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[STING]

JENNIFER LAGASCER: So I've had Herbie - it's going to be six years, six years next month. Yeah.

LAITH MAJALI: And you got Chico...

JENNIFER LAGASCER: Two years ago.

DANA BALLOUT: This is Jennifer Lagascer speaking to the filmmaker Laith Majali. Herbie and Chico are her camels - and Jennifer is a cameleer - that's the term for very serious camel owners. And Jennifer, Jennifer is a serious camel owner.

JENNIFER LAGASCER: When we got married, I came in on a camel. We wanted to do a big carnival party event. We were both animal people, both have a degree in biology.

DANA BALLOUT: Laith was speaking to Jennifer at a meet-up of around 25 cameleers in the Mojave desert, about a 3 hour drive east of Los Angeles - where I live, actually. And some of them had driven for miles to be there, in their own custom built camel trailers.

LAITH MAJALI: Yeah just kinda like horses. They have their custom made trailers. It's a lifestyle, it's a lifestyle.

JENNIFER LAGASCER: What attracted me so much to the camel tribe as we like to call ourselves is the warmth and welcomeness that they all bring. And I love that.

LAITH MAJALI: So as I've met the community of cameleers, what fascinated me is the multiple uses they found for camels. So you've got a big group using a camel milk for beauty products; everything from pills to animal shampoo, to human shampoo, soap bars. I remember eating chocolate fudge made with camel milk.

DANA BALLOUT: What did it taste like?

LAITH MAJALI: Oh, it was great. I love camel milk. I don't have an issue with it - so it was good.

DANA BALLOUT: You've also got the people who use camels in movies, people who rent them out to use in nativity plays, people that work in zoos, circuses. Laith is not a cameleer, but for the last few years he's been following the trail of a camel expedition that was once led by a man that went by name Hadj Ali back in the 1850s.

Hadj Ali is a name you've likely never heard before - and yet, he was one of the first people from the Middle East and or North Africa to emigrate to in the United States. And for someone who was so new to a country, Hadj Ali definitely left his mark and for that reason, there's kind of a war of narratives in the MENA region about where exactly he comes from.

LAITH MAJALI: The Greeks claim him as a Greek. The Turks claim him as a Turk, since he was an Ottoman subject. But the letters that I found in the archives all mentioned a Bedouin man. I saw that the name of Al [Hadjiya] was attached to him as a tribal name. And [Hadjiya] is a tribe that comes from the south of what is now Jordan, from an area called Al Qatrana. So that town is maybe 30 kilometers from where I'm from in Jordan, which is Kerak, a big city in the south. So I was like, ah, maybe some of my ancestors have met Hadj Ali. And that kinda started a really long detective-style research where I was really looking for who this was man was.

DANA BALLOUT: This investigation has taken him to all kinds of unexpected places: Arizona, to Texas, and really all over the United States.

And, what Laith has found is a kind of alternative history of America, of Arabs in America, all wrapped up in the story of camels. It's a wild story... so saddle up.

I'm Dana Ballout and this is Kerning Cultures. Stories from the Middle East and North Africa, and the spaces in between.

[INTRO STING]

DANA BALLOUT: This whole journey for Laith started with a guy who is kind of the godfather of the modern camel scene in the United States.

DOUG BAUM (ARCHIVAL RECORDING): Let me introduce you to a couple of our friends. This one is Richard, he's one of our family...

DANA BALLOUT: He's the one who was supervising the trek in the Mojave - His name is Doug Baum, also known as... the camel whisperer.

DOUG BAUM (ARCHIVAL RECORDING): And we've also got bactrian camels - the kind with two humps - look here's Shian.

DOUG BAUM: I started working with camels in the spring of '93, really at the same time that Trish and I had our first child, Vanessa. And so I became a father and a camel trainer at the same time and earned through a lot of, sometimes patience, that the two disciplines are actually kind of similar, but, fell in love with the camels.

