John Winter Gardner, Harlingen Photographer

By Norman Rozeff, June 2015

J. W. Gardner was a prominent commercial photographer headquartered in Harlingen. He was born in Crawfordville, Indiana on October 25, 1876. He evidently arrived here at least by 1924 as documented by his very early photographs of the community and region. To both publicize the area and earn money he created postcards featuring attractions to be found here. In a June 1926 booklet published for the Texas Firemen's Convention held in Harlingen, Gardner has an advertisement that notes he has studios in Pharr and Harlingen.

In the 1930 telephone directory Gardner Studio is listed at 1005 W. Harrison Avenue. He and his wife Lillie have their residence at 901 W. Harrison in a home valued at $2000. The April 1930 US Census of Harlingen indicates that John is 20 years older than his Texas-born wife Lill Reed. He was married at age 40 while she was 19 having completed the then 11 years of public school. At the time they have two young Texas-born sons, Jack G. Gardner 11, and J. C. Gardner 6. Gardner had started his work career as a carpenter.

In the 1931-32 directory the listing is for Gardner's Studio, and it is both the location for the studio and their residence. By 1935 the listing is for J. W. Gardner, portrait and commercial photography, 118 South First Street.

In the 1937-38 directory the listing has Gardner Studio, Lillie R. Gardner, photographer. The fact is Mr. Gardner had, while in the Valley Baptist Hospital, died on June 10, 1936 of peritonitis brought on by a ruptured appendix. At the time of his death the family was living at 309 W. Filmore. Gardner was buried in the Restlawn Cemetery, La Feria. He had spent the last 25 years of his life as a photographer.

In the 1939 directory there is no listing for either Gardner. Mrs. Gardner with her youngest son J. C. are, by 1940, living in Lubbock where she makes a living as manager of a beauty shop. Born on May 19, 1900, Lillie will live to the age of 93, dying in Wewoka, Oklahoma.

Gardner photographs document not only the society of Harlingen but also the buildings and agriculture. Apparently Gardner was hired by real estate promoters to put together a photographic booklet showing the many diversified crops possible in the Valley. He did so in late 1926 or in 1927. The booklets contained 100 glossy black and white photos. They were 6 ½ “ by 8 ½ “ in size and were glued on heavy black composition paper (6 3/4” by 11 ½ “) common for albums of the period. The majority of photos are agricultural in nature. They show every conceivable cultivated crop and orchard crop being grown somewhere in the Valley at the time. Inscribed on the bottom of most is information naming the crop and often quoting the current price that it was fetching. The idea was to entice prospective land buyers by indicating how lucrative were the returns on vegetable and fruit production.
In addition to the agricultural photos, Gardner had photos of attractive Valley residences, churches, schools, multi-story business buildings, and packing sheds. Mr. Gardner's script on his photographs left something to be desired as did his spelling.

Some of these booklets, including one at the Harlingen Library, still exist. One discovered in 2006 in the mid-west, where it was sent as a sales tool, was put up for auction, and in 2007 the 100-picture photos in an album fetched $1,200 at an auction.

Gardner also took photographs of golf tournaments at the Harlingen Municipal Golf Course in the late 1920s and 1930s.

His post cards sometimes had “Photo by Gardner” written in somewhat crude white lettering on their bottom front side. His larger photos had Gardner Studios or Gardner Photography stamped on their backsides.

Gardner's work represents an important link in documenting the area's past history. Where Robert Runyon photos ceased in the 1920s, Gardner's continued thereby leaving no visual gap in recording regional history.