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# The Curious Case of Asa Carter and The Education of Little Tree

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## Recommended Citation

Browder, Laura. "The Curious Case of Asa Carter and The Education of Little Tree." In *American Indians and Popular Culture*, edited by Elizabeth DeLaney Hoffman, 63-79. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012.

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## Chapter 5

# The Curious Case of Asa Carter and *The Education of Little Tree*

*Laura Browder*

*You become more certain over time; that's just the way the mind works. With the passage of time, your story becomes your reality. You get wedded to your own version.*

—Peter Neufeld, cofounder of the Innocence Project

### The Two Lives of Asa Carter

In 1991, Forrest Carter's memoir, *The Education of Little Tree* (1976), was providing the University of New Mexico (UNM) Press with an unprecedented publishing success. The press had bought rights to this Cherokee orphan's autobiography—which was first published in 1976 by Delacorte Press—for \$500 in 1986, seven years after its author's death, according to Mike Stedham in the *Anniston Star*. Since then, an article in the *Birmingham News* details how the book became a true word-of-mouth success, going on to win the coveted ABBY award from the American Booksellers Association, which is awarded to the book that members most enjoyed selling. It went on to sell over 600,000 copies. Readers loved the book's story of a young boy's adoption by his Eastern Hill Country Cherokee grandparents and of his simple life with them. As Rennard Strickland, founder of the American Indian Law and Policy Center at the University of Oklahoma, wrote in his introduction to the UNM Press edition, "*Little Tree* is more, much more, than a touching account of 1930s Depression-era life.

This book is a human document of universal meaning. *The Education of Little Tree* speaks to the human spirit and reaches the very depth of the human soul.” The book affected a wide range of readers, as Strickland wrote. It “found its first and most loyal readership among those who cared about the young, about ‘growing up,’ about the Indian, about the earth, and about the relationship of man and the earth.” Yet soon it found other readers: teenagers, younger children, and “[s]tudents of Native American life [who] discovered the book to be as accurate as it was mystical and romantic.” As Beth Hadas, then the director of UNM Press, recalled, “I cried when I read the book at my desk. And at a university press, that doesn’t happen too often.”

As the back of the book jacket on the UNM Press edition of *Little Tree* read, Forrest Carter,

whose Indian name is Little Tree, was known as “Storyteller in Council” to the Cherokee Nations . . . Born in the mountain country of east Tennessee, and orphaned at the age of five, Carter lived with his half-Cherokee grandpa and full Cherokee grandma until their deaths when he was ten. After that he was on his own, working ranches as a cowboy all over the South and Southwest. Self-educated, Carter drew material for his books from his kin, from his Indian friends, and from a diary his great-grandmother kept during the reconstruction period . . . His Indian friends always shared a part of his earnings from his writing.

*Little Tree* was number one on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list on October 4, 1991, when historian Dan T. Carter published an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* that demolished the image of the book’s author, explaining that Forrest Carter was in reality Asa Carter, and he was no Indian. Rather, Dan Carter (no relation) wrote, “Between 1946 and 1973, the Alabama native [Asa Carter] carved out a violent career in Southern politics as a Ku Klux Klan terrorist, right-wing radio announcer, home-grown American fascist and anti-Semite, rabble-rousing demagogue and secret author of the famous 1963 speech by Gov. George Wallace of Alabama: ‘Segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever.’” As Dan Carter concluded, “What does it tell us that we are so easily deceived?” To his question, pundits and readers quickly added others: Were the allegations true? And if they were true, could Asa Carter have had a change of heart and become a new person?

Beth Hadas, Carter’s UNM publisher, in a memo to “Members of the American Booksellers Association,” defended him as authentic: “Indian

