

Always Leave 'em Laughing



As legislative jester of a one-party state,
Denny Garrison earned respect and affection
on both sides of the aisle.

As U.S. Senator David Boren entered his Washington office, he was told Henry Kissinger was on the telephone.

Boren smelled a rat. "You can't fool me, Denny Garrison," he chortled into the mouthpiece.

"Who the hell is Denny Garrison?" the German-tinged voice of the former secretary of state responded.

Who indeed?

Seventy-two-year-old Denzil D. Garrison—"Denny" to everyone—has long been one of Oklahoma's most engaging political figures.

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Denzil D. "Denny" Garrison

A staunch Republican from Bartlesville, he always has been able to work closely with Democrats. A skilled mimic and practical joker, he has duped and tweaked some of the brightest minds in state government. A man who enjoys a laugh, he has been part of some of the most serious and far-reaching events in Oklahoma history. And he demon-

strated in the Legislature that a determined minority—even when tiny—can decide matters when the majority is divided. *continued*

BY JENK JONES JR.

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Denny Garrison, center, attends a black-tie event in Oklahoma City in 1979 with two of his political favorites, Republican Henry Bellmon, left, and Democrat David L. Boren.

Garrison, who did undergraduate work and received his law degree from the University of Oklahoma, can sound more like Boren than Boren. Using that talent, he once nailed state Senator Gene Stipe, dean of American state legislators in length of service.

While working as Democratic Governor Boren's legislative aide during the 1970s, Garrison called Stipe in California, where the McAlister senator was on business. They chatted, then Garrison asked if Stipe would like to talk to the governor. Switching voices, "the governor" came on the line. Stipe asked how things were going. The bogus Boren gushed that the smartest thing he had ever done was to hire that brilliant Denny Garrison, ladling it on thick and at length. Finally Stipe caught on. "Denny, you little sonofabitch!" he growled.

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... with Nelson Rockefeller, 1959.

Another time Garrison faked a legislator's voice to call ex-House Speaker J.D. McCarty, then a lobbyist, and tell him bluntly that he (the legislator) would oppose McCarty on a bill unless the ex-speaker showed up with his black bag. Then Garrison hurried to the office of his unwitting foil to tell him what was afoot. Together they waited; it was not long before the rotund McCarty puffed into view, carrying his bulging black briefcase.

Garrison called a state representative and a state senator, representing to be the other in each case. He had them so angry at what they thought the other was saying that they nearly came to blows in the Capitol corridor.

One of his favorite scams involved state Senator Gilmer Capps. President Jimmy Carter was to visit the Air Force base at Burns Flat, not far from Capps' home in Snyder. Garrison says Capps desperately wanted to be included in the Air

Force One entourage for arrival at the base but lacked an invitation.

Again employing his Senator Boren voice, Garrison called Capps at his state Capitol office to tell him a spot had been arranged for him on the President's plane, which he was to meet at Tinker Air Force Base in Midwest City. Capps returned to the Senate floor aglow, Garrison recalls.

A bit later, "Boren" called Capps again with the sad news that Victor Wickersham had bumped Capps from the plane due to Wickersham's status as a former congressman.

An angry Capps called Wickersham, demanding to know what was going on. The latter, of course, knew nothing. Capps realized he had been taken.

"Gilmer's always laughed about it," Garrison grins.

Game-playing runs in the family.

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... with Barry Goldwater, 1960.

Garrison says his grandfather, a former Alfalfa County assessor, advised him always to vote straight Republican. But, the elder said, spend some time in the voting booth so any Democrats around may think you are splitting your ballot; that might lead them to split their own.

Hearing a person speak and copying his voice is easy, Garrison says. But you wonder that he has the ear for it.

As an artillery officer in the Korean War, Garrison says his six-gun battery—part of the famed 45th Division—was at Porkchop Hill, T-Bone Mountain and Old Baldy, "all very active parts of the front." For the year he was there, "We fired all night most every night, and in daytime.

"The last week I was with the battery, we fired 7,000 rounds. I was almost totally deaf. We also had an eight-



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inch howitzer unit firing right
over my position; we got a ter-
rible shock wave from them.”
Garrison says he received per-
manent hearing damage.

But he is proud of his 20-
year military service, which in-
cluded 15 years in the National
Guard and Reserve. From an-
cestors to current day, mem-
bers of his family have borne
arms from the American Revo-
lution to Desert Storm. His son
and a son-in-law are Army of-
ficers; another son-in-law pre-
viously served.

Garrison returned from
Korea to finish his law degree
in 1953. Norman was home
ground; he was born and grew up there.
A photo on his wall shows the high
school football team on which he played
halfback.

He went to Bartlesville as an attorney
for Cities Service. Entering politics,
he served two years as county attorney
for Washington County, four years in
the state House of Representatives,
12 in the state Senate and advised
governors of both parties. Always pas-
sionate about history, he was president of the
Oklahoma Historical
Society for three years
and has been on its
board since 1970. The
Junior Chamber of
Commerce named him
its Outstanding Young
Oklahoman in 1960.

