

Welcome back to another edition of our on-line newsletter. This month I share with you some amusing stories about my father, Lawton, who just celebrated his 90th birthday last month.

First, though, just a few words about life on Ocracoke this time of year. As the weather turns chillier and the days continue to get shorter Ocracoke gets quieter and the village turns more inward to nurture our family and community ties.

Potlucks, Fall weddings, Halloween parties, and school & community events are just a few of the many activities that help keep us connected in the off-season.

This is also the time when many of us take both short off-island trips and even long-awaited extended vacations. Recently, activity on our web site has been limited to updating existing information and making a few minor changes. I just returned several weeks ago from a hiking trip in east Tennessee, and will be leaving in a couple of days for a relaxing few days at a lakefront cabin in a South Carolina state park. From there I will be attending a conference on Science and Religion in Atlanta. So there will be limited new additions to our web site for a while. Nevertheless, we continue to be open and we still boast over a thousand different items in our on-line catalog. Most orders are shipped a day or two after we receive them. Use the links to the left to browse our many pages of fine quality US made crafts. Ordering is safe, secure, and easy.

My father, Lawton Howard, was born on Ocracoke, not far from the Village Craftsmen, in 1911. He lived on the island until he went north to work in 1927. His wit and sense of humor are just as keen now as when he did the things related below. Some of these stories were recently included in our island newspaper, the "Ocracoke Observer." Several have never before been published. All are true! We hope you enjoy them.



Lawton Stories:

"Pfbbbtt," my mother would mutter exasperated, the sound directed through half closed lips so they vibrated slightly. "Lawton," she would continue, as her eyes rolled back and her right hand moved dismissively through the air.

We all knew the routine. After 50 years it had become familiar. My father's mind was not entirely on the present situation. Instead, his thoughts had wandered off to something silly he had thought to say or do. And....he had just said or done it!

"Lawton," my mother would repeat, "you never pay any attention. All you ever think about is doing something crazy."

And she was not entirely wrong. Anyone who knows my dad can tell you stories of the things he's said or done to make people laugh. So sit back and enjoy the following tales to tickle your funny bone.

The Empty Jug

In the late 1960's and early 1970's Lawton worked for the NC ferry division at Hatteras Inlet. Back then the ferries ran less frequently and there were no public facilities at the north end of Ocracoke. One hot summer afternoon a young couple pulled into line only moments after the ferry had pulled out. The woman was pregnant. They would have to wait an hour for another boat.

Presently the woman's husband walked over to Lawton and asked him if there was anywhere they could get a glass of cold water. He motioned for them to follow him into the port captain's office. The crew had a small refrigerator inside and he would be happy to pour them each a tall glass.

Lawton opened the refrigerator door, looked inside, and spied two water jugs, one empty and the other full. He reached in and drew out the full jug. He left the door ajar, and the husband peered inside as he filled their glasses.

Presently the young man's curiosity prevailed and he inquired, "Why do you have an empty jug in your refrigerator?"

Without a moment's hesitation Lawton answered, and his retort made as much sense as anyone could possibly hope for.

"That's for them that don't want no water," he offered.

Half a haircut

Lawton is a man of many talents, and he is mostly self-taught. I never had my hair cut by a professional barber until I went to college. Dad always did the job. When I was young it was with scissors and hand-shears. Later on he used electric clippers.

When he worked on the dredges and tugboats on the Delaware River in Pennsylvania he soon earned a reputation as a serviceable barber aboard ship and was often called on to cut hair in his spare time.

At that time, haircuts were just a dollar. One of the deckhands had let his hair grow unfashionably long before he went looking for a haircut. As Lawton was trimming the first side the young man admitted that he only had fifty cents, but would pay the rest as soon as he got the money.

Lawton didn't immediately say a word, but just kept cutting on the right side, trimmed around his right ear, shaved the right hand side of his neck and trimmed his right sideburn....then quit! He packed up his clippers, his scissors, his brush, his tunic and his talc. "I'll finish the haircut when you bring me the other fifty cents," he said.

I can just imagine this poor bloke running about the ship, with half a haircut, trying to borrow the money to regain his dignity. (Of course Lawton would have finished the haircut. But the opportunity for a good laugh was just too compelling.)

Shoes

Lawton was often pulling innocent, practical jokes on people. He just enjoys seeing folks laugh. Sometimes, though, he was accused of things he never did.

When he was single he had a bunk on board the boat he was working on. It was customary for the men to place their shoes on the floor by the bed before they went to sleep.

One morning Lawton's cabin mate slipped his feet into his shoes only to discover that they were nailed to the floor!

Lawton swears to this day that he never did this deed, but he got so tickled by the practical joke, and he laughed so hard, that no one believed him. He often says he wished he'd have thought of it himself.