identity is a touchy subject and because the University of New Mexico Press specializes in Native American studies I wanted to verify the legitimacy of the book in Native American literature.” After citing examples of several Indian scholars and writers who continued to authenticate the book, Hadas concluded: “I have yet to talk to a Native American who rejects the book.” And Clint Eastwood—who had produced and starred in the movie version of Carter’s first book, *The Outlaw Josie Wales*—wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* defending Forrest Carter. Hadas pointed out in an interview with Alvin Benn: “If Forrest Carter was a racist and a hater who later converted to a sensitive human being, that would be most admirable,” he wrote. The issue of whether a bad person could write a sensitive book loomed large for many of Carter’s defenders, including his agent, Eleanor Friede, who in a memo to readers of the book asked, “How could a person (like Asa Carter) write ‘Little Tree’? Come on—that kind of honesty and truth? Could that come from a bigot?” The idea that Indianness is somehow authentic and easily recognizable comes straight out of the pages of *Little Tree*. *Little Tree* tells us that “Granma began to hum a tune behind me and I knew it was Indian, and needed no words for its meaning to be clear.” The primal wisdom of the American Indians occurs in a universe outside of time, outside politics. It is one in which bigotry seems impossible. Put even more poignantly, one 26-year-old fan of *Little Tree*, Sarah McCraw, told Connie Koennen that “It’s fairly sickening. Everybody loved it. You wanted it to be true because it was so sweet and so hopeful.” If the author of the book turned out not, in fact, to be the primally wise American Indian Forrest Carter, what would that do to the “sweet, hopeful” truths of the book?

The story of Asa/Forrest Carter also seemed to play into some sympathizers’ notions of personal reawakenings and second acts. As Beth Hadas, his publisher, said in an interview with Alvin Benn: “Some have said this is a work by a right-winger who wrote it to make it look like he wasn’t that kind of person. From my point of view, I think Asa Carter underwent a true transformation before his death.” This sentiment was elaborated upon by Wayne Greenhaw, the Alabama journalist who had known Asa/Forrest for decades in Alabama. Greenhaw wrote in a 1976 letter to the editor of *Publishers Weekly*, “The last time I talked to him as Asa, he was a confused and tortured human being. He talked about going off and doing something ‘to save this universe from ourselves.’ As he walked away, tears streamed down his cheeks.” The occasion to which Greenhaw referred was George Wallace’s 1971 inauguration, an event at which Asa and his supporters

demonstrated, “carrying signs reading, ‘Wallace is a Bigot’ and ‘Free Our White Children.’” However, Greenhaw continued, “I believe Asa Carter went through a great personal and intellectual metamorphosis.”

Greenhaw had long been interested in the story of Forrest/Asa Carter—after all, he had been the first journalist to expose Forrest Carter as Asa Carter—in 1976, in the pages of the *New York Times*, shortly before the publication of *Little Tree*. The occasion had been Carter’s 1975 appearance on the *Today* show with Barbara Walters to promote his book *Gone to Texas* (originally published as *The Outlaw Josey Wales*) and to talk about his upcoming memoir about his Cherokee boyhood. Among those who noticed that the cowboy boot-wearing, folksy Forrest Carter bore a striking resemblance to white supremacist Asa Carter was Jack Shows, chief investigator for the Alabama attorney general’s office, who had a deep familiarity with Asa Carter’s career. Yet Carter himself may have had such an enduring faith in his own power to appear as a new person that it did not seem to occur to him to decline the Barbara Walters interview. And the American public seems not to have noticed the article, for the shockwave that greeted Dan T. Carter’s 1991 op-ed piece suggested that this was fresh news.

Was Carter a hardened con artist, or a man who had undergone a stunning spiritual renewal and emerged as an American Indian spokesman? Was the American public incredibly gullible, and was this a cause for concern? Or simply put, were all these questions the wrong ones to be asking?

In my 2000 book *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, the story of *Little Tree*—in both its incarnation as heartwarming New Age narrative and as a shocking fraud—offered me a chance to explore both the ways in which Carter recreated himself in a new, more appealing Native identity, and the reasons for his embrace by the public, as well as the reasons for the enormous sense of betrayal expressed by his readers upon his exposure. Yet it was not until four years after the publication of *Slippery Characters* that I was unexpectedly afforded an opportunity to explore the story of Asa/Forrest Carter in much greater depth—and to learn some surprising truths about his reinvention.