The Oklahoma Bar
Association and the
Disabled American
Veterans saluted him
for the successful de-
fense (along with Stipe and two other
lawyers) of Marine Randall Herrod, an
Oklahoman who was charged with 16
counts of massacring Vietnamese vil-
lagers. The trial was swayed in large
part by Oliver North, whom Garrison
called “the best witness I’d ever seen
on the stand.” The defenders convinced
the court that the village in question
was “100 percent hostile” and its in-
habitants had ambushed Americans.

Garrison’s first race, for county at-
torney, was low-budget. He spent \$175.
His mother-in-law, Mrs. A. A. Hopper,
wrote 1,000 letters by hand for him.

That 1954 win was the GOP’s first in
that office in 20 years.

He won his first House term in 1956.
But it was in his second term that
Garrison came to notice.

Democrat J. Howard Edmondson
had swamped his Republican foe nearly
4 to 1 in the 1958 gubernatorial race.
Republicans were reduced to a mere
nine of the 119 members in the House.

A bit brash, perhaps, but Garrison
predicted that the GOP
would elect the next gov-
ernor—a first for the
party. “People laughed
at me, but it was true.”

As House minority
leader, “I also told
Howard before he was
sworn in that we had
nine votes he might be
interested in.”

The huge Demo-
cratic majority was
closely divided between
the anti-reform Old
Guard, mostly rural in those pre-re-
apportionment days, and Edmond-
son’s supporters. Garrison says his
small GOP faction, generally wielded
as a solid bloc, provided the margin of
victory for such crucial reforms in gov-
ernment as central purchasing, the
merit system and repeal of Prohibi-
tion.

As a result, Garrison was invited into
meetings with Democratic legislative
leaders and the governor. And Republi-
cans were not ignored when state
projects were considered.

“I suddenly found out what a dedi-

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... with Richard Nixon, 1960.

drubbed Democrat Frank Mahan, an
Old Guarder who had held the office for
18 years. “That got one of the big burrs
out from under the saddle as far as
Howard Edmondson was concerned,”
Garrison says.

Senator Tom Tipps, D-Ardmore, a
friend of Mahan’s, was not happy. In
charge of assigning the 44 senators to
the 43 offices available, he refused to
give one to Garrison, telling him to put a
desk in the hall.

Senator Bob Lollar, a Miami Demo-
crat, made space for Garrison in his
office. One secretary worked for both.

The two and Democratic Senator
George Pitcher of Vinita decided to
stick together on votes; the three be-
came the largest “bloc” in the 44-mem-
ber Senate. On a key turnpike bill, they
turned seeming defeat into a one-vote
victory, Garrison says.

The result? Lollar and Garrison
were given a larger office and a second
secretary, and Garrison a new desk.

Garrison spent two years in the Sen-
ate as assistant minority leader, the
remainder of his time as minority
leader. When Republican Henry
Bellmon was elected governor in 1962,
to be succeeded by Republican Dewey
Bartlett in 1966, Garrison was a vital
bridge between the governor’s office and
the primarily Democratic Legislature.

He says he was primary author of
322 measures that became law during
his time in Oklahoma City. “If a law
was needed, I’d give it a try, and a lot
of them were passed.”

One, though laudable, came back
to haunt him. *continued*

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Oklahoma delegation vice chair Denny Garrison, right, festooned with badges proclaiming support of former OU football coach Bud Wilkinson for U.S. Senate and Barry Goldwater for president, is pictured at the 1964 Republican National Convention with Richard Kleindienst, later U.S. Attorney General in the Nixon administration.

Garrison says there were provisions for recounts in primary elections but none for a general, where a Republican might benefit. He won passage of a bill providing recounts in general elections, and Governor Raymond Gary signed it.

In 1960, Republican Clyde Wheeler apparently had defeated Democratic incumbent Wickersham in the 6th District congressional race. But there was a recount, and Wickersham was declared the winner by 76 votes out of more than 136,000 cast.

"Maybe you think that my chin didn't hit the floor when the first thing they

did was count us out of a congressional seat," Garrison says. "That was hard to take, but it was important that we have the right of recount in all elections."

He took his sole fling at Washington in 1966, giving Democratic Representative Ed Edmondson, Howard's brother, his only close race in 20 years. Garrison lost by some 8,400 votes out of more than 116,000 in a bitter contest he calls "not enjoyable, not a lot of fun."

Legislative reapportionment, which arrived via the federal courts in 1964, gave added representation to the urban—and more

Republican—areas of Oklahoma.

"Reapportionment had a lot to do with the rise of the two-party system," Garrison contends. "One-man, one-vote brought a level playing field to Oklahoma politics."

