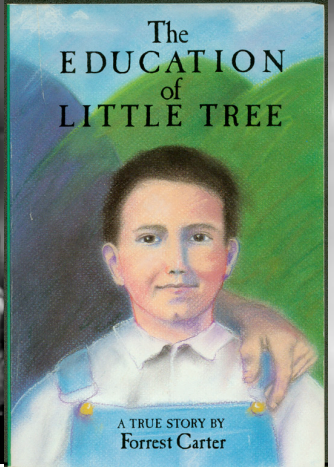

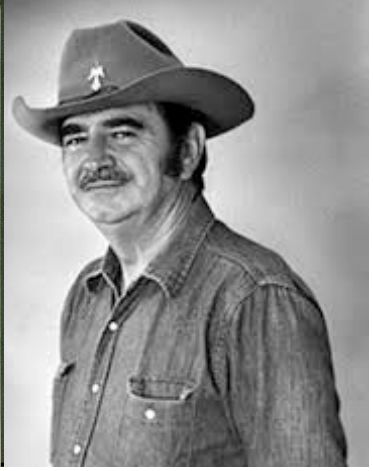

The Man Who Lived Twice

Was best-selling writer Forrest Carter hiding a vicious past?

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Oct. 27, 1991
By Jim Auchmutey

Bill Whitaker was getting ready for a date when his editor asked him to go look at a corpse instead. A novelist had died, someone he'd interviewed for the Reporter-News in Abilene, Texas). But for some reason, The Associated Press was confused about the man's identity. Somebody thought he might be another writer from Alabama, not Texas.

So Mr. Whitaker drove to the funeral home and peered into an inexpensive casket at a puffy-faced, middle-aged man with jet-black hair. He was laid out in a western-cut denim suit --- the same one he had worn when the two had met at a book signing.

"It's Forrest Carter," the reporter phoned in.

He was half right.

When Forrest Carter died in June 1979, at 53, he left behind three western novels (one of which Clint Eastwood made into a movie, "The Outlaw Josey Wales") and one memoir. It's the memoir that has people poking the ashes of their memories for any insight into the strapping writer who seemed to have no past.

Twelve years after his death, "The Education of Little Tree," Forrest Carter's memoir of his childhood among the Cherokees of East Tennessee, has become one of publishing's most peculiar successes. The book was reissued this year by the University of New Mexico Press and, with almost no promotion, has sold 500,000 copies and topped The New York Times list of nonfiction paperback best sellers since September.

It's a tale in harmony with the times. Orphaned at 5, Little Tree --- as Forrest Carter said the Indians called him --- is raised by poor Cherokee grandparents who teach him self-reliance, distrust of government and oneness with nature. Schoolchildren have formed Little Tree clubs. Tommy Tune handed out hundreds of copies of the book at an opening-night party for "The Will Rogers Follies," his musical about the part-Cherokee humorist. Variety reported numerous movie offers last month under a headline that promised boffo box office: "After Dancing With Wolves,' H'wood is barking up Little Tree.' "

If Little Tree seemed too good to be true, it's because it is. Early this month, news broke that the book may be the biggest publishing hoax since Clifford Irving conjured his Howard Hughes autobiography.

First the Abilene Reporter-News and then The New York Times ran articles alleging that Forrest Carter's memoir was a well-wrought lie. That the folksy raconteur who used to say you could hear a mesquite tree breathe if you put your ear to its trunk was actually Asa Earl Carter, a rabid Alabama segregationist who once ran for governor against George Wallace because he wasn't racist enough for his taste.

Forrest Carter's family has refused to comment. His widow, India Carter, does not answer her phone. His agent, Eleanor Friede, immediately branded the allegation scurrilous.

In fact, she says, the rumor came up during the author's lifetime and she confronted him with it point-blank.

"It's not true," he told her. "I'll send you proof. I'll take a fingerprint test if you want me to."

She didn't press him. She liked his books --- liked him. Besides, with his high cheekbones and dark complexion, he looked Cherokee.

Did Forrest Carter even have Indian blood? Was he really a white race-baiter trying to bury his part in the Deep South's nightmare years, like some Nazi hiding under a rock in Argentina? And if he was the same man, did he undergo some happy transformation, repenting for his racial sins and being reborn as a New Age mystic with Native American wisdom?

One thing's for certain: he sure could tell a story.

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Asa Carter was a little hot-blooded and quick to fight, but he didn't seem like a bad kid. Growing up in Oxford, Ala., just south of Anniston, in the hilly tailbone of the Appalachian spine, Asa was the second of four children born to Ralph and Hermione Carter. Stalwarts in the De Armanville Methodist Church, they ran a dairy and lived in a white frame bungalow on U.S. 78.

"The Carters were good people. No one could understand how Asa got messed up like he did," says Julia Ruth McDowell, a classmate at Calhoun County High, from which he graduated in 1943.

How young Carter "messed up" is unclear. After serving with the Navy in the Pacific, he attended the University of Colorado and decided to pursue a career in radio. He married his childhood sweetheart, a Calhoun High cheerleader named Thelma India Walker, and took jobs as a commentator and talk-show host with stations in Denver and Yazoo City, Miss.

