

Gordon Leavell

Interviewed by Nicholas Himes

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Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

Transcribed by Nicholas Himes

Nicholas Himes: All right, so my name is Nicholas Himes. I'm here in Corpus Christi, Texas. The date is September 28th [2020]. I am here with Gordon Leavell, and the topic is going to be post slavery cotton working or cotton picking in post slavery times. So, can you just talk about your childhood, when you were a young child coming up?

Gordon Leavell: Well it was fun. We had fun even though it was a lot of hard work. I mean it was a lot of hard work. We had fun. It was not so much electrical gadgets like technology like computers and stuff like that. You had to really talk to each other, and really had to know each other. And that's what we got to do. Now, all of the gadgets interfere. So, my childhood was a lot of fun. And the kids today though, they do not have as much fun so as we had fun.

NH: Okay.

GL: Kind of fishing, and you know, playing in the woods and you know, and stuff like that fun. And then it was like chores. We had to work. It wasn't nothing even at a young age we had to work. We learned to work very early. Like when you turned five you got a chore. You turn six you knew your chores, and on and on. You had to do for the family. You know the family work together so that's what's more family, the family worked together.

NH: Yeah. Okay, cool. So, you say about five so what age did you begin doing field work working outside?

GL: You know I was young; you go, you went with your parents to fields where they worked, and because it wasn't babysitting, we babysitted ourselves. And you the family babysit. The oldest babysit the younger and on and on. So, we went to there and as when we go there, we helped them work. So, it was very young, I was six years old and I was picking cotton. Yeah, and I was doing fieldwork like that fieldwork then, but I was kind of was on a farm. And on the farm, I had chores to do like feed the pigs. We called them hogs. But we feed the pigs and chickens and cows and water and all that. Now that you learn at a very young age. It wasn't nothing that but you still had time for a lot of fun.

NH: Oh okay, cool. So, when you went with to work with your parents what was this a farm that you'll owned, or you'll work for someone?

GL: Well, we had a farm our own, but it was not cotton. We would pick cotton for someone else. And they had man, acres and acres and acres and acres and acres of cotton. So, we picked

the cotton for others, and this was before I even went to school, I learned how to pick cotton. But I was not very good at it. When they let us go whatever we could contribute was okay.

NH: Right, and I know you were at very young age, but do you know how the pay was or?

GL: No, it is kind of hard to remember, but it was very very little. Very little, we're talking about pennies. You know. So, you know you can work all day and not make five dollars.

NH: Wow.

GL: Yeah. Or you can work all day you might make 7 or 8 dollars. And that was big then you know so it was very, very little.

NH: Wow. Okay, so dealing with the working in the cotton field as a young child, about how long did you do it? Up until about what age did you?

GL: What, work in the fields?

GL: Probably until I was about, probably about until I was about 13. And then things changed. So, I didn't have to. So, up unto I would say 13, 14.

NH: Okay.

GL: Because I did, I started working at a dishwashing job.

NH: Okay. So, from the age from the young age, about six to about 13, you were working in the fields, doing different things of that nature. Were you going to school as well?

GL: Yeah. Oh yeah. We had to go to school too. Let's see, this is the thing, like, the family stayed together family. We prayed together. We ate together. We took care of all our bills together. We did everything together. And so, I would go into the school in the mornings, and when I get out of school, then we would go and pick some cotton. And see so until dark almost, right there. And then I would run and do my chores. And then I would do my homework, and then I will go to bed. And this time the next day. And it was a lot.

NH: Wow. Wow.

GL: That's, a lot. And so, we had to do all of that. We picked cotton in the evenings after, but cotton months was at August and September. So, it was in August and September, so right in school. It might, it may have last until October, but not further than that.

NH: Okay, and what kind of things did you do after the cotton was already?

