison, more than 12,000 of its 45,000 Northern prisoners died in the stench and filth of its cramped quarters. Their graves are marked by 16-inch high marble slabs, laconically recording for those whose names are known rank and native state.

The monuments raised by the victorious Northern states commemorate the heroism of those who died to preserve the Union against rebellion. The State of Georgia's monument, erected only a few years ago, noncommittally honours all Americans imprisoned anywhere in the service of their country throughout its history.

A mile away off federal property the monument of the Georgia chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy tells a different story. It honours the prison Commandant, Capt. Henry Wirz, hanged in Washington on November 10, 1865. It damns General Grant for refusing an exchange of prisoners that might have saved many lives, and praises Capt. Wirz for not saving his life by incriminating President Jefferson Davis as responsible for the dead of Andersonville.

In the next stop, Americus, the county seat, two war memorials side by side emphasize the dual loyalty of the natives of Sumter County. The monument to those who served in World Wars takes the whole of the United States as the country served. The Confederate monument treats the 11 slave states of the Confederacy as the country for which Sumter County men heroically fought.

The approach to Plains is heralded by a car bumper sticker reading, "The end of the World: Plains, Ga". The first sign seen upon entering Plains proclaims the virtues of Nutreena Feeds. The next sight is a row of 50 wagons used for taking peanuts and cotton from the fields to the Carter or Williams' warehouses in the town.

Religion is the biggest business in Plains. The town has six churches whose membership collectively is several times its population. It had only one petrol station-cum-general store and two other stores when Jimmy Carter set up his Presidential campaign headquarters there two years ago.

The First Baptist Church, to which the President belongs, is a large white wooden edifice, with painted glass windows shaped in an Early English Gothic manner. Its members dress respectably for services, but afterwards menfolk can be seen taking off their ties before getting in their cars for the hot drive home. The church offers passers by leaflets warning them against "The adder's sting" (alcohol) and "Gambling: a Violation of God's Law of Order". Another leaflet—"Shall I Marry a Catholic?"—contrasts the theology of the religions of the 35<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> Presidents of the United States.

Plains is named after the Plains of Dura, where Nebuchadnezzar set up a golden image three score cubits high. Only the inevitable small town water tower is that height there today. Any graven images must be imported from the North, whose media men are more likely to proclaim the divinity of Presidents than are local folk who know the mortal clay from which Carters are made. A local news-sheet puts royalty first, headlining a story about The King, Elvis Presley.

Becoming a President's home has changed Plains. Six souvenir shops have opened in brick buildings that once served as company stores to sharecroppers until the mechanization of farming drove white and black sharecroppers away to Atlanta, Florida, Texas, California and New York. The President's face and the peanut are the dominant motifs of souvenirs. For example, there is a choice between a bottle-opener with a peanut-shaped handle, or one using the President's teeth as the opener.

The President's younger brother, Billy Carter, has done best from the tourist business, cultivating a beer-drinking 'Good Old Boy' image that complements his brother's controlled behaviour. The summer he has incorporated as Professional Brother Inc., selling his services to help launch a new liqueur, Peanut Lolita; as a wisecrack artist at Stock Car races; in a TV show called 'Hee Haw', and local rumour has it, as a lecturer at Harvard in succession to John Wayne.

Trying to spend Saturday in Plains emphasizes the smallness of the second-largest town (population: 683) of Sumter County. There is no place to get an evening meal. The only signs of life on the street at 8 o'clock are a few black boys on their bicycles, and half-a-dozen black youths lounging outside the 16-foot frontage of the Skylight Lounge and Nite Club.

A trip to buy a cold beer after a 'down home' dinner in Americus makes one realize why drinking is not considered respectable there. Beer is sold in a disused petrol station. Because spirits cannot be sold there, some loungers 'brownbag', carrying combinations like cherry brandy and fruit juice to drink till a quart jar is empty. A lounge, seeing a strange face, asks me where I am from. 'Britain' I reply. He returns a look of dull incomprehension. 'Britain, Missouri,' I say, trying to establish contact. This works. 'Oh, hell, I know Missouri. Did my basic training there. Always drunk on a Saturday night'.

No wonder the locals do not comprehend 'Britain, England'. A local television station is showing "Brief Encounter". The sight of Southern England 40 years ago looks as strange in Sumter County as "To Kill a Mockingbird" does in Surrey.

For more than a century Sumter County has been home to the Carter family. Like characters in a Faulkner novel, they have survived, no easy thing to do in South West Georgia. Some locals even say that people with any gumption or any brains get out. Apparently, Rosalynn Carter had such common sense. She did not want her career officer naval husband to leave its spick-and-span cleanliness to go back to soil that had made so many people fugitives.

Whatever took Jimmy Carter back a quarter-century ago could not have been ambition. The Navy offered glittering prizes, and security enough for any ambitious rural Southerner. It was his roots that pulled him back. Many generations of Carters are buried in this red earth. They include his great-great-grandfather, who was acquitted of murdering a neighbour who had stolen a slave, and his great-grandfather, described as the member of “a minority group”, the uninjured veterans of three years of fighting in the Sumter County Flying Artillery in The War. Carter’s paternal grandfather is buried here too, shot dead in a dispute about a piece of furniture. So too is his father, known respectfully still as Mister Earl.

Small as Plains is, it was the metropolis to the youthful Jimmy Carter, raised in the hamlet of Archery, three miles away along the now abandoned line of the Americus, Preston & Lumpkin Railroad. Archery had twenty black and two white families living without electricity, piped water and much else that cost ‘store money’ to buy.

In Carter’s boyhood the dominant evils were the boll weevil that destroyed the staple crop of cotton and the depression, that destroyed the market value of cotton. Mr. Earl, a rural jack-of-all-trades, bought and sold anything for which there was a market, and taught his son how to do the same. By the time that Carter quit the Navy to return to the land, his father’s shrewd trading and scientific farming had produced a promising, but by no means secure, agro business. Today, it can even provide an instant job as peanut procurement co-ordinator for a young son for whom marital troubles make it inadvisable for him to live amidst Washington publicity.

Once elected, every President is simultaneously running for re-election and for the history books. The tragedy of Richard Nixon was that he could win elections, but he had no sense of history. Nixon left small town Southern California to go to war. Instead of returning, he sought fame in the East, rising from Congressman through Vice President to legal advisor to Pepsi Cola Inc. Like any retired successful athlete, his successor, Gerald Ford, is welcome anywhere in America. But because of his mother’s divorce, he has a family tree cut short at the roots.

The distinctive thing about President Carter is not that he is from small town or rural America, for most of his predecessors were that. Nor is it that he is a throwback to the past, for that is not true. None of his predecessors could have learned nuclear engineering in their student days.

The distinctive feature of Jimmy Carter is that he is from a different place. Sumter County does not come out of the history or travel books that most Americans read. It is a place of the Deep South, where nothing much happened for generations after The War, making Jimmy Carter’s roots as alien to hundreds of millions of Americans as they are comfortable to himself.