

As Lawton always liked to tell it, he was the tenth child, born at ten minutes after ten o'clock, on the tenth day of the tenth month.....in 1911.

Lawton was one of fourteen children born to Homer & Aliph O'Neal Howard, and one of the seventh generation of the Howard family to call Ocracoke Island home.

By the time Lawton was born, four previous children had died (Failing, Beatrice, Neva May, and one unnamed child).

Agatha, Marvin Wyche, James Enoch, Evans, and Cordelia Zilphia welcomed their new brother into the family. Two months premature, Lawton was so small that his mother made a bed for him in a dresser drawer.

Aliph's family, the O'Neals, were known for their Irish traits - bright red hair and numerous freckles. Homer, proud to bear the Howard name, swore with each new pregnancy that he would give away any child that looked like one of the O'Neals.

In the fall of 1911 Homer was stationed at the Little Kinnakeet Coast Guard Station on Hatteras Island. Although Lawton always considered himself an Ocracoke native, he was actually born on Hatteras.

Imagine Homer's surprise when he discovered that his worst fear had finally been realized. Lawton's hair was a flaming red. What was Homer to do? They were scheduled to return home to Ocracoke in just a few months.

The Homer & Aliph Howard Home:



Always innovative, and with a wry sense of humor, Homer finally knew what must be done. On the day before their departure for home Homer took out his straight razor and shaved Lawton's head.

Eventually, of course, Lawton's hair grew back and Homer had to admit defeat. One of Lawton's childhood nicknames was "Carrot Top."

The family was once again settled into their modest "story & a jump" home just a clamshell's throw from Howard Street. Thelma Gray, also red-headed, was born the following year, and Homer Rodheaver in 1917. Two other children, Aliph Carena and Aliph Dean, died only months after they were born.

At little more than a year apart, Lawton & Thelma became constant playmates and spent many hours together. They even concocted obscure nicknames for each other. Thelma became "Yardie" and Lawton was "Hordie."

Together they played "Comsie-Comsie" (a local variation of "I Spy), "Annie Over the House" (one child would throw a homemade ball over the house; the other would try to catch it and then run around the house and tag the first child), and other childhood games. With nearby island children they would also play "Cat" (a colonial version of baseball that survived on Ocracoke until the mid 1900's).

In those early days of the twentieth century the Howards, like nearly every household on the island, had a vegetable garden and chickens. A fence was obligatory in order to keep the semi-wild horses out of the yard. Homer occasionally kept sheep as well.

Lawton and Thelma would often hunt for wild "grass nuts" that were considered a local delicacy. One day Lawton found some sheep droppings that looked just like the nuts they had collected earlier. He couldn't resist the temptation so he picked them up and offered them to his younger sister. He helpfully pointed out that he had had plenty and wanted her to have her share, too. Thelma says she spent the rest of the afternoon chasing him all over the neighborhood.

Lawton remembered the first airplane he ever heard or saw. It frightened him so that he crawled under the house and hid.

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 working up north, 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 soft drinks and Mary Jane candies.

When his mother found out that he had taken money from his older brother and squandered it on sweets 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" (front porch) eating all of his candies!

In the late 1920's there was little work available to young men on the island. Fishing was seasonal and unpredictable, and most markets were far away on the mainland. Enlistment in the US Coast Guard, successor to the US Life Saving Service, might no longer result in an assignment on the Outer Banks.

A quarter of a century earlier Lawton's cousin, Perry Howard, like so many other Ocracokers, had been a seafaring man, serving on several of the many schooners that delivered goods along the eastern seaboard. While docked in Philadelphia he realized that the days of schooner traffic were numbered. He applied for and landed a job with the American Dredging Company, working on vessels up and down the Delaware River.

Before long a steady stream of young Ocracokers was heading north to work with the US Army Corps of Engineers and other maritime concerns in the Philadelphia area. Lawton was no exception. Three of his brothers had already gone to Philadelphia, and at the age of sixteen Lawton left home for the big city too. He had completed the equivalent of the sixth grade.

The night before leaving home Lawton stopped under a large live oak tree on Howard Street. He was with his best friend, Ansley O'Neal. They had their fiddles so they played a few simple tunes and then sat down with their backs against the trunk of the tree. There they talked about growing up on the island and about how their lives were about to change. They could only guess what their futures would be like.

