



## LITTLE BROWN JUG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of Eric Wilt

Interview November 5, 2019

Delaware County Historical Society  
Delaware, Oh

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Eric Wilt, conducted by Richard Leavy on November 5, 2019 at the Delaware County District Library.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been created by Jay Wolf and has been edited for clarity only.

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## Eric Wilt Transcript

Leavy: I just want to start out by saying, thank you very much for being willing to do this.

Wilt: Thank you, sir.

Leavy; Eric has been the paddock blacksmith for years, so he has an insight into the Little Brown Jug that, well, not many other people would have. So, I'm just going to start by asking you how old were you the first time you saw a Jug?

Wilt: The first year I worked it was 1991. I was 22, just turned 23. I was actually there in 85, 86. But I didn't have any interest in horses, like I do now. When you are 16, 17 years old, trying to figure out how to make a living wondering in the woods with a bow and arrow [laughing]. I really had no idea I would be a horseshoer someday. So Barberry Spur, Jaguar Spur, I was there but I was in the back. I wasn't watching the races.

Leavy: So you were there for the fair?

Wilt: Yea. My brother showed dairy cattle, so I was with that.

Leavy: When you started working, so again you were 21?

Wilt: I was 22.

Leavy: What kind of impressions did you have of the race, the people, the place?

Wilt: Well, I started with Johnny Wilson in 91 in May, right after I got out of the military. I was...I was primed up. You know, they had me all primed up and charged up and getting excited about going to the Jug. I really didn't understand the significance of it. I shod horses with Johnny for five or six months before the Jug so, that first Jug was...all the talk that year was about Artsplace. He wasn't able to race in the Jug. I don't know if he was sick or I don't remember. Precious Bunny came to the Jug Preview at Scioto Downs and he won. That was a heck of a year for three-year-old pacers – Complex Trooper, Easy Goer, Die Laughing, Three Wizards and all those nice horses. He was on top. It was great. It's almost like you feel like you are a kid in the dugout at the World Series, you know? You get to see these guys that you hear about, racing out east. Guys that have won the Hambletonian and the Breeders Crown. You get to be right among them, like I am among you right now. That makes it, you know...that first Jug I'll never forget close you are to that level of action in this business.

Leavy: That's a great analogy, like being in the dugout at the World Series.

Wilt: Yeah, you are right there. You are right there. You can see them, talk to them, You got to stand in line...they get out of the restroom. They're just people. You idolize these people from afar and you can't believe you are among them when you come to Delaware for the Jug.

Leavy: Have you attended all the Jugs from between then and now?

Wilt: Yeah, I wasn't always the blacksmith. I was the paddock blacksmith at Scioto Downs. As a rule, most of us paddock people would...the races would end at Scioto Downs on a Saturday night and the very next morning, Sunday morning, we would be here at Delaware to handle it here. When it came to the blacksmith job, the old man that trained me, Johnny Wilson, he had the job for life. So as his apprentice, working with him every day...the track vet at Scioto was the track vet here, and so he always needed helpers to collect urine samples, testing after the race, for drug testing. For a few years I did that. Just an excuse to get here, you know. To be with Johnny, he'd pack a big lunch. One year I handed out the saddle pads, you know, when the vet had plenty of people. When Johnny, you know, he was in his late 60s, in his early 70s when he retired. I'd carry his tools. If a horse was really bad I would jump in there, because I was younger, to fix it. So when he retired, he retired in 97, before the Jug, so 1997 was the first year I was actually the paddock blacksmith.

Leavy: What was that like?

