

Lawton Brooks

FF: Okay Lawton, you tell us about the gypsies.

LB: I'll just tell you you can't beat 'em. That they can tell you your fortune and tell you the truth.

FF: I don't know, I had my fortune told one time--not really my fortune, but--I think some people have certain insights.

LB: I'll tell you what, now, that gypsy, she hit mine. And it's worked out, and still works out, and I think of it every once in a while, exactly what that woman told me.

FF: Well, tell us about it. Where did you find her?

LB: Well, I was in the mill, runnin' the mill, and then all them used to travel by horses and buggies. And all the horse traders--the gypsies were horse traders--they all had a gang of horses of all kinds, draggin' 'em along with 'em. The main one, she had a little Shetland pony to her--little Shetland pony and buggy, just room for one to ride in there. And she was a fat lady. And they come down by and they's going on down, below our house about a mile was what they called the Herbert Ford, where they forded the river--they didn't have no bridges and they forded it when the river wasn't up. So they'd go down there and they'd camp there. And they'd stay there for two or three weeks at a time, good tradin' post there. Fork's in the road there, where two or three roads come in there from different ways, you know. And they'd put up there under them big birch trees there and it's a good place to stay. They'd put up camp and they'd stay sometimes two weeks there, swappin' horses. And they come on down by there towards Hiawassee, so I'd stand out there on the mill and no one seen a gang of them go down. Directly, this lady comes down in that little Shetland pony and buggy and she just turned in there and turned into the mill and got out and wanted to buy some corn. And I told her, "I ain't got it." I sold out. I didn't have it. The man had just got the last bushel I had--I had to scrape the box to get it. And a feller come in then with some corn while we were talking. She wanted to tell my fortune. I told her I didn't want to know nothin' about it; my fortune would be bad anyway. She said, "No, you got a good fortune. I can tell by the looks of you, you've got a good fortune." She said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. You let me have a peck of meal to eat and--just a quarter of a peck--and she said, "I'll tell your fortune. I tell 'em for two dollars and a half, but I've been needin' some meal for supper. I'll tell you one."

Well, I studied it a minute. I didn't have no way--I said, "Well, I believe I'll do it." And I throwed that other man's corn up in there and I tolled it and it came out just a peck. So I just throwed it all up and went to grindin' it. And when it ground out a peck, I poked her up a peck. She told my fortune and, by grabs, she hit it. And she told me things that I knowed durn well that nobody knowed but me. And she hit it right on the nail head. And she said I'd live to be a very old man and said I'd handle lots of money but never lay up no money. And I have, I've had lots of money in my days but I never did lay up no money.

FF: What else did she say?

LB: She just hit it right on the nail head. Told me about the girls--I was courtin' two girls then. I was going to see one in one direction and another'n. I was slippin' back'ards and for'ards. And she told me that the black-headed girl thought a whole lot more of me than the blonde-headed girl did. But I thought it was right the other way. But it worked out it wasn't, it was right the way she said it was the whole time. And she told me about them girls and told me the color of their hair and everything and I knowed she'd never laid eyes on one of them. And how she done it, I don't know. But now, she hit that.

They swap horses for a livin', that's how they do it. Swap horses, tell fortunes. That's what they done for their living. And they'd swap horses for the boot, and they'd always ask a fella for a boot before they'd give you their knot, they'd always ask for the boot.

FF: Well did they ever trade anything else?

LB: No, I don't know of them ever trading anything but just horses. That's all I ever traded with them. I traded horses with them lots of times. I got one old horse off of 'em that wasn't worth a dime. That thing wouldn't work no where you put it, just kick gear off anything you put on him. I kept him until a bunch of them came back--I traded him right back in, got me a good mule.

FF: You traded him to another bunch of gypsies?

LB: Yeah, another bunch. They'd come down, i'd trade 'em to another bunch. They'd come along, every summer they'd come along there for, oh, they'd be there three or four times during the summer. They'd be a'camping there a week at a time. Different ones. They'd come through.

FF: Well where did they come from?

LB: I don't know now. That's one place I never have found out where the gypsies come from.