LAITH MAJALI: Doug... Doug has a fair complexion, blondish hair, tall, farmer. So he's someone who works in the land and takes care of his plot. He speaks multiple languages, including Arabic - by experience, more than by studying, I'd say. Very well read. Maybe on a

first glance, you'd have a stereotype of who this person is just because of how he looks, how he dresses, what he does maybe. But what I love about Doug is, as you keep on peeling the onion, the layers and layers, you just discover more and more about about him.

DANA BALLOUT: The first layer of that onion: Doug first got involved with camels in Nashville Tennessee, back in the 1990s.

DOUG BAUM: I'd been working as a zookeeper and had moved to Nashville to play music and needed a day job.

LAITH MAJALI: He used to be a drummer in Nashville. So he used to be a professional drummer, but kind of moved into the camel world because he was working at a zoo.

DOUG BAUM: At the old Nashville zoo, and I ended up working with primates for about five months.

LAITH MAJALI: As a side job and the zoo brought camels in and he was the one who was handling them and fell in love with it.

DOUG BAUM: I've always wanted to work with elephants and there was no opportunity to do that at the time, but I thought, camels would be the next best thing.

DANA BALLOUT: Doug said he sees himself as a kind of champion of the underdog. And to him, camels are an underdog.

DOUG BAUM: The camels are horribly misunderstood. Everybody sees the camel - laypersons - see the camel is a nasty mean animal that bites and spits. That's only true of the camels that do that. But it's certainly not true of every single camel on the planet.

DANA BALLOUT: And after he'd been working with camels at the zoo for some time he had this idea that camels could work really well in animal therapy - kind of like horse therapy if you've ever seen it. Which is when he left the zoo and started working with a residential treatment programme for at-risk youth called Vision Quest.

DOUG BAUM: All those kids, I had hundreds of kids, and I can remember almost every single one because each one of them had a very individual relationship with a camel.

DANA BALLOUT: Anyway, that's a whole other story. The point is, Doug is seen as kind of a pioneer in the cameleer community in America. This is Lauren again - one of the people on that Mojave trek.

LAUREN: Being around Doug makes me excited for history and camels. He's a self-taught anthropologist and musician, incredible with camels, a historian, a storyteller. When you're around him, you are just captivated by his knowledge of a place. I love Doug.

DANA BALLOUT: Some years ago, Doug realised that he could use camels as a way for people to learn about their own - or other peoples' - history in the United States. Which is the reason they were all there - this trek... it is a special occasion in cameleer calendar. And no camel trek with Doug is ever complete without a bit of camel folklore.

LAITH MAJALI: We had just finished dinner. Everyone was sitting in an area of this camp that is, is made kind of for food or kind of like small events.

DOUG BAUM: I'm going to sing, and I'm going to juggle and I'm going to saw you in half and it'll be fine.

DANA BALLOUT: Once everyone sat down, Doug got up and started to tell them this story.

DOUG BAUM: So welcome out, my name's Doug Baum. I own Texas Camel Corp.

LAITH MAJALI: Doug is a fantastic storyteller.

DOUG BAUM: So why don't we pick up with Hi Jolly? Hi Jolly, is for those of you who don't know, this is a broadly speaking Middle Eastern gentleman who was brought here in the 1850s to work with recently imported camels.

DANA BALLOUT: In the late 1840s, the USA had newly colonised this huge stretch of land between what is now the state of Louisiana and and the Pacific Ocean.

DOUG BAUM: Now its really important that you understand a timeline of history - we're talking about a period of time that predates the civil war.

DANA BALLOUT: There were no railroads or cars at this point. But as the colonists expanded west, they started looking for a more efficient way to travel across the land - which was largely arid and dry.

MARSHALL TRIMBLE: They needed a beast of burden.

DANA BALLOUT: This is Arizona state historian, Marshall Trimble.

MARSHALL TRIMBLE: And lot of that area was water less. You could go 40 miles without water.

DANA BALLOUT: Ordinarily they would have used horses or mules, but they wouldn't get very far in the heat without water. These lands were completely barren - there could be days of travel between one water stop and another.

MARSHALL TRIMBLE: This is something that mules and horses couldn't do.