On another occasion he got into similar trouble. Our next door neighbor, Bob, installed a pool in his back yard and we were often invited over for cookouts and a cooling dip.

On the morning after one of our neighborhood pool parties, Bob discovered his new

Florsheim shoes floating in the pool. He knew my dad's sense of humor, and immediately accused him of this not-so-funny joke.

Again, when Lawton heard the story, he could not contain his laughter, though he insists he would never stoop this low (and I believe him). It took some time for Bob to decide that Dad was innocent. They can both laugh about it today.

Hugs at the Community Store

There is a chalk board on the porch of the Community Store where islanders check for local news. People will gather on the bench and rockers nearby just to chat and exchange gossip.

As in days gone by, the old men often sit there each morning and tell tall tales.

One spring day Lawton was sitting there when one of the local women walked up the steps. "Today's my birthday," he announced.

Without hesitation she walked right to him, bent over and gave this eighty-year-old a big hug. (His birthday is in October!) All morning long he kept this up, and all morning long he enjoyed hugs from all the island women.

So he tried it again the next day!

Eventually the truth got out, but he is just too loveable. Now when he tells women it is his birthday they scold him for his white lie....but they give him a hug anyway.

Encounter at the Ice Cream Freezer

On another occasion Lawton walked into the Community Store and noticed a woman bending over the ice cream freezer searching for a particular flavor. He was sure it was one of the island women he knows well, so he approached her from behind and patted her on the fanny.

He was surprised to discover, when she stood up (a little nonplused), that she was a total stranger!

"I'm sorry," he said, embarrassed. "I thought you were someone else."

"Oh, that's OK," she assured him.

"Do you want me to do it again, then?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

I don't know how he thinks of these quips so fast!

Lawton the Drunk

My dad never drinks. Never has. Ask anybody who knows him.

But he loves to play the drunk.

Ernest Cutler served as Ocracoke's school principal for a number of years some time ago. Irvin Garrish, our County Commissioner at the time, lived on Howard Street.

It was Ernest's first day on the island and he was walking up the street intending to introduce himself to Irvin.

Lawton was in his car, on his way home from the Post Office when he spied the new school principal on Howard Street. Dad does not know what pretense is. He just knows how to have a good time.

It didn't take him but a moment to start to swerve down the road, weaving from side to side. Ernest caught sight of him out of the corner of his eye and soon realized that this driver had had one too many and was dangerous.

Wide-eyed and flabbergasted, Ernest jumped over the fence to save himself as Lawton passed by and continued to swerve on down the sandy lane without stopping.

"Oh, don't worry about him," Irvin assured the principal. "He's not drunk. He's just having fun."

At first Ernest didn't believe Irvin, but later he got to know Lawton. Now he stops Lawton every time he comes over to the island for a visit and they both have a hearty laugh remembering their first encounter.

Eyeglasses and Stalled Cars

You never know what my dad is going to do. He is just unpredictable. When he is not playing the drunk, he is liable to be doing something equally disconcerting.

A neighbor was walking down Howard Street a number of years ago when she noticed Dad crawling about in the soft sand in the road.

"What are you doing, Lawton?" she inquired.

"I'm looking for my glasses," he said, and she immediately got down on her hands and knees to help.

"How did you lose them?" the woman asked.

"I saw a pretty girl in a bikini walk by and my eyes popped out so far they knocked my glasses off," he said. It was only then that she noticed his glasses were still planted firmly on his nose.

We still get a chuckle thinking about Lawton's escapades.

Another time, as Lawton stepped off the Community Store porch, he noticed a car slowly backing out of a parking space. Quick as a wink he walked over, put his hands on the front fender and leaned into the task of pushing the car along. With a wave of his hand and a call for help he soon had a bevy of strong men helping to push the car.

We can only imagine the Good Samaritans' consternation, as well as the driver's bewilderment, when it soon became apparent to all that the automobile was perfectly capable of moving without their extra help.

Dad, however, got a good laugh out of it.

Childhood Antics

Lawton was the tenth child of Homer and Aliph Howard and he grew up in the house next door to where he lives now. When he was a child Ocracoke was still without paved roads, electricity and running water. Lawton remembers the first airplane he ever heard or saw. He was so frightened he crawled under the house and hid until it went away.

Once his mother sent him down to the store to trade a few eggs for groceries. Along the way he got "wrassling" with another boy and broke all of the eggs in his pockets. As he says, "It was a mess, right."

Another time, he was fighting with his cousin John Williams. His older brother, Marvin, home from work, rode by on his father's horse and tossed him fifty cents. That ended the squabble. With that much money Lawton and John figured they were rich and went down to the store and bought drinks and Mary Jane candies.