Wilt: The first year? Well, by then I was experienced. Johnny...that first Jug when I told you Precious Bunny won, well Die Laughing was in that race. I don't remember what was wrong with Die Laughing but he'd gotten a shoe off and Johnny fixed it. Now Johnny shod horses for 50 years and I'll talk about him some more because he's important. But he'd been doing it for 5 years and he nailed that guy's shoe on. After the first heat when the guy was disappointed on how his horse raced. He accused Johnny of sticking the horse with a nail. And Johnny pulled the shoes off and the nails one-by-one and put them right in his hand and said, 'listen I did not stick this horse with a nail.' But right then, and I'm green as a gourd, you could see where – you better be able to back yourself up, you better be able to treat these great horses like it's just another horse. You know...defend yourself. You're going after that horse foot with nails and hammers, knives. There's no room for mistakes. So by the time I had the job, I was more experienced. I didn't get the jitters [laughing].

Leavy: When you are at the Jug, I am assuming that you're mostly working. Is that the case?

Wilt: Well...you're there for accidents. I'm kind of sitting there waiting for something to happen. A horse jumps sideways from the harrow, picks a shoe. It's the rules, at least at pari-mutuel racetracks in Ohio. It says it right in the rules -- 'services of a blacksmith will be provided in the paddock.' That's for the betting public, if you've got 10 dollars to win on the three horse and the three horse loses a shoe. Don't worry because there is someone there that can fix it. You just didn't lose your money because the horse has three shoes. Somebody there can fix it. That's in the rules. A lot of times, especially at the Jug, you are there for just in case. Sometimes it's a big deal, sometimes it's a little deal.

Leavy: I am just curious of how often that its necessary for you to do some shoeing there?

Wilt: It seems like...I'm averaging...I mean maybe...maybe four a day. Something like that. Could be more, but it depends on the day as well. On Jug Day, almost all those races are going for pretty good money, so a lot of those guys, they dot their I's and cross their T's. They're ready to go. Somedays you get the locals, nothing against locals, but they are not going for as much money and it's another day at the races, so sometimes those guys don't check as often. It doesn't seem as big a deal to them, I guess. I'm not badmouthing anybody, it's more routine, you know? Those guys, if they were going for 400 thousand, they'd check, double check and re-check also [laughing].

Leavy: So you have seen lots of horses, you've seen lots of drivers and trainers. I don't know whether you have a favorite, but I was just wondering if you would share that...let's say a horse that really impressed you.

Wilt: My favorite horse, that's tough to say...because I don't hold a grudge against any horse. If they are all good enough to get there, they are all good enough for me. Precious Bunny will always stand out,, just because the first, you know? Well, him firing out that gate like that is something that they still talk about to this day. The guy that drove the starting gate could hardly pull away from him. He had probably a 15 horse length lead before they ever went into the turn. Nobody had ever seen a horse like that. Shadow Play...I can't go through an interview like this without talking about Shadow Play. I talked to one of my clients before I came here and I told him what I was doing and he said, "oh, all you got to do is talk about Shadow Play.' That's it [laughing]. My name and Shadow Play will be synonymous or together forever. I worked out east for eight years and I always came back to work for the Jug. I was out east and I worked for a big outfit and horses came and went all the time. So Shadow Play came down from Canada, I didn't know much about him. I checked his shoes, they were good and he had raced, but nobody talked to me about shoeing him. The horse came with a caretaker and the trainer, Dr. Ian Moore, he stayed in Canada. Finally, the groom told me Dr. Moore wants you to shoe Shadow Play. I didn't know anything about this horse. I shod him. He win the Reynolds. I think he got one more start, he went to the Meadows. He made a break or something silly at the Meadows and he came back and Renaldo, the groom, the caretaker said.' Doc Moore wants you to shoe him again.' I had an apprentice, this was like a Friday, and there was something funny about his feet that I wanted to show my apprentice for months and I finally got the opportunity. I had the chalk board out and I am showing this apprentice of mine what's going on with these feet, how he's wearing his shoes, the way his feet are growing and everything. The groom was excited about it. We made the adjustments. A buddy of mine that was shoeing in another barn even came over and said, 'your drawing of the horse makes him look like a Jersey cow.' So I came back home for the weekend and that Saturday I got a phone call from that groom. 'Thank you, thank you, thank you – Shadow Play just set a World Record in the Adios.' I think they only gave like 16 thousand for Shadow Play at the Harrisburg sale. They didn't stake him that heavy. The Adios was going to be his grand finale. If he makes it, we'll see how we do there and after that we're not going to spend any more money staking him to these other races. Somebeachsomewhere was on fire, he was a terror that Somebeachsomewhere. He had 20 wins out of 22 starts. They didn't know the horse was going to set a World Record, that had to keep going with him and they paid to

