



LITTLE BROWN JUG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
The Reminiscences of Roger Huston (video interview)  
July 7, 2020

Delaware County Historical Society  
Delaware, Oh

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Roger Huston, conducted by Richard Leavy on July 7, 2020 at the Barn at Stratford.

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 Richard Leavy and has been edited for clarity only.

Transcriptionist	Richard Leavy
Transcription Date	August 2, 2020
Interviewee	Roger Huston
Interviewer	Richard Leavy
Interview Location	Barn at Stratford
Interview Date:	July 7, 2020

## Roger Huston Transcript

Leavy: This is an interview for the Little Brown Jug Oral History Project . Our interview today is with Roger Huston, spelled R-O-G-E-R- H-U-S-T-O-N. This is a project that is being done by the Delaware County Historical Society. My name is Richard Leavy and we are interviewing Mr. Huston in the Barn at Stratford in Stratford, Ohio. Today is July 7, 2020. We are in the middle of a pandemic and perhaps Roger can explain your mask.

Huston: We're all supposed to be wearing masks. I'm doing what I have to do. I have a little trouble breathing with one on, so I don't wear one unless I'm out in public. A horseman, Kent Sherman, his wife, knew my saying "Be There" and my connection with the Little Brown Jug, so she made me a bunch of face masks with the brown jug and my favorite phrase Be There. I appreciate Kent Sherman's wife for sending me a bunch of these. You don't know how many people have asked, "Can I get one of those, too?" But I only have a limited number.

Leavy: Well, first off, thank you very much for agreeing to be a part of this project. I'm going to start us off going back to when you were growing up. You grew up in Western Ohio. If I understand correctly you uncle was a race announcer so harness racing was something you saw from a young age. Do you remember how old you were when you first saw the Little Brown Jug and what kind of impression it made on you?

Huston: My birthday is September the 16th and that always falls right before or during the Little Brown Jug so I believe I was 16 years old. Just had a birthday at my first Jug which would have been 1958. I went with a farmer from Bowersville, Ohio, Fremont Whittington. We left at 5:00 am in the morning, got to Delaware little after 6. Put our chairs out. We were going to sit in front of the grandstand. Went to eat breakfast in one of the church tents. They had the flaps down because it was pretty cool that time of the morning. I can remember going from barn to barn. We got a racing program, trying to see every single horse in the Little Brown Jug. We found them all that morning. Enjoyed the races but that was my first trip to Delaware and I had no idea at that time Delaware with me to be as an individual in years to come.

Leavy: About how old were you when you started being an announcer? You were announcing county races, as I understand.

Huston: In 1953 I started going with my uncle, Don Huston, to Lebanon Raceway and I had no idea I'd be an announcer but I went to the race track every night when I should be home studying the books or something like that. The races were more important. And finally, I guess it was probably 1959, I was 17, he started having me do some post parades and things like that. At Lebanon Raceway, where he had been announcing since '53. But then he called me one morning and said, "You want to go down to Wilmington, Ohio with me?" I said, "What's going?" He said, "The Sertoma Club is having a matinee, might as well go to the races with us." So I did. I think I was standing up in the first turn of the Clinton County Fairgrounds and after the first race my

uncle paged “Roger Huston come to the infield judges’ stand. Roger Huston come to the judges’ stand.” I went to the judges’ stand and he said, “I gotta go to the bathroom, do this post parade; I’ll be back in time for the race.” Came time for the race and Bobby Williams, the speed superintendent, I asked him, “What do I do?” He says, “Don’s not coming back. You’re announcing the rest of the races today.” That first race was horrible. Thank goodness it got better as the day progressed. I did a fairly good job towards the back end of the racing program and from that I got hired for five county fairs in the state of Ohio. I didn't realize at that time it would be a full-fledged career but it started me on the pathway for a total career of announcing races.

Leavy: Would you tell us the story about how you got to be the announcer at the Little Brown Jug and when that was?