GL: When the cotton was over, you know we just, it was more we could focus on school. And I can focus on sports and different things we had at school. All our sports we had because we participated in all the sports. But then in the springtime it would start all over again. And we would start working in the fields. And all through the summer. We worked all summer in the fields so we in the spring we'll go to picking peas and things and stuff like that. And then in the summer we would do corn and watermelon and peas and stuff. And we had to work hard. It was hard work. So, we worked, and money was very little. Like I say you could go work all day and

not make four or five dollars. But four or five dollars would last a long time. That and you put the whole family together. And you got kids making three or \$4. And you got six kids out there then it adds up quickly. But it's still small money. (Laughter)

NH: Could you take me through a typical day from once you got to the fields? What type of things would you do, like what type of duties would you do?

GL: Okay. A typical day would probably start about 4:00-4:30 in the morning. You had to get up because we had chores to do. We had to get up, wash, do you chores, eat a big hearty breakfast. We had gravy, biscuits, fried chicken, rice. I mean, and preserves, we had a big serious breakfast. And first you get up in you do your chores and you have your breakfast, and you get ready to go to field before it gets too hot. See, so you want to do it be before you get too hot. When daylight breaks, you want to be already working. So, we worked from there, right around lunchtime. Right around noon it gets too hot so that you had to take a break, and we take a lunch break, and then we'll go back in the afternoon. And we will work until the evening. And that was before school. Once school started, then we wouldn't be able to go back and do that. We would have to work after school. And then how do you get off from that you come home and do your chores again, and then you do your little schoolwork and then you go back and you get ready to prepare for the next day. And it wasn't much television. So just you have to do you know and plus in this in this day, we also would attend church, and church was a big part of our life. We had full days. And, but we still had time. It seemed like it was so much time because we didn't have the computers and cell phones and things. We had so much time we would still have fun. It was fun in working. It wasn't just like I was just working, I enjoyed the work, because we all had so much fun doing the work. And you know guys would sing, while you're working, and you get to meet other people while you're working. And then also you know it wasn't just like total like slave labor. It was enjoyment too.

NH: Okay, so talk about how you balanced, everything as far as your, the fun, your friends, the sports you played, and then also the work and the labor that you had to do to, because essentially you were helping to support the family, you know, so talk about how you balanced everything and still did well in school.

GL: It was this way we did these things, but it's pretty easy, because, first we'll go school, we'll get up and go to school. We'll do our chores in the morning. It was just nice, and school was out about 3 o'clock and 3:30. So, that's like a lot of daylight we had left in August (laughter). So, we had time and weren't working, we had time to go out to school, we would play sports like basketball or something like that. And then we would have time to go. And I like to hunt. Then I was hunter too, so I could go hunting in an evening time when I didn't have to work. And I would still do my chores. And when school was going on. I would go I would start washing dishes. right around 13 years old. And I was a big camp, and I would go wash dishes. When school, I would go to school. Go wash dishes. When we were working in the fields, and then I'll make my money I worked to Eight, nine o'clock. Nine o'clock, and come home, maybe get ready watch a little TV maybe if we had TV and then I would get ready for the next day, but I had plenty time for my friends I would come back out. And it was just a lot of fun to me, because we didn't have all this TV all this cell phones and all this stuff didn't take all our time. So, time was

really slow. It's just like an hour was a good long time. So, I'll come home and play basketball with my friends when I wouldn't go into work. And we play basketball in the evenings. We still get our studies and we play, and every now and then we go to church. And then we enjoy that and then every now and then we would go out. And maybe as I grew up a little bit we would go to a little dance. And so it was a lot to do, and but we had plenty time. We had plenty time to do all these things because nothing interfered like television and all that technology. I couldn't look on the computer, my cell phone and start reading cause we didn't have one. (Laughter)

NH: Right, right, right, right. So, hearing these things about from six years old to getting to actually your own personal job washing dishes at 13, kind of talk about what do you think about today's time with kids. They have child labor laws where they don't let kids do work until 16 and things like that, so there's the childhood is very different. What do you think about that?

