

Transcription of the interview with Chip Thomson

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Interviewer: Richard Leavy

Location: Delaware County District Library

Leavy: Do you remember about how old you were when you first attended the Little Brown Jug race?

Thomson: My first recollection was, and I bet this answer doesn't surprise a lot of people, when you think about the Little Brown Jug you can't help but thinking about a county fair. We are unique in that way. So someone's first recollection of a county fair is the smell, when you walk in. The popcorn, the animals, you can't walk by the pig barn and not smell them. So as a very young child, I remember running around and enjoying the fair. I was always fascinated with horses. That quickly turned into a passion when I saw what my grandfather, Hank, was able to do and what my father, Tom Thomson, was able to do as far as bring what I would consider as Delaware together in one location and be proud of what we had and what we have and what we have to offer in the form of, what I would consider to be, an incredible harness race that has no rival and those memories date back a long way. But I think my first real memory would have been Falcon Seelster, I was probably a young teenager, that was an invitational race. That was a race that Roger Huston called.

Leavy: So, you are going back to your teens?

Thomson: Absolutely

Leavy: OK. So, as you said on one hand there's the fair and on the other hand there's the race. I am wondering about the race specifically, whether you were impressed with certain things or you have early memories about reacting to that scene?

Thomson: So growing up, the race just wouldn't happen. We would go into the kitchen and mom and dad would have on the table these blue index cards, these pink index cards and there were hundreds of them. We knew you couldn't mess with the index cards as a kid. We saw the groupings, how the payments were made and recorded. Because in order to participate in the Little Brown Jug you sustain your eligibility – you make a payment when you're a yearling, you make a payment as a two-year-old and so on. So back then, all of that was compiled by hand and it was index cards, there were no computers, it was a filing system. You would constantly see my father, my mother, my grandfather working with compiling all of that information, which all brought the culmination of that one great race on a Thursday in September. So, I saw early on that it just didn't happen. It took a lot of effort.

Leavy: Have you attended the Jug race for most of your adult life?

Thomson: Yes. My first Jug would have been 1976. I graduated high school in 1988, so you know ten years – excuse me, I graduated from high school in 1984 that tells you how old I am – 1984, so eight

years before that I would have been maybe sixth grade. I quickly grew to appreciate what we had. I felt very fortunate. I think that as you get older in life you grow to appreciate things a little more and that's the case with me.

Leavy: So you have seen lots of races and I don't know whether or not you have some that you think were the most exciting, the most surprising or the most something. Does anything come to mind after thirty years of watching?

Thomson: You know, Wiggle It Jiggle It was an amazing race for a horse that probably had done something that not a lot of horses have done, that's race from an outside position and still win. Not only did it race from the outside, it raced from the outside for half a mile. Which meant it was going farther – it was going farther than the horse that was on the inside. That was an amazing feat. I remember one of my favorite races was when it was raining and the drivers would come into the winner's circle and they were just caked in mud and these drivers were so happy. They could care less (about the mud), they were winning at Delaware, so I was happy to be there with them. I put on my muck-a-luck boots – it was an environment that didn't matter what was going on, it was the fact that they were there. I appreciate every moment of Delaware and I hope, my goal is that the fans are also that way. It needs to be that way.

Leavy: That they have as much emotional investment?

Thomson: Absolutely. For a lack of a better term I would say I want it to be old home week.

Leavy: Can I ask you to what extent you think it *is* old home week?

Thomson: That's a great question because to me it's tradition. Tradition as far as where I park, what I eat, who I get to see. I don't like to see a ton of change, but yet change is necessary. The industry is constantly changing, I recognize that. I have been involved in many aspects of harness racing. I see where the sport is going. We got racinos now, so money is starting to play a bigger role. I want to see Delaware preserved in a way that you still see that Ferris Wheel when you look across the way. It's a history that I want to preserve.

Leavy: Are there some traditions that you think should never be changed?