Huston: In 1967, first week in August, Hank Thomson, who was instrumental, of course, was the main person at that time for the Little Brown Jug, came to the Adios in Western Pennsylvania. I was still living in Xenia, Ohio. But Hank went to the Adios that day, and Charlie Hinkle who was his announcer for the Jug at Delaware was also the announcer at the Meadows for the Adios. And Charlie told Hank, “I won’t be able to be at Delaware this year because I am going to California. I will do play-by-play basketball for the new league and the Los Angeles team” which was owned by Pat Boone, believe it or not. So Hank needed an announcer. Well, Stan Bergstein was there that day and he says, “Well, I can announce Jug Day but can’t do the first three days.” Corwin Nixon, who was president of the United States Trotting Association, spoke up and says, “Maybe you can get that young kid, Huston in Xenia. He can do the first three days.” “What’s his phone number?” “I have no idea,” Bergstein said. So Hank, after the Adios, drove back to Delaware. It’s about 10 o’clock at night. At that time, you could call the operator in Xenia and ask for somebody’s phone number, but he didn’t know my first name. So he called the operator in Xenia, and said, “How many Hustons do you have?” She said “seven.” “Well, I don’t know which one I want. Let’s start with the first one.” And it was a “C “ for Cecil, my dad. So got ahold of my dad and told him what he wanted and he said, “Oh, you’re trying to get ahold of my son, Roger.” So a little after 10 that night I got a phone call from Hank Thomson. I was in bed sleeping. The phone rang. I’d been going to the Jug since ever ’58, and I remember Hank said, “You probably don’t know me, but my name’s Hank Thomson.” Well, I literally rolled out of bed because I knew who Hank Thomson was and he told me the story. He said, “I need an announcer for the first three days. Stan Bergstein will call the Jug, but I’m sure he’ll let you announce some races on Jug Day, as well.” So I said, “OK.” At that time, my wife says, “How much are they paying you?” like a normal wife would. I said, “I don’t know, and I don’t care!” So I went to Delaware that year; did the first three days, and announced a few races on Jug Day. After the races were over, Hank pulled me aside and he says, “By the way, you’ll call the Jug in 1968.” And that’s how it came to be.

Leavy: So you were a young man. You were 26 or so. How did the oldsters react to you?

Huston: There was nothing negative. I can't really remember because there was nothing out of the ordinary. I worked with older people my entire life at the county fairs so I think everyone accepted me there. The infield judges' stand was quite crowded at that time. They did not have the automatic timer or anything of that case. They had three timers in the booth with myself. Kind of crowded with four people. The only thing that happened: one of the head timers told me, he says, "You can't stand there because we can't see the quarter and three-quarter poles." So they were telling me where to stand during the races. But that was no problem .

Leavy: So there must have been a point in your life when you knew you were going to be an announcer, you were going to do this full-time. Can you think back to when you had this realization, "I going to do this for a living"?

Huston: That occurred before the Jug. In 1965, I got my diploma from Wilmington College. And on the way home from the graduation, my uncle passed me in Lumberton on 68, told me to pull over to the side of the road. I did. He said, "When you get home, you gotta call Phil Mulber right away at the Red Mile in Lexington." And Phil said, "I gotta go to Toledo, could you come to the Red Mile and announce the final week of the spring meet?" And I said, "Yeah, I'd love to." At that time I was working at a radio station in Xenia and still going to college. News and sports and playing music. Everything. A small station. When I talked to the owner, I said, "I've got an opportunity to go to Lexington and call five nights of racing for the spring meet. Can I have the time off?" "No. I don't have anybody to replace you." Well, I was dead set that I was going to go to Lexington to do it. So I continued to work my radio shift at the station. Five am til 12 noon; go home to sleep a while, get up about 3 o'clock, drive 147 miles to announce races at the Red Mile, drive back 147 miles, sleep a couple hours, and go to work at 5 am in the morning. I loved it, and at that point in time I realized this is what I want to do. I graduated close to being a school teacher but I never got into the student teaching or anything like that so my total career path changed on that Sunday afternoon to be a full-fledged announcer.

Leavy: It strikes me that with all the energy you had invested, it was clear that this was the career for you.

Huston: I couldn't make out that last question.

Leavy: OK

Huston: I couldn't hear it, was the problem.

Leavy: My comment was that with all the energy you put into being at the Red Mile, being in Xenia, it was pretty clear that this was a career that you needed to pursue.

