

**HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION**  
**DEMOLITION AND RELOCATION PERMITS**  
**MAY 3, 2023**  
**PR-2023-030371; GF-2023-043151**  
**401 RIDGEWOOD ROAD**

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**PROPOSAL**

Demolish a ca. 1953 house.

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**ARCHITECTURE**

One-story vernacular Ranch house with rustic stone veneer, a full-width front porch, and a shallow side-gabled roof.

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**RESEARCH**

The house at 401 Ridgewood Road was built around 1953, and remained vacant until it was purchased by legendary Austin performer Richard S. “Cactus” Pryor Jr. and his wife, Jewell, in 1955. The Pryors may have lived in the house until around 1967, when their next residence—309 Blue Ridge Trail, an A. D. Stenger house—was constructed in West Lake Hills; however, this has not been verified by directory research due to facility closure.

Pryor was a fixture in LBJ’s “Texas White House” and beloved by television and radio fans as well as his entertainment industry peers. Walter Cronkite noted on CBS that “Cactus Pryor has given his native Austin a rare gift that few cities can claim—a real live humorist with the sharp eye, the quick tongue, the educated pen, and, most important, the warm heart to record in sometimes hilarious detail its fashions and foibles. Cactus himself is one of a kind.”<sup>1</sup>

After his death in 2011, the Austin-American Statesman’s obituary page emphasized Pryor’s importance as an Austin original, deeming him “the most famous man in Austin” upon recounting that “The first person ever to appear on Austin television was Cactus Pryor.”<sup>2</sup> Pryor did the first TV broadcast in Austin in 1951 for KTBC, owned by Lady Bird Johnson. Pryor later became the Johnson family’s favorite emcee for gatherings at the LBJ Ranch. As a longtime fan of Western films—Pryor’s father, Richard S. “Skinny” Pryor, owned the Cactus Theater, origin of his son’s nickname—Cactus Pryor appeared in two films alongside his friend John Wayne (1968’s *Hellfighters* and *The Green Berets*).<sup>3</sup>

“He was a broadcasting legend: Cactus delivered the news, played records, served as programming manager, hosted a variety of shows, and even swept the floors. During Lyndon Johnson’s presidency, Cactus helped organize and provide entertainment for many heads of state,” notes his LBJ Library memorial page, where Luci Baines Johnson recalls the impact Pryor had on her family, his hometown, and on the state of Texas:

“No greater love could a grown man give than to dress as a bluebonnet. In green tights and blue plumage Cactus marched [Lady Bird Johnson’s] cause of protection of our wildflowers onto the stage and into the hearts of countless Texans. Cactus Pryor truly was an ‘Austin original,’ a true folk hero of our time! He performed for Presidents and Prime Ministers in the Texas White House as comfortably as countless philanthropic efforts in Texas’ school houses. For nearly ninety years he made us laugh, learn, love and sometimes cry all at the same time. He could have spent his extraordinary talent on the national stage. Instead he chose to give it to the people of Central Texas.”<sup>4</sup>

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**PROPERTY EVALUATION**

*Designation Criteria—Historic Landmark*

- 1) The building is more than 50 years old.
- 2) The building appears to retain high integrity.
- 3) Properties must meet two criteria for landmark designation (LDC §25-2-352). Staff has evaluated the property and determined that it may meet two criteria:
  - a. Architecture. The building is a vernacular structure constructed with Ranch-style influences.
  - b. Historical association. The property is associated with Richard “Cactus” Pryor. However, further research is needed to determine the Pryors’ tenure in the home.

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<sup>1</sup> Barrera, Ralph. “Cactus Pryor Dies at 88: The Most Famous Man in Austin.” *Austin American-Statesman*, 2011: <https://austin.culturemap.com/news/city-life/08-30-11-18-19-cactus-pryor-has-died-at-age-88-the-most-famous-man-in-austin>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Memorial.” *FindAGrave.com*, 2011. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/75730602/richard-s-pryor>

<sup>4</sup> “The LBJ Library Remembers Cactus Pryor.” Press Release. <http://www.lbjlibrary.net/press/releases/2011/pryor.html>

