

LOWRY

Written by

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Based on a true story

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TEASER

FADE IN:

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Title: Robeson County, North Carolina - December 1864

A quiet dirt road. Tall grass waves on both sides. A carriage enters left, pulled by a single horse. It's in no hurry.

JAMES BARNES (50s), the driver, is a wealthy slave holder in the dying Confederacy. His plump belly bounces with the road.

A small BURLAP BAG rests beside him, stained with blood and dirt. Barnes smiles and whistles to himself, unaware of the danger lurking in the tall grass...

EXT. TALL GRASS - CONTINUOUS

Weathered shoes dig into the soft ground. Calloused fingers stretch and grip the trigger of a SPENCER REPEATER RIFLE.

A YOUNG GUNMAN looks left through the grass. Another just like him waits about 30 feet away. Two more hide on opposite sides of the road -- all ready to pounce like hungry lions.

We bounce between the FOUR GUNMEN. Bandit masks cover their faces. Their eyes are those of cold-blooded killers.

The trotting horse and rolling wagon wheels draw near.

Back behind the Young Gunman. He breathes, lowers his mask to spit, clutches his rifle...

EXT. ROAD - CONTINUOUS

Barnes leans forward, pats his horse.

BARNES

There, there, girl. Just a little
bit further.

WIDE as all four gunmen rise from the tall grass...

THREE SYNCHRONIZED GUNSHOTS. ONE DELAYED.

Barnes falls from the carriage and lands hard in the dirt.

A Gunman approaches and calms the horse. Two others move up on the carriage from behind.

The Young Gunman is the last one out. One of his fellow triggermen grabs him by the shirt and slams him against the carriage! The Young Gunman must have done something wrong.

There's clear back and forth, but it's hard to hear what anyone's saying, only the echoes of muffled fighting against the empty Carolina backdrop.

Another Gunman boards the carriage. He jumps down with the bloody burlap bag.

The Young Gunman pulls down his mask and stands over Barnes. Still, we never see his face.

The others walk away as the Young Gunman aims his rifle at Barnes. A bloody palm rises to shield his face...

BANG!

ACT 1

Opening credits play over an animated/hand-drawn map of Robeson County, North Carolina, circa 1864. We see sepia sketches of the people and locations pertinent to the story, along with wanted posters for each member of THE LOWRY GANG. We finally end on Henry Berry Lowry's wanted poster as the title appears on screen: "Lowry"

EXT. TOWNS/FIELD/FOREST - DAY

Establishing shots of the towns and settlements that make up Robeson County, North Carolina. Replicas of what we saw in the opening credits.

Traders hawk their wares. Drunks stumble through the streets of MOSS NECK and SHOE HEEL.

SHERIFF REUBEN KING (40s) steps onto his porch in **Lumberton**. His hand itches to pull his pistol. "Free people of color" take the long route around. Whites smile in his direction.

In SCUFFLETOWN, NATIVE AMERICANS tend their land and fields. Among them is ALLEN LOWRY (50s). He wipes the sweat from his brow and gets back to work.

A few Lumbees barter in the less-vibrant town center, mixing with every shade of human being.

Over these shots, a YANKEE NARRATOR--who's identity will be revealed later in the series--brings us up to speed:

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Life is different in Robeson County--
- hard for most, harder for some.
For the Scuffletown Mulattos,
life's been hardest these past 30
years. North Carolina voted to deny
eastern Indians the same rights
their white neighbors enjoy with
blissful impunity. Now considered
"free people of color," same as the
free negroes, the Scuffletown
Mulattos can't vote nor bear arms.
And though they dress the same,
talk the same, drink the same, and
pray the same, a few shades of skin
color separate the conqueror from
the conquered.

EXT. CONSCRIPTION CAMP - DAY

As the Narrator continues, we see black, white, and brown workers slaving away with picks and shovels. Their confederate masters loom overhead, watching their every move.

