

Outrage Over Cotton Picking Mascot! Racism or Misunderstanding?

By: Nicholas Himes

Disclaimer: Hello everyone I am Nick Himes. Before we jump into the podcast, I would like to warn you all that it contains some language that may be offensive to some listeners. So, please be advised.

(Intro Music)

Nicholas Himes: Welcome to South Texas Stories I am Nick Himes. In this podcast, we will discuss the recent outrage surrounding the Robstown High School mascot, “The Cotton Pickers”. A video of the Robstown High School football team coming out to the field in their season opener went viral on Twitter on September 5th, 2020. Many African Americans shared their disapproval of the mascot claiming it was highly offensive and racist. The words cotton picker bring up many bad emotions in the minds of African Americans due to the history of slavery. A few of the quotes from twitter reads:

“In 2020 they still call the team the cotton pickers....”

“Aint no fucking way...”

“The fuck is this. How did this team name slip through the cracks for so long?”

But the question I will put forth is, was this mascot intentionally created to make mockery of black people in slavery or is it inadvertently offensive? Could there be a part of history that is missing that could lead to the understanding of why this school chose the “Cotton Picker” as its mascot? Hmm.

(Transitional Music)

We know the Dark history of slavery haunts many Americans both black and white. It is a very sensitive subject to touch on. The immoral and brutal assault against a people to force them to labor in rigorous conditions to generate wealth for their masters for centuries cannot be easily forgotten. This is why I understand the outrage. But the history of the city of Robstown gives a much-needed context to the “Cotton pickers” mascot. The city of Robstown was established in the early 1900s. After the Abolition of slavery in the south. This city was inhabited by a predominantly Hispanic people who were farmers and business entrepreneurs. They worked to turn the area into a leading cattle, cotton, and vegetable farming area. There was no slavery involved. There were many migrant workers that came to Robstown seeking employment opportunities.

A part of history I think many people are missing is that the huge demand for cotton remained after slavery was abolished. So, in South Texas many people of different ethnic backgrounds labored in the cotton fields. I have family that picked cotton post slavery that find nothing

wrong with the term cotton picker. They did not pick cotton as slaves but as free African Americans and were paid for it.

Gordon Leavell: 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 know 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.

NH: This is Gordon Leavell, my great uncle, and African American entrepreneur. He built a carpet cleaning business from the ground up. Now his business has grown into a full commercial cleaning service where he has over 30 employees on his staff. He grew up on a farm and worked in cotton fields from a young child into his teens. He details what picking cotton was like from his perspective.

GL: 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. 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 add them up. And you got six kids out there then it adds up quickly. But it's still small money.

NH: We know that back then a dollar was not that same as it is today, but I cannot see myself doing a hard day's work for less than five dollars. Aint no way! I asked my uncle to detail what it was like to pick 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 put 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. 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 conditioning. 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: I think it is amazing that he had this type of outlook on doing this type of labor as a kid. Though his parents taught him the value of hard work as a kid by sending him out to the fields he did not feel like he missed out on any fun growing up.

GL: 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. 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 was more family, the family worked together

NH: Learning this history from my family was very interesting and mind opening. Just imagining in my head my family in the fields doing this type of work was fascinating, but it led to some more challenging thoughts. I wondered how they could bring themselves to happily pick cotton when slavery was so fresh in the minds of black people. What type of feelings and emotions came with doing this kind of work? I had to ask.

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 respected 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, 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.

NH: Looking into the mindset that my uncle had, it is very easy to see why he felt the way he does about picking cotton. He didn't feel any ill will towards working in the cotton fields because he felt he was doing it to help provide for the family. He felt it kept his family together and close. I think it also gave him a sense of pride that he could do something to help contribute to the livelihood of the family. Now why is this important? Because it takes us back to the outrage behind the "Cotton Picker" mascot. Here we have a black man who picked cotton and is proud of it. There is no shame or degradation attached to it for him. I think blacks who have never picked cotton have a different perspective on what it means. They also may not be thinking of the many black families that picked cotton post slavery to earn a living, such as sharecropping. He went on to explain what he thought about being called a cotton picker.

GL: 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.

NH: He went to the University of North Texas and earned and degree in Kinesiology. He eventually decided to leave that field and to go in to business for himself.

GL: So, I now 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 (laughs). Yeah, good hard work. So being cotton picker doesn't bother me at all. I don't think its anybody saying anything about black people at all. And if they are so what? Cause it doesn't bother doesn'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 it's nothing derogatory about it. It was an honest work. It was an honest work.

NH: Now what does all of this have to do with the Robstown 'Cotton Pickers' mascot? I thought it would be good to ask someone who firsthand has picked cotton, what they thought about the mascot.

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. 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 hard 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.

NH: He brings up a strong point about there being Mexicans and people from Hispanic backgrounds that worked in the fields as well. Many migrant workers came to Robstown to work on cotton and vegetable farms. In fact, there is a historical landmark in Robstown for the labor camp that was built to provide housing and other resources to the migrant workers. So being a cotton picker is not just a black thing or just a slavery thing. I think this is the history that people are missing. In response to the outcry against the mascot the Robstown Independent School District issued a statement. Here's what they said: "The area around Robstown is one of the leading cotton producing regions in the United States. To be a 'Cotton Picker' represents a sense of pride based on tradition for the students and a historical legacy for the community members for Robstown."ⁱ Looking into the history of Robstown there is a deep, rich history surrounding picking cotton. And the people with generational ties to the city are proud of the name and the history that is tied to it. I have full respect for them and the way they want to honor their history. I am Nick Himes and thank you for listening to South Texas Stories.

ⁱ Michael Errigo, "A Texas High School Faces Criticism after Its Cotton Pickers Team Name Gains Attention," *Washington Post* (WP Company, September 7, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/09/06/texas-high-school-faces-criticism-after-its-cotton-pickers-team-name-gains-attention/>.

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