

## Ava Constant – Through My Father’s Eyes

This is Ava Constant with the South Texas Stories podcast. Today I will be sharing stories of my father about growing up in South Texas.

My father, Anthony Constant, was born in Galveston, Texas on August 13, 1947 and grew up in Victoria, Texas. On today’s episode, you’ll hear about his experiences from an oral history I did with him back in September, which discusses growing up in the aftermath of World War II, and how he witnessed the progression of the Civil Rights movement in South Texas.

It is important to share these experiences through a child’s eyes because many children live through historic events and fail to realize it. Learning how to reflect on the events of our childhood can help us recognize when change is needed, especially when we may not be directly affected. Knowing that others in our community such as friends, teachers, and people we pass by everyday are often impacted by things such as discrimination and systemic racism, can make us more empathetic and help us better combat these issues.

My father’s family lived in America for generations. He is of mixed European ancestry: English, French, German and Greek. I asked my father to describe his nuclear family:

“My parents were Margaret Lehman and Dr. George Andrew Constant, MD. My mother was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska; my father was born and raised in Grand Island, Nebraska, which is a hundred-and-fifty miles out west from Omaha. My only sibling, Nicholas, was born there in 1941. The family moved to Galveston, Texas when my father began his internship in psychiatry at John Sealy Hospital, where I was born in 1947. Five years later, my father began his private practice, specializing in Psychiatry and Neurology, in Victoria, Texas, population 11,000.

I asked my father about how he spent his playtime as a “baby boomer.” I found that my father’s favorite games, other than sports, were indoor games about war.

“I played boardgames. I devoted a lot of time to games that recreated Civil War battlefields and allowed players to be the General in charge of the Army and fight the battle all over again. My favorite was ‘Gettysburg’ because of that battle’s singular importance in the Wars’ outcome and the romance that Lincoln’s Address at Gettysburg placed upon it; and most importantly, because my great grandfather was a Union soldier in that battle. He was a teenager (like me when I was playing this game). I got his war records and knew his unit and when he had been with it in the field; and I had seen with my own eyes the drums and flags carried by his Regiment. At the Battle of Gettysburg, he was 16 years old.”<sup>1</sup>

Unlike most children at that time, my father attended a boarding school in middle and high school. He boarded at St. Edwards in Austin, Texas during middle school and boarded in high school at Georgetown Preparatory School in Garrett Park, Maryland.

Speaking of his boarding school experience, my Dad said:

Anthony: “It’s a bit like the famous book where the boys are on an island by themselves, children, and they behave very badly, what’s the name of that book?”

Ava: “*The Lord of the Flies.*”

Anthony: “*Lord of the Flies.* It’s somewhat, like that, not quite, you know, that dramatic, that crazy, but the . . ., lots of continuous infighting amongst the boys, and tribalism in the form of picking sides and belonging to groups, and that was sort of the central activity.”

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<sup>1</sup> My great great great grandfather, Theodore Bliven Gerow, is listed in the Annual Report of the Adjutant General of the State of New York, vol. 1894-1895 as “Musician, Co. G, Fifth Infantry, transferred to Co. B, One Hundred and Forty-Sixth Infantry, this regiment, May 4, 1863; discharged, December 4, 1864, near Petersburg, Va.” By family lore, Theodore was a drummer.

While at school, my father often participated in rowdy activities.

Anthony: "I got in fights just for fun, not because I was mad at anybody. It was something we did, and I don't know exactly why, some kind of male stupidity, but we would take umbrage at something somebody said or did, and then we'd challenge them to a fight. Then we'd go have the fight, and all my buddies would come help me out. One time I was having a fight and one of my buddies brought me brass knuckles, and I actually put them on under my gloves, but then couldn't use them [because they could cause real serious damage] and I took them off. I didn't do too well; I would've done a lot better with the brass knuckles. The guy I was fighting, over time, he and I became very good friends. After high school, he got drafted and sent to Vietnam. He never came home, alive anyway."

"The school yard fighting and the Vietnam fighting were part of the same male stupidity. The fighting established a pecking order. That's all they were about. Both of them."

## Segregation

How were you touched by racial segregation?

Segregation was normal. I knew it as just the way things are; as if it was natural. For a long time, I didn't know there was anything wrong with it and didn't personally experience it until the day Seymour wasn't allowed to enter a restaurant with us.

Seymour Scott was a World War II veteran who risked his life for the United States of America in the European sector as an Army grunt. He earned a Purple Heart. Seymour worked for our family in whatever capacity the day called for; as a chauffeur, a waiter, a yardman or whatever handyman skills were needed. He was driving me, my brother and my mother from Victoria to Houston, when we stopped to eat at Hinze's Bar-B-Que in Wharton. Nick and I ran inside to play our favorite pinball machine. When I noticed Seymour wasn't inside with us, I went out to find him. Seymour was maybe my best friend. He was standing as if guarding our car. He was very well dressed in a gray suit with pocket square complete with Fedora. He explained he couldn't go into the restaurant because it did not serve coloreds. I didn't understand it. It made no sense. It made me angry. But I accepted it . . . as we all did, as Seymour did.

But as a teenager, I began to see people on TV who did not accept it and who took action to change our country. The Civil Rights Movement was very exciting for me and my generation as we imagined we had the power to change – that we did not have to accept the rules handed down to us by bigots. When John F. Kennedy was elected President in 1960, we were imbued with the excitement of this belief; and we worked hard to elect his Vice-President Lyndon Baines Johnson as President, on the promise that he would push the Civil Rights Agenda. I spent untold hours every day in the Fall of 1964 going door-to-door to identify his partisans and get them to the polls on Election Day."

## CONCLUSION

LBJ did manage, against all odds, to pass into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that outlawed discrimination in public accommodations including, most importantly to Seymour and my father, the right to walk together into a restaurant and have a meal together in a public space for all to see (just as every other person could do).