CAPTAIN RODERICK MCMILLAN (40s) rides by on his horse. Every ditch digger and Confederate soldier stands up in reverence.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

But, perhaps, the worst part about being a "free person of color" circa 1864 was that "free" didn't mean "free." Not with Confederate conscription officers molesting any home they pleased and ordering its inhabitants to the nearest fort. The war was slipping through their fingers like warm butter. They'd be damned if they lost their laborers too.

EXT. SWAMPLANDS - DAY

A group of NATIVE MEN -- THE LOWRY GANG -- makes camp in the dense swamplands of Robeson County. They're well-armed. Their eyes never drop below the horizon.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

For people like Henry Berry Lowry and his kin, their only option was to lie out in the Robeson swamplands, knowing their pursuers wouldn't survive the night.

EXT. STOREFRONT - DAY

A BLACK WOMAN (60s) rocks in a chair on the porch. When she licks her dry lips, we see she's mostly void of teeth. She's mouthing something, but we can't tell what... not yet.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Upon my only visit to the swamp outlaws of Robeson County, I met an old negro woman void of teeth. She told me her master had knocked them out with an oat stick. And though I pitied her with every fiber of my being, I'd never met a specimen who so perfectly embodied the atmosphere of the times.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)

When I asked her about the Outlaw King, she looked upon me and said:

CLOSE on the woman's mouth. Her lips read:

NARRATOR (V.O.)

"This a hard country out here, sir. And Henry Berry Lowry? He's just payin' 'em back. He's just a' payin' 'em back."

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

Several men run for their lives. Not far behind are Groups of Confederate Soldiers, some on foot, some on horseback.

BRANTLEY HARRIS (40s), the cruelest conscription officer north of Georgia, leads the charge.

HARRIS

Rally those prisoners and bring 'em back where they belong! Don't lose 'em in the goddamn trees!

Over a DOZEN PRISONERS run like scattering mice, weaving through the tall grass and leaping over obstacles. But there's no outrunning the Confederate Cavalry.

Among the prisoners are WILLIAM (30s), TOM (20s), STEVE (20s), and HENRY LOWRY (16) -- The LOWRY BROTHERS.

Several horses get ahead, cutting off the prisoners before they make it to the trees. Most weave around the rearing steeds. Some aren't as lucky.

Henry watches a prisoner trip and fall. He stops to help. William hollers from about 20 yards away:

WILLIAM

Leave him, Henry! Keep moving!

It's too late, the slight delay gives one confederate horse enough time to get in front of Henry. The CONFEDERATE SOLDIER on horseback, a boy no older than Henry, takes aim:

SOLDIER

End of the road, colored.

Then, like a freight train, William leaps and tackles the Soldier off his horse.

WILLIAM
(to Henry)
Run!

Henry steps toward William to help.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)
Now! Go!

Henry takes off. William punches the Soldier hard in the nose, drawing blood.

EXT. TREE LINE - CONTINUOUS

The Lowrys and remaining prisoners make it across the field and through the trees. They vanish in the dense, dark forest.

HARRIS
Get on in there and flush 'em out!
God as my witness, you'll be
fillin' their shoes for every one
that gets away!

Harris' men scramble into the woods while he waits behind.

HARRIS (CONT'D)
Son of a bitch!

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

The prisoners and Lowrys split into pockets of two or three.

Henry and a young UNION P.O.W navigate downed logs and rocks. Henry has run this route before. The P.O.W struggles.

A bullet strikes the P.O.W in the leg! He crashes hard to the ground, writhes in pain. Henry hits the brakes.

UNION P.O.W
Ah shit! Help me! Please!

Henry looks around, doesn't see anyone coming. He runs back to help. When he kneels, a Confederate rifle presses into the back of his skull. It's the Soldier from moments before. Blood drips from his nose.

SOLDIER
Don't move another step! Where'd
the rest of ya' run off to?

Henry stays quiet.

SOLDIER (CONT'D)

You tell me where they are or I
swear I'll shoot you dead!