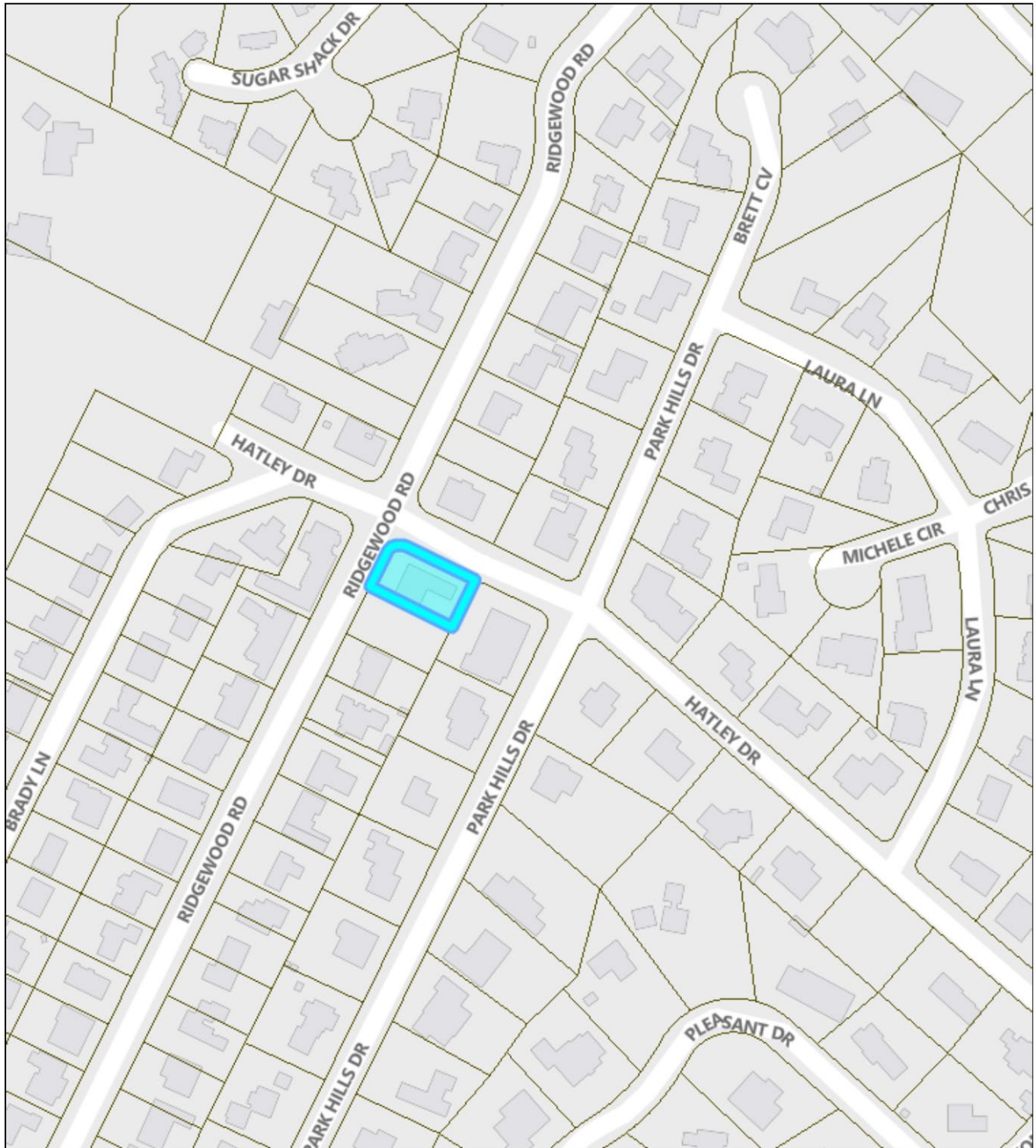
- c.* Archaeology. The property was not evaluated for its potential to yield significant data concerning the human history or prehistory of the region.
- d.* Community value. The property was not evaluated for its ability to convey a unique location, physical characteristic, or significant feature that contributes to the character, image, or cultural identity of the city, the neighborhood, or a particular demographic group.
- e.* Landscape feature. The property does not appear to be a significant natural or designed landscape with artistic, aesthetic, cultural, or historical value to the city.

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**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Consider initiation of historic zoning, or postpone the public hearing to June 7, 2023, to allow time for further research.

## LOCATION MAP



1: 2400

Lot Lines

Lot Line

**GF 23-043151**

401 RIDGEWOOD ROAD



4/14/2023

This product is for informational purposes and may not have been prepared for or be suitable for legal, engineering, or surveying purposes. It does not represent an on-the-ground survey. This product has been produced by the City of Austin for the sole purpose of geographic reference. No warranty is made by the City of Austin regarding specific accuracy or completeness.