I had begun work on *Slippery Characters* as I was finishing graduate school at Brandeis University. At that time, Douglas Newman, an undergraduate working on his senior thesis, heard about my work through his thesis adviser, film professor Tom Doherty, and got in touch. In the spring of 1993, I served as a talking head for Newman’s thesis project, an extremely low-budget documentary film based on the strange story of Asa Carter, white supremacist-turned-Cherokee author. When Newman tracked me down in

2004, he was ready to produce his own work, and wondered if I would be interested in having him produce a documentary based on *Slippery Characters*. Before too much time had elapsed, I had become a partner on the film (as executive producer) along with Newman (producer) and Marco Ricci (director). With the support of several grants for our film *The Reconstruction of Asa Carter*, we were able to crisscross the country in order to talk to friends and acquaintances of both Asa and Forrest Carter—as well as a number of historians, scholars, and journalists who could put Carter’s career in perspective.

## Biography

To arrive at any understanding of Asa Carter, it may be helpful to look at what is known about his life. According to both Asa Carter’s FBI file and Dana Rubin, Carter was born in 1925 in Oxford, Alabama, served in the U.S. Navy in the Pacific theater in World War II, attended college in Colorado, and returned to Alabama in 1953, taking a position in Birmingham as a radio announcer at the small station WILD, where he had a right-wing morning show designed to garner support for the American States Rights Association, an anti-integration businessmen’s group. He also began publishing a segregationist newsletter called the *Southerner* in 1956. When he lost his job as a Citizens’ Council spokesman because his views were too extreme (Carter’s associate Ray Andrews sneered at the Citizens’ Council as “the country club KKK”), he founded his own branch of the Klan in 1957, the Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy. This group was involved in such high-profile incidents as an on-stage attack on entertainer Nat King Cole, a shooting in which Carter was implicated; and the castration of a mentally retarded black handyman in 1957, for which Carter was not present. During the 1960s, Carter became a behind-the-scenes speechwriter for George Wallace and was the author of not only his 1963 inaugural address but also of such well-remembered set pieces as Wallace’s “speech in the schoolhouse door,” during which Wallace vowed to block federal efforts to desegregate the University of Alabama. Then, once the television reporters had filed their stories, Wallace stepped aside to let the federal marshals escort students Vivian Malone and James Hood through the door the governor had been blocking. During these days, Carter maintained a dramatically violent image—as his old friend Ray Andrews told me, holding his hands a foot apart: “Asa carried a pistol about yay long. . . . oh, he was tough.”

Carter eventually became disillusioned with Wallace for his lack of commitment to the segregationist cause, and ran as a protest candidate for Alabama governor in 1970, coming in fifth and last, with only 15,000 votes. Although Carter rallied to lead a network of white supremacist groups known as the Southerners—who had their own printing press, all-white gas stations, grocery stores, and schools, none of which ultimately proved to be successful—he was already beginning to write the book he would publish privately (using the imprint of the Southerners' printing press, Whippoorwill Press) as *The Rebel Outlaw: Josey Wales*. He subsequently published *Josey Wales* with Delacorte Press as *Gone to Texas* in 1973, and it became the basis for the Clint Eastwood vehicle *The Outlaw Josey Wales* after Carter sent it to Eastwood's producing partner, Bob Daley. In 1976, Delacorte published both *The Education of Little Tree* and *The Vengeance Trail of Josey Wales*. Carter's fourth and final book, *Watch for Me on the Mountain*, came out in 1978, the year before he died following a drunken fistfight with his son.

What clues could this biography possibly hold about Carter's transformation, real or imagined? Plenty, as it turned out. Yet to uncover these clues would involve contextualizing Asa/Forrest Carter's story within the history of Indian impersonation in America, conducting a series of interviews with those who had known Asa—and those who had known Forrest; doing some deep perusal of Asa Carter's extensive FBI file; and finally coming to some conclusions about the complex nature of collective memory and imagination.

## Indian Impersonation in the United States

First, the context: although virtually all commentators on the Asa/Forrest Carter story focused their bewilderment on the fact that a white supremacist could conceivably take on the role of an American Indian, it is well documented—by Philip Deloria, Shari Huhndorf, S. Elizabeth Bird, and Donald Smith, among others—that Americans have deployed Indian identities since the Revolutionary War era. Indian impersonation is nothing new.