DANA BALLOUT: So they decided that the solution to their problem could maybe be camels.

So, in 1853, the American secretary of war at the time - this guy called Jefferson Davis - pitched congress with this idea to spend \$30,000 on camels from the Middle East. It took two years for congress to approve the budget and eventually they did. And so then in 1855, the plan was greenlit, and the experiment became known as the United States Camel Corps.

That summer, a group of representatives from the American government stepped on board a ship called the USS Supply - kind of a camels-only Noah's ark - and the ship had a mission to travel to the Mediterranean and the Middle East and come back with \$30,000's worth of camels.

They travelled all over - first stop was in Italy; no camels in Italy. Then to Tunis, where they bought a handful of camels. Then to Malta and Egypt, picking up a camel here, a camel there. But the Americans didn't know how to handle these camels. Their temperament was totally different from the mules or horses that they were used to back home.

MARSHALL TRIMBLE: Camels were very temperamental - they did not seem to like Americans any better than Americans liked them, it's funny.

DANA BALLOUT: Eventually, they landed in the Ottoman port of Smyrna, modern day Turkey. And this is where they met three young camel handlers. One of them was called Hadj Ali. And they couldn't pronounce his name very well, so...

MARSHALL TRIMBLE: It didn't roll off of the Americans tongue very easily, so when they tried to pronounce it sounded like Hi Jolly. And so that's what he became. But his name was really Hadj Ali.

DANA BALLOUT: Hadj Ali... Hi Jolly. Here's Doug Baum again.

DOUG BAUM: We're told that Hi Jolly greets these American soldiers who in the 1850s show up in what's now modern day Turkey, but the broader Ottoman empire. And there they're buying camels and they say: 'We're here to buy camels' and Hi Jolly says: 'America? Doesn't have camels? What kind of backward place is this?' I love that. Even if it might not be exactly true.

DANA BALLOUT: Either way, Hadj Ali was a talented camel whisperer, and these US government people knew nothing about keeping camels. So they hired him and a group of other people in Smyrna to come back with them to the US.

On February 15th 1856, they set sail from Turkey with 33 camels on board, along with a load of hay and oats to keep them well fed on their trip back. The writer Gary Nabhan said it was the longest trip ever taken by any camel in history, and the furthest Hadj Ali had ever been from home.

MARSHALL TRIMBLE: They arrived in the United States, and the first boat landed with 34 camels. One had died along the way and two new camels were born. So they had a net gain of one on that first trip. And they would come a year later with another full boat load with 41 camels. So that made up the original camel herd of just under a hundred camels.

DANA BALLOUT: Hadj Ali - or at this point Hi Jolly - and his team spent the next few years training the camels. And he loved working with them - he had a special talent for it.

MARSHALL TRIMBLE: I guess we'd call him today a camel whisperer. He had a knack of communicating with the camels. He loved the camels and the camels loved him.

DANA BALLOUT: One person who had seen him at work wrote at the time, "Moving quietly among the restless animals, he spoke to them ... reassuring them, placating them, as a mother would speak to a fretful child."

Then in the summer of 1857, part of the herd were picked out to be taken on a trek out West towards California. The expedition was to be led by Hadj Ali and a navy lieutenant called Edward Beale, and they wanted to use the camels from the camel corps experiment because they thought they'd be the best fit to navigate the difficult, dry terrain.

Their goal was to scout out a wagon route from New Mexico to the eastern edge of California, a little over 1000 miles. The California Historical Society Quarterly had a short account about the journey. And it read:

"[Navy Lieutenant Edward Beale] had driven his camels more than 1,200 miles, in the heat of the summer, through a barren country where feed and water were scarce, and over high mountains where roads had to be made in the most dangerous places. He had accomplished what most of his closest associates said could never be done."

But it could be done, and it was done - with the help of the right animals. This route that they eventually carved out became one of the famous roads in America: Route 66. If you overlaid a map of today's Route 66 with the camel corp's tracks, the two roads line up exactly from Albuquerque to the Pacific Ocean. Its quite amazing.