FF: Well Mr. Duvall said that they were from Ireland. And he said they didn't like to be called gypsies, he said they wanted to be called "Irish Traders." That's what he said.

LB: Yeah but they called 'em gypsies.

FF: Right. Well what did the people in your area think of the gypsies?

LB: Well, they just come along and people'd go down and swap horses with them. Sometimes they'd get some pretty good'uns, sometimes they get some bad. Sometimes they'd have some maybe you'd know, they'd trade for something maybe right there in the country. Maybe you wanted to trade for it and you couldn't trade for it, they could trade then you could trade to the gypsies. Gypsies'd trade with you some way or another, when you get in with them.

FF: Mr. Duvall said they were real good traders.

LB: They was good traders, you bet they was good traders.

FF: Did the people around here or around Hayesville think that the gypsies would cheat them?

LB: Oh yeah, they knowed they would if they got a chance, but the people around us, they'd cheat the gypsies if they could. So it was just one went with the other one. A horse trader, he's gonna beat a man if he can. But I got one bad trade off of 'em and the rest of the time I done pretty good. When I traded for one for the mule, I made the best trade I ever made though. I kept that old mule a long, long time. It was an awful good mule. But I traded with them lots and lots of time. I traded 'em back'ards and for'ards horses to 'em.

FF: What did they look like?

LB: They kind of a colored, like, and most of 'em is low people; ain't many of 'em tall. Most of 'em's heavy set. That lady that told my fortune, she was a big, fat woman. They're nice-looking people, just a nice-looking people. But all of 'em ever I seen, all they ever thought about was trading and swapping.

Leila Gibson

LG: Well these people were dark-complected and there were some Egyptians with them that fortune told--told your fortune. And so these Egyptians, I mean, yeah, these Spaniards, they come around to every residence and all the boarding houses, hotels, and so on. There wasn't any motels in that day, you know, it was hotels. And so they had a fruit jar, a glass fruit jar, and they had spiders, worms, millers, moths, all different kinds of insects. And they showed this to the people and they told them that in these feather beds, pillows that they had these insects in 'em and it was dangerous. That they might cut through and injure their bodies. Maybe their eyes, nose, or in their ears. Especially all the cavities above the faces, you know. And it scared the people. So they said, "Now we're fine." So they had a pair of scales. They weighed the feathers and the ticking to you, each customer. And they got all of Macon County and Franklin around and they got all this renovation done, as they called it. They cleaned the feathers, washed the ticks, starched it, ironed 'em, and brought 'em back and weighed 'em back to 'em. Well, they weighed the same as they did when they took 'em away. And when the feathers got real dry, the solution that they took 'em to when they got real dry, they didn't have the feathers. There wasn't a pound of feathers to each pillow and each, and all the feather beds, there was about three or four pounds. They stole. They took and then charged 'em for the renovation.

FF: Well, did you say that the Spanish people had fortune tellers with them?

LG: Oh yes.

FF: Did you ever get your fortune told? Did you know anyone who did?

LG: Well I was too little at that time, you know. But lots of 'em did and said that they hit pretty good. Yeah, they did. I'll tell you, there's people in this world that can tell you things. I do know that. 'Cause when I was a young grown lady, and even after I was married, I had my fortune told two or three times. And they even told me my child's name, told me my name, told me my husband's name, told me my husband was a locomotive engineer. And told me that he, that we recently had built a home, which we had. And says in less than five years, your husband will die. And you will put your child in a school and you will travel east. And you will buy a home there and live there for 12-13 years. Well that's true. That much was true. Whether she guessed at it or not, now I don't know. But she told me to raise my, to take my thumb and forefinger and raise it gently and she'd tell me my two bitterest enemies. And she did.