Moreover, since the mid-nineteenth century, Americans who have felt trapped within black/white binaries have written themselves into Indian identity and out of blackness or whiteness—and in doing so, they have often had to rely on the support and endorsements of white supremacists. For instance, the autobiography of Jim Beckwourth, which appeared in 1856, was written by a former slave who, rather than joining the forces for abolition, used his autobiography describing his passage into an Indian

identity to rewrite himself into whiteness. Beckwourth's autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, Mountaineer, Scout and Pioneer, and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians*, with its tales of exotic adventure and bloody heroism, was an immediate best-seller, and an immediate source of controversy; in his introduction to the 1931 edition of the work, Bernard De Voto reports that typical of the complaints that Beckwourth was no more than a "gaudy liar" was the note American historian Francis Parkman scribbled in his copy of the autobiography, denouncing Beckwourth as "a fellow of bad character—a compound of black and white blood, though he represents otherwise." And while early historians often acknowledged Beckwourth's status as one of the greatest of frontiersmen, they generally linked his veracity (or lack thereof) to his color. Typical of these accounts was that of Charles Christy, who headed a chapter in his 1908 frontier memoirs "Nigger Jim Beckwith," and who called Beckwourth "the biggest liar that ever lived."

Yet a century after Beckwourth's rejection by racist critics because of his African American status, later generations of critics applauded him as a black hero—no matter how eager he himself was to escape that racial designation. The publisher's blurb for Leigh Brackett's 1963 *Follow the Free Wind* describes Beckwourth as "A half-breed rebel in search of his identity," and by 1966, Harold W. Felton published *Jim Beckwourth: Negro Mountain Man*. By 1969, the autobiography itself was reprinted in Arno Press's series *The American Negro: His History and Literature*. Perhaps the greatest sign of Beckwourth's rehabilitation as African American hero was the 1992 biography for young readers, which appeared—complete with an introduction by Coretta Scott King—as part of Chelsea House Publishers' *Black Americans of Achievement* series, which also includes biographies of such figures as Hank Aaron, Paul Robeson, and Sojourner Truth as well as civil rights leaders James Farmer, Rosa Parks, and Ralph Abernathy. As the publisher's blurb describes Lawrence Cortesi's 1971 biography *Jim Beckwourth: Explorer-Patriot of the Rockies*, "Captured by Indians who adopted him as a long-lost brave whose skin had been burned dark by the desert sun, Jim learned to respect and love his tribe." In this telling, Beckwourth's act became a wonderful lesson in cross-racial solidarity—and Beckwourth's rewriting of his own identity, out of blackness, became once again rewritten by historians eager to create uplifting narratives for young audiences.

Indian impersonators seeking to escape their racial definitions have often found themselves trapped within layers of irony. An even more famous Indian impersonator, Sylvester Long—who reinvented himself as Chief



Buffalo Child Long Lance—did not confine his imposture to the page, but became a film star and celebrity of the 1920s. His memoir, *Long Lance* (1928), was widely translated and helped promulgate the image of an “authentic” Indian identity worldwide. Long Lance became a cultural icon: he appeared in comic strips, attended glittering cocktail parties with movie stars and aristocrats, and lived in New York at the famed Explorers Club, whose members included Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen, former president of the United States Theodore Roosevelt, and noted author and wildlife artist Ernest Thompson Seton. Long Lance authored a best-selling book on Indian sign language and even had his own line of B. F. Goodrich running shoes, endorsed by none other than the great American Indian athlete Jim Thorpe. Yet Long Lance, who sought to flee his blackness, was most likely of white and Indian ancestry.

Brought up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Sylvester Long found that the only career path open to him was as a janitor or the equivalent. The racial laws of the day defined Long, the child of former slaves, as “colored” although his parents were American Indian and white, a binarization of racial identity (black or white only) that was to culminate in Virginia’s Racial Integrity Act of 1924 (under which Indians were defined as African American). Given his social definition, Sylvester Long was well positioned to understand the arbitrary nature of racial categories—and to learn how to manipulate them. Thus, Long enlisted the help of some of the foremost racial theorists of his time to authenticate his Indian identity, including Madison Grant, a leading eugenicist who authored the 1916 *The Passing of the Great Race*; in this book, he pleaded with his readers to support white Anglo-Saxon supremacy, for “conservation of that race, which has given us the true spirit of Americanism, is not a matter either of racial pride or of racial prejudice; it is a matter of love of country.” Madison Grant and other racists had no problem accepting American Indians as members of a doomed, yet noble race headed for extinction—and thus far from threatening.