Thomson: Yeah. I have been a big supporter of heat racing, but I am probably going to lose that battle. The horses nowadays are meant to race one time – at least that is where the sport is going – to where when I was growing up in the (19)70s and (19)80s even in the (19)90s – heat racing was, you would have 30 horses that were broken into three groups of ten and you had to win twice. That means you were going to race two, possibly three, times in one day. I am afraid that I'm going to lose that (argument), but the excitement for the public, for the bettors, the fans, they like heat racing, because it really shows the best of the best on that given day. That is a tradition that I would love to keep, but I don't think I'll win that battle.

Leavy: So you see it as, sort of tension between the owners and the ability of the horses to do it? What is the argument for eliminating the heat races?

Thomson: These (horses) are athletes and these athletes are racing for a lot of money. We are talking about tens of thousands. The Little Brown Jug and the Delaware County Fair are a part of the Grand Circuit. The Grand Circuit is sort of like the PGA (Tour). The Grand Circuit goes from place to place to place and the featured races are always on the Grand Circuit. So if my horse races really well and it wins, I want it to rest, not get injured. Some say that the possibility of injury could go up through heat racing. These are just such incredible animals that are racing for so much money that I think the owners realize that they don't want to risk an injury to the horse. These horses are treated so well that I don't blame the owners. So of these horses are very expensive. I understand both sides.

Leavy: But, if it were up to you...

Thomson: I try to find a middle ground unlike our government nowadays (laughing). Is there a middle ground? I don't know if there is, but I would be welcomed to try.

Leavy: Over your long experience with the race, I am assuming you have seen some changes over those years. Could you talk a little bit about what you think were changes for the better and maybe changes for the worse over that time?

Thomson: Technology, I think has made the sport better. I think we have the ability to televise the event. We have the ability to simulcast it throughout the United States. For example, let's say you are in Idaho and maybe you could go to a racetrack there or in Las Vegas and you could see the race on TV there. So it's broadcasted and can reach more people. I think that's a positive. I also think that (technology) could be a negative. (People) could also say, 'I can watch it on TV and I don't have to come.' We want you to come; we want you to experience the Little Brown Jug. *Sports Illustrated* had the Little Brown Jug as one of the top 100 sporting events that you need to see before you die. They say this little town in Central Ohio comes together for this one race. It's so much more than a race, but it's something that we use to bring everyone together. You don't necessarily need to be a huge race fan to enjoy the Little Brown Jug. So technology is a good thing and I think a bad thing is technology. So it's a Catch-22? I also think that as we get older we see people pass and a lot of good friends. I've seen a lot of people pass away. Then you have the younger group. The older I get, the more I appreciate the little things and I think it takes age to get there. I think that (with) the passing of time, we're going to see change. We have some that say, "hey, let's race (the Jug) at night and put lights up.' There are some that say, 'Why don't you race on Saturday, you'd get more people here?' I'd say, 'Well, welcome to Central Ohio and Ohio State football.' It rules the roost. That's ok. When we do it on Thursday, it's amazing how you might get a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* there, because it's not a huge sports day.

Leavy: Fair enough. It fills a hole in the news, the sporting news.

Thomson: Right.

Leavy: Perhaps you have touched on this but I want to ask this pretty specifically. There are a lot of harness races, there are a lot of sporting events, in your view what do you think makes the Jug so special?

Thomson: Well, it's got to be tradition. Like I said, it's always been tradition to do heat racing. I think I might lose that battle, but I don't think that's going to diminish the fact that horses are still going to want to come and race in the Little Brown Jug and it's because we have a phenomenal facility – the half-mile race track is a huge investment by the Fair Board and the Fair Board recognizes that fact and takes care of it. We have two people that work on (the track) constantly. We have people that, I guess you could say that history is on our side – mom and dad always went and I grew up going and now I go and I take my children. So the tradition can be due to repetition or 'why do we do this?' the old story goes, "why do we cut the ends off the ham?" We don't know, so we ask grandma and she says she didn't have a pan big enough. I think that the Delaware County Fair and the Little Brown Jug are a tradition and I think that Delaware, its hometown, embraces it. I don't think we have done a lot to hurt that. I think we try to respect the tradition...if that makes sense.

Leavy: I hear you. So if the Jug was no longer in Delaware? How would that affect you personally? How do you think it would affect the community in general?