supplement him everywhere. He was tough, tough now. He had a funny way of going, Well then he went to Canada and I never saw the horse again until the Jug. But I was familiar with him, very familiar. All these drawings, the Jersey cow it all stuck in my head, I remembered. So he won the first heat of the Jug and he went back to the Jug Barn. Within minutes they are coming to get me. 'We need you in the Jug Barn. We need you in the Jug Barn. Ian Moore needs to see you in the Jug Barn. There's something wrong with Shadow Play.' So I went back there. Now I used to shoe horses for Woodland Run, a very reputable vet from here in Columbus. I used to shoe for them and Doctor Reichert, he has a saying, 'work your magic.' That is what he says. If this room was a mess and you had a broom in your hand, he say, 'Mr. Leavy, take that broom and work your magic' [laughing]. So I go back there with my tools and I'm thinking the horse lost a shoe. Well I get back there and there are crowds of reporters, photographers, from all over. I walked up with my tools, Doc Reichert's got this foot in the air with his hoof testers and he looks up. 'He's Eric, Eric work your magic.' I mean the cameras were [laughing], these cameras were going off. The horse was lame and David Miller drove him in the first heat, he also won in another division of the first heat. Roger Huston just asked him, 'who you going drive, who are you going to pick for the final?' David said, 'I came here to drive Shadow Play.' He doesn't know that Shadow Play was lame. I knew about him. When they took him to Canada, they totally unraveled everything I did. The exact opposite. Up in Canada, they did what you should absolutely not do for him. I took leather. I used leather for pads and I built up the side of the foot that they should have never cut off. The side of the foot he was sore on, I floated that leather, cut the leather off. So that side of the foot never touched the ground. We then put a pad on the other foot, so he would be the same – pads on each foot. Long story short, he set a two heat World Record. He win, win the final, he win the Jug [chuckles], with the winning horse. I'd never been treated like that. I'd never been talked to like that. Woodbine Entertainment Group was interviewing me, it was on ESPN.com, it was...I had big articles about me in the *Canadian Sportsman* magazine, *Hoof Beats*, the *Delaware Gazette*, the *Columbus Dispatch*. I had an apprentice, a different guy who went back to college, and he was looking out the window, (he asked) 'what about the Jug?' I remember what I told him, I said, 'Not yesterday and not tomorrow, but for today and only today, I am the most famous blacksmith in the whole world.' [laughing] They invited me to go to Hyde Park, a fancy steakhouse. I went right in there in my bib overalls and Serge Savard, he won two Stanley Cups, a hockey player, as a player and I think three as a General Manager or coach in Canada. A famous hockey player. The other owner owns a chain of McDonalds up in the Maritimes, in Canada. It was absolutely a...probably, had to be one of the greatest days of my life. I ended up shoeing him when he came back out east, I kept shoeing him. He was second in the Breeders Crown behind Somebeachsomewhere. As a four-year-old his feet got messed up again in Canada and I couldn't get up there. It was when the made it mandatory passports to get to Canada and stuff. The owners wanted me to go up there, I couldn't do it. When he came back to the states, I don't think he lost a race. He won the International Pace, he beat the biggest names in the game – Shark Gesture, Mr Big. After that I don't think he raced anymore. That was his four-year-old year. Yeah, Shadow Play is a special deal to me. He would have to be my favorite, right? [chuckles]What the heck, I just spent a half an hour talking about him. [laughing]

Leavy: What year was that?

Wilt: 2008.

Leavy: 2008. Wow. It's hard to come up to that level of...magic.