DOUG BAUM: And its a route created by camels. And I love this. So Beale moves across New Mexico into what's now Arizona, truly unknown country. He doesn't know what's going to happen. Spoiler alert! He does in fact make it to California. And we have Route 66. This is the legacy of the camels.

DANA BALLOUT: So this story, the legend of Hadj Ali, is how Laith found himself at this desert camp in the middle of the Mojave desert in the company of American cameleers - to trace the wagon tracks that Hadj Ali had carved out more than 170 years ago.

LAITH MAJALI: So Doug made a very kind introduction to me. And then, I just spoke a little bit about the project, why I was doing it, how long I've been doing it. And one gentleman in the crowd basically raised his hand and asked me...

UNKNOWN: I have a question. Did I hear you right that your last name was Jolly? You're not related to Hi Jolly? Is that a common name?

LAITH MAJALI: Haha, close! My name is Majali.

LAITH MAJALI: He must have misheard my, my family name Majali and he thought it was Jolly and he thought I was related to Hi Jolly,

LAITH MAJALI: But Hi Jolly is how I ended up with this story, because one of the theories out there, is that Hi Jolly is a bedouin from potentially the south of Jordan, which is where I'm from. And I'm exploring that theory with some people in the region too. So that even makes it more personal for me.

LAITH MAJALI: But I had to explain to him that, you know maybe, maybe if, if that origin story is true, then he could have been from a home from a town not too far from my hometown. So that's my closest potential relationship to Hi Jolly but not the same family - potentially the same area.

DANA BALLOUT: Ah, okay, that's funny.

LAITH MAJALI: I've been on his trail for five years and his spirit kind of lives in a lot of people in this community. And it's just been a brilliant journey. And hopefully this is the third location where maybe I cross paths, maybe we'll see the ghost of Hi Jolly, you know?

DOUG BAUM: Yeah! Yeah I like that.

DANA BALLOUT: They went to bed that night, and woke up early the next morning to get ready for the first day of the trek.

LAITH MAJALI: Before we set on the first walk, it's funny, there was a little tradition where there's a...

DOUG BAUM: Little right of passage, pay to the desert gods.

LAITH MAJALI: A little pot under a Joshua tree and you're supposed to throw a penny in it.

DOUG BAUM: With intention!

LAITH MAJALI: Make a little prayer to the desert, hope for a safe journey.

DANA BALLOUT: But does the penny have to go into the pot?

LAITH MAJALI: Yeah. It's just a little pot - you just drop in it.

DANA BALLOUT: It's not like if your penny doesn't go in you don't make it?

LAITH MAJALI: You get the snakes if you don't make it. You know, after breakfast we headed out.

DOUG BAUM: Yeah. So we're going to move about 12 miles west, to a place that's got a beautiful photo op, it's a waterhole in a cool rocky canyon. It's like 12 miles from here. Trucks, trailers, everything. Camp is broke. Everything rolls west. We'll unload there, and we'll start making about a 10 mile movement back east.

LAITH MAJALI: You know, it's full of Joshua trees, full of cacti. It's a desert terrain, but you don't see dunes. It's not kind of a desert with dunes. It's more of dry beds. Again, lots of cacti, very similar again to the terrain in the south of Jordan.

DANA BALLOUT: The group did this every day for four days.

LAITH MAJALI: I think, yeah, we averaged, you know, maybe four or five miles a day.

DANA BALLOUT: At night they'd gather at their campsite and play music...

[Camel riding blues song]

DANA BALLOUT: Until finally, on the last day of the trek, they came to the spot Laith had been waiting to see.

LAITH MAJALI: What's alright Doug?

DOUG BAUM: Good lord, I'm looking at it. The wagon tracks of the 1857 Beale expedition. Hi Jolly's feet we're on that path right there.

DANA BALLOUT: So here they were... after 4 days of trekking, their camel expedition was finally walking on the very same ground that Hadj Ali's camels had more than ~150 years ago.