He was back in Alabama at Birmingham's WILD-AM when his increasingly ultraconservative diatribes finally tripped him up in 1955. An advertiser dropped him for making anti-Semitic remarks.

Asa Carter turned his energies to what he saw as the cause of the day: defending a threatened Jim Crow. With his younger brother, Doug, he published a white supremacist magazine, The Southerner, and organized a segregationist fringe group, the North Alabama Citizens Council.

The police knew them well. In April 1956, four council members were arrested for attacking Nat King Cole on stage during a concert in Birmingham. A year later, Asa Carter himself was arrested for critically wounding two Klansmen during a shootout at a Birmingham theater. Charges were later dropped.

That wasn't his only connection to the Klan, according to Dan T. Carter, an Emory University history professor who's researching a book on the Wallace era. He says Asa Carter formed the Original Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy, a 100-member paramilitary gang that wore Rebel gray robes and on Labor Day 1957 castrated a black man as part of an initiation rite.

Doug Carter, however, denies that he and his brother were Kluxers. "We didn't hate black people. We believed in states' rights. We were segregationists, not racists."

Asa Carter laid low after the 1957 incidents. He ran a dry-cleaning establishment in Birmingham, moved back to the Anniston area and raised four children (one of whom he named Bedford Forrest Carter, after Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Confederate general who founded the Klan after the Civil War).

In 1962, Ace --- as everyone knew him --- resurfaced in quieter fashion as a speechwriter for gubernatorial candidate Wallace.

"It was Ace who wrote most of the speeches George got known for," Oscar Harper, a longtime Wallace crony, wrote in his 1988 memoir, "Me 'n' George." "When George would want a speech that folks would talk about, he'd say, Ace, write me something a little fiery.' Then Ace would hole up in the suite we rented in

the Jefferson Davis Hotel and write 24 hours at a time, smoking 10 packs of cigarettes a day."

Mr. Harper credits Ace Carter with the governor's most famous line, from his 1963 inaugural speech: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."

The governor later backpeddled from that battle cry. His speechwriter didn't.

When Mr. Wallace ran for president in 1968, he tried to disguise his more racial rhetoric for a national audience. Ace Carter didn't like it one bit; he wanted the 100-proof stuff.

"He was always trying to get Wallace to use terms like race-mixing' when Wallace wanted to use code words like busing,' " says Tom Turnipseed, a Columbia, S.C., lawyer who was the governor's campaign manager. "After a while, the Wallace people got a little afraid of Ace. He was beyond the pale."

By 1970, he was off the reservation as well. That year he challenged Mr. Wallace for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. Candidate Carter vowed to lead a march from one end of Alabama to the other, pulling white children out of desegregated schools. His campaign literature showed that his prose had lost none of its pungency. Commenting on the governor's supposed drift toward the middle, his former propagandist wrote: "The dog returns to its vomit.''

On election day, Asa Carter won only 15,441 votes out of 1 million. The times were leaving his type behind.

With the state firmly under Wallace control, Asa Carter realized he had no political future in Alabama. He told friends he might get serious about writing that novel he'd always wanted to try. In the meantime, he needed to make a living. He heard about a new radio station out west and applied for a position there.

But someone passing through the station from Alabama recognized his name. "Do you know who Asa Carter is?" he warned, and the job was scotched.

Asa Carter never forgot that.

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The colorful stranger arrived in Abilene about 1973. A big, bluff man in a denim suit and a bolo tie, he'd drift into town every now and then with a Stetson full of tales about riding the range and fasting with Indians and hanging out in Hollywood with Clint Eastwood. The actor was making a movie of the stranger's first novel, the story of a bitter Confederate veteran on the run from bluecoat vigilantes. It was published in 1973 under the title "Gone to Texas," which is what frustrated Rebels carved on their cabins when they headed west after Appomattox to start over.

Like an Eastwood character, Forrest Carter didn't say much about his background. When he started showing up at Texas libraries, he said he had been raised by Cherokees in Tennessee and had moved west to work as a cowboy. It was pretty much the Little Tree story.

Far from a racist, he seemed like a Native American poet. He talked about the Wounded Knee massacre and how it wasn't Cherokees who wept on the Trail of Tears, it was shamed onlookers. He was proud to say that the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma had passed a resolution naming him their storyteller in residence.

If the details were hazy, it hardly mattered. Forrest Carter acted like a Western writer ought to.

"He looked like Clark Gable and talked like Will Rogers," says J. Robert Miller, an Abilene artist who befriended the writer.

"I'll tell you how charming he was," says Chuck Weeth, another friend who owned an Abilene bookstore. "Forrest had set up two of his sons in a Texaco station in town. He'd go down there with them sometimes and pump gas and clean windshields. He'd get to talking to a customer, and the next thing you know they'd be coming into the bookstore saying this guy was so interesting they wanted his book."

The only thing not charming about Forrest Carter was his drinking. The more people saw of him in Abilene, the more dissipated he seemed. He'd get tanked at the airport, miss publicity engagements, show up two days late and drunk for a picnic. Even his autograph was getting shakier.

