



Boyd Carter (left) gives Najera's treasures to Mexican Academy representatives, Antonia Acevedo Escobedo, Salvador Novo, Luis Garrido and Alfonso Junco.

Carter presents the skull thought to be Pancho Villa's to Guillermo Guzman-West at a meeting held in Chicago, June 25, 1968.



Boyd G. Carter: Scholar and Hero

Dr. Boyd G. Carter, professor of Spanish and French on the Columbia Campus, is a scholar, but he shatters the stereotype.

He's also a poet (He's published in eight magazines in the U.S. and Mexico). And a short story writer (He's had 80 stories published). And a newspaper feature writer (An interview with his 112-year-old cousin, one of two survivors of the Confederate Army, made the *Omaha World-Herald Sunday Magazine* in 1958). Other papers in the U.S. and Mexico have run stories with his byline. His first job was with the Associated Press in Richmond, Virginia. "I'm still a newspaperman at heart," he says, and confides that his secret ambition is to write "the great American novel."

He's also an honorary member of the 82nd Airborne Division. His brother, Ross S. Carter, was in the 82nd, which suffered terrible losses in World War II, and wrote a book about his experiences, *Those Devils in Baggy Pants*. Boyd Carter edited the book after his brother's death and wrote an epilogue. *Reader's Digest* condensed the book in 1951.

"Those of us who write, do it on time that other people waste," he says.

All of these varied accomplishments are in addition to his scholarly work: 18 books "authored (He wrote the first history of Spanish-American periodicals.), co-authored, edited or published in" and 70 articles in English, French and Spanish.

Carter was decorated by the French government in 1956 with the "Croix de Chevalier des palmes academiques, officier de l'instruction publique." At the invitation of their governments, he has lectured in Mexico and Nicaragua. One Mexican literary critic, commenting in a recent magazine on Carter's contributions, called him "un heroe cultural."

Carter's research on Manuel Gutierrez Najera is in part responsible for Carter's recognition in Mexico. "I have," Carter says through the mouth of a main character in one of his short stories, "in spite of myself become . . . a victim . . . of near total addiction to a long dead Mexican poet. And by extension to Mexican culture."

After receiving his AB at the College of William and Mary and his AM and PhD from the University of Illinois, Carter did post-doctoral work in Spanish with Professor E. K. Mapes at the University of Iowa. Mapes was interested in Najera. Carter, in Mexico on a grant in 1951, "happened upon" some literary periodicals containing works by Najera. When Mapes died in 1961, he left Carter a legacy of his uncompleted work on Najera. Mapes had suggested that Najera's essays be published. In December, the University of Missouri Press published the collection of 264 essays dedicated to Mapes and edited by Carter and his wife, Mary Eileen, who taught Latin and Greek on Campus.

Najera's contribution to Mexican literature is comparable in volume to Edgar Allen Poe's writings in the U.S. From the age of 15 to 35, the versatile Mexican author, writing under at least 30 different pseudonyms, published enough material in dozens of newspapers and reviews to fill 40 books.

The essays in the Carters' recently published book originally appeared in the Mexican daily, *El Universal*, between April 8, 1893 and Jan. 10, 1895, under the title, "Plato del dia." Most are signed "Recamier," after Charles Recamier, Mexico's leading French restaurateur of the time. "The author himself, as 'chef-litterateur,' " the Press's review explains, "grills his contemporaries and serves them up as featured 'specialties of the day' in his columns of good-natured satire garnished with verbal play."

So Carter is known for his Najera discoveries and for collecting Najera's scattered works, a task made more difficult by the pseudonyms Najera used so liberally.

"Any scholar who doesn't work out to the frontier of his field, who doesn't discover something, is certainly not doing his best," Carter believes. That's his definition of scholarship. But scholarship is also adventure to Carter.

In the summer of 1967, Carter was reading a newspaper in a motel room in Fort Dodge, Iowa. He just happened to see a newspaper article about a bullet-riddled skull thought to be the missing remains of General Francisco (Pancho) Villa, which had been discovered in a farmer's shed.

Eleven years earlier, Carter had written an article on Villa. So he knew that on July 20, 1923, Villa had been bush-whacked and shot, and that two years later, Villa's grave had been desecrated and the body decapitated. An American national from Fort Dodge, one of Villa's former soldiers of fortune, was the prime suspect, but was never brought to trial.

Much circumstantial evidence, including some photographic negatives found with the skull, led Carter to think that the skull might be Villa's.

Carter had met Villa's widow and knew that she was grieved that her husband's grave had been disturbed, so Carter acquired the skull, brought it back to Columbia, and put in a bank vault for safekeeping. After correspondence with Senor Martin Luis Guzman, publisher of the Mexican news magazine, *Tiempo*, and former member of Villa's staff, a meeting was set up. Carter took the skull to Chicago and gave it to Guzman's son.

"I don't know for certain that this is part of the remains of Villa, but whether it is or not, we hope to achieve an act of symbolic restitution in testimony of the goodwill and affection of the people of America for the people of Mexico," Carter said at the presentation.

Another adventure became a short story. In 1967, Najera's daughter gave her father's things to Carter to be kept in his custody at the University or transferred to Mexico if a museum were provided for them. Najera's belongings included the writer's pocket watch, writing pen, ink stand, blotter, ash tray, gloves, and a model of the Eiffel Tower, as well as books, manuscripts and photographs.

"The very thought of being responsible for these priceless things terrified me," said Carter's alter ego in the story. "My agony began the moment I left (Najera's) daughter's house in the cab. Imagining myself in a car wreck, bleeding on the street or even dead, did not disturb me as did the prospect of irreverent dawdlers, making off with the poet's things. . . . On the train I carried the bag containing the treasures with me to the men's room, to the diner, to the bar."

Najera's things were safe, but Carter's fears about someone hijacking them made a good story. The outcome in reality was even more exciting. Carter presented Najera's treasures to the Mexican Academy in Mexico City on July 23, 1972, where they will be kept at Museo del Escritor, an adjunct of the Academia.

All this helps explain why Boyd Carter, for many Mexicans, is a "cultural hero." □