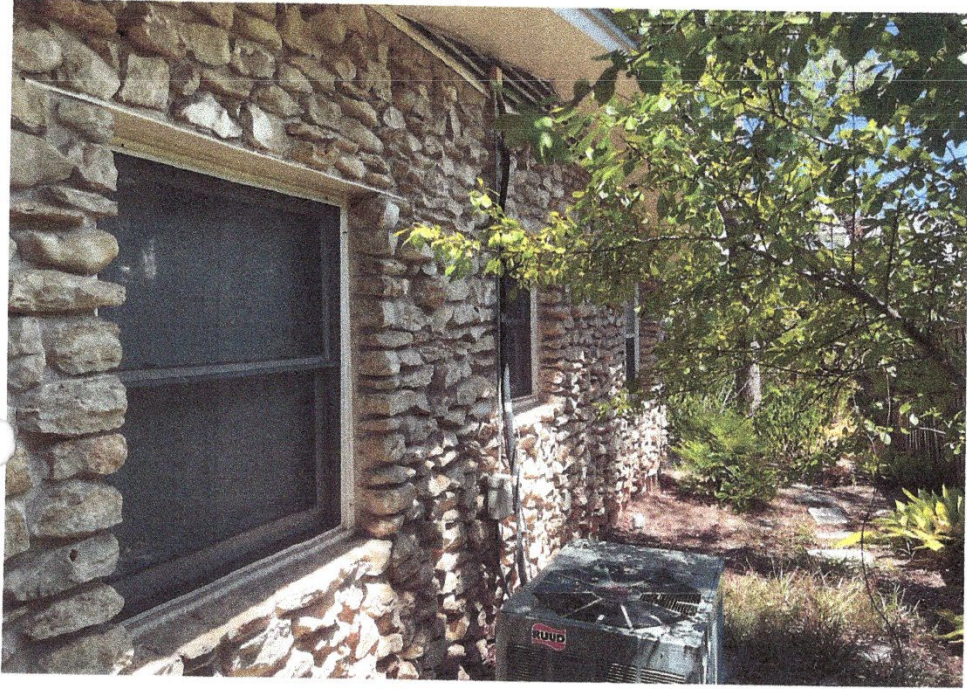
**PROPERTY INFORMATION**

*Photos*

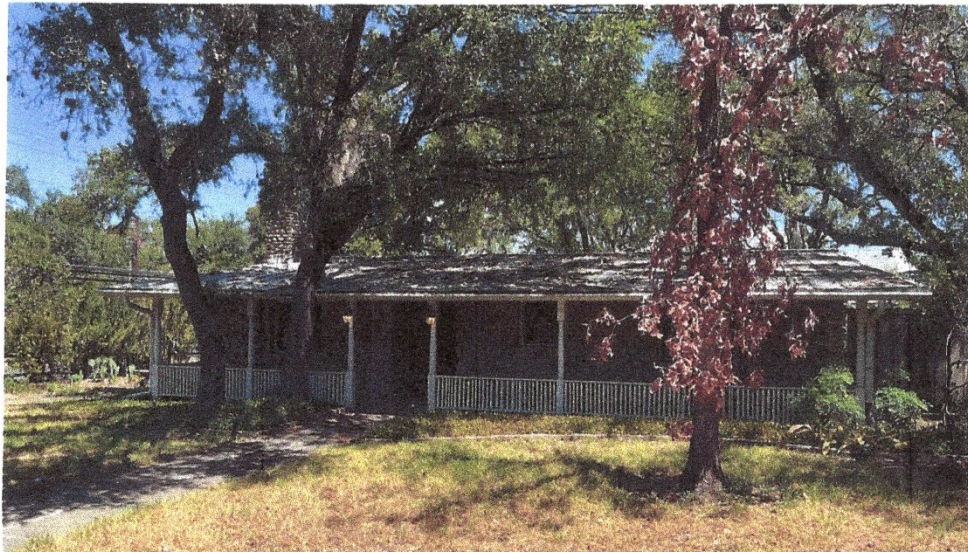
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*Demolition Permit Application – 2023*





*Google Maps, 2020*

*Occupancy History*

City Directory Research, March 2023

*NOTE: later research is not available due to Austin History Center closure.*

1959 Richard S. & Jewel A. Pryor Jr. – Project Director for KTBC TV

1957 Vacant

1955 Vacant



## Cactus Pryor has died at age 88: The most famous man in Austin

 [austin.culturemap.com/news/city-life/08-30-11-18-19-cactus-pryor-has-died-at-age-88-the-most-famous-man-in-austin](http://austin.culturemap.com/news/city-life/08-30-11-18-19-cactus-pryor-has-died-at-age-88-the-most-famous-man-in-austin)

August 30, 2011

Cactus Pryor died today. He was 88 years old and living out his years with Alzheimer's in Buda.

Cactus was a Texas legend, easily the most famous man in Austin for more than four decades. He was a humorist, a television personality, a radio host, film actor, dinner speaker, roaster, and perhaps the nicest man to ever walk our streets.

The first person ever to appear on Austin television was Cactus Pryor. It was 1951 when KTBC signed on the air, and it was Cactus who welcomed the city to a new technology. He would do commentaries for over 30 years both on KTBC and on KLBJ radio. He is a Texas broadcasting legend, but broadcasting only scratched the surface of Cactus's life.

"Sometimes you just know what you are supposed to do. I really believe I was put on this earth to try to make people happy."

His friendship with Lyndon Johnson began in 1944 when he started working at Lady Bird's new radio station in town. That friendship took him to the the President's "Western White House" often to emcee parties for dignitaries and movie stars. He loved to tell stories of escorting Raquel Welch and Lucille Ball to events with the President. Never brash, always humble and self-effacing, Cactus loved his life in Austin and despite many opportunities to leave for New York or Los Angeles and national fame, he always chose to stay.

Walter Cronkite, the late legendary CBS anchor once said, "Cactus Pryor has given his native Austin a rare gift that few cities can claim — a real live humorist with the sharp eye, the quick tongue, the educated pen, and, most important, the warm heart to record in sometimes hilarious detail its fashions and foibles. Cactus himself is one of a kind."

I had the great privilege of knowing Cactus. I started my media career at KTBC as a photographer back in 1983. He was a fixture at the station then with his brother Wally. Cactus never cared how big the audience was, he was nice to everyone, and funny as hell.

He appeared in two films, both starring John Wayne who became a good friend — "Hellfighters" and "The Green Berets."

He was a native Austinite, born January 7, 1923. According to his biography, his grandfather helped build the Texas Capitol. His father was Richard "Skinny" Pryor, who performed vaudeville and owned one of the first movie theaters in Austin called The Cactus, the origin of his nickname.