Huston: Oh, yeah. I mean it was, I wanted to do it. I think it was the second year, one week went to three weeks, I knew in advance. So I drove back and forth the first and third weeks and the middle week was my vacation and I stayed at the Red Mile. So, yes, I knew that's what I wanted

to do. Then in '67 I got. That was kind of wild, too. In 1967, I got Pompano Park, the Red Mile in Lexington and Delaware, Ohio jobs in a period of two-and-a-half weeks. Hired for all three locations. And so, we were off and pacing.

Leavy: Would it be a good idea for us to take a break so you can get your voice back?

Huston: No. I just put the Halls in once in a while. I have tremendous allergies.

Leavy: OK. When you come to Delaware for Jug Week, do you have any traditions, any sort of routines that are part of that week?

Huston: I don't know if traditions or what, but with my birthday following usually on Jug Week, one night after the races a group of my friends, we go out to eat. Over the years that party has grown to about 20 people. So we always do that. I always come a day early. Right now they race on Sunday and I get there on Saturday. I want to be ready as soon as I can get there. I look forward to the Jug Week and I come over early and the morning after the Jug I drive right back home and take my regular job.

Leavy. OK. Well, one of your traditions, actually, I understand correctly, is that you let people know before the Jug who you think has a pretty good chance of winning. Do I have that right?

Huston: I have to pick a winner or my handicapping numbers for the radio station. I think I figured it up we're somewhere around 56 to 60% right over the 52 years, which is pretty good percentage. But that means a lot of favorites have won the Little Brown Jug. I did call one shot a few years back. A good friend of mine was Charlie Wingfield and he and his brothers, the Wingfield brothers here in Ohio. I sold Charlie the draw for the post positions and even before we knew what division he'd be in or post position I was sitting there with Charlie and I said, "By the way, when Limelight Beach wins the Jug, you're gonna be the first one I go to to talk to in the winner's circle. So that one, I called the winner probably four or five days in advance of even knowing who was going to be in it or what the post positions were going to be.

Leavy: You mentioned Hank Thomson who had a really important role in your life. Could you speak a little bit about Hank Thomson, about the other people who have been formative in the Little Brown Jug?

Huston: I never had the opportunity to meet Joe Neville. And I never had met Hank Thomson until that Monday in 1967. (Wells up and cannot speak for several seconds.) The entire family has become my second family. Tommy, now Tom Wright, Tommy's daughter and sons. I've known them since they were youngsters and they're my family here in Delaware, Ohio. We're very close. I go to weddings, I go to funerals. I spoke at Hank's funeral, which was probably the hardest thing I ever did in my life, because there have been a couple people who have been instrumental in my life, of course. It was Hank Thomson who got me on the right path and got me started.

Leavy: Thanks. I know you keep track of how many races you have announced. We are at 188,000 plus and you have announced races all over the world. So you are wearing a Little Brown Jug shirt and it means a lot to you. What do you think makes the Jug special?

Huston: Forty-five to fifty thousand people on a Thursday afternoon 25 miles north of Columbus, OH. I don't think there is any other major horse race that draws that many people at a county fairgrounds on a Thursday afternoon. The fans make it extra special. Tradition, tradition, tradition. Needless to say, I am a traditionalist. Now things have changed over the years. You have to make changes with the times. But the Jug is special not only to me but to that 45,000 fans that come each year. I'll guarantee you that probably 35,000 have been coming for 20 to 30 years, so it's the fans that make the Jug very special. Special.

Leavy: And you mentioned traditions and that you like them. Are there traditions associated with the Little Brown Jug that you would want never to change?

Huston: Like I say, there have been many changes. They've done away with the hub rail. It's now it's pylons. Used to be that you had to win two races to be crowned the Little Brown Jug champion. That has changed because horsemen don't like the idea of going three heats with the speed that they go now-a-days. One tradition that I hope will never change is the way it is right now where they come back for a second heat. I can't help but feel--- there's been some talk by horsemen at least --- and even the Jug Society about having eliminations for the Jug on Sunday and then the final --- "one dash for the cash"--- on Thursday. It's my opinion that if they did that you would automatically lose 10,000 fans on Jug Day because those fans come there to see a two-heat battle. That's one tradition that I hope never changes.