Reapportionment also saw the districts of many veteran lawmakers eliminated or merged with others. The result: a massive turnover for the 1965 Legislature.

Clem McSpadden, the Democratic Senate president pro tem, told Garrison he had so few veterans back that Garrison, even though a Republican, would have to chair a Senate committee.

Garrison laughs that the Democrats did not trust him to head a committee redrawing congressional district boundaries (an occurrence that would end another example of rural over-representa-

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... with Charles Halleck, 1966.

tion). So he was awarded Judiciary, which he believes is the only major Senate committee a Republican has led.

It was a hot spot. That term saw the Oklahoma Supreme Court scandal and the subsequent restructuring of the state's court system.

Garrison says his hardest vote was that to impeach Justice Napoleon Bonaparte Johnson, who was convicted of taking bribes and removed from the bench. Johnson was a former chief justice and one-time American Indian of the Year.

The vote was 32-15 on each of two counts. Had one "aye" switched to "nay" the verdict would have fallen short of the required two-thirds to convict.

Garrison says the Johnson forces brought in the jurist's granddaughter, who had known the senator since third grade, and placed her in the gallery right above his desk. And, he adds, "I got pressure on that case from places you wouldn't believe." But he voted for conviction. "They (prosecutors) clearly proved their case as far as I was concerned."

Still an active lawyer, he says Johnson's conviction and—10 years later—that of ex-Governor David Hall, a former county attorney

in Tulsa, "hurt the legal profession."

Garrison definitely is a Republican. The state's Barry Goldwater campaign leader in 1964, he has pictures in his home taken with Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller and Bob Dole plus Bellmon and Bartlett. He is a member of the Republican State Committee and served as U.S. Senator Jim Inhofe's Washington County campaign chairman and on Congressman Ernest Istook's steering committee. But while he owns portions of the wooden platforms upon which Republican governors Bellmon and Bartlett were sworn in, he has counterparts from the inaugurations of Democrats Boren and George Nigh.

He is not happy with growing partisanship in the nation and in Oklahoma, though he believes it occurs when a majority party "truly feels threatened."

More may come in Oklahoma, he adds, if the GOP successfully invades Democratic strongholds in the Legislature and county offices in coming years. In Washington, he thinks the most liberal elements control Congressional Democrats, the most conservative the Republicans, making conflict likely.

"A partisan solution is hardly ever the best solution, though we're seeing more and more of it."

He would like to see more diversity within parties, less control by interest groups. "When a party gets to the point where it can tolerate no difference of opinion, it will lose. That does not mean that we all have to violate our principles, but as long as we have a two-party system, each party must accommodate several views, at least."

Garrison quit the Legislature in 1972 because "it was time to take care of my business and my family (wife Barbara, nee Hopper, a former OU student, and five children)." But two years later he ran for governor, losing the primary to Inhofe, who in turn lost to Boren in the general election.

The new administration hardly had begun before Garrison's phone rang. In his best Boren drawl, he replays hearing, "I really need some help down here."

"I wouldn't have gone to work for David Boren if I had thought the only hope we had for a good administration

was through the Republican Party," Garrison says. "I don't believe the only good people we have in Oklahoma are Republicans, by a long shot."

So Garrison became the governor's legislative aide, and Boren remains one of his political favorites. The late Democrat Lollar, who was chief of staff for Republican Governor

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... with Ed Edmondson, 1972.

Republicans,

Garrison's appreciation for the way he eased Oklahoma through school integration and for extraordinary knowledge of state government and finance. Former Representative Jim Hamilton he calls "a good and honest man. He is incorruptible."

He says the first two years of the Edmondson administration—including passage of central purchasing and the first strong push for reapportionment—"were perhaps as momentous as any other time in our history."

Garrison thinks fondly of the first two GOP governors, especially Bellmon.

"Henry Bellmon was absolutely the best person to lead us as our first Republican governor. He was completely honest, he was completely believable, and his private life was impeccable. On top of that, he was one of the most intelligent men I've ever known."

Garrison says Bellmon's party was in a small minority and Oklahoma's governor has limited powers, "but he still was able to do an outstanding job by utilizing all his strengths and to best advantage."

Citing Bellmon's "complete dedication to what he thinks is right," Garrison says the two-term governor and 12-year U.S. senator would vote contrary to popular opinion if he believed that was the right course.

Bellmon got along with Democrats, Garrison says, "because he never lied to them. For that matter, he never lied to anybody, so far as I know."

Therein lies Garrison's ultimate lesson in government.

"The basic thing you have in politics is your word. If you break your word, you are completely ineffectual."

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... with Ronald Reagan, 1974.

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Library.
... with Frank Keating, 1995.

Bartlett, is another Garrison admired. "His intellect was largely responsible for the most successful first three years of the Bartlett administration."

Two other Democrats draw his praise. Gary (governor from 1955 to 1959) has

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