When his mother found out that he had taken money from his older brother she was angry. She found him hiding under the house eating the candy. With a long stick she prodded him out and took his treats away.

Lawton clearly remembers his mama rocking on the pizer (the porch) eating all of his candies!

Even as a child Lawton was full of mischief. He and his brothers and sisters liked to hunt for "grass nuts" and would eat them whenever they could. One day Lawton found some sheep droppings that looked just like the nuts they had enjoyed earlier. He couldn't resist the temptation so he picked them up and offered them to his younger sister, Thelma. He pointed out that he had had plenty and wanted her to have her share, too. One bite was all it took and she spent the rest of the afternoon chasing him all over the neighborhood.

Sometimes they would even pull the old trick of balancing a bucket of water on the top of a half-opened screen door. Next they would rap on the side of the house until the unsuspecting neighbor came out to investigate. I guess his daddy never found out about this prank.

Electric wire

Al Scarborough likes to tell of the time he went to Lawton's shed to borrow clam rakes. There was a coil of electrical wire wrapped around the ceiling rafters with one end hanging down and suspended over a wooden tub.

"What's the purpose of this?" Al asked, pointing to the wire and bucket.

"Oh, I'm just letting the excess electricity drain out of the wire into the tub," Lawton explained. "With the power so unpredictable, you never know when you might need a few extra kilowatts."

Children and Paint

Lawton enjoys children. Often, when he first meets a child, he will bend down to their level, twist his right ear (and close his right eye), then twist his left ear (and close his left eye). Then he prompts the youngster to push his nose. Of course both eyes open wide and they both have a good laugh.

Lawton also enjoys explaining to children how they got the spiral stripes on the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse. It's so easy, he explains. Just paint black and white stripes straight up and down, then twist. What could be simpler?

Speaking of paint, Lawton is always quick to remind anyone who mentions that they are about to start a painting project (in a serious tone of voice) to be sure to put the sticky side on the inside.

Cabbages

Lawton has not hitchhiked much in his life, but he does remember once in Pennsylvania when he was offered a ride by two men who were arguing about how fast their car could go.

Lawton and his buddy were sitting in the back seat and there were several cabbages on the floor. The driver, who had been drinking, would speed up to 70 or 80 miles an hour and then slam on the brakes. He did this repeatedly. Lawton and his friend would instinctively, but in vain, try to brake the car by pushing forward with both feet. Lawton is sure the driver had no need to chop up the cabbage when he got home. They had mashed them all into the floorboards.

The Coffin

One of my favorite stories about Dad concerns the time we built a hand-made coffin.

Until the early 1960's Ocracoke funerals were conducted without the assistance of a professional undertaker. Island carpenters built the caskets and they were sold at the Community Store.

Several years ago I helped make another simple wooden casket. It was a beautiful day in the Spring of the year and we were putting the final touches on the box in the yard behind the Village Craftsmen. I walked to my shed for a hand plane, and when I returned I discovered that Dad had crawled into the box (he was about 80 years old). He was lying there with his eyes closed and a flower clutched to his chest.

It was a slow day in the shop so I told him to stay put while I went inside to get my two employees, Dallie and Jude.

We all had a big time laughing. Of course, since we were all outside, no one was in the office when my business telephone rang.

I ran up the stairs and into the office as quickly as I could. "Village Craftsmen," I said, breathlessly, "This is Philip."

Without waiting to hear who was calling, I added this apology. "I'm sorry," I said, "I'm puffing because I just ran into the building. We were all outside looking at my dad in the coffin."

Silence.

Immediately realizing what I had said, I corrected my self. "Oh don't worry," I explained. "He's not dead. He's just lying in the coffin for fun."

I don't think my explanation was reassuring, but at least it wasn't difficult to get rid of this particular telemarketer!

Lawton the Dog

Lawton is not known for subtle, dry humor. In addition to playing the drunk, he could sometimes be seen walking down Howard Street on his hands and knees. There was no doubt about what he was up to when he would sidle up to a tree or a fire hydrant and lift his rear leg.

While everyone else laughed (and silently wished they had so few inhibitions) my mother would shake her head and roll her eyes. She had gotten used to his silliness.

Boating

Lawton's nephew, Robert, lives near Winston-Salem, but spends time on the island now and then. Several years ago he brought a small aluminum boat and a couple of fishing buddies with him.

Although his grandfather was born and raised on Ocracoke, Robert was not very familiar with the waters nearby. So he asked his Uncle Lawton to accompany them on their first day out.

They motored out of Silver Lake, through the ditch and then turned to go past Teach's Hole towards the Point of Beach.

As they approached the sea buoy in the inlet Robert turned to Lawton and asked "Now what should we do?"

"I don't know," Lawton answered. "I've never been out this far."