Cactus remained a fixture of Austin's Social scene until he became sick in 2007. He announced his illness to our community in an interview with the Austin American Statesman, as only he could — "My doctor has told me that I will be losing my memory because of a certain disease. I don't buy that. There will come a time I won't even recognize my own family? No way. Me forgetting the name of my wife, ah, Jewell, ah, Peggy, or was it Harriet? No, that's my sister who lives in Santa Monica, no, San Antonio."

Before he died, he wrote a short biography and recorded it for posterity:

"Sometimes you just know what you are supposed to do. I really believe I was put on this earth to try to make people happy. After all, it's what my daddy did. My older sister, Mary Alice, played the piano, made people happy also. So I guess it just came naturally.

Before I was old enough to go to school I stood on stage at my father's picture show, *The Cactus*, and pitched the upcoming shows, soaking in the audience response, measuring their approval, feeling their happiness vibrating in my bones. Oh the joy of a good audience! It is the best tonic for my spirit."





*CAPTION: In this Nov. 3, 1982 photo, Lady Bird Johnson helps Cactus Pryor celebrate the final arrival of his new book "Inside Texas" at the Headliners Club atop the American Bank building, in Austin, Texas. Richard "Cactus" Pryor, a longtime Texas broadcaster, humorist and author, has died following surgery for a broken leg. His daughter, Kerry Guthrie, says Pryor died Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2011 at an Austin hospice facility. He was 88. (AP Photo/Austin American-Statesman, Ralph Barrera)*

Barrera, Ralph. Austin American-Statesman, 2011: <https://austin.culturemap.com/news/city-life/08-30-11-18-19-cactus-pryor-has-died-at-age-88-the-most-famous-man-in-austin>

## The LBJ Library Remembers Cactus Pryor (1923-2011)

Richard "Cactus" Pryor was a friend, advisor, co-worker, and the humorous soul of the Johnson family and the LBJ Library. Cactus was first heard on Lady Bird Johnson's radio and television stations, KTBC in Austin (The radio station later became 590 KLBJ.) He was a broadcasting legend: Cactus delivered the news, played records, served as programming manager, hosted a variety of shows, and even swept the floors. During Lyndon Johnson's presidency, Cactus helped organize and provide entertainment for many heads of state. At every opportunity, the Johnsons asked Cactus to serve as the emcee at programs.

For many years, Cactus, the entertainer extraordinaire, dressed in costume to give away the Texas Highway Department's Beautification Award, a monetary prize given to Highway Department employees sponsored by Mrs. Johnson.



Photo courtesy of Luci Baines Johnson.

### Quote from Luci Baines Johnson

"No greater love could a grown man give than to dress as a bluebonnet. In green tights and blue plumage Cactus marched Mama's cause of protection of our Wildflowers onto the stage and into the hearts of countless Texans. Cactus Pryor truly was an 'Austin original,' a true folk hero of our time!

He performed for Presidents and Prime Ministers in the Texas White House as comfortably as countless philanthropic efforts in Texas' school houses.

For nearly ninety years he made us laugh, learn, love and sometimes cry all at the same time. He could have spent his extraordinary talent on the national stage. Instead he chose to give it to the people of Central Texas.

He spent over half a century of his professional life in our family's broadcasting business. Each year he presented our board with the record of thousands of hours he had selflessly given to community causes. He never even thought of seeking compensation for his service to community. He was the ultimate 'professional volunteer.'

I don't remember life without Cactus, and I can't bear to think of it now. But I know for sure that Mother and Daddy are leading the applause for his debut in Heaven. And every time I think of 'one- liner wisdom,, social justice, natural beauty, or a good laugh, I'll think of Cactus and rejoice. He was my lifelong friend." - Luci Baines Johnson



Photo courtesy of Luci Baines Johnson.

*"The LBJ Library Remembers Cactus Pryor." <http://www.lbjlibrary.net/press/releases/2011/pryor.html>*



Cactus Pryor was the first face that viewers had ever seen on TV in the Austin area. I was going through the Delta Upsilon fraternity rush at UT in the fall of 1952 when I began watching the Thanksgiving Day Longhorns-Aggies football game on a black-and-white television set. It was the first time I'd ever seen a TV program. Thirty-year-old Cactus was on camera in the studio, introducing the game before they switched to the football field, and little did I know that I would one day work for that young TV personality with a strange first name.

Cactus was the funniest guy I've ever met. At one point, KTBC had an extra fifteen-minute slot to fill around suppertime, and he asked himself, "Well, what are we going to put there?" He created a little show called "Cacti's Fill Time," and he'd do just about anything that popped into his head. There was a hatched door that opened up from the KTBC studio in the Driskill Hotel, and sometimes Cactus would wheel the camera out onto the sidewalk and leave it on, capturing the scene in all its raw street splendor.

He also introduced a segment called "Toupee or Not Toupee?" He would try on different hairpieces and say into the TV camera, "Call and tell us. Do you like this one, or do you like this one?" He would straighten out the hairpiece. "How does it look to you?"

Television was primitive in those days, with little money to spend on gimmicks and gadgets, so Cactus used his fertile imagination to engage people. He was a genuine talent.

His wonderful sense of theater came from his father, "Skinny" Pryor, who owned the Cactus movie theater in downtown Austin, and that's how Richard S Pryor Jr. got his nickname.