It is easy to see why both Beckwourth and Long, given the racism of their day, would try to escape from blackness into an American Indian identity. And if we believe Wayne Greenhaw, Clint Eastwood, and Beth Hadas, Asa Carter was doing the same thing, with a twist—escaping his identity as a racist by reinventing himself as an Indian.

### Remembering Asa—and Forrest

As Marco Ricci, Douglas Newman, and I interviewed dozens of people who had known Carter, either as Asa or as Forrest—and occasionally as both—it

became clear to all of us that the man at the center of our film had spent a lifetime successfully manipulating his audiences: segregationist Alabamans eager to believe in the mythology of a noble, lily-white South built by their redneck granddaddies, and New Age readers comforted by his description of a mythically pure life on a mountaintop, a timeless world where young Little Tree lived with his wise American Indian grandparents, in tune with nature. Carter had been able not only to identify American mythologies, but also to embody them.

Like the Native impersonators who came before him, Carter was able to take advantage of white supremacist ideologies that posited Indians as a noble but dying breed, one that had been swept away by the inevitable march of civilization. Yet what may have been most striking to all of us was the ways in which Carter's impersonation succeeded, not just because of his own skill in representing himself as an Indian—skills demonstrated, as Bob St. John told us in 2008, by suddenly breaking into “Cherokee” dance and chanting during dinner at an Italian restaurant outside of Dallas. It was the stereotypes, which his interlocutors brought to the encounter, that made it all work for him.

Rhoda Weyr, the agent for Forrest Carter, recounted their first meeting in 1975; Carter had come to New York to make his first-ever appearance on the *Today* show with Barbara Walters. His literary career was in the ascendancy, but at this point in 1975, Carter was, as he told Weyr, a country man, attuned to nature and unused to the ways of the city.

He showed up at Weyr's Upper West Side apartment in cowboy boots and jeans, and the first remark out of his mouth was a racist slur against the African American elevator operator. “Indians hate black people,” Weyr's then-husband whispered to her. She accepted this as truth, and let the moment pass. Weyr and her then-husband liked and respected the elevator operator—they were political liberals who would never have tolerated racist language from a man they saw as white. Yet because he saw Carter as Indian, Weyr's husband at the time redefined this racism as proof of American Indian authenticity.

Rhoda Weyr narrated for us a hair-raising tale of the night Forrest Carter spent at her apartment—an evening that ended with her barricading her four young daughters in a bedroom following Carter's crude passes at the 10- and the 13-year old girls. Weyr was able to place Carter in the context of the New York publishing world of the 1970s, when, as she told us, Indians were fashionable: her conclusion about him was that, although he appeared naïve, “he played us all very, very effectively.”

The message of *Little Tree* was as double-edged—or as open to interpretation—as was Carter’s racist comment about the elevator operator. Asa Carter had spent much of his career extolling the Alabaman “redneck great-grandpappies” who had fought off Federal forces during Reconstruction and refused to back down; in *Little Tree*, the narrator explained that:

Grandpa had all the natural enemies of a mountain man. Add on to that he was poor without saying and more Indian than not. I suppose today, the enemies would be called “the establishment,” but to Grandpa, whether sheriff, state or federal revenue agent, or politician of any stripe, he called them “the law,” meaning powerful monsters who had no regard for how folks had to live and get by.

Grandpa’s hatred of politicians knows few bounds—as seems appropriate, given that his creator felt so betrayed by George Wallace, the man whose speeches he had penned: “Grandpa laid his [cousin’s] death at the door of the politicians, who, he said, were responsible for just about all the killings in history if you could check up on it.”

Throughout *Little Tree*, Forrest Carter either echoes or directly quotes statements he has made in his incarnation as Asa Carter during his 1970 campaign for governor of Alabama. The “sweet root” that Little Tree and his grandfather dig up was unknown to Cherokee storyteller Freeman Owle, whom we interviewed for the documentary. However, Asa Carter invoked it as food for Alabamians’ Confederate ancestors in the 1961 inaugural address he wrote for George Wallace: “They dug sweet roots from the ground with their bare hands . . . they gathered poke salat from the woods.” It is what they lived on during Reconstruction, along with the “poke salat” that Little Tree and his family also eat.