LAITH MAJALI: I realised the importance of having a figure like Hi Jolly. There's an importance to having an early footing in a place like America. To know that we've been part of this country's existence and making since at least 1857. Because you know, Hi Jolly directly relates to Route 66, which is an American icon. You know, it's one of the most famous highways in the world. And it's a route discovered by camels, and Hi Jolly and Beale, of course, it's always credited to Beale but I bet you if this Bedouin was not with them they wouldn't have survived that five months journey. It just adds to the sense of maybe belonging to a place and working towards making it better. Especially in these times after the years we've had to go through recently. To be able to say, hey, we've been part of making this place, what it is - is important, you know?

LAITH MAJALI (AUDIO DIARY): And I am at the edge of the camp looking west. Quite hazy. And I've got a range of the Mojave mountains silhouetted against the haze of the setting sun. It was quite a successful trip I think. And it was a great experience for me. Today especially we got quite close to what would have been the road that Hi Jolly and Edward Beale would have been on as they headed towards Los Angeles in 1857. There's a third place that I get to intersect with the footsteps off Hi Jolly. And my search continues for the story of who this man was. For now, thank you for listening, and signing off from the Mojave desert.

DANA BALLOUT: Not long after Hi Jolly's trek to California in 1857, the US army's camel corps retired. The civil war started, then the train came along. And even though the camels proved successful in their mission, the US army ended up selling the camels to whoever would take them. Hadj Ali - Hi Jolly - is said to have kept a few himself.

Hadj Ali left the army in 1870 and got married ten years later. In his wedding photo he's wearing a three piece suit, with pushed back hair, a thick moustache, and of course cowboy boots. That same year, he became an American citizen and lived out the rest of his life in the United States. But it wasn't necessary a happy ending for him.

LAITH MAJALI: He dies penniless. He dies with not much to his name, estranged from his wife and kids. And I even found a plea in a newspaper called the Arizona Republican dated September 21st, 1901 titled 'Deserves a pension, a former government servant who needs assistance now'. And it talks about Hadj Ali and his story and how he basically wasn't registered correctly in the army. So he never got a pension plan. The article ends with. With this quote: "If this be true, and it is within the power of any citizen of the territory to help him, that favour should be tendered him. For Hadj Ali was one of the men that made Arizona fit to live in."

DANA BALLOUT: He died in Quartzsite, Arizona in 1903, and a few decades later the town built a memorial for him on the side of the road. It's a pyramid, about 8 or 9 feet tall, with a metal camel on top, and a plaque at the bottom.

LAITH MAJALI: So the plaque on his grave in Quartzsite, Arizona reads: "The last camp of Hi Jolly, born somewhere in Syria, about 1828 died at Quartzsite, December 16th, 1902. Came to this country February 10th, 1856. Camel driver, packer, scout, over 30 years a faithful aid to the US government. Arizona Highway Department, 1935.

[Hi Jolly by the New Christy Minstrels]

LAITH MAJALI: He must have been such a character and such a man to be able to one, traverse three months on the ocean, come live in the wild west. Deal, I'm sure, with a lot of

racism and being looked down upon. Contribute, live a life, change his name, build a family. And you know, we're still talking to about him today.

[Hi Jolly by the New Christy Minstrels]

DANA BALLOUT: After the break, we link up with Doug again - but this time in Egypt.

[MIDROLL]

DANA BALLOUT: So a couple months after we recorded with Doug, he reached out to us to tell us he was going on a trip to Egypt. In addition to Doug doing camel treks in the US, Doug also takes Americans to camel treks across the Middle East - to places like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, etc. These trips, they help Americans better understand the Arab and African countries.

LAITH MAJALI: Other than doing trips and treks in the US and especially in Texas, Doug for many years, has been leading trips to places like Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, I know he's done Kenya, Mongolia. And he does these trips which, they're touristic trips, but what's special about them is that he's established these relationships, these close ties with families in these countries. Mostly families that deal with camels. And he's used that as a form of education for himself, but also as a form of having people who join him on these trips get a chance to experience life in these countries, the way people live on the ground. So you're not staying in fancy hotels, you're not running around in big buses with big tour groups, no, you're actually staying in the homes of people and it gives the trips quite a different perspective.

