

Reagan 'wanted to know what you had to say'

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commissary.

"Ronnie was a funny guy — nobody called him Ronald," Ramon recalls. "He kind of latched on to The Twins, as we were called. He was president of the Screen Actors Guild and very knowledgeable — he just ate up information, and if you knew something, he wanted to know all about it."

Reagan was immensely entertaining with an endless inventory of stories and jokes.

"He could do voices, Yiddish, Italian, Russian, you name it," the dancer said. "He especially loved Irish stories."

But there was something that set Reagan apart from the glib storyteller who is always "on" with cohorts.

"He could be right in the middle of a story or a thought, and if you interrupted, he clammed right up," Ramon said.

"Right. Exactly the word. He clammed up and listened. He wanted to know what you had to say, even if it was a funny story of your own. He wanted to know about what was going on in your life. It struck me at the time."

Typically, Ramon said, actors will have brief, convivial friendships during a film or stage run, and pass out of one another's lives, never to meet again.

So, two years later, in 1954, when the Blackburn brothers were performing in Las Vegas at the Last Frontier casino, they were joined

by another headliner: Ronald Wilson Reagan with a stand-up act of what else? Hollywood stories and his joke repertoire.

Reagan ran into trouble the first night of the three-week run, according to Ramon: "He was too good. People hung on his every word and quit gambling. The word from the manager came down for Reagan to cut it short. They wanted people on the floor losing money."

Which left more time for renewing old friendships. Ramon has a framed poolside picture of Reagan with his brother and Evelyn Ward, later the wife of actor Jack Cassidy, and mother of David Cassidy.

A hospitable Reagan

Fast forward 34 years to September 1988, the close of Reagan's second term. Not once had the brothers Blackburn or Reagan crossed paths or corresponded. By then the Blackburn twins had long closed their dance act, last performing in 1963. Never would Ramon Blackburn presume to impose on their former association.

Well, not much, anyway.

But since he was taking his wife and granddaughter to visit Washington, what was to lose by writing and asking for a White House tour?

"Dear Ronnie," he began. "Perhaps you don't remember the Blackburn twins..."

Days after he sent his letter to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., the phone rang at the



Ronald Reagan with the Blackburn twins — Ramon (left) and Royce — and Evelyn Ward, wife of Jack Cassidy and mother of David Cassidy, at the Last Frontier Casino in Las Vegas in 1954.

Blackburn condo in Lantana. No secretary asking Ramon to hold for the president, just a familiar voice from the past with a question: "So, Ramon, you want to see the White House. How come you don't want to see me?"

After recovering his composure, Ramon asked whether it would be OK to bring his wife and their 14-year-old granddaughter.

"He said, 'Yeah, I'd like to see you guys — bring the whole neighborhood.'"

After a Saturday VIP tour of the White House and Capitol, including a handshake with Bob Dole, the visitors were invited back to the Oval Office on Monday. Reagan had scheduled them for five

minutes at 11:25 a.m.

"The president came up, gave me a big bear hug!"

"He wanted to know what I had been doing, what my brother was up to, and all the while, he dug around in a corrugated box behind his desk, sorting through souvenir gifts: Presidential Seal cuff links for me, a pendant for Joyce and a wrist charm for Audrey. The next thing you know, he was telling stories."

The five minutes scheduled with the leader of the free world grew to 10 minutes, then 15, then 20, and



Photos courtesy of Ramon Blackburn

President Reagan meets Ramon Blackburn of Lantana in the Oval Office in September 1988, for what was supposed to be a five-minute reunion.

soon Cabinet members and aides began drifting into a meeting room where lunch was being served. When Ramon recognized Secretary of State George Shultz, he said:

"Mr. President, don't you have a meeting?"

Reagan said there was no rush and launched into another story.

And did the retired entertainer remember the story? Indeed, he did.

Seems there was a priest from Dublin touring Venice who was fed up with every gondolier launching into *O Solo Mio*. Afraid that he was going to throttle a gondolier if forced to endure one more serenade, he prayed to God for relief, and sure enough,

the singer's throat closed up in mid-song. Recovering, the gondolier began anew and again, the priest prayed, and again *O Solo Mio* was stifled. On the third try, the priest prayed more fervently still, and God must have heard, because now when the would-be Caruso sang, it came out in tones rich and sonorous:

"When Irish eyes are smiling..."

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