In *Little Tree*, Forrest Carter also espouses the anti-federalism that Asa Carter championed in that address, which is remembered today chiefly for the infamous lines “Segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever,”—words that echo the Klan slogan “the Klan now . . . the Klan tomorrow . . . the Klan forever,” a fact of which some of Wallace’s listeners would have been very well aware. Of the Confederate ancestors that Carter nostalgically invoked in that speech, “Not for one single instant did they ever consider the easy way of federal dictatorship and amalgamation in return for fat bellies.” In fact, it is only the folly of government intervention that can endanger Little Tree’s idyll—whether in the form of government revenue agents who imprison Grandpa for running an illegal

still, or worse, when the state takes Little Tree from his grandparents and places him in an orphanage of Dickensian horror.

Yet this antigovernment message sounded more appealing when it was not embedded in a text like the Inaugural Address, full of racist fear-mongering: “the *international* racism of the liberals seek to persecute the *international* white minority to the whim of the *international* colored majority.” Rather, it was wrapped in mystical rhetoric about “The Way of all the Cherokee.” It was also full of rhapsodic gushing about nature, such as Little Tree’s descriptions of “Mon-o-lah, the earth mother, [who] 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.” Take away Mon-o-lah, however, and the antigovernment message echoes the message of the inaugural speech.

As his old friend from the Southerners, George Hodges said in 2008, “He went from stepping on the downtrodden to uplifting the downtrodden, but it turns out the message is basically the same. It’s a universal message he’s preaching. It appealed to liberals, it appealed to conservatives. And it’s kind of the way you put the icing on it.” The kind of populism Carter exhibited, both as Forrest and as Asa—antigovernment, extolling a people’s connection to their land—played well to both countercultural commune dwellers and to resentful neo-Confederates.

Whether he was writing faux-naïf letters to Clint Eastwood from the reservation where he claimed to live, giving Eastwood and his partner, as Bob Daley said to us, the Indian they could believe in, or whipping crowds at Klan meetings into a frenzy of rage against civil rights activists, Carter had one great gift, and that was to use American archetypes—the noble savage, or the dispossessed farmer—to move his audiences to action. After Asa Carter found, in the early 1970s, that the raw racism that pervaded Alabama life had become less overt, and that his rhetoric was outmoded, he managed to reinvent himself in a new mold.

## FBI Files

However, if *Little Tree* is to be read as Carter’s autobiography, it must be read side by side with another volume that lays equal claim to narrating his life, and that is his 1,000-page Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) file that offers a glimpse of Carter’s evolution from Asa to Forrest (1956–1974). Of course, an FBI file should not be taken as gospel truth: enough evidence

exists as to the inaccuracy and sloppiness of the bureau to warrant skepticism. However, the file still reveals Carter's self-presentation and his evolving views.

First of all, it reveals that *Little Tree* was not Carter's first attempt at a memoir. While being interviewed by FBI agents on October 30, 1958, "concerning his whereabouts on 3/16/58, the date bombings occurred in Miami, Florida, and Nashville, Tennessee, and also his whereabouts on 4/28/58, date a bombing occurred in Jacksonville, Florida, and the attempted bombing of Beth-El synagogue in Birmingham, Alabama," Asa Carter volunteered that "he is engaged in writing a book, [called] 'ACE CARTER: The Foolish Knight' by ASA CARTER. He stated this book is well along and he anticipates completing it in the near future. [All capitalizations in original.] Although this volume never saw the light of day, it is clear that Carter was thinking about producing an autobiography—or at the very least presenting himself as an autobiographer—decades before he wrote *Little Tree*.

It is also clear that Carter feared using his authentic voice—but perhaps for somewhat different reasons than the ones that led him to recreate himself in the 1970s using a Cherokee identity. For also in this conversation, Carter agreed to make a voice recording, but then "declined to record his voice using the phrase 'Confederate Union' or 'Confederate Underground,' or any of the language or words that were used in any of the telephone calls after school and synagogue were bombed." The FBI continued to name him as a suspect in bombings—Carter is named as suspect in the bombing of the Anshe Emet synagogue, 3760 N. Pine Grove, Chicago, on January 10, 1961; on May 14, 1965, as a suspect in the case known as GREENBOMBS—Birmingham bombings that took place on March 21–22, 1965, and on April 1, 1965—but in both of these cases, Carter refused to talk to the FBI.