Not Dead Yet

Lawton often stops by the Village Craftsmen and sits behind the counter to visit. Now and then he has opportunity to talk with a visitor to the island. When folks learn that Lawton was born and raised on the island they often ask him if he has lived here all of his life. "No," is his standard reply. "I'm not dead yet."

Hearing Aid Whistle

Lawton has worn a hearing aid for most of his adult life. If it is not seated properly in his ear, or if he cups his hand over his ear, the aid will whistle. Often when he gets a hug or a kiss on the cheek from a pretty young woman, he will secretly cover his ear. "Listen to what you're doing to me!" he'll exclaim. "You'll get me in trouble with my wife."

Named After Me

When Lawton is introduced to young people he will frequently tell them that they were

named after him. You can just see the confusion in their eyes. "Of course," he reminds them. "I was born in 1911. You were born in 1991. You had to be named after I was."

Raw Clams and Small Crabs

Lawton loves to take his wooden skiff out into Pamlico Sound and wade around on Hog Shoal raking for clams. (By the way, he makes some of the best Ocracoke-style clam chowder on the island.)

After an afternoon of clamming Lawton will stand at his outdoor workbench that is nailed between two live oak trees, and open the clams with his pen knife.

Lawton has always enjoyed exchanging stories with island visitors, so he is happy to share his knowledge with folks who walk over to see what he is up to.

Most people have a difficult time opening a fresh clam. It is definitely a learned skill. But even if they can't manage to open one themselves Lawton will offer a raw clam, as much to see their reaction, as to be polite.

It is even better when the clam contains one of those tiny, very soft crabs that occasionally live inside the clam shell.

He likes to pick up one of the little crabs, place it on his tongue so it can crawl around a little, and then eat it. Most of the folks are happy to decline if offered one too.

Rosin Stringing

As young boys on Ocracoke Island, Lawton and his playmates learned to "rosin string." To do this you take one end of a spool of thread and tie it to a small piece of wood. Then you jam it into a window frame on the outside of a neighbor's house.

Then you walk back across the yard with the spool and hide behind the chicken coop or a bush or a tree. You pull the thread tight and take the lump of rosin out of your pocket and begin to rub the rosin over the taught string.

This trick, of course, is best accomplished at night, and very quietly.

As you rub the string, a squeaking sound is transferred to the window frame and from there throughout the house. The effect is eerie and very disconcerting.

As an adult in Pennsylvania Lawton tried this on one of his neighbors.

Lawton and his conspirators could see their neighbor, Paul, through the open windows.

When the squeaking started Paul walked through the house with a puzzled look on his face. In the kitchen he spied the coffee pot sitting on the range. When he picked it up and shook it, Lawton stopped the rubbing. As soon as he set it back down, Lawton started running the rosin over the string again.

Over and over again Paul picked up the pot, shook it, put it down, bent over to inspect it, shook his head, walked across the room, looked out the window..... It was too much. The pranksters finally burst out laughing and confessed. It was a great trick that they talked about for years to follow.

The Date that Never was

Lawton worked as a deckhand on the ferries at Hatteras Inlet for a time. From their perch on the walkway around the pilot house, the ferry personnel always had a bird's-eye view of the vehicle deck below.

On one occasion Lawton heard a gentleman of about his own age call to his wife, Mary. As the boat neared the dock Lawton began to remove the chocks from under the cars' tires. When he walked by Mary he called her by name, looked her in the eye and raised his eyebrows. She was taken aback and wondered aloud how he knew her name.

"Don't tell me you don't remember me," Lawton said. "I took you to a dance years ago. We had a great time afterwards!"

Then he moved on to the next car and continued his task of removing chocks.

(Of course Lawton explained his joke to Mary before she and her husband motored up the ramp and onto the island. But I can just imagine her mind racing futilely to recall her nonexistent date with my dad.)

A Thing Just Like Yours

Lawton has had a hearing problem most of his life. In middle age he finally got his first hearing aid, while living in Philadelphia. Although bulky and cumbersome, this relatively new invention made a dramatic improvement in his hearing.

Soon afterwards, on a trip to visit his parents on his island home he attended church. Elizabeth Howard, the island postmaster, had recently started wearing a hearing aid also. When she heard about Lawton's new device she walked over to him after services and remarked, "Lawton, I've got a thing just like yours."

"Elizabeth," Lawton replied, with a twinkle in his eye, "you may have a thing, but I'll be

damned if it's just like mine!"

Stop by the Village Craftsmen next time you are on the island. Dad often visits in the afternoon and he loves to talk with folks. Just tell him you read all about his antics in the Ocracoke Newsletter!

Wishing you a wonderful November and hoping to see you next season,

Philip and the entire staff at Village Craftsmen