Wilt, Yeah, I've told a hundred people 'that will never happen again.' People were having me sign their hats, signing their programs. The following year I was speaker...me and Ian spoke at the Log Cabin for the Driver's (school). People were having me sign their copy of the *How to Train Horses* (booklet). I'd never signed so many autographs since I bought my house. [chuckles] It feels funny, you know I'm a regular guy.

Leavy: But you really worked your magic.

Wilt: I did. That was crazy that he said that. Nobody else knew that he just says that. Work your magic. It played right into the story. [laughing]

Leavy: You have lots of experience with the Jug and you've been everywhere in harness racing. What would you say makes the Jug special?

Wilt: That's an easy question to field, but it's hard to explain. It's got to me the atmosphere. Anybody who could appreciate the roots of this business has to understand that getting out there at the fair, the Farris wheel, the people and the fair food. And again you are so close to the action. I've gone to the Meadowlands Pace and you sit there and they come out and they do their thing and they go back. You can't go back there and see those people, you can't shake their hands or talk to them. You're not that close. But at the fair you are right there. It's a fair that those kind of horse come to. They don't come to the Franklin County Fair or the Crawford County Fair, but the Delaware Fair they do. To be a Jug fanatic it's like listening to Bluegrass or something, it's kind of a clannish type thing. People don't know what it's about, but when they come, they have a blast. The attendance is huge. I think it's been as high as – when Precious Bunny won in was 60 thousand. I went to the Yonkers Trot, I don't know...ten years ago , and I was on the apron and it was like they were putting on the races just for me. There wasn't enough people there to get a good card game started and that the Yonkers Trot. It's next to the casino, but there's a million, ten million people in New York City. But the Jug, the attendance, the atmosphere and there's a lot of great horses at Delaware. We only ever talk about the Jug. The final of the Ms. Versatility Trot...let me tell you what, those free-for-all, open trotting mares – you talk about some fierce competition. They travel around, they race at different tracks. The final is at Delaware. There were two millionaires in this last Ms. Versatility. The Jugette for the three-year-old (filly) pacers, the Old Oaken Bucket. Of course the Jug is the star of the show, but there's a lot of good racing there. Like I said, the owners and the trainers, it's a chance to read about them all year, but stand next to them during that week.

Leavy: Are there some traditions that you hope never change...about way things are done at the Jug?

Wilt: This is a tough question too, because there was a time when the winner, the horse that wins the Jug in the winner's circle, they present, they put on this gigantic floral blanket on it with all yellow roses. They would walk the horse around the fence where the people were – right along the fence. They would give out yellow roses from this blanket and stuff. This year, it's like, the Jug's over. The horse came back to the paddock, back to the Jug Barn. Let's start the party.

Leavy: Everyone goes home.

Wilt: I thought, and that's the first year I really noticed it. What happened to walking the horse along, around the people? What happened? People came here and sat here all day, got up early and stood on their chairs to see this race. What a nice touch, right? You could be right there and the guy might hand you one of these yellow roses out of the blanket. I used to see them walking by after the race and they'd have one. Now it's like 'the race is over, back to work.' [laughing]. I'm thinking that...

Leavy: And you were mentioning the sort of intimate relationship there is between the horses and the people. And it's losing some of that.

Wilt: I think so. The Tune Timers, the little band, the Little Brown Jug - the Glenn Miller song, they would play that and play that like crazy. (Now it's) something on someone's iPad. You hear it a little bit, once and a while. Those little traditions, those little things I hate to see go. I don't know about everyone else in the business, but little stuff like that – when you hear that song...now when you hear that song in the middle of February, I perk right up. It's like listening to the bagpipes and such, I sit up straight, you know? [chuckles] It's just Glenn Miller...crazy. [laughing].

Leavy; I don't know what it would mean to you if the Little Brown Jug was no longer in Delaware, or there was no Little Brown Jug. Could you talk a little bit about what it would be like if it weren't?