Cactus grew up inside that theater, absorbing movies—especially Westerns, which he loved—along with serials, cartoons, newsreels, whatever appeared on the screen. It was the early 1930s, and all

across the nation, movie theaters were becoming open, friendly, and safe environments for a generation of children.

Cactus told me that his father was very popular because kids would come to the theater and say, “Mr. Pryor, I don’t have any money for the show.” And Skinny would say, “Okay, you can work for it. Go get me a glass of water.” When the kid returned with a glass of water, Skinny would say, “You earned your ticket. Go on in.”

Cactus was a boy soprano, performing in groups and sometimes solo. He got his start on stage as a young singer, and at the same time he was learning his entertainment chops by watching what Hollywood was projecting on his father’s movie screen. When Cactus’s voice changed and eventually developed into that great mellow baritone he used for radio and television, his evolution was complete.

At the University of Texas, his focus was naturally communications, which was primarily radio at the time. But World War II soon broke out, and he dropped out of UT to join the Army Air Corps.

Cactus was more than a standup comic telling one-liners. He knew how comedy works, and he wrote jokes and great speeches for others. One time when we scheduled a roast at the Headliners Club, Governor Preston Smith called Cactus and said, “I understand you’re gonna roast me pretty good.”

“That’s right, Governor, no holds barred,” Cactus said.

“Well then would you write me something to say in response?” asked the governor.

Cactus wrote the governor’s comeback responses and gave him the best lines, making him look like a comedy genius and Cactus the butt of the jokes. Listeners said, “Hey, the governor got the best of Cactus tonight.” Which was exactly what Cactus wanted to hear.

*Spelce, Neal. With the Bark Off: A Journalist’s Memories of LBJ and a Life in the News Media. Excerpts from*  
<https://books.google.com/books?id=TypHEAAQBAJ&pg=PT50&lpg=PT50&dq=%22richard+s+pryor+jr%22&source=bl&ots=L SuGuf1FL8&sig=ACfU3U3guAmX77IzP2R6f2eOX 4Vx960HA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjz08 UqrT-AhWfm2oFHcOIDoAQ6AF6BAGZEAM#v=onepage&q=%22cactus%22&f=false>; <https://alcalde.texasexes.org/2021/07/renowned-texas-newsperson-neal-spelce-remembers-getting-his-start-in-the-television-business/>



## Cactus Pryor, Austin's original funnyman, dies at 88

§ [statesman.com/story/entertainment/2011/08/31/cactus-pryor-austin-s-original/6661854007](http://statesman.com/story/entertainment/2011/08/31/cactus-pryor-austin-s-original/6661854007)

### ENTERTAINMENT

Ricardo Gandara

Cactus Pryor, Austin's original funnyman and a pioneer of local radio and television, died Tuesday afternoon. He was 88 .

The cause was complications from a recent fall and Alzheimer's disease. He fell and broke his leg earlier this month while living at an assisted living facility in Buda. With family around him, Pryor died at Hospice Austin's Christopher House, where he was moved recently.

When Austin got its first local TV broadcast on KTBC in 1951, the folksy humorist was the first face that viewers saw. Until 2008, he did commentaries about Austin haunts and personalities on KLBJ radio, but the station continued rerunning his old commentaries, a tribute to his lasting popularity with listeners. He ended each segment with a distinguishable but puzzling word: "thermerstrockimortimer." Pryor never revealed what it means.

"For nearly 90 years he made us laugh, learn, love and sometimes cry, all at the same time," said Luci Baines Johnson, daughter of President Lyndon Johnson. The president had Pryor emcee parties at the LBJ Ranch, and the family hired him to work at its radio station, KLBJ.

"I don't remember life without Cactus, and I can't bear to think of it now. But I know for sure that Mother and Daddy are leading the applause for his debut in heaven," she said.

A local institution, many called him, his style distinguished by Southern-fried wit. "The funniest person ever in Austin," said Dale Dudley of KLBJ-FM.

Dudley, who called Pryor a mentor, referred to him as "Mr. Pryor," but TV viewers and radio listeners knew him as Cactus.

"Very few cities or towns ever know the benefits and pleasures brought about by rare legends like Cactus," said Bob Cole, longtime radio talk show host on the competing KVET. "These treasures are individuals that not only help define the culture and character of a community; the fiber they weave likely endures forever. Austin is Austin, in large part, because of Cactus Pryor."

Pryor, who grew up on Speedway near the University of Texas, dipped in Barton Springs and fished Onion Creek, called his upbringing a "privileged" life. And he was everything to everyone. He entertained world leaders with the Johnsons. He had small parts in two John Wayne movies, "Hellfighters" and "The Green Berets." He escorted stars such as Raquel Welch, Lucille Ball and Dean Martin on promotional tours.

He became an in-demand after-dinner speaker and roaster of politicians and entertainers. He sometimes used disguises. In 1971, he appeared as Count Krag Jansen at a gala at the new Highland Mall. The American-Statesman photographed and identified him as a Danish fashion designer. Unfortunately, the reporter left before the punch line. The next day, the newspaper had to note that Pryor had duped everyone once again.

"To me, he was a star," said golfing buddy Theo Painter. "I saw him many times as an after-dinner speaker. He was the Bob Hope of Texas and could have been a national star, but he decided to stay in Texas."