Thomson: Wow, if it wasn't in Delaware I hope I would have a say on where it did go. We don't know how close we came to losing the Jug, I would say six years ago, five years ago, when the fairgrounds was in such disrepair, not due to anybody's fault...We're still a business and we still have to pay our bills. When you look at a water bill of sixteen thousand dollars a month due to cast iron water lines that were leaking, that's an unsustainable business plan. I don't care how much money you have, that's a raw resource that was washing away. We needed to stop that too. There's only so much money. I feel as though that if it were to leave, which I don't foresee it leaving, I am on the Little Brown Jug Society and the rules or by-laws of the Little Brown Jug Society state that it will be raced in Delaware, Ohio and in order for those rules to be amended, you would have to have a two-thirds vote by the Little Brown Jug Society and I don't see that happening. We have local directors, local people on that board. The only other thing that could happen would be that the Delaware County Fair couldn't host it due to some catastrophic event – if the fair went bankrupt or didn't have the facilities it needed to put on the race. Those are the only two scenarios that I foresee and I hope that past efforts on my part have rectified that through the implementation of the hotel bed tax.

Leavy: And I want to get to that shortly. But I guess I wasn't aware that six years ago it was questionable. Can you say more about that?

Thomson: I sure can. The facilities at the Delaware County Fair – let me back this up. In 1938, there was a ballot movement that actually made the current fairgrounds possible. The voters approved and it was through the addition of a swimming pool at the (current) fair office. A WPA grant was issued. That was a

part of the New Deal, the FDR New Deal. The fairgrounds was built and some of those buildings are that old. I will tell you and I got to preference this – a lot of people might disagree with me – well the fair would never lose the Jug. They might be right. But I see the fact that financially, the fair could not sustain if it didn't change its ways. That's my personal opinion that we were losing money based on the fact that our facilities were antiquated. If we didn't address that need, if we didn't address that concern...you know, if you're bankrupt, if you have no money because you are wasting it on sewer lines that are broken, water lines, leaky roofs and not able to fix some of these things, you are in a pickle. That's my personal opinion. Maybe others were like, "Chip, you are ringing a bell that doesn't make any sound." I'd say, "I hope you are right." I saw what was before us. That was my thought.

Leavy: You were very much involved in the bed tax and I would hope that you would tell us the story. I am assuming that part of the impetus of that was seeing the facilities in disrepair and needing some financial resources just to be able to take care of them. Could you say a little bit about how this got started and what the process was like?

Thomson: Sure, in the late 1990s – 96, 97, 98 – I was a founding member of the convention and visitors bureau in Delaware. The convention and visitors bureau is funded by a three percent hotel bed tax. So, on that board, at the time, I think three percent was generating a couple of hundred thousand dollars (a year). They were not able to get Polaris money because Columbus had a visitors bureau that was already getting that money.

Leavy: Even though it is Delaware County?

Thomson: Right. But thus lies the (inaudible). You can't collect a duplicate tax. You have a hotel and motel and a visitors and convention bureau in Columbus getting that money, Delaware can't get it now, because Columbus already gets it. Does that make sense? I actually tried in 2003. People don't know this, but I tried in 2003 working with Bill Harris, who was President on the (Ohio) Senate and Jon Peterson, our county treasurer who recently passed away, and didn't get far. We had bed tax language done through legislative services and for whatever reason it never really got off the board, I think because...I had people say, 'you want to do what?' I kind of gave up on the idea. I have the language in there, it's quite amazing the thought process. It came back up - what was it four years ago? Well five, six years ago really when I started pushing it again seeing the grave need of the condition of the fairgrounds. So that's how it came about. Actually through the visitors and convention bureau, which I think is a great organization. I also had to do one thing that I felt was very important and there are only so many tax dollars to go around. The Delaware County Agricultural (Society), I think, again this is my opinion, is not worthy of the public's (property) tax dollars. I think that libraries, schools, developmental disabilities, Council For Older Adults, and other organizations are much more deserving, in my personal opinion, and everyone is fighting over that dollar. So, how do I solve a problem without affecting you, who may or may not come to the fair? This was a unique way to have a permissive tax. That not necessarily affects you, but accomplishes what it sets out to do. That, along with talking to a lot of people and a lot of leg work, got us to where we are today.