Before he gets the chance, William appears behind the Soldier. He presses a Bowie Knife to the boy's throat.

WILLIAM

You scream, you die. Finger off the
trigger, and you keep the blood you
have left.

He obliges. William grabs the gun and tosses it to Henry.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

(to the Soldier)

Now, you're gonna close your eyes,
and you're gonna count as high as
your mama taught you. That very
high?

The Soldier shakes his head "no."

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

Well, you're gonna count as high as
you can, as many times as you can,
'til your throat dries out. And if
you open your eyes before that
time... if you come back after
us... you gonna wish you hadn't.

The Soldier closes his eyes and starts counting. William and Henry take the P.O.W by the arms to help him walk.

SOLDIER

(fading)

One, two, three, ah, four...
shit... ah, one, two, three, four.
One, two--

Henry looks at the Soldier once they're out of earshot.

HENRY

(to William)

Why not kill 'em'? You know he
ain't gonna stay quiet.

WILLIAM

He's a boy, Henry. No older than
you. We'll take their guns; we'll
take their bullets. We'll take
their sugar, corn, salt, and
whiskey. But we don't take their
lives. Don't need 'em.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

The rest of the escapees and Lowrys reconvene in a tight clearing. Steve and Tom remain on high alert. They clench their guns, watching every gap between every tree.

TWO BLACK MEN stick together and stay quiet.

There's a rustle in the darkness. Steve aims toward the sound. Henry, William, and the P.O.W emerge from the trees. Steve calms, lowers his rifle.

WILLIAM

This it?

Tom nods. William isn't pleased.

STEVE

You boys get lost out there?
 (re. P.O.W's bullet wound)
 Son's a bitch, William. What do we do with him?

WILLIAM

We can get 'em up to Nash's in the mornin'. Right now...

William looks at the group and sighs.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

...Right now, we get somethin' to eat.

EXT. ALLEN LOWRY'S RANCH - NIGHT

All's quiet on the Lowry home front. A native teenage girl, RHODA STRONG, sits alone on the cabin porch. Her long, mournful eyes gaze at the distant trees.

Rhoda raises a pipe to her mouth and takes a long drag.

MARY LOWRY (50s), the matriarch of the Lowry band, walks out of the cabin and joins Rhoda on the porch. Rhoda offers up her pipe. Mary pushes it away.

MARY

Staring at those trees won't bring them back any sooner.

Rhoda takes another drag. She knows Mary's right.

Mary leans over and points out a tree in the distance.

MARY (CONT'D)

I've always liked looking at that one.

As she does, the Lowry men appear from the trees. Rhoda lets out a long sigh, but instead of running to them, she empties her pipe and walks away.

MARY (CONT'D)

Allen! Come quick!

Allen Lowry -- patriarch of the Lowry band -- bursts from the cabin and hustles toward his sons.

ALLEN

William! The hell you doin' bringin' them back here?

WILLIAM

(re. P.O.W)

This one won't survive the swamps. They're hungry, Pa. We all are.

(to Henry)

Henry Berry, go and fetch some rope to tie his leg.

Henry runs toward Allen on his way to the cabin. As he passes, Allen reaches out and grabs him. He pulls Henry close, hugs him tight, inspects him up and down.

ALLEN

You okay?

HENRY

I'm fine.

ALLEN

Go. That boy needs our help.

Henry takes off. As he runs, he sees Rhoda standing with her back to the group. She never turns to look.

Allen looks between his sons and the prisoners. Something bothers him...

ALLEN (CONT'D)

Where are...

William shakes his head. Allen sighs.

LATER

Henry returns with the rope and hands it to William. He looks toward Rhoda, who hasn't returned the stare. The others settle near a FIRE PIT.

ALLEN

Steve, Tom, get a fire goin'.
Henry, there's some pork in the
smokehouse. Spare what we can.

STEVE

(to Henry)
I left a bottle of bourbon in there
too.