Leavy: Now the changes you have seen, and you've seen a bunch, do you feel they have been for the better? for the worse? it didn't make any difference?

Huston: It's not for me to judge. I'm an announcer. I know that those changes have been brought about for various reasons. Like doing away with the hub rail. That was done for a safety factor. The fact that we no longer have the possibility of three heats, that was done because the horsemen who enter horses in the Jug felt that three heats on a hot, sunny afternoon was too much for the horses with the speeds that they go. So those were traditions, so to speak, that have changed over the years but they have been for the better in the long run. One thing I do miss is the fact that when I started doing the Jug we had the likes of Billy Haughton, Joe O'Brien, Curly Smart, Gene Riegle, Stanley Dancer. These were some of the greatest horsemen that harness racing has ever known. Then we went to "catch" drivers and trainers. And I can't help but feel that ---it's only the oldtimers that agree with me, probably ---that we miss the day where the individual was both the trainer and the driver. I literally almost wanted to cry the day that Billy Haughton decided to put up Magic O'Donnell--- Bill O'Donnell -- to drive his horses. And I asked Billy, "Billy, why did you quit driving?" And he said, "O'Donnell is a fifth of a second faster than I am." That's what our sport has got to: a fifth of a second, 7 or 8 feet. If a driver can

mean that much difference, I guess it means a lot. And more wins. But, man, I miss the days of the trainer/driver.

Leavy: When you think back over 50-plus years of Jug races, I'm going to guess that there are a couple, maybe three, that you would put in a special category as really memorable. Would you be willing to say what are two or three memorable races?

Huston: I can put it at three rather easily. Let's go with number 3. Nansemond upsetting Albatross and the crowd becoming... very boisterous, supporting Herve Filion and Nansemond to the fact that they booed Stanley Dancer in the post parade with Albatross. It was a race of unbelievable at that time. After all, Albatross was considered, even Dancer was quoted as saying "All I have to do is go to Delaware and jog around the track and I'll win the Little Brown Jug." Well, when Nansemond won his division they came back in the final it was evident who the fans wanted. I think half of it was everyone knew that Dancer had made that statement in Detroit the week before. And when it looked he was gonna get beat, the fans started to pull for Herve. And of course, Herve was so charismatic he always played to the crowd. Remember with Hot Hitter he come back standing in the sulky and the crowd went crazy. Number two is Life Sign. Now a lot of people say Life Sign's race with John Campbell was the best of all time, but I don't agree with that. After all, Campbell did say it was the worst drive he ever made. Made that statement in the winner's circle. I think he was at the pylons all of maybe 15 yards during the whole mile. Other than that he was hung every step of the mile. Was beaten at the top of the stretch and did come back to win. But there's a lot behind my number one Jug, Wiggle It Jiggleit, 2015. Wiggle It Jiggleit, and I think part of it had to do with the name! It was a name that everybody liked. Montrell Teague, a young man driving. George Teague, his father and the owner and Clyde Francis, the trainer. They went everywhere to race. And they became a legend well before they ever got to the Little Brown Jug. And I can remember the night before the Jug I went to dinner with George Teague and Montrell Teague and other friends right here in Delaware and we talked about the race and like that. There had been rumors that Wiggle It had had some problems and had trouble getting around the half-mile track. George says, "Well, I don't think that will be a problem here in Delaware." Well, it was a problem because going into the final he made a few bad steps in the first turn. Montrell didn't want to happen in another turn so he tipped him to the outside and raced on the outside of Lost For Words and David Miller, the Brian Brown horse. And I know when you interviewed Brian his comment that it took weeks for him to accept that loss. I still think, to this day, that it was the greatest horse race ever contested in harness racing. Two horses Lost For Words, Wiggle It Jiggleit, stride for stride, nose to nose, toe to toe. The battle turned into a war down the back side. Lost for Words opens up by a length-and-a-quarter coming out of the final turn. Montrell thought "we're beat." George Teague is quoted as saying, "I couldn't look at the finish 'cause I knew we were beat." But somehow, Wiggle It Jiggleit, the heart of a champion, came back and in the final stride got Lost For Words at the wire. And to me, the 2015 Little Brown Jug was the greatest harness race of all time regardless half-mile, five-eighths, or mile track racing.