Leavy: So I am curious how you undid Columbus' handle on all of those hotels and motels.

Thomson: Well, that is a great question. So, I said earlier that you can't duplicate a tax. Well, Columbus does not have an agricultural society tax. They have a convention and visitors bureau tax, so their money is allocated to the convention and visitors bureau. So when you pass a bed tax it's allocated, it could be to a sports authority, like up in Cleveland to take care of the Browns' Stadium, or it could be used and underwritten to offset the budget of a city. When we sat down with our legislators and came up with this plan, there were many in the county that said, 'I will only support it if it was county-wide.' I was like, 'OK.' We didn't know legally how that would go about. It was beyond my pay grade. Cliff Rosenberger, Speaker of the (Ohio) House, you had Keith Faber, President of the (Ohio) Senate, John Kasich, Governor at the time. You had Jim Buchy, House of Representatives, a lot of good people put together language that said, 'OK Delaware, here is what you are going to do. We're going to put this language in the budget.' It passed the budget and the Governor did not veto it, but it said that you have to go out and get the public to support it. So, we were on the ballot. I don't know if you knew that. We were on the ballot and Delaware supported it 65-35 (percent). An overwhelming majority of the citizens of Delaware County, including those that lived in Polaris, voted 'yes' to implement this hotel bed tax. It was a five-year pilot plan. That's key, too. "Pilot" means, in legislative terms, "new." They had never heard of it before. The Governor said, 'Chip, I support Delaware.' – he lives in Delaware – 'but let's have the citizens have the final say.' That was hard, it made me nervous. I said, 'OK, don't let this challenge get in your way of what actually I felt was worth doing.'

Leavy: What are your images of what will change at the fairgrounds, and with the Little Brown Jug, because of this influx of money?

Thomson: Oh wow, it's going to be amazing. I am one person on a 21-person board. I can give you a primary example. Obviously, the water lines have been replaced, now we have a nine hundred dollar water bill.

Leavy: Already?

Thomson: Yes. Roofs that were leaking are now repaired. You've got horse barns that we are proposing be changed, switched out. A lot of the horsemen go to Florida (in the winter) because they don't want to be in outdoor stalls. Well, we want to build horse barns that are covered and are indoors. I'd love to see a nice, indoor riding arena so that you and your family could, if you wanted to on the weekend, watch jumpers and other horses. I want to be able to put together a facility that meets ADA needs. That was very important to me that. Why not – at the time my grandmother, who was in a wheelchair, be dropped off at the entrance of the fairgrounds, make her way through the Art & Crafts Building, through the Coliseum, maybe a barn, we could take her to a handicapped restroom, watch a couple of horse races and be wheeled back to her car? Why can't we have that? I say we can.

Leavy: And she would not be able to do that...?

Thomson: Well our current facility, it's not too wheelchair friendly because of the antiquated roads. We've quickly found out that this bed tax which generates a great deal of money – it will be nine million dollars over five years – and you don't know this, but I was able to get the legislators to extend it fifteen more years. So now, through our current Governor and current Speaker of the House, they extended it fifteen years, but they put in the (rules) that it could be subject to referendum. The hotel/motel association did not institute a referendum to force us on the ballot. So that referendum expired in October and the county commissioners - before them is to extend it another fifteen years. So it is our hope that our first building will be about six million dollars and it will be a 4-H and agricultural society building that will be the spotlight of the State of Ohio. We're just not talking some little, mammy pambly building. We're talking (about) a building that I feel that Delaware will be so proud of. We hope to seat 500 people for dinner. That has nothing to do with harness racing, but what it does do, it creates a meeting place for Delaware. I think that Delaware deserves that. I think we deserve a past through, permissive way that isn't really going to cost you anything. Believe me, I follow hotel/motel bed tax. Columbus does not have an occupancy rate problem. Delaware does not have an occupancy rate problem. More and more people are coming. More and more people want to come to Delaware. If I build this facility, if we build this facility, more people will want to come to Delaware and more people will come to Delaware and more people will stay at the hotels. That's my goal, that's my hope.