Wilt: Nobody wants to like of their era as a bygone era. It's a sad thing to think about no Jug. It's like your life is water under the bridge, it's not here now. [stutters] If there was no Jug [shakes head].

Leavy: A big loss?

Wilt: It would, yeah for the business, which is already in trouble. It's got to stay important. It does.

Leavy: How do you think it can be maintained, how do you think it can be enhanced in the future?

Wilt: The people are the key. The fans are always the key. Too many horsemen only talk to horsemen and too many times its big shots shaking hands to get these deals cut. It all comes down to the people. If you don't have the fans, then you don't have the betting. If you don't have the betting, you don't have the income. If you don't have the income, how are we going to do this next year? The key is to, in my opinion, keep the people involved. We're not trying to wreck people's lives by making them chronic gamblers. But I have to admit that if you drop two dollars on the six horse, you're going to pay a little



more attention to see if he wins. If you can afford to spend two dollars you can make that race a little more. You've got to have people. Owners bringing people in to be owners. We're in the entertainment business. I've had to explain to a lot of people that never understood why I'm working on Memorial Day weekend. I tell them it simple, 'because everyone else is not working on Memorial Day weekend and they might want to go to the races, so if they want to come to the races, the horsemen got to work. [laughs] So, I don't have that off....making sure things are ready having the horses shod and ready to go. I would be neat, especially at Delaware if there was a way for people to get to know who the horses are before the race ever comes. I would be neat if the average dude could ....GAP....people all year round. Get the Little Brown Jug Review, or Preview. The advertisers are paying for it but you can see what is going on in the winter time. You can see how the Jug eligible are shaping up and who qualified a great mile at the Meadowlands in May, a Jug hopeful that we might be able to see in September. People can follow them and be a little more attached to them. It will mean a little more when they come and see them, not just a bunch of names on a program.

Leavy: A neat idea.

Wilt: Yeah. And with all these pictures of these horses they could darn near give them away or put them with a program where youngsters could find people and get them to sign. This is the picture and that is the horse. Get more and more fans to keep it important. There showing up and buying a Pepsi of this vendor...it's everybody's money...it's all there. You know what I mean? To keep it going, keep the fans in it. Keep them interested in it and maybe they'll want to get involved in it as an owner. There's where the money is too.

Leavy: I just want to ask a little about the blacksmithing part of this. You were brought in as an apprentice. In what way are you keeping the tradition going...that you are passing along what you've learned to the next generation?

Wilt: It's hard to do. It's really hard to do. Johnny always told me, 'in a million years I would never find a guy like you. You had to find me.' In order to pass this long, it's almost like you could look but I've had apprentices that are pretty much in my way for a week and wondering why I didn't give him enough money to make a new truck payment. I worked with Johnny for two years and didn't make no money. It's hard to find somebody with the intensity to stick to it and hang in there when you're confused, hand in there when you're tired. Stick with it and be confident. I could take you five years before you are where you are close...

Leavy: There's lots no know.

Wilt: Yeah and do. You've got to get physically up to it and you got to get your reputation, get your clients and following. You got to be handy with your tools, obtain tools, and be willing to travel on the road. Most people just don't even think. I still know a lot of people out there that can't even believe that someone still makes a living shoeing horses. [chuckles] Most of these folks don't even...they never think

of it. Fixing cars or delivering stuff, being a big-time business man or something. They never think of a horseshoer.

Leavy: You see yourself continuing this for the foreseeable future?

Wilt: As long as I can, yeah. By now it is all I know. I don't know what quit shoeing horses looks like. I don't know what not working at the Jug looks like. Slowing down, but not like I'm used to being anyway. Not like I used to shoe. I'm just getting older. It's hard to keep up.

Leavy: Are there any other topics that you thought would really help this oral history project? Things you would like to say?

