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GARLAND LANDMARK SOCIETY

PO BOX 462232, GARLAND, TX 75046

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The Landmark Museum and the Pullman Railcar are operated by the Garland Landmark Society, a non-profit and volunteer organization.

Open Thursday, Friday, Saturday  
 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Private tours for at-risk patrons available on request

Heritage@garlandtx.gov  
 972-205-2992

FREE Admission  
 Donations are appreciated

Are you a long-time Garland resident with 1-2 hours to spare? Make an appointment to visit the Museum and help us identify hundreds of photographs. We are looking for information on WHO is in the picture, WHAT they are doing, WHERE the picture was taken and by WHOM, as well as WHEN the photographer pushed the button!

Appointments available on  
 Mondays and Wednesdays  
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Email: [Heritage@GarlandTX.gov](mailto:Heritage@GarlandTX.gov)

# ON TRACK

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GARLAND LANDMARK SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

July Aug Sept 2020

## HOT Tamales

Yes, folks bought tamales even in the summertime....



Nathan B. Carpenter, creator of the Carpenter tamale recipe, is pictured on his horse-drawn wagon in Cleburne. His son John brought Carpenter tamales to Garland about 1930. Other members of the family established themselves in McKinney, Mesquite, Mineola and Tyler. *Courtesy Barbara Williams*

Garlandites whose local memories predate 1960, often smile with memories of a "Tamale Man," who sold homemade tamales from a cart. Jay Jones mimics his "HOT tamales" bark, but few can call Tamale Man's name or describe his clothing. Cart descriptions vary, as do rumors about tamale peddlers offering prurient pocket comic booklets. Might multiple carts, multiple vendors or both have plied our streets?

One bona fide Garland Tamale Man was John L. Carpenter, born in Greenville during 1885 to Emma and Nathan B. Carpenter. Nathan soon relocated his family to Corsicana, where he became a tamale purveyor.

Also in Corsicana, Lyman T. Davis had concocted a mixture that eventually became known as Wolf Brand Chili. Both spicy offerings were originally sold a la carte from wagons on Corsicana streets. Carpenter family legend contends that the two were one-time partners. However, the horn Nathan tooted to announce tamales was his own bugle.

Interviewed for the June 20, 1954 Garland News, John Carpenter reported bringing the family tamale recipe to Garland "about 25 years ago." From a red pushcart, he worked his small downtown beat "in or around the square," at least through the 1950s. When rationing of beef forced suspension of the tamale business for several years during WWII, John says he took a sabbatical to work in a Washington State defense plant.

The Carpenters sold only beef tamales, revealing nothing of his recipe except that they contained corn, meat and peppers. Initially, the couple wrapped tamales in corn husks recovered from waste piles, but admitted that sanitary difficulties plagued them. After its creation in 1930, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) stepped up enforcement of the Pure Food and Drug Act. John began wrapping his HOT tamales in what he called "cooking parchment." He and his wife could produce at least 100 dozen tamales each day atop a stove in the kitchen of their home on E. Main Street.

# Garland Landmark Society

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**Willie Carpenter, one of Nathan Carpenter's 15 children, stands beside his tamale truck in Corsicana during the late '30s. Willie took over the Corsicana branch of the business when his father died in 1937. Courtesy Barbara Williams**

HOT tamales from the '30s remained warm enough in Pete Nelson's memory that he clipped and saved a March 2013 article from the Carpenters from *Wood County Electric Cooperative's Coop News*. Eventually, the story claimed, other Carpenter family members established themselves regionally. Bud reportedly went to McKinney, Red to Mesquite and others to Mineola and Tyler. Booter Carpenter claims possession of the original Carpenter recipe in McKinney. Though retired, Booter still produces these delectables for holidays and special occasions. John Carpenter, Garland's Tamale Man, died in 1970, but a family historian reportedly resides today in Tyler.

Carpenter descendants say John first delivered in Garland from a pedestrian-powered child's wagon customized with four wooden sides and a lid. However, in the Garland News interview, Carpenter himself reported that the cart began life "as

a wheel chair and had its box painted red." Repainted every five or six months, the vehicle was simply parked overnight on the square, where it was never disturbed. This allowed the couple's short commute between home and cart in a vintage blue Plymouth they called "the old wreck."

Some witnesses described later, larger, animal-powered versions with seats and canopies. HOT tamales were packed into cans, which were stacked horizontally and wrapped individually with towels to retain heat inside the enclosure. Jerry Flook believes he remembers a '50s HOT tamale vehicle being painted red, and one version may have been fitted with a canopy. But if so, was that Carpenter's contraption?

Linda Killion Beller, whose family operated Garland Saw and Lawnmower in the 100 block of present Main, reports regular trade

with a tamale man in the '50s and '60s, but perhaps not John Carpenter. Unconfirmed accounts describe tamale trade with a local man named O. C. 'Opie' Rudolph. Nobody can explain why all Garland's vintage tamale men seem to have been Anglos. Carpenter's family was mostly Irish. The term "tamale" derives from a Spanish word for wrapped. Assorted fillings are first enclosed in a dough of ground corn or maize, then wrapped in available husks or leaves and steamed. Wrappings, shapes and sizes can vary according to the source area. Tamales are believed to have originated up to 8,000 years ago in pre-Hispanic Middle America, where they are still provided by street vendors and eaten with all meals, especially festivals.

In late '30s-and early '40s Garland's May Beth Watson Smith considered it a treat when her father provisioned occasionally from the Tamale Man, probably Carpenter. Despite comments from skeptics, she remembered no health problems or unexplained disappearances. Her nostalgia, as well as his own interest in novel downtown attractions, drove her son Robert to research Garland's tamale traditions and explore current possibilities. Response from traumatized regulators came swiftly: HOT or not, traditional tamale trade from carts threatened public health, the future of the city itself. Robert never bothered asking about chili.

*Michael R. Hayslip*



**Pictured in June of 1954 is John Carpenter and his tamale cart in Downtown Garland. Garland Daily News**

## Share Your History

If you're a Landmark Society Member or friend—and you must be if you are reading this—you have history in your head that we would like to share with other members. We encourage you to write your memories of Garland's history and send them, along with supporting pictures, letters or newspaper articles, to us.

Email [Heritage@GarlandTX.gov](mailto:Heritage@GarlandTX.gov)