Henry's not paying attention. He's fixed on Rhoda.

STEVE (CONT'D)

(nudging Henry)
Henry Berry, you hear me?

CABIN EXTERIOR

Henry walks past Rhoda on his way to the smokehouse. They lock eyes; words hang on the tips of their tongues.

SMOKEHOUSE

Henry opens the smokehouse doors. The foul stench of rotten pork stings his nose.

HENRY

Ah, goddamnit!

Rhoda walks up behind him and into the Smokehouse, impervious to the rotten smell. She disappears into the darkness. A moment later, she comes back with Steve's bottle of bourbon.

She pops the cork and takes a swig. She presses it into Henry's chest and walks away.

Henry takes a long, courage-building swig and catches up.

EXT. SMOKEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Henry walks up beside Rhoda. He offers her the bottle.

HENRY

Pork's gone sour.

Rhoda swigs. They pass it back and forth.

RHODA
Got tired of waitin', I guess.

Henry sighs.

HENRY
You know I intend to marry you one
day, Rhoda Strong.

RHODA
And how you gonna do that if you're
dead?

HENRY
This how you wanna live? This how
we gonna grow old together?
Wonderin' if the spoiled pork is
safe to eat? Not knowin' where our
next meal's gonna come from?
Stealin' from white folks and lying
out in the swamps 'til they get
tired of huntin' us?

RHODA
I just wanna grow old together. The
rest'll come with time.

HENRY
I wanna eat when I'm hungry, Rhody.
I wanna drink when I feel like
gettin' good and drunk. I wanna
sing songs till the sun comes up
without worryin' some 'scripts
gonna drag me away in my sleep.

RHODA
And I want those things too, Henry
Berry. But is it worth fightin' a
war you can't win?

HENRY
Ain't winnin' nothin' with William
in charge.

RHODA
And you think you can do better?
William's keepin' the peace. He's
keepin' us alive.

HENRY
And he ain't makin' no damn
difference. Still can't vote;
(MORE)

HENRY (CONT'D)
 still can't own a gun.
 (re. The Rifle)
 Hell, they catch me with this
 'round my back, they'll tie a noose
 'round my neck.

RHODA
 (handing Henry the bottle)
 Hold this.

Henry takes the bottle. Rhoda wrestles the gun off his back.

HENRY
 The hell you doin'?

Rhoda grabs the barrel and throws the gun like a long stick into the brush.

HENRY (CONT'D)
 What'd you do that for?

Rhoda doesn't answer. Instead, she grabs Henry's face and kisses him. She pulls back. Our young lovers stare into each other's eyes.

STEVE (O.C)
 Come on, where's the pork? Boys are
 gettin' hungry.

Steve ruins their moment. He grabs the bourbon, takes a swig.

HENRY
 Stick your head in and find out.

Steve walks into the smokehouse while Rhoda and Henry wait outside. A moment later, he comes out gagging and coughing:

STEVE
 Ah, that's worse than hot shit!

Henry and Rhoda can't help but laugh.

INT. ALLEN LOWRY'S CABIN - NIGHT

Mary serves up hot coffee and a plate of cornbread while William and Allen smoke at the table. The men sip the coffee, but don't touch the cornbread.

WILLIAM
 (upset)
 They didn't wanna come with us.
 Their papers are up in two weeks.
 Didn't wanna risk it.

ALLEN

Your cousins are strong kids.
They'll be home soon.

WILLIAM

A lot can change in two weeks,
especially with McMillan in charge.
We risked our lives to get 'em
outta there. Now what do we have?
Three more mouths we can't feed.

ALLEN

Family or not, every soul you pull
outta' that place is worth savin'.

Steve enters. Henry's right behind him.

STEVE

Pork's gone to hell.

Steve joins William and Allen at the table.

WILLIAM

Shit. Ain't got enough cornbread to
feed 'em...