The FBI certainly suspected many people of bombings during this period, and not all of them were guilty. However, there was at least one incident in which the circumstantial evidence against Carter was strong. On September 18, 1967, the FBI file notes that Carter had been in Jackson, Mississippi, the night the Beth Israel Temple was bombed. Several of the prime suspects visited him at his motel room at the Sun-n-Sand shortly before the bombings. Carter left early the next morning. He was considered a prime suspect by the FBI, but there is no indication that he was ever arrested for this. In fact, he proved maddeningly elusive to the FBI.

However, this changed in the early 1970s, when the agency managed to recruit an extremely garrulous confidential informant to attend the meetings of the Southerners, Carter's white supremacist group. The entry for October 1, 1973, reads: "ASA CARTER CONDUCTED THE MEETING.

CARTER SAID THE PEOPLE MUST BE EDUCATED [...] THAT THEY ARE THE TRUE ISRAELITES.”

By this time, Carter was beginning to incorporate anti-Semitic, far-right Christian rhetoric into his speeches. But the following excerpt must cast doubt on all claims that Carter underwent a spiritual transformation when he became Little Tree:

CARTER SAID HIS BOOK BEING PUBLISHED BY [...] WHIPPOORWILL [...] WOULD BE OFF THE PRESS SOMETIME IN OCTOBER. CARTER SAID HE HAD CONTACTED SOME OF THE INDIAN TRIBES LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES, THE CHOCTAWS, CHEROKEES, CREEKS [...] AND WOULD GIVE THEM A PART OF THE PROCEEDS. CARTER SAID MAYBE THE INDIANS CAN GET ON THE JOHNNY CARSON SHOW. CARTER SAID GENERAL PATTON WOULD ENDORSE HIS BOOK.

Although Patton did not, in fact, issue an endorsement, and it is unlikely that Carter donated any proceeds from his publishing career to any Indians, or even contacted the tribes. It is apparent that he was maintaining the two seemingly disparate identities of white supremacist and Cherokee author—simultaneously. On January 4, 1974, the informant reports that:

The next thing that ASA CARTER talked about was a book that he has written under the name of BEDFORD FORREST CARTER [...] captioned “Rebel Outlaw” and which he has written under the name FOREST CARTER [sic]. He said there are seven publishers contacting him trying to obtain the rights to publish the book. [...] he would turn the proceeds [...] over to the organization after taking a small commission for himself to live on.

It is unclear whether Carter ever followed through on this pledge to his white supremacist group. If he had, it is easy to imagine how betrayed those readers who loved *Little Tree*'s wholesome message would feel.

He certainly used his white supremacist group's resources to actually produce his first book, however. In February 2006, when we interviewed Bob Daley—Clint Eastwood's producing partner on *The Outlaw Josie Wales*—he proudly showed us his first edition of *Gone to Texas*, which had been produced by the Whippoorwill Press—a press that had previously devoted all of its efforts to printing racist pamphlets.

*Little Tree* is full of heartwarming stories about people of different ethnic backgrounds—including Jews, as personified by the kind old peddler,

Mr. Wine. When Little Tree asks, in response to overhearing a slur, “‘Granpa, what is a damn Jew?’ Granpa stopped and didn’t look back at me. His voice sounded tired too. ‘I don’t know; something is said about ‘em in the Bible, somewhere’s or other; must go back a long ways.’ Granpa turned around. ‘Like the Indian . . . I hear tell they ain’t got no nation, neither.’” Granma and Granpa preach tolerance and remain dignified in the face of prejudice. Yet in his performative, as opposed to literary, life, Asa Carter was becoming increasingly anti-Semitic, as seen in this January 28, 1974, file:

IT IS NOTICED THAT THE SOUTHERNERS HAVE SWITCHED FROM TALKING ABOUT THE “NEGRO PROBLEM [” TO CHRISTIAN IDENTIFICATION AND HATRED OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE. IT WAS LEARNED THAT [REDACTED] AND CARTER ARE SPEAKING OF THE “TRUE ISRAELITES AS THE CAUCASIAN PEOPLE AND THE JEWS AS THE SONS OF THE DEVIL.”

