



PHOTO COURTESY OF GEORGE GONGORA The 2015 Muy Grande Hall of Fame class. From left is former Texas Rep. Hugo Berlanga, former House Speaker Gib Lewis, outdoor writer Judy Bishop Jurek and Duval County Attorney Baldemar Gutierrez. That's contest founder Muy Garza on the right.

Iconic Muy Grande Deer Contest turns 50

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By: David Joseph Sikes - Corpus Christi Caller Times, Sportswriter

Leonel Garza described himself recently as a grease monkey who managed Freer's Center Circle filling station in 1965.

The former high school track star, who ran a mile in about four and a half minutes, spent his days after graduation pumping gas, cleaning windshields and fixing flats in the tiny Duval County oil town at the crossroads of U.S. 59 and State Highway 16. But this son of migrant workers had big ideas.

That same year Freer began attracting hundreds of visitors to an event billed as the Freer Oil-O-Rama, which eventually became the Freer Rattlesnake Roundup. Across the street from the high school gym, a Texaco station lured tourists in with caged rattlers. Today, thousands attend the event, which was declared the state's Official Rattlesnake Roundup by the Texas Legislature in 1993.

Not to be outdone, Garza decided deer hunting was a more fitting feature to boast the town. From November through January, Garza had watched hunters drive through Freer with trophy whitetail bucks. They cared little for rattlesnakes. So he organized a contest to promote the region's hunting opportunities by honoring these brush country deer chasers.

Around this time, Garza recalls a man dressed in camo walking up to his filling station with a problem. The man explained he had high-centered his pickup on an area ranch and was in need of a tow. Garza offered a smile and a solution.

He unhitched the trailer to his big-rig tractor and easily reacquainted the man's tires with the ground. The hunter was so grateful that he offered to pay Garza for his trouble. Garza refused the cash but asked the man to spread the word about his deer contest and to tell folks the grease monkey at Center Circle was the deer hunter's friend.

Garza had no idea his new friend was Fred Strong, outdoor writer for the Victoria Advocate newspaper. Strong's next column was all about the hunter's friend in Freer. Within two weeks, Garza was filling the tanks of nearly every hunter who passed through town.

"They kept telling me they were there to thank me for what I did for Fred Strong," said Garza, who turned 75 Saturday. "The line of vehicles was two blocks long."

The story grew legs. Soon, outdoor writers from the Houston Post and Chronicle, the Dallas Morning News, Fort Worth Star-Telegram, the Caller-Times and the Bryan-College Station Eagle either retold the story or wrote features on Garza's deer contest. In one of those articles, the writer referred to the competition as that little filling station deer contest, or something like that.

This spurred Garza to come up with a catchy name. He chose *Muy Grande* because he said the antlers on South Texas bucks grew as wide as the Rio Grande and the deer were as big as Texas. That same year, 1968, Garza created his unique formula for ranking bucks. This included the Boone and Crockett antler score, the base circumference of each main beam, the antler width times five, number of points and the animal's field-dressed weight.

Homero Garza of Freer won the 1965 contest with a buck, whose antlers measured 27 1/4 inches across. Leonel Garza gave him the watch off his wrist, no kidding. And no, the two men were not related.

Garza and about 500 fans celebrated the iconic contest's 50th anniversary this past week with an awards ceremony and the induction of four high-profile friends of hunters into the *Muy Grande* Hall of Fame.

Inducted were former Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives Gib Lewis, former Texas Rep. Hugo Berlanga, outdoor writer Judy Bishop Jurek and Duval County Attorney Baldemar Gutierrez. Country singer Johnny Rodriguez performed at the event.

Garza's little gas station contest is much more than the longest running deer competition anywhere. The event honors a culture that connects families with each other and the land. His

legacy is secure as possibly the first Texan to create a contest to promote Texas' hunting heritage by encouraging generation after generation into the field. Others have followed.

The institution grew in step with its founder's emerging reputation. At some point Garza became known to deer hunters everywhere simply as Muy. Today, about 1,000 hunters pay to compete annually in the contest, along with about twice that number of lifetime members eligible to compete.

Over the years, countless fathers have shown young wannabe hunters their Muy Grande jackets, belt buckles or trophies, while recounting stories of wilderness adventures. Others conveyed the glory and pride of being recognized by their peers or having their photos taken with the charismatic Muy Garza.

The granddaddy of deer contests that began with a single prize for widest antler spread now awards hunters in 11 divisions and 137 categories, including separate honors for children, women, heaviest hog, bow hunting, highest Muy Grande score, high fence bucks, low fence bucks and others.

As the contest grew so did interest in hunting leases around Freer. While one landowner suggested all the attention on the region's big bucks promoted poaching, others saw the economic value of being recognized as the birthplace of both the Rattlesnake Roundup and the Muy Grande contest, which was honored in April by the Texas Legislature.

Deer hunters looking to lease property often turned to Garza. So he became a lease broker, which he parlayed into a real estate business in 1968. Garza said he sold one to three ranches most years since then. In 1969 Garza made enough to buy a Ford LTD for his growing family. He and his wife Elda have five daughters.

At some point Garza bought the gas station where he worked, in part, with money borrowed from a local priest. Today, the little filling station, which became known as Muy Grande Village, is a 5,000-square-foot convenience store with 10 gas pumps, a deli, souvenir shop and outlet for Garza's own line of camouflage clothing, taking up nearly an acre, which the family now owns.

Most organizational responsibilities for the operation have fallen on Garza's youngest daughter Imelda Sharber and her husband Kenneth. The family also runs a Christian nonprofit called Muy Grande Ministries, which supports education and the local food bank, while catering to the needy.

Leonel "Muy" Garza remains the smiling face of this storied institution. Stop by and see him if you're passing through Freer. Maybe buy his book, "The Legend of the Muy Grande," or simply listen to his stories. A pacemaker for his heart hampers Muy's shooting ability these days. But this former grease monkey with big ideas is deadly with a camera. And he'll always be a friend to hunters

Congratulations, to my friend and to the Muy Grande Hall of Fame class of 2015.