Wilt: There's a lot of good stories happen every year at the Jug. There's a lot to follow up on. There are a lot of neat things that have happened. These kind of things would be more apparent if more people could follow it. In '92, there was a horse named Western Hanover and Gene Riegler had him and for years he had never won a Jug. He'd been everywhere. He was an icon on the Grand Circuit, an Ohio guy. Artsplace didn't make the Jug in '91. That was a disappointment. So '92's going to be his year, he's got Western Hanover, one of the top horses. They made him the '92 Little Brown Jug Festival Honoree, Gene Riegler. Everything was primed for him to win the Jug. The first three divisions...the way the Jug was, you had to win two (heats). Western Hanover got beat by Fake Left. Western Hanover made the final but he didn't win one of the divisions. And Fake Left got beat seventh in the Jug Preview, just 12 days before. This horse was a front-runner and won everything and finished seventh. Out of the blue this horse beats Western Hanover. Western Hanover makes the final. Four horses in the (race-off) and Fake Left beat Western Hanover. It's one of the shockers. They went a third heat and Western Hanover lost. I felt bad, everyone felt bad for Gene Riegler. He did get his win the following year with Life Sign, but everything was primed for him to win in '92 and it didn't happen. Gallo Blue Chip got beat. That horse had 1 point 8 million dollars made. He got beat because they went to a third heat. When it goes three heats, you never know what's going to happen.

Leavy: Do you think it's because the horses, even these horses, are out of energy or reduced in energy anyway?

Wilt: I don't know. A lot of it must go back to their training programs. A lot of people don't like the two heat racing, three heats. Now they got it where it can't go three heats. I'm not opposed to going three heats at all. I used to shoe a mare for a guy and he always told me, he said, 'after the first heat when the routine changes, that mare knows we are going again and they help themselves get ready.' They are up to it.

Leavy: They are smart animals.

Wilt: Yeah. It's not the same as it used to be, they'd be getting ready to go out again. But nowadays, so many people they train their horse to go that one big race and get a week off. It tends to, I hate to say it

makes a weaker horse. I don't know if anything catastrophic has happened after two or three heats, but they just want to get rid of it. It's a shame. I don't know how you do it, but that adds to the thrill, again for the fans. Who's going to make the final? Now you've got four, five or six important races on your card instead of one heat of the Jug. Especially if you're just going to go back to the paddock and no one's going to get to see it after the race. [chuckles] But the upsets are neat. It's neat to see that.

Leavy: Are there any particular race that you think was, I guess you mentioned Precious Bunny as sort of special for you...one that you thought was really exciting, really sort of remarkable, maybe because of how close it was or anything that sticks out in your mind?

Wilt: Wiggle It Jiggle it in more recent years. That was really something. That's kind of a neat story as a friend of mine explained it to me. That horse wore a, I think he wore a Murphy (blind) on the left side. This horse was a dominate horse, tough as nails and a winner, to say the least. At the head of the stretch he started to fade. Then he took off like nobody's business and he won. Well somebody told me, but it makes a lot of sense and it's a cool story...that horse thought he was on top. He thought he was on top and won the race, but he had that Murphy on and he couldn't tell there was that horse right here. When he faded, that horse came into view, [shooting sound]. One of my buddies had a horse in that race, McWicked. He said, 'that horse is like a heat seeking missile. As soon as he saw he wasn't in front he just screamed right at them. We don't see this very much in the Standardbred business, but he run them down. He tracked them right down. The runners are thoroughbreds, but the trotters and pacers are...he just screamed right after them. That was thrilling. That was no doubt...

Leavy: He was beat, or it looked that way.

Wilt: Yeah. It's like he got on top and I remembered thinking to myself – he's fading, he's done, they cooked him. That's not what happened at all. From what I hear, he didn't know he wasn't on top. He just had to fade enough to see that horse. He was like a heat seeking missile. [laughing] Great.

Leavy: I thank you.

Wilt: Thank you.

Leavy: It was a lot of fun.

Wilt: Yeah, it is.

Leavy: I learned a lot and I think the important thing in this whole project is to be able to have the stories from the people who were there and have them forever, so I really appreciate it.

Wilt: Thank you very much. It was an honor.

Interview