Hob Duvall

HB: A lot of folks want to call 'em gypsies, but they're Irish traders. They come from Ireland, where they're originally from. And they were smart people. A lot of folks accused 'em of being thieves, rogues, this, that, or another. They didn't steal--they'd trade you out of your clothes if you let 'em and leave you almost nude. But if they owed you, they'd pay you. They're way better people than they got credit for being. You know how anytime somebody out trades you, you don't think as much of them. That's the truth about the Irish traders. But the women were the bankers, they kept the money. When the men had to have it, why they'd go to the banker. In other words, they traveled all the time. They never stayed nowhere over a week at a time. And they were movin' all the time. But they were a lot better people than they got credit for being, because back then they out traded a farmer and he didn't think much of them. They still do that. But i don't know too much about them. In other words, I never did marry into them. They married in the families. In other words, they'd marry their second and first cousins. I mean they did that in order to keep their tribe together, don't you know. But they were a lot better people than they got credit for.

FF: Well let's see. Was there just one group of them that came up to this area?

HB: No. There was the Maguires--Tommy Maguire was always called a gypsy but he was an Irish trader. He was an auctioneer; one of the smartest auctioneers I've ever met. He could talk as fast as three men. And, you know what I mean, and knew when he was gettin' bids in a big crowd that way. He was really, really a good auctioneer. There were the Maguires--

FF: That was one group? The Maguires were one group?

HB: Uh-huh. Harrisons. It's been several years since I've seen 'em. O'Hares--did I call them?

FF: Harrisons.

HB: There were Harrisons and O'Hares--Johnny O'Hare was a big mule man in Atlanta then. He had, I guess, 150, 200 mules that he bought and sold. He was a big dealer. They spent the winters in South Georgia, where the cotton grew. They always were around all the good cotton belts. I mean, they dealt in mules more than any other kind. In other words, that was, you know, people plowed and farmed with mules then. But they'd trade any kind of livestock. In other words--well, they didn't mess with cattle because they couldn't move them like they did horses. But they had their wagons built kind of like a Winnebago or something--you know what I mean. But they slept in those wagons. And they were really nice, it was about the prettiest thing you ever saw was one of them Irish wagons, but they called 'em gypsy wagons. You know, local people would. But they never stayed over a week at a place. I never did travel with 'em but I did camp with 'em, you know what I mean? Maybe we'd all be camping in the same area. But the women kept the money when they'd make a trade, why they'd always hand the money to their wives. They'd go to these places like the five and ten cent stores, they'd buy lace. These women would get out and peddle that lace through the country. They'd swap it to people who didn't have any money. They'd trade it for vegetables, you know what I mean. They always had plenty to eat. They were smart people.

FF: Well let's see, then, they came up here in the summer months? Well, would just one group come up here or would several different groups pass through?

HB: There'd be several different groups. I've seen as high as ten families in one group. But they'd marry into--most of them were Catholics. They were Catholic belief. They only buried once a year. And when they--they buried in Atlanta. They had a cemetery. I don't know whether they cremated them or how, I never did go to that, but they only buried once a year. They didn't bother them; when they had one of those burials, they'd all meet. It was, you know, a protracted thing, you know, when they had their funerals. But they'd never stay in a house. You couldn't get them people--they rented a house, they'd rent this house here and they'd camp right out there.

FF: Really?

HB: That's the kind of life they lived; they wouldn't live in a house. I don't know why. Never did know what would be the reason. But they camped wherever they--they'd rent a nice place in Atlanta, put their tent right out in the yard or their wagon. And you couldn't get 'em to sleep in a house. You'd never get 'em to go to the house. They'd never go to a hotel. They always camped. That was the life they lived. And you know, they didn't want to get away from it.

FF: Well, whereabouts around here would they camp?

HB: Oh, at Hiawassee. They always camped near a little town, you know what I mean, where they could get groceries and things that they had to have. But they camped Hiawassee and Hayesville in North Carolina, Clayton--they used to camp, come right through here. They traveled by wagon, don't you know. Kind of like Ringling Brothers Circus. It used to travel the roads before the railroads and highways got to where Ringling Brothers could go by train, they

went by wagon. And when I was only a kid, just a tiny kid, Ringling Brothers come to Hiawassee, a small little town like Hiawassee. I don't guess it's over 2,000 heads. Today, they don't stop nowhere only the big cities. It takes a good big city to get Ringling Brothers to even stop there, because they have so much overhead, don't you know.