Leavy: I can't help but think about your grandfather. When I was thinking about this interview – other people that we have interviewed have talked about how the Jug and the people that come to it are family. In your case, it *is* a family. So I am thinking about how far things have come from the time that Hank Thomson and Joe Neville talked about this to where it is now. Could you say a little bit about how you see your grandfather, what kind of person he was, how he...what was that like?

Thomson: He was very proud. When I sit down and think about Hank, I didn't see him get mad a lot. As the Thomson family, we take it personal. You can be critical of the Jug, a lot of people are and that's OK. So it's hard to not take it personal because when you have put so much of your life into something, I think you have earned the right to say, have a say. Ultimately, Hank Thomson, his biggest legacy, in my opinion, is that it is still going today. Sure, the sulkies have changed, they are lighter and carbon fiber now rather than steel or whatever they were made out of, but it's this sacred, valuable thing that I feel Delaware has said, 'well done, my good and trusted friend. Let's continue on and make it better' and that is a really good thing to be proud of. I saw him work all of the time. I saw him travel as a steward of harness racing. I am a Grand Circuit Steward and I go to these events and represent Delaware and I see the excitement that people have for what Delaware is doing. They look to Delaware. I go to county fairs – Richwood or Marion--- and I see what they are doing and appreciate the fact that they are doing everything they possibly can to put on great harness racing. As far as Hank Thomson, I saw in him a passion, kind of like a second job. There was an article in today's paper – Jack Nicklaus just turned eighty. Obviously he was a golfer, but Muirfield (Village Golf Club) was his passion. People come to the Memorial Tournament, he created this and it would be my hope, and I am sure Jack Nicklaus would be, 'listen, this event is bigger than just one person. It will probably change, but at the end of the day, you and I could sit down in twenty-five years at the one hundredth and say, 'still here.'

Leavy: Right. So your grandfather's legacy was – clearly there's the (news)paper, but there's the Jug.

Thomson: Absolutely.

Leavy: The torch kind of got passed to your dad. What was that like?

Thomson: I can give you what I remember about it. My grandfather – Tooty got sick, she had had one of the first open heart surgeries bypasses in the state of Ohio – a long time ago. I don't even know when it was. She was at the Cleveland Clinic and that's when Hank said, 'Tom, you have been helping. Now is a perfect time for you to assemble your own friends, your old crew and put on this race.' So dad – and he would have rightfully said, 'you accomplish great things with great people.' So he surrounded himself with really, really good people that he could trust. By doing that he or Delaware – I don't think he himself would say – we have experienced tremendous success and it is through surrounding yourself with smart people. You have people like Steve Wilson, who was Hank's friend, maybe a little younger and Tom Thomson's friend...the Hoffman family at Bun's...Rex Welker and the Welker family...you got good Delaware people seeing the fact that, you know what, we need to do to continue. This is a good thing. I guess, when you choose your friends and they are there to help you, they get a lot of the credit too.

Leavy: Do you feel like the torch has been passed to you?

Thomson: Maybe. Some. Like my brother T, he works at the fairgrounds as the Marketing Director. He works every day. My brother-in-law Tom Wright, who is Director of Racing. Tom probably can't go a day without being on the phone with some somebody or talking to somebody or going to a meeting. Me, I am, right now, in charge of the advertising committee for the seventy-fifth Little Brown Jug. I have taken on many roles that might not be harness racing-related, such as the seeing the need for the hotel bed tax. I hope that that bed tax has an everlasting impact on the fair, because with a good fair we have a good race. I would love to see the fair be profitable fifty one weeks a year and that's if it rained everyday, we just keep going right along.

Leavy: So is that your legacy?

Thomson: So my legacy, I hope, is that we have left something better than when we found it. Does that make sense?

Leavy: Absolutely, absolutely. I very much appreciate you coming in and participating. What I wonder is if there are some topics or some stories about the Jug or the things around it that you think we would need to heard about, in order to get a really full picture of this. Is there anything that has been left out?