GL: Well, I think the kids are missing out on a lot because they think they are entitled. (laughter) And they never learned the things I learned. See so, I can go now today if my age wouldn't stop me. You can sit me in any part of the world and I can make a living. Because of things I learned when I was young. And it didn't hurt me at all. You know I graduated from University of North Texas, and I went on to do many things in sales and tops and all things. So, all this hard work at a young age didn't hurt me at all. But I understand it may hurt some kids, but I think they missing out on how to fellowship with the family, and how important the family is. And I think they are missing out on how to be a good friend, and how to be a good daughter or son. And not be asking for things but to contribute. So, they need to learn how to contribute and then they won't feel so entitled, and then I look at the suicide rate with teenagers and stuff, because they when you never hear no. well we hear no a lot and it didn't do nothing to us. It didn't kill us. So, no is something good. And now with my grandkids I say you have to teach him what no means. And no don't mean you go act up and do something crazy. And that's what kids do. They hear no, they go do something crazy. And that's what kids do today. They hear no and they go act up and do something crazy. So, I think they miss out on cause when I worked it gave me a sense of you know, I did something right for family. And we didn't, I wasn't concerned about the money at my age. You know give me my money I worked all day. No, didn't see it, but I did see it because I had food and I had clothes and we ate well. And I had fun with the family. So, I think the kids today don't know how to, you know, deal with their time with the family. And then, enjoy and work. And then are all able to play. And then I see my grandkids now on that cell phone when we can be interacting and knowing who we are and find out about me. Instead they have a cell phone everywhere they go. They have a cell phone at the dinner table, they have a cell phone in the car a cell phone. They have a cell phone everywhere they go, and I say well okay you got to put that cell phone down because it's not time for it. So, I think the kids are missing out on enjoying the family. And they don't really then when it's time for them to grow up they don't know what growing up is.

NH: Okay. All right. So, dealing with the cotton, can you describe the type of tasks and duties that came with the cotton?

GL: Oh, it was hard. We had a long tow sack, like a long big sack. Sometimes I've seen them at least six, eight feet long. And then they put it around their shoulder. They have a little hook like,

you know, like a basket or something. Like someone who carries their books now, but a little bag, but it was a long sack. And they would wear that on their shoulder, and they would go down to between two rows and pick the cotton off on both rows all the way to the end. And then by the time they get to the end of that row they might have anywhere from 60 to 120 pounds.

NH: Wow.

GL: And he had to drag that or more, and it's just all cotton. Not the boughs, but that was when you picked the cotton out of the boughs. So, you and your fingers got all cut up. And you know, it was nothing to us. It was just what we did. And your fingers get cut up in, and all scratched up, but it was all good at the end of the day you had little money. And back then money went a long, long ways, and the sun was blasting hot. So, you had to wear a hat, and you had to drink a lot of water. And so, the water was good for us, and the sun was good for us. And you got strong, and you can tolerate quite a bit. And the days was when lunch time come, and that cold water was just so good. But when lunch time come you would find you some shade. Get under a good shade tree. You didn't have to have air condition. And the wind blowing it was really nice. And when it was time to go back to work, you would work until that evening, and if it gets too hot you cut off the day, and go home and then do something else. But it was you would work all day. And they worked all day for little money, and then everybody people were happy.

NH: Right.

GL: Yeah, and they didn't have time to go out and do what they do today. You know go out and raise a little hell over here and there. No, they was tired. They go home and rest. (Laughter) You go home and rest and thank God you made it through another day.

NH: Great. What type of troubles or hardships came with that type of work?

GL: Well, at the time, you know at the time you didn't realize all the things the hardships cause if you cut your hands up it okay because they will heal. And then but later on in your life, you can feel your back, and stuff like that from the hard work. But if you didn't overdo it. You know some people work too much hard and it was like bad on their health. But some of it I believe most of it was average pretty good for you. It was better for you than it was against you, your health. But you can, your back could be hurt and now, and stuff like that. We didn't get all the we didn't know about no ACL and all those things, you know. And but pretty much we stayed in contact. I did not see much hurt and you know injuries like that.

NH: Okay, what do you think about, or how did you feel about doing that type of work? In reference to, you know, our people had just been enslaved and forced to do that type of work for free. How did you feel having to do that same type of work, how was that experience?