FF: Well did the gypsies, say the ones you were familiar with, did they have a certain route they'd take every year?

HB: No.

FF: They just sort of wander?

HB: They come north in the summer, they'd spend up here in these mountains in the summer. And they'd never stay over a week at a place. But they'd move from little town to town, don't you know. It was cool and they enjoyed it up here. They'd get away from the mosquitos and the heat. But--

FF: But they didn't have a certain route they followed every year?

HB: No, un-uh. But in the winter, they'd always go south. They'd hit the cotton belt and they'd go way down south too. They didn't just stop in middle Georgia; they'd go plumb on down to the Florida line.

FF: Well did they, when they went back down in Georgia, farther down in Georgia, did a, would a whole bunch of them meet down there?

HB: No, they split up and had territories. In other words, if one of 'em had maybe two or three counties, he'd call that his country. He didn't want none of these other gypsies in there trading. I mean they'd fall out among themselves that way. They'd fall out among themselves that way; they moved their territory, don't you know, they didn't want no others movin' in on 'em.

FF: So would one group of gypsies have one territory in South Georgia and one territory up here?

HB: Right. They called 'em gypsies but it would make 'em madder than hell to call 'em a gypsy. They wanted you to call 'em Irish traders.

FF: Irish traders.

HB: They were smart people now. They were a lot smarter than people give 'em credit for being. They wore loud clothes, and a lot of beads and you know looked kind of like Indians in a way. They wore their hair long. I call a lot of these young kids that go around now, you know, their hair long and dressin' so funny, I call 'em gypsies. I say, "You look like a bunch of gypsies." I've

got a grandson who wears a beard--I never did see none of the men wearing a beard, but the women wore loud clothes more so than the men.

FF: So how many wagons might there be in a group?

HB: Oh, fifteen to twenty. You know what I mean, they'd have all the horses and mules you ever thought about seeing, they kept a drove anywhere from ten to twelve head to each family, don't you know. And it was kind of like seeing a circus come to town to see through the country. I always got a long with them. A lot of people didn't like 'em, but they always treated me good and I always, you know what I mean, treated them good. I never did have no enemies in my life.

FF: What did most of the people around here think of them?

HB: Well the ones that they get the best of, if they cheated them in a trade, why they had it in for them. But a lot of people accused them of stealing, I never saw one of 'em steal anything yet. They'd out talk you. If they could out talk you, why they'd take you for a ride, but I never did see any of them steal. Shoplift, like a lot of the people we got right here even in Clayton.

FF: Well do you know when they came over from Ireland?

HB: No I don't.

FF: Do you know how long they traveled around in this area?

HB: Oh, for over 50 years.

FF: And when's the last time you saw a real group?

HB: The mules and horses went, well they cut them up into smaller groups, now. In other words, you'll see they'll have their wives maybe in Gainesville, they'll work this territory, the men will. They go in trucks and cars now.

FF: Can you give me a rough idea when the last time you saw a real group of them with horses and everything was? In the '30s or?

HB: It's been 40 years ago.

FF: Can you tell us of any stories about when you traded with them? Do you remember any instances?

HB: No I never did trade with them too much because they were smarter. I always, if I met somebody that knew more than I did, you know what I mean, I didn't have a chance to make any money off of him, because if anybody knows more than you do, why you better let 'em alone. You can't make no money. I'll hand it to 'em, they were all smart when it come to knowin'

the age of a horse. They could see into a mule or a horse, you know what I mean? If there's anything wrong with it, they'd kick it just like that. A lot of horses used to, they'd be moon-eyed--their eyes'd go once a week out of every month they'd be blind as a bat. Well them gypsies were bad to handle kickers. A plow-kicking mule. Maybe would work good to a wagon, they'd be draggin' them along to a wagon but you wouldn't think about what he'd plow. You just show him a plow stop and he'd go to kicking. Well they'd trade 'em off, the next day they'd send somebody back, and trade 'em out for about half of what he give for it. 'Cause when a man gets sick, then you can cheat him. Yeah, they were smart. I never did trade none with them because they were just too smart for me; I wouldn't try to trade with them. I was afraid of 'em, other words.