Behind the scenes, he was a sensitive man who cared about people, said Barbara Miller, who co-hosted "The Noon Show" with Pryor at KTBC from 1978 to 1983. "He was my son Lasater's godfather, and every Christmas morning, Cactus brought him a present. He spoke at Lasater's rehearsal dinner when he got married. Talk about spanning generations. Twenty-five-year-olds then were in awe of Cactus."

A man who thrived in the public eye, Pryor told his KLBJ listeners in 2007 that he had Alzheimer's disease. He joked about it in an interview with the American-Statesman: "My doctor has told me that I will be losing my memory because of a certain disease. I don't buy that there will come a time I won't even recognize my own family. No way. Me forgetting the name of my wife, ah, Jewell, ah, Peggy, or was it Harriet? No, that's my sister who lives in Santa Monica — no, San Antonio."

He was determined not to be slowed by a disease. "There's still some living and laughing to do," he said.

And that he did. He continued his regular commentaries on KLBJ, where he pecked away at the computer while trying to read handwritten notes.

"I write things down, and now the fun part is trying to remember what they mean," he said.

He continued weekly golf games with four friends on his beloved Muny — Lions Municipal Golf Course in West Austin. The outings came to be known for tall tales as much as precious time on the greens.

"Golf feeds my soul," he said. He wrote "My Sand Trap or Yours?," which has stories of golf outings with friends, and "Playback," a collection of essays. His first book was "Inside Texas" in 1982.

The second of six children, Pryor was born to entertain. His father, Richard "Skinny" Pryor, was a legendary vaudeville performer who ran the Cactus Theatre on Sixth Street — hence young Richard's nickname. He graduated from Austin High School in 1941. He majored in radio at the University of Texas but did not finish; he went into the U.S. Army Air Forces, and after a three-year stint, he returned to Austin in 1945 and married Jewell, his first wife.

His first radio job in Austin was with KNOW-AM, but the stint was brief because he couldn't get along with the program director. After short stays in Corpus Christi and Houston, he returned to Austin for good in 1948 and began working as a disc jockey for KLBJ. He and Jewell had four children: Paul, Kerry, Don and Dayne. Jewell died in 1983, the same year Cactus met Peggy Davis, who was then working for Lady Bird Johnson. Cactus and Peggy married in 1988 and had been sweethearts ever since.

His first radio job in Austin was with KNOW-AM, but the stint was brief because he couldn't get along with the program director. After short stays in Corpus Christi and Houston, he returned to Austin for good in 1948 and began working as a disc jockey for KLBJ. He and Jewell had four children: Paul, Kerry, Don and Dayne. Jewell died in 1983, the same year Cactus met Peggy Davis, who was then working for Lady Bird Johnson. Cactus and Peggy married in 1988 and had been sweethearts ever since.

They enjoyed a life of Labrador retrievers, seven grandchildren, one great-grandchild and fishing in Port Aransas.

Pryor called Peggy "babe" and said, "I'm damn lucky to have her." She felt the same and didn't mind sharing her husband with the world.

"Everyone Cactus knew thought he loved and cared for them better than anyone else, and that was OK with me," she said. "We had an ever-abiding presence for one another, able to listen. Through the joys and sorrows and messiness of life, we held on through the ride, loving one another completely, loving well. We have been richly blessed, and we knew it."

Even in his declining years, with Alzheimer's getting the better of him, he courted her.

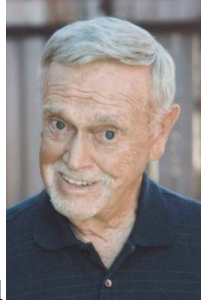
Kerry Guthrie, Cactus' daughter, recalled a recent phone call from her jubilant father, who was repeating over again that he was married to Peggy. One day while visiting a grocery store, her dad bought a flower arrangement.

"He was so proud walking out of that store with the flowers. They were for Peggy," she said.

Pryor is survived by his wife, four children, stepson Stuart Clark, seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.



Richard S. "Cactus" Pryor



JANUARY 7, 1923 – AUGUST 30, 2011

Nationally-known humorist and broadcast personality Richard S. "Cactus" Pryor left life's stage on August 30, 2011, in Austin after a long and spirited challenge against Alzheimer's. He was 88.

Born in 1923, the entertainment icon was an Austin native whose grandfather helped build the Texas Capital. Cactus contracted show business fever at age 3 when his father, Richard "Skinny" Pryor, let him make stage appearances at Austin's early-day picture show, the Cactus, which he owned. Those stints at the landmark led to his permanent nickname.

Cactus attended Austin High School and the University of Texas. After leaving UT he served in the US Army Air Corp. Upon his return to Austin he became a member of Lady Bird Johnson's broadcast family in 1944 when he joined the staff of KLBJ Radio and became a familiar decades-long fixture to Central Texas listeners. He also served as program manager for Austin's first and only television station for ten years, the Johnson's KTBC.

He made public disclosure of his Alzheimer's diagnosis in 2007 but vowed that the show would go on. And indeed, his familiar voice was still heard on KLBJ this week via archival recordings, culminating a remarkable 67-year run.