DOUG BAUM: I always tell my tour groups, look, I know you've probably got a bucket list. You you've wanted to see the pyramids since you were a kid and the pyramids are incredible, but they will be the least incredible thing you see when I take you to Egypt. And I tell him that, and I say, look, if the pyramids are the highlight of your trip, you should ask for your money back because they're incredible, but they're the least incredible thing. And a hundred percent of the time, my guests will tell me that the highlight of their trip was meeting this lady at the bus station, or this fella who sat down with us at a restaurant. It'll always be a human, it'll always be somebody real and it'll be usually some surprise interaction that you never even saw coming.

LAITH MAJALI: And what's even more interesting is when he comes back to his town, which, you know, it's a small town, I wouldn't say maybe thousand people, he comes back and tells them all of these stories about his travels, whether it's in Egypt, Morocco, Kenya, Kazakhstan, the guy has been everywhere because of a choice he made to take camels as the animal of choice, you know?

DANA BALLOUT: So, a couple of months after his trek in California, Doug reached out to tell us that he'd be visiting Egypt soon with a group of Americans, and did we want to come to a wedding he was taking them to?

DOUG BAUM: I have known the groom since he was 9 years old - he's now 27. He's more than family, he's as close to me as my own family.

DANA BALLOUT: So we asked our colleague Heba Afify to go along and record. He didn't give us much more detail, except to say that there would be camels.

MICHELLE: I have never felt more welcomed anywhere on the planet than I have in Egypt.

DANA BALLOUT: And one of the first people she spoke to when she arrived was one of Doug's guests - Michelle, from Texas and it was her 7th time in Egypt with Doug.

And I have never once had a- I've never once had a bad experience here. Not a single time ever. I have just been welcomed and treated with incredible hospitality.

HEBA AFIFY: You've teared up a little bit telling me about what these trips mean to you. Why is that?

MICHELLE: Yes, these trips have made my life immeasurably richer. My life is better for the people that I meet and the experience I'm going to tear up again, immeasurably, richer, and better for the experience I've had and the people I've met. And I have friends all over the place now that wouldn't have not happened and they make my life better.

DANA BALLOUT: After everyone had arrived, it was time for the bride and groom's grand entrance - on... you guessed it... camel back. We'll just let Heba take it from here.

HEBA AFIFY: Okay. So now the carriage, whoa, the carriage carried by the camel almost ready now. It looks pretty huge. So like it's a almost - it's I think taller than the camel itself, draped in these beautiful red drapes and then they've attached some balloons to it and there are lights inside of it. I'm a bit scared for the bride and groom.

Bride and groom are in the carriage now. And I think the camel is about to lift off. I think the bride looks a bit scared as I would be.

Oh, lift off! The carriage - oh my god. Oh my God. Oh my God it does not look stable! Oh my I think it's going to fall. Oh my God no.

Someone is having similar feelings to me and just praying that they make it in one piece. Oh my god the carriage is like violently swaying right to left it's quite scary.

DANA BALLOUT: Quickly, before we go: earlier in the episode we played a song about Hadj Ali that was recorded in the 1960s. But today, we wanted to make an updated version of it.

So we asked Kerning Cultures' very own Ahmed Ashour to re-write it, as our own little tribute to Hadj Ali.

[Ahmed's song]

DANA BALLOUT: This episode was produced by Laith Majali, Alex Attack and me, Dana Ballout, with additional support from Anastasia Campbell, Zeina Dowidar and Nadeen Shaker. Fact checking by Deena Sabry. Sound design by Mohamad Khreizat and Alex Attack. A special thanks to our managing producer for Arabic, Heba Afify, for her help recording the wedding in Cairo.

You can see some of Laith's photos of the US camel community at his instagram @lmajali. We'll also put them on our instagram - @kerningcultures.

We'll be back next week. Thanks for listening.

[OUTRO STING]