GL: Well, I felt good about doing the work because I got paid for it. And it wasn't very much, but I didn't know no better. We didn't know no better. We earned our way through life. If you, you know like the word of God says, if you don't work, you don't eat. And we just thought that's the way to do it. So, we had nothing, it didn't affect us any kind of way. Not myself, it didn't affect me in any kind of way, working hard, but I didn't want to go work all the time.

Sometimes some days I didn't really want to go to work, but it wasn't, you don't tell your parents, "man look, I'm not going to work." You know, that didn't work, you know, because we had to go

to work, and you respect them. And so, you went to work, but I didn't feel like enslaved. Maybe I didn't know no better. I didn't feel like slavery. I thought it was great that we can go and work and make money. My parents thought that was great too. And that's what we did. And then, when we had at the end of the day, they would feed us a big ol grand meal. We ate good. A big huge meal, and everybody just enjoyed it. You know, so, and then you can sit on the porch and sing songs and listen to bugs and you know, really enjoy life. You know, it was like really enjoyable. So, I didn't feel anything like I was punished to pick cotton. I feel like it was a blessing. But when I got out of it, and I started working at other jobs and making I still made the same amount of money, but I just didn't do that kind of work, because I can go and work all day. I can work all week part time after school and make \$27. And that was a lot of money for me. I thought \$27 was it. But when I made 18 and 21 dollars after a weekend, I thought that was great. And in the summer when we worked all day long you make 40 something dollars for a week of work and \$50 in more that was super. So, I didn't feel like I missed out on anything. I didn't feel like any slavery, and we didn't know any better about the money and to then it was just a norm. And families stay together, and it was really good. We really bonded.

NH: Wow. That's amazing. Okay, so now this question is in regard to recent stirs in the media regarding the Robstown high school mascot, the Cotton Pickers. Okay. A lot of black people, you know descendants of former slaves they feel highly offended behind a mascot being named the cotton picker. How do you feel about that?

GL: It don't phase me at all. You know? I don't understand why they getting upset about that Cotton Picker, because it's not many black people over there in Robstown and going to school. But it never offended me. Matter of fact, I do a class and I got a room full of cotton pickers in there and they love to say cotton pickers. Never offended me, because in the Mexican community, they picked cotton too. So, how would it offend me? They was in the same boat. They did the work they had to pick cotton. We had to pick cotton. I never thought about it was just a black person's thing, because it's just wherever you was from. And I know the slavery. They may have not had the slavery, but they had to do the same kind of work. Yeah, so it doesn't being called Cotton Picker doesn't bother me at all. I was watching the news article on that last week I believe. I didn't get it at all. And it got something to do with something totally different. And it's nothing to do with blacks in slavery and anything like that. So, to me, they can just keep Cotton Picker. You know? I mean, I was a cotton picker for a while too. And now, guess what, it really helped me. And it didn't and I don't think nothing is degrading toward that. You know, it's what one want to do. So, I went from picking cotton, to being a number one salesman at big retail and going and finishing college. So, that didn't affect me. It didn't stop me. Now to owning my own business. And now I own my own business and cotton was part of it. Picking cotton. So, I don't know how to work, and I learned what not to do. See, sometimes in life we have to learn what to do and what not to do. So, it took me a while to work out some of those things but that good work, taught me a lot of things. (Laughter)

NH: That's awesome.

GL: Yeah, good hard work. So being cotton picker doesn't bother me at all. I don't think nobody is saying anything about black people at all. And if they are then so what? Because it doesn't

bother don't phase me. It's not many people could do, come from picking cotton. I know it's a lot of peoples went from picking cotton, to where maybe I am today. But it wouldn't phase me, because it don't stop anybody. And its nothing derogatory about it. It was an honest work. It was an honest work. And today you know it may be still prejudice in the black community for that. And we got to watch out for that because we all know what prejudice is like.

NH: well, I want to thank you. This was a very enlightening for me. And I want to thank you and thank you again for the interview. Thank you very much.

GL: You bet.