Beyond his broadcast career, Cactus also appeared in two movies, "Hellfighters" and "The Green Berets," with John Wayne. He and "the Duke" were friends and Cactus was introduced to the crew of the Green Berets as the "funniest man alive." Not surprisingly, he was a sought-after special events entertainment headliner. One of his trademark acts was to appear in the character of a monarch or other royalty of an obscure European principality. Disguised by dress and accent, he mesmerized dinner guests who were totally charmed and then astounded when the masquerade was revealed.

Cactus has been a distinguished writer all of his life. The bulk of his work has been for the radio ear or the television monitor, but he has published two books of his radio commentaries, *Inside Texas* and *Playback*, and a more recently light-hearted work, *My Sand Trap or Yours*.

Cactus also served as co-host of the weekly Darrell Royal Football Show for a number of years in the late 60's during that legendary U.T. coach's championship run. As such, he gave voice to the questions of Longhorn fans and often spiced the commentary with irreverent ad libs.

Cactus has been the recipient of a host of honors for community service through the years, including recognition as Austin's Most Worthy Citizen.

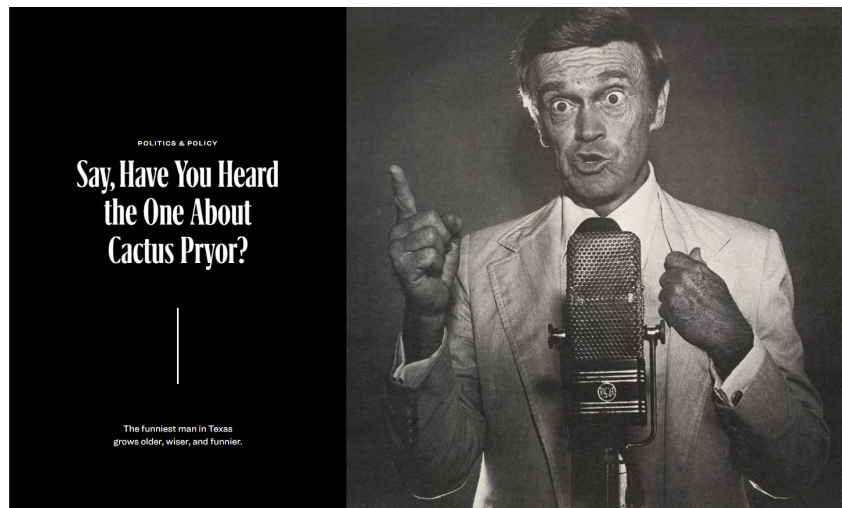
Cactus is preceded in death by his parents Richard "Skinny" Pryor and Mary Thompson Pryor; first wife of 33 years and mother of his four children, Jewell Elizabeth Allison Pryor; siblings Mary Alice Pryor Bryant Clark, Arthur Pryor, Bill Pryor and his beloved Labrador retrievers.

Cactus is survived by his wife of 22 years, Peggy Davis Pryor of Austin; daughter Kerry Pryor Guthrie and husband Larry, of Austin; son Paul Pryor of Austin; son Don Pryor and wife Kim, of Austin; son Dayne Pryor and wife Julie, of Dripping Springs; step-son Stuart Davis Clark and wife Julie, of Burnet; and daughter-in-law DorRae Pryor Stevens and husband Bobby, of Dripping Springs; grandchildren Allison Parnell Ponton and husband Mark, Ana Louise Pryor, Richard Ray Pecos Pryor and fiancé Katie Pinson, Elizabeth Jewell Pryor, Marissa Lynn Pryor, Kevin James Clark, Michael Davis Clark and great-granddaughter Ava Leigh Ponton; siblings Wally Pryor and wife Euna Faye, of Cedar Park; Harriett Pryor Scotka and husband Luddy, of San Antonio; mother-in-law Blanche Davis Ward of Little Rock, AR; and sisters-in-law Sarah Pryor of Austin and Patricia Davis Norris and husband Art, of Little Rock, AR. Cactus is also survived by numerous nieces, nephews, friends, and mishpokhe.

All family members are deeply grateful for the many expressions of love and support. Cactus's greatest legacy will be the warm smiles he leaves with so many across Texas and far beyond. Memorial contributions may be made to Hospice Austin, Meals on Wheels, Capital Area Food Bank, Caritas, Austin Area Alzheimer's Association, Skinny's Gallery at the Paramount Theater or the charity of your choice to benefit those in need.

Cactus's family will observe a private burial at the Texas State Cemetery.

<https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/austin-tx/richard-pryor-8214220>



In a comic,” Cactus Pryor had told me on the way to Sealy. “Some guys are very sensitive about that word, especially on the after-dinner circuit. They want to be thought of as ‘humorists.’ I don’t think that—politically, for instance—I’m that profound. If I can bring out the irony of the situation, the hypocrisy, and get a laugh, that’s my contribution. I can’t compare myself to Will Rogers or whoever.”

Pryor might fit more easily into a tradition if his career were not such an eclectic affair. He is, or has been, a speaker, actor, newspaper columnist, radio and TV personality, singer, pitchman, toastmaster, roastmaster, director, sports commentator, kennels owner, and screenwriter. For everyone who might care to force a comparison with Will Rogers, there is another who would suggest a closer affinity to Bob Hope, and still another who would dismiss the whole question by simply writing him off as a buffoon, the sort of washed-out celebrity that local radio and TV stations keep on the payroll as mascots.

