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## IN MY OPINION

# Echoes of a strong governor

**More than 70 years after O. Max Gardner led North Carolina through the Depression, his words still carry hope – and an important message.**

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Gov. O. Max Gardner holds his grandson, O. Max Gardner III. COURTESY OF O. MAX GARDNER III

Words rushed out of the old book like a fresh wind.

Powerful words of hope from Shelby's O. Max Gardner, the governor who led North Carolina during the Great Depression.

I recently found a faded and taped copy of his public papers and letters in Cleveland County Memorial Library.

Stuff like that is usually dirt dry. But this collection, published in 1937 by the N.C. Council of State, speaks to the economic problems of today.

N.C. Gov. Bev Perdue is also reading up on Gardner.

Perdue recently mentioned Gardner's time as governor, 1929 to 1933, as she talked about transforming state government.

Gardner also faced rising jobless rates, businesses closing down and state and local governments struggling to meet the state's needs.

When he died on Feb. 6, 1947, he was on his way to London to become the new ambassador to England.

Gardner's legend lived on in Shelby, where I grew up. I didn't know a lot about him as a kid. It wasn't until 1971, when UNC Press published Joseph Morrison's biography of Gardner, that I got a deeper understanding of this visionary North Carolinian.

Morrison, who taught at the UNC School of Journalism, shed new light on Gardner's years as a lawyer/lobbyist in New Deal Washington. He was, Morrison wrote, a powerful player.

Gardner and Franklin Roosevelt were old friends, and the former governor had the president's ear.

Morrison wrote: "It seems clear that Gardner's repeated refusal of every proffer of a full-time appointment by the president heightened Roosevelt's regard for Max Gardner's advice, because he knew that that advice came from a man who wanted nothing from him."

### **Telling it like it is**

Like a lot of people these days, I've been reading about the Great Depression and FDR.

But what brought my focus back to Gardner was a book that came out last year by Raleigh News & Observer reporter Rob Christensen: "The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics." He retold the Gardner story in a tightly written, engaging chapter on the Shelby political dynasty.

“From 1928 to 1948, the Shelby Dynasty ruled North Carolina politics,” Christensen wrote. “Gardner was one of the state's most gifted political figures. Forced to be innovative because of the Depression, Gardner reshaped state government.”

The state highway and prison systems; state funding of public schools, including teacher salaries; the consolidated state university system; all these things and much more came about because of Gardner.

Christensen led me to re-read Morrison's book, paying particular attention to the Depression years.

Then I checked out the Gardner papers from the Shelby library. In that faded 788-page volume, Gardner's voice came alive. Telling things like they were.

Addressing the State Council on Unemployment Relief on Dec. 2, 1931, the governor said: “We are facing the most critical period since the Civil War, and the individuals and institutions of the state must realize the condition...the way to win this fight is to recognize that we must adjust our expenditures to our incomes. Today, the state has exhausted its ability to build and contemplates its inability to pay.”

But, Gardner said, “I am not pessimistic about the future...North Carolina has gone through worse conditions and has won out.”

Speaking in person and in radio addresses, Gardner constantly hammered home his theme of hope.

“The throat of this state and nation is in the grip of a general, continued economic depression,” he said in July 1931. “Can we win this war? If so, how?... Let me tell you how we cannot win this contest. We cannot win it through class struggle. We cannot win it through sectional civil war. We cannot win it by instilling political poison in our own ranks. We cannot win it by dividing the main army of North Carolina into lesser armies of western North Carolina, of Piedmont North Carolina, of eastern North Carolina.”

Unified purpose and determination: those were the keys, Gardner said.

### **Bold actions**

On a recent walk around Shelby, I stopped by Webbley, Gardner's historic home, now the law office of his grandson, O. Max Gardner III.

I paused by the old courthouse where lawyer O. Max Gardner's voice once rang out as he defended clients. On a nearby city street, in the mid-1930s, Gardner rode with FDR in a motorcade headed to a political rally in Charlotte.

Along part of that route, I made my way to Gardner's grave in Sunset Cemetery.

In a time of layoffs and economic chaos, it's an inspirational spot.

Gardner's comments on FDR came back to me: "They call him (FDR) a dangerous man and a demagogue," Gardner said in 1931. "Roosevelt is dangerous to no man and no business unless that man and that business is dangerous to the welfare and happiness of the American people...if there was ever a man who should be proud of the enemies he has made, that man should be Franklin Roosevelt."

Like FDR, Gardner was not only a gifted speaker but someone who got things done.

I'm still working my way through the Gardner book, impressed by his words, but even more so by the bold actions.

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