Lawton & His Fiddle:



With the exception of one overnight boat trip to Hatteras with a fishing party, Lawton had never been off the island. He was soon overwhelmed in the city. He had never seen a train, a brick building, an indoor toilet, running water, or electricity. In his spartan hotel room he noticed a wall socket (the light bulb had been removed). Curious, he stuck his finger in the opening!

Back home Lawton's mother had taught her young son good manners. Whenever he passed neighbors on the sandy lane, or sitting on their porch, he was instructed to greet them politely. On his first jaunt down Philadelphia's busy Broad Street he said he nearly wore himself out saying hello to everyone he passed.

Lawton took work as a deckhand on dredges operated by the Corps of Engineers, but his significant hearing loss prevented him from obtaining a captain's license. Eventually he learned the welder's trade, which he pursued until his retirement in the early 1960's.

Many of the crew of the dredges, especially the single men, lived on board their vessels for weeks, months, or even years. Shore leave frequently found them at taprooms and night spots along cobblestoned Delaware Avenue. Lawton seldom drank, but he usually went along with his messmates. His good nature and infectious sense of humor served him well, and he made many friends.

Lawton was also a man of many talents, mostly self-taught. He soon earned a reputation as a serviceable barber aboard ship and was often called on to cut hair in his spare time.

Haircuts were just fifty cents. 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 twenty-five cents, but would pay the rest as soon as he got paid.

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, scissors, brush, tunic and talc. "I'll finish

the haircut when you bring me the other quarter," he said.

In August of 1933, at the age of 21, Lawton married Kunigunde (Connie) Guth, daughter of Hungarian immigrants. They lived in Philadelphia for several years before they purchased a small bungalow in the working-class suburb of Prospect Park, Pennsylvania. There they raised their two boys, Lawton Jr. (Buddy), and Philip.

Lawton always looked forward to going back "home." He never talked about returning to "North Carolina," or even to "Ocracoke." It was always "home." That's where mama and papa lived. It was the place he loved.

In the early days summer vacations meant traveling three days to get to the island. The drive to Atlantic, North Carolina took two days down the east coast on narrow roads through small towns and farmland. The next day there was the four hour trip across Pamlico Sound on the mail boat. There was no ferry service to Ocracoke at that time.

On one trip to his island home Lawton attended church with his brand new hearing aid, a bulky and cumbersome affair, but one that made a dramatic improvement in his hearing. 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!"

By the 1950's Frazier Peele had started his first private ferry service across Hatteras Inlet and the trip home became shorter, if more of an adventure. Soft sand roads, WWII landing mats, stormy weather, loading ramps that lowered into the shallows, and unmarked trails just above the beach's low water mark were anything but conventional.

Eventually a hard-surface road was built on Ocracoke, and the state of North Carolina took over operation of the ferry system. By then Lawton had his own property on the island, next door to his childhood home. His brother, Marvin, had inherited their grandparents' land and generously gave a portion to Lawton.

Lawton and Connie built a small home there adjacent to Howard Street.

The Lawton & Connie Howard Home:



On retirement, they moved to the island where he continued one of his long-time pursuits, woodworking. Over time he built a traditional Outer Banks skiff, several ship's wheels, two dozen reproductions of his grandfather's platform rocker (salvaged from the "Ariosto," wrecked on Ocracoke's beach on Christmas eve of 1899), and numerous smaller items. He also took up wood carving, especially curlews and other shore birds.

Lawton in one of his Chairs:



Lawton also gained a quick reputation as a first-class prankster and joker. With a twinkle in his eye and a quick wit he entertained natives and visitors alike.

On one 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 knew 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.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's Lawton worked for the NC ferry division at Hatteras Inlet. In those days 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.

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.

Finally 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.

Connie died in October of 1989, after 56 years of marriage. Their marriage had been a happy one, full of laughter, fun, travel, family, friends, and community.

Lawton learned to cook at age 78. He made some of the best tasting light rolls, and his clam chowder was widely recognized as among the best. At 83 he read his first book. As an explanation for not having read books before, he simply said, "I always had other things I was more interested in." In the next seven years he read To Kill a Mockingbird, Silas Marner, and The Clan of the Cave Bear, among numerous other books.

Lawton died in his own bed, next door to his childhood home, in 2002, at the age of 90. He had been determined to live life to the fullest, enjoying his children, his grandchildren, and his many friends.

Lawton is buried on Howard Street, under the shade of the live oak tree under which he sat with his best friend, Ansley O'Neal, when he was sixteen years old.