And it is true one could receive that last impression, based on a cursory glance at Pryor’s media presence. It’s unfortunate that the least interesting of his talents are the most relentlessly aired. One turns on the tube in Austin and sees him huckstering, in his low-key manner, for some Western-wear shop or poor-boy art fair, or performing salacious monkeyshines when Suzanne Somers’ name is mentioned during a promotional announcement for the upcoming season. Neither does his newspaper column, syndicated in seven papers in Texas and one in Louisiana, show him off to much advantage. It consists of maybe five or six one-line jokes, usually about political issues and almost always a beat or two away from being funny.

But those who have seen him perform in person know how brilliant he can be, and how the same jokes that would seem isolated and eccentric in his newspaper column can suddenly blossom, little flash-frozen organisms coming to life in the saline bath of his personality.

I’d heard it said that Cactus Pryor is a “Texas institution,” but I never gave the overworked term much thought until last February when Pryor was honored by the Headliners Club, the Austin journalism society that every year conducts a “roast” of some celebrity or other. Pryor had written and emceed these events for twenty years, lampooning the antics of the Legislature and ridiculing the latest scandals and ineptitudes of the current governors, who, with the exception of the inscrutable Dolph Briscoe, were good enough sports to attend regularly.



This year it was Pryor's turn on the spit. The event was held at the new Special Events Center of the University of Texas, a massive coliseum encircled by access ramps that look like the rings of Saturn. It was filled with movers and shakers, women in extravagant gowns and men in tuxedos who had allowed their gray hair to fluff out over the ears in the current fashion of power. Women wearing sashes that read GIN or VODKA stood around with trays in their hands serving the audience, each member of which had paid \$30 to see an assemblage of power-seekers and celebrities make jokes about Cactus Pryor's toupee. John Connally was there, and Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather, Jack Valenti, Darrell Royal, and Erma Bombeck, along with several football stars and a sampling of dough-faced former governors of Texas.

"Tall and tan and lean and handsome," Lee Meriwether sang to the tune of "The Girl from Ipanema,"

"The man called Cactus Pryor goes dancing,  
And when he passes,  
Each girl he passes goes . . . Yecch!"

Dan Rather conducted a mock interview with John Connally, a moment of strange-bedfellowism that was absorbed into the prevailing hysteria.

When his turn came, Pryor fended the barbs with finesse. "Jack Valenti, how fortunate President Johnson was to have your counsel. 'Pick the dog up by the ears, Mr. President.' 'Show them your scar, Mr. President.'"

At the end of the show, just before the principals locked arms and sang a tribute to Pryor to the tune of "Hello, Dolly," Lady Bird Johnson came onstage to announce that the Headliners Club had planted a cactus patch in Pryor's honor at Town Lake.

Pryor leaned back in his seat and held the wheel loosely. In the glow from the instrument panel he looked serene. He ran a comb through his fake hair, took the sucker out of his mouth, and more or less told me his life story.

"Dad was an old song-and-dance man," he said, "but he misused his voice over the years—they didn't have PA systems back then—so he spoke with just a rasp."

When he retired from vaudeville, Skinny Pryor ran a movie theater on Congress Avenue called the Cactus. The name Cactus attached itself temporarily to a younger brother, Arthur, before it settled permanently on his sibling, who until that time had been known as Richard.

"My first memory is of that theater," Pryor said. "I grew up in the front row. My mother was the cashier and my Uncle Wallace was the projectionist. Whenever the film would break or catch on fire and the kids started complaining, Uncle Wallace would yell out from the projection room, 'Shut your goddamn mouths! I'm tryin' to fix the goddamn thing!'"

Pryor had worked at KTBC, the Johnson family radio and TV station, for 33 years, and he was obviously touched by this tribute from his employer. The crowd warmly applauded Mrs. Johnson. Pryor's roast was, in a way, a valedictory to an era that they had been seeing out for a long time. The stage was filled with the minions and protégés and offhand creations of Lyndon Johnson, and the closing moments of the show were strangely somber, as if the whole thing had been a kind of séance meant to invoke the spirit of L.B.J.

Pryor never belonged to the deep inner circle of policymaking and busywork of the Johnson presidency. He was hired help, what studio personnel call, almost derisively, "talent." He was Johnson's funnyman. Perhaps it was that distance, and the attendant perspective, that made him seem the most durable and resilient character present that night. Watching him, I was impressed less by his sense of humor than by his sense of dignity and decorum, even embarrassment.

"What was unique about Dad's theater was that Dad would get out in front and hawk the show in. He'd stand out there wearing his derby hat, firing a cap pistol in the air. 'Cowboys shootin' 'em up tonight! Sit too close to the screen and you'll get powder bum!'"

"Dad loved children like no man I've ever known. All you had to do if you didn't have the price of admission was stand around and look hungry for a while. He'd send you on some little errand; that way he could justify letting you in for free. Once he caught two kids sneaking in and he showed them how to do it right. The trick was to get into the crowd that was leaving the theater and then walk backwards. He was actually in competition with his own box office at times."

*"<https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/cactus-pryor/>"*

*Permits*

Bob Connolly

401 Ridgewood Road

~~Map~~

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607

Ridgewood Village #1

Stone veneer and frame residence with  
carport attach.

54698 8-7-53

\$14,000.00

Owner

*Building Permit - 1953*