Leavy: Well, you have had your heart in harness racing for your whole life and you have seen that harness racing is not exactly what it used to be. How do you think that the Jug sustained or maybe even advanced into the future?

Huston: Well, in recent years, some of the top horses have skipped the Jug because they don't want to go two heats. Quoting Ron Burke, who does not mind two heats one bit, Burke's the winningest trainer in wins and money for the last 10, 12 years, he says, "It's all how you train your horses. They can all go two heats." He trains his horses to go two heats; maybe other trainers should do the same. The purse has to get to \$1 million. I don't know how but I think that will solve half the problem of people skipping the Jug. One of the interesting stories I got to tell you about a horse skipping the Jug, the great Somebeachsomewhere. And I went to Toro Raceway up in Canada and there was a question-and-answer at the horsemen's dinner that night. Somebody asked me, "What do you think of Somebeachsomewhere?" I said, "Who?" "Somebeachsomewhere." I said, "I've never heard of him. Did he race in the Jug." Well, of course, he skipped the Jug. After the dinner was over and everything, the gentleman who asked the question came up to me. He says, "By the way, I own Somebeachsomewhere." So you can put your foot in your mouth every once in a while. I did that day anyway. But I feel the true champion is the one that can go two heats. That's what harness racing was all about. Don't forget, at one time they were going five and six heats. Of course the speed wasn't the same. And they say, "We can't do that because they are going so much faster." I, I, I don't know. I'm not a trainer. Heat racing makes the Little Brown Jug. I think those horses, trainers, owners that skip the Jug, if the purse was \$1 million, they might change their mind.

Leavy: I'm going to guess that our viewers have noticed your rings. And so I can't resist asking you about your collection of rings.

Huston: Well, these are the eight that I currently wear. I probably have four or five others at home. Some of them I've given away over the years. Some of them are just decoration. This one right here--- decoration. Saw it, I liked it, I got it. This right here, I had a couple diamond clusters, the jeweler says, "You turn in those diamond clusters, we'll make you a bigger ring." And so I got that one maybe 20 years ago. This I just liked so I bought it. This one I liked. It's a lady's ring but I thought it makes a nice pinkie ring. Then they got the ones that mean so much. The Wall of Fame here in Delaware. The United States Harness Writers Association hall of fame ring. Communicators' corner to the hall of fame. Pennsylvania Harness Racing Hall of Fame ring. I got the lady's ring because I wanted to save...the men's ring was just too much. Can you imagine Roger Huston saying, "Too much?" Anyway, it was too much so I got the lady's ring and put it on this finger. But this one right here, it's a hall of fame ring, but it's not mine. A gentleman called me, he was a goodwill ambassador for harness racing, Delvin Miller. Gave me this ring before he died. And I wear it proudly and will 'til the day I die. When that happens it goes to the Hall of Fame in Goshen, NY. But Delvin says to me, he says, "You know, harness racing has been good to you, now you be good to harness racing." That's what I've tried to do my entire life--- be good to harness racing.

Leavy: Thank you. Are there any other stories or any other topics that we ought to know about to make this oral history project as full and as useful as we can?

Huston: I can't think of anything that we should really 'cause we've covered about everything.

Leavy: Fair enough.

Huston: Anything that you want to ask me? I'll be happy to answer it, but off the top of my head I can't think of anything that we've missed or anything.

Leavy: Well, then, just a big "thank you." You have been incredibly important to harness racing and to the Jug and I should say you are going to be also incredibly important for this oral history project. And we very much thank you for participating.

Huston: It's been my pleasure. Excuse me for being a little teary-eyed every once in a while. But when you think of the Jug, people think of Roger Huston and that's a great feeling. And I can't help but feeling that calling the Little Brown Jug is responsible for my trips to Ireland, Wales, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Australia; guest appearances at totaling, I think, right now 146 different venues in the world. And I don't think I'd ever made all of those trips if it hadn't been for the Little Brown Jug.

Leavy: Thanks.