In the mornings, Carter labored over his “memoir,” in which he described the kindly Jewish peddler who befriended young Little Tree. In the evenings, he lectured to his followers that Hitler was right and that it was time to bring back the gas chambers. So which Carter was the real one? From this vantage point, it is impossible to know. The one thing we can be certain of is that Carter, with his speechwriter’s gifts and his ability to move from one identity to the next, embodied the greatest myth of all—that of American mutability, our shared cultural belief that no matter where you start out in life, you can make of yourself what you will.

Strangely, Carter remained very open—if somewhat fantasy-driven—about his dual life when he was speaking to his racist followers on February 24, 1974:

ONE OF THE MEMBERS SAID ASA CARTER WAS BUSY WRITING TWO BOOKS AND HIS AGENT TOLD HIM HE WAS PLEASED [...] AND BELIEVED HE COULD SELL ANYTHING CARTER WROTE. THIS MEMBER SAID CARTER HAD RECEIVED A LETTER FROM BURT LANCASTER.

Yet his writing life was beginning to overtake his life as a white supremacist leader. On May 3, 1974, the confidential informant notes that “ASA CARTER could not attend as he is busy with details in connection with sale of movie and publication rights on his book.”

Finally, he decided that he could not maintain these identities at once. The final entry in Carter's FBI file occurs on May 20, 1974, when, it is reported, he walks into the FBI office in Anniston, Alabama:

ACE CARTER appeared at the ARA [the Anniston, Alabama, FBI office]. He said he had wrote a book on the mountain people in his family and a book on the wild west. He said one of his book was being sold to a movie company andhe [sic] had a New York Agent handing [sic] his business. He said he did not want his agent or other people contacted by the FBI in effort to locate or determine his whereabouts. . . . Carter remarked that he felt he was about to make some money for the first time in his life and he did not want anything to go wrong.

## Conclusion

Carter had literally “gone to Texas” and would not look back—though there were certainly moments, such as his racist remarks in the presence of Rhoda Weyr and her husband, when his mask slipped. And yet Carter's followers were in some ways as responsible as he was for recreating him in a new identity, of meeting him halfway in an imaginative territory where noble, timeless Indians could still exist. As Richard Allen, policy analyst to the Cherokee Nation, notes, “It fits into that magical, mystical idea of American Indian people. I certainly wish that I was magical and mystical, but I'm not, and I don't know any Cherokees who are.” So perhaps it is fitting to close with the story of Carter's funerals. As Wayne Greenhaw, the journalist who first exposed Carter, told me—in a story that was later echoed by Howard White, another of Asa Carter's friends—when Forrest Carter died, he had a funeral attended by Hollywood celebrities, with a eulogy given by an American Indian medicine man. The funeral ended, and the mourners drove away. A half hour later, another group of cars pulled up and there was another funeral—but this time there was a Christian preacher in attendance, and this time his family members were present. And this time, too, the name on the headstone was Asa Carter.

It is a great story, and one that perfectly sums up the contradictions and mysteries surrounding Carter's life. There is only one problem with it: as Asa Carter's friend Ray Andrews, in a view echoed by a Carter family member, told us in 2007, the story is “pure Disneyland.” There was only one funeral. Yet Anne Plott of the *Tuscaloosa News* reported in an article—“Curious ‘Ace’ Carter Dies . . . Curiously”—published shortly after his death that



“Forrest Carter was buried June 10 in a cemetery at DeArmanville . . . [his] cousin has confirmed that the man buried under the simple headstone bearing his name is Ace Carter, the former segregationist’s immediate family has refused to either confirm or deny it.” Today, there is only a headstone bearing Asa Carter’s name in that cemetery.

So who is right? If Forrest Carter was a construct, he was certainly one created by his fans as well as by Asa Carter. And if his story teaches us anything, it is about the power of myth, and both the instability of identity and its multiplicity. The scandal surrounding *The Education of Little Tree* continues to bubble up intermittently: in 2007, Oprah Winfrey pulled the title from her list of recommended books, after learning the story of its authorship. And yet the book continues to do well commercially: to date, the University of New Mexico Press has sold 1.7 million copies of it.

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