Thomson: I am extremely happy with the support that Delaware has gotten on a local basis, though the county, through the city and then the state level, it's amazing. People don't see that. I feel blessed. Maybe we have done a good sales pitch, maybe. Maybe Delaware has. I think you have a city council

and county commissioners that work together to help the fair. We are never going to be perfect, but I will tell you that with the help of a lot of good people, I want continue to see this grow. I'll be very vocal on what I think and I'll be very honest that I am not always right. What I will tell you is that if you are not out there working to better something, it is just going to get worse. As a community as a whole, I am very excited and proud to say that I live in Delaware. Everybody has their role to play – the city is doing the city work, the county is doing the county work, the state is doing the state's work – and I look at my little world and say I am willing to do some of the Delaware County Fair work. We have a twenty-one person board that does everything from – like yesterday I had a call from a horseman that said, 'hey, there is not enough salt on the roads up at the fairgrounds.' So I said, 'OK, no problem.' I called Dave and he said, 'I'll take care of it.' It is that kind of cooperation where – that had nothing to do with the Little Brown Jug, but everything to do with the fairgrounds itself. No one entity, like the Fair Board, is perfect. We're going to make mistakes. Did we learn from them? If we did, then we will be better off. I sincerely hope that people respect what we're doing with this bed tax. The Fair Board is extremely conservative with it. We have spent hours and hours and hours planning, working with some really smart people. The fruits of those hours and all of what we have put together come to fruition. It's not as fast as I would like. We are in an economic boom, construction wise. Delaware is seeing...it's hard to get good contractors. We as a Fair Board agreed that we wouldn't go into debt right now, so we have saved that bed tax money to build this first building. We worked with the county extremely well, worked with the city – people don't realize that the fair in 1938, the zoning was done probably by a handshake. You are going to bring a fair...we quickly found out that the fairgrounds was zoned residential. We had an alley way going through it, so we have to abate the alley way, we have to get zoning redone. All these things that people don't see behind the scenes that have had to take place. It's just a process that we are going through. I want everyone in Delaware to be proud, including the hotels, we appreciate getting this money and we appreciate the efforts that everybody has put into it. Has everyone been happy, has everything been perfect? No, but at the end of the day can we all agree to disagree and meet back here again to keep working? Absolutely, and that's been the most incredible thing – that we work through issues and we attack them with vigor and we, me, see a bright future for Delaware. Economic impact-wise, I want to have a tremendous economic impact on Delaware with whatever we build and when we build it, it's the star for Delaware. I honestly think that...we've talked with people like the Quarter Horse Congress, you bring us some horse shows - anything and everything that we can think of. We have been to other fairgrounds and steal shamelessly from ideas and good things that they've done. They have encouraged us. We see a bright future. We see that we've been very blessed and it's my hope that Delaware, you know, in the next ten years we can sit back...you know in twenty-five years we'll be at one hundred. Boy that will be something. God willing.

Leavy: About the 75th, are there, to the best of your knowledge, plans for celebration? Frankly, do you see a way that what is coming out of this oral history could be useful, could be a part of a 75th anniversary celebration?

Thomson: I'll tell you what, the first thing when you talked to me, I wished there were oral histories done a long time ago. So if anything, people can sit back and learn from what we have done right and what we have done wrong. As far as planning and success of the 75th, to be honest, I know someone

from a major, I am talking extremely large country (music) group that's said we'd like to come and occupy the infield and have a concert the week of the 75th Little Brown Jug. Then they quickly said that they needed a half a million dollars to do it. We had one board member that said, 'I'll work on doing that.' I was like, 'God speed, John Glenn.' I anticipate the 75th Little Brown Jug to be something where we have more people that have ever been at a harness race in history. That's a goal of mine. I would anticipate that if you were not there, you wish you were. We need good weather and to create an environment where there is something for everybody. That means the little kid's first experience – it might be the pig barn because of the smell to the seventy year old man that says, "I sit here in this chair.'

Leavy: I'll always sit here.

Thomson: Yeah, that's right. I sit in this chair, around this fence and that's where I plan to be. It is my hope to say, 'your chair will be waiting.'

Leavy: Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate your time and your ideas.

Thomson: Thanks.