Steve grabs a piece of cornbread, eats it in two bites. He
tosses one to Henry, who takes a nibble.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

(at Henry)

...hardly enough to feed ourselves.

Henry puts his piece of cornbread back.

STEVE

(through a mouthful)

You wanna cut 'em loose? Nothin'
sayin' it's our job to feed 'em.

William thinks, looks to Allen, who doesn't have an answer.

HENRY

What about the Barnes farm?

WILLIAM

What about it?

HENRY

Me and Rhoda were walkin' by the
other day. He's got a pen full of
pigs. Enough to feed us for two,
three weeks.

WILLIAM

Have you lost your damn mind, Henry Berry? Barnes doesn't notice a little sugar and corn. But his hogs? You're askin' him to rub mud in his eyes.

HENRY

He's got dozens of 'em. He ain't gonna notice if two go missin'.

WILLIAM

It ain't worth the risk.

ALLEN

William's right, Henry. Think about what you're askin'. Mr. Barnes is our neighbor. Him and I've known each other a long time.

Henry looks off. His stomach churns. He eyes the nibbled piece of cornbread.

STEVE

I'll go with ya' Henry Berry. We'll take the cart.

WILLIAM

(angry)

Damnit! I said it ain't worth it! That's not family out there.

Henry grabs a handful of cornbread and heads for the door.

HENRY

Family in here, ain't it?

Henry storms out of the cabin. William sighs. We follow Henry toward the...

FIRE PIT

...where Tom tends to the Union P.O.W's wound.

Rhoda sits by the fire. She and Tom see Henry coming. As he huffs by, he tosses a piece of cornbread to Tom, who barely catches it. He throws another to the two Black Men. He presses a third piece into Rhoda's chest.

Tom divides his piece evenly between he and the Union P.O.W. Rhoda bites into hers. She follows Henry with her eyes as he walks toward the edge of the property.

INT. ALLEN LOWRY'S CABIN - CONTINUOUS

It's quiet after Henry's outburst.

WILLIAM

It's too dangerous. Even stealin' one ain't worth it. And one won't cut it. These people look up to us, you especially, Pa. They expect we do what's right by them... to lead 'em somewhere better than this.

ALLEN

Leaders don't do what's right. They do what they *think* is right. You gotta live with the choices you make.

William hangs on Allen's words.

WILLIAM

We'll leave the gate open. Make it look like one of the farm hands let 'em out.

STEVE

(excited)

We're eatin' like governors tonight, boys!

ALLEN

Take Henry with you.

WILLIAM

No, he ain't ready. Steve and Tom'll do just fine.

ALLEN

He'll never be ready if you don't give the boy a chance.

William nods. He and Steve head for the door:

ALLEN (CONT'D)

And William. If it don't feel right. You get outa' there. Last thing we need is Mr. Barnes sniffin' 'round the ranch.

INT. MCMILLAN'S TENT - NIGHT

McMillan sits behind a desk in his tent, clenching and sipping a bottle of whiskey. The flap pushes aside.

Brantley Harris walks in, dragging the frightened Soldier who can only count as high as four by his neck.

HARRIS

Tell 'em what you told me, boy!

Harris pushes the Soldier forward. He falls on his knees. He trembles, not sure who he fears more; McMillan or Harris.

SOLDIER

It... it was...

McMillan stands and hollers at the Soldier:

MCMILLAN

On your feet, son! You whimper like that when the Yankees come knockin', we might as well save 'em the bullets!

The Soldier stands, still shaking as McMillan walks around and stands before him... their noses mere inches apart.

SOLDIER

The Lowrys, sir. Lowrys came in the night and set the whole lot free. They was lookin' for someone. Went tent to tent before they cut anyone's ropes.

HARRIS

We got two of their kin workin' in the ditches. They's probably waitin' for William and Steve to come back and set 'em free.

MCMILLAN

Bring 'em to me, Mr. Harris. Let's find out what these Lowrys know about the others.

Off Harris' grin. He likes where this is going.

END OF ACT I