Louise Green, who interviewed the writer several times on a TV nature show she hosted, witnessed his ugly side during lunch at a steak restaurant. "Forrest had been drinking," she says, "and someone happened to mention something about blacks. Forrest got louder and louder, talking about no-good lazy niggers and how they ought to send 'em back where they belong. And I thought, I can't be seen with this man, I have a TV show.' I got up and went to the restroom."

Lawrence Clayton, a dean at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, invited the novelist to speak to English classes on several occasions. He never heard him spout racial slurs, but he did worry about his friend. "One time, I think it was in 1979, the publisher's rep who came with him said he didn't think Forrest would dry out enough to write another book."

He didn't.

On his way to Hollywood, where a TV miniseries based on his last novel was planned, Forrest Carter stopped at his son's house in Abilene on June 7, 1979. What happened next is uncertain. News reports said the writer suffered a heart attack. His death certificate cited "aspiration of food . . . had just participated in a fight."

The ambulance driver, now dead, told this story to Mr. Miller, the first of the writer's friends to reach the funeral home: The father was drunk and started cussing his son. A fight broke out. The father fell, struck his head on a sharp countertop edge and choked to death. There was no family at the funeral home, Mr. Miller says.

The body was shipped to Alabama and driven to the De Armanville Methodist Church. A couple of dozen people gathered at the graveside to hear a short eulogy and a few lines of Kipling. There was no minister.

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Alabama newspapers first linked Forrest and Asa Carter in 1976, and the rumors soon trailed the writer to Texas. Occasionally someone asked him about it.

"It came up at a party I was at," Mr. Weeth, the book dealer, recalls. "Forrest waved his hand and said, That's my brother. He's a character, kind of a no-gooder. I don't have much to do with him.' "

That's how many acquaintances of Forrest Carter and readers of "Little Tree" have coped with the revelation that the writer may have been hiding a vicious past: Forrest and Asa couldn't have been the same person --- spiritually, at least. He must have changed, they believe, and isn't that a beautiful story of human redemption? As Mr. Eastwood expressed it in a letter to The New York Times: "If Forrest Carter was a racist and a hatemonger who later converted to being a sensitive, understanding human being, that would be most admirable."

If it were only true.

Doug Carter saw no conversion. "As far as I know," he says, "my brother held firm segregationist views through the end."

Ron Taylor, an Alabama country musician who handled the funeral arrangements, also discounts talk of a changed man. "People think Asa Carter couldn't have written what Forrest Carter did, but I don't see any contradiction. He kept his racial pride."

One person who doesn't comprehend how a white supremacist could have written "Little Tree" is Forrest Carter's agent. Eleanor Friede met the novelist in 1973 when Delacorte Press, where she worked, published his first book. For the next six years, he sent her strange dispatches from Texas, Alabama, Oklahoma, Florida, Arizona, California. He always seemed to be on the move --- "hidin' out," he called it. Even his wife, who split her time between Abilene and a beach cottage on St. George Island, Fla., didn't seem to know where he was much of the time.

When the dual identity controversy broke this month, Ms. Friede denied the connection time and time again when reporters called her Virginia home. "An anti-Semite, anti-Negro? That was never Forrest," she protested.

Finally, in the face of mounting evidence, Ms. Friede faxed a letter to Mrs. Carter. "I deserve to hear the truth," she pleaded.

The reply came from Florida the next day:

"I thought you knew."

"The Education of Little Tree" was made into a movie in 1997, six years after this article ran.

Asa Earl Carter

The political activist gave this biography:

Background: Born Sept. 4, 1925, in Oxford, Ala. Raised by white parents who ran a dairy.

Education: Attended University of Colorado.

Job experience: Commentator at radio stations in Alabama, Mississippi and Colorado; organizer, North Alabama White Citizen's Council; dry- cleaning proprietor.

Publications: Wrote and published The Southerner, a white supremacist magazine; wrote speeches and campaign biography for Alabama Gov. George Wallace.

Affiliations: "Adviser" to Original Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy.

Quote (on the prospect of black policemen, in a 1970 pamphlet): "SOON, you can expect your wife or daughter to be pulled over to the side of the road by one of these Ubangi or Watusi tribesmen wearing the badge of Anglo-Saxon law enforcement and toting a gun . . . but he will be as uncivilized as the day his kind were found eating their kin in the jungle."

Bedford Forrest Carter

The writer gave this biography to his publisher:

Background: Born around 1925 in the mountains of East Tennessee. Orphaned at 5 and raised by Cherokee grandparents who moonshined.

Education: Self-educated. "We didn't realize what literate illiterates we were."

Job experience: Cowboy.

Writings: "Gone to Texas" (1973), "The Vengeance Trail of Josey Wales" (1976), "The Education of Little Tree" (1976), "Watch for Me on the Mountain" (1978).

Affiliations: Storyteller-in-residence to the Cherokee Nation.

Quote (from "Little Tree"): "Mon-o-lah, the earth mother, came to me through my moccasins. I could feel her push and swell here, and sway and give there . . . and the roots that veined her body and the life of the water-blood, deep inside her. She was warm and springy and bounced me on her breast, as Granma said she would."