

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Clifford Boxley Remembers



"If we learn, we learn from the past. There's nothing to be learned from the future."

[Clifford Boxley, a resident of Natchez, Mississippi, and a long-time Civil Rights activist, is presently involved in efforts to identify the Mississippi route of the Underground Railroad and the designation of the Forks-of-the-Road Slave Market site in Natchez as a historic site and museum.]

To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- Reflect on Mr. Boxley's childhood influences and think about people in your own life who hold some of the same values and characteristics. What makes them good role models?
- How does Mr. Boxley's life on the plantation differ from life in the town of Natchez? How do you account for that difference?
- What are the ways that Mr. Boxley says he survived the "Jim Crow Jungle"?
- What does Mr. Boxley's incident with his friend, Dooney White, reveal about the nature of racism, its boundaries, and its essence?
- What does Mr. Boxley stress about the importance of learning about the past?
- Think about the Mr. Boxley's description of the 60s, the activism, his "defiance." What is he defying?
- What is Mr. Boxley's challenge to all young people regarding their education?

The name that's on the birth certificate is Cleverton Boxley. Through most of my adult life, I used Clifford Boxley. My plantation name, or the European name, that connects me to the family and to Natchez, Mississippi, is Clifford M. Boxley. I started using an African name in 1966, Gobo Wa Arathi, a Swahili name that I took to signify the process of stripping away the southern values, as well as American values, that had been instilled in me. In other words, my name publicly announced that I was getting rid of what I considered to be a white identification, a European identification, an American identification. The name Gobo in Swahili means "to cast off" or "to strip away," which really said that I was stripping the values of my football coach, the values of my mother, and the values of other adults that influenced me as I was being raised in Natchez, while, at the same time, I was taking on an African identity that would be truly mine.

Childhood Influences

In the African tradition, the one that plays the role of the male is the father, whether it's biological or not. So, my next-door neighbor Ernst helped me with my school studying and my lesson plans. Frank Ward--a local farmer who allowed me to work in his field at an early age. My football coach ... these are the type of men who influenced me as I was growing up. It was the Catholic Priest at Holy Family Church and School and that kind of adult influence. I can think of Sister Mary Cletus at Holy Family School, which was a school for all blacks that was run by White Catholics. I can

think of Mrs. Annette Donnan at Sadie V. Thompson High School as being one of the African-American females that had a great deal of influence on me.

Also, when I was a small child, my mother worked for a family called the Hoggatt family, a white family out on Providence on the southwest side of Natchez. I was raised on Providence Plantation, which, I guess you gathered, now was owned by **John Roy Lynch** who was enslaved at one time. So, a lot of my youth was spent particularly in the Hoggatt area because the Hoggatts had a son named Robert, who was just a little younger than I. My mother would work for them and we would be put into the same bed or playpen together.

The Hoggatts had all kinds of horses, ponds, pastures, and everything. So, there were always these people, whites who came to the Hoggatts for dinner or to camp out. You know, whites were no mystery to me as a young child. We camped out, rode horses, we fought and beat up on each other. Some of the older white boys would jump Robert and I'd jump them for jumping Robert and, when they would go home to get their [BB] guns, Robert and I would get our guns and go up into the loft of the big house down on the Marjorca Plantation and look up at the gate waiting for them to come back. It's only when I'm getting older and I'm beginning to come to town, this is when the lines of Jim Crow demarcation, the racial lines begin to be noticeable. I'm aware of them; they're pronounced.

Life in Natchez

There are these restrictions that you have. For whites and for us, the pattern of social contact and behavior is clearly laid out. It's like going to California in the 1960s, and, if you don't see any blacks working or doing this, then you don't apply or do it. We had a saying, "Franklin Street is where the N people meet," Negro people, you know I don't use that other word anymore. So, you knew if you went up on Main Street, you had to be going to work, or you had to be coming to one of these stores, you had to be coming to purchase something. You had to be coming over here to consume something or to work. Otherwise, you had no business on Main Street. Now, on Franklin Street, you could hang out, especially from about Union on back to what is now Martin Luther King and down, it was then Pine Street, and then down Pine Street. You could hang ... that was the, you know, the clubs, the drug store that was owned by blacks. It was all right to even stop and hang and talk in front of the hardware store, where people from the rural area would come in to get their ploughs and their seed and all that. You could socialize, but you're not hanging on Main Street.

So, I understood this. But, if there was ever a time when I was conscious of unfairness or what have you, it's when you are confronted with the first line of the oppressive system, the white police. That's your greatest fear. That's where your greatest trouble is going to come from. Or, from some "redneck" white men. You had to be very skillful and concerned, especially with shady-type white men, you know. You could discern which ones, you could tell them, you knew the type ... you know the typical ... come right up off the plantation, the overseer type. You know, dirty, unshaven, speech bad, teeth nasty or missing--those kinds of things. You don't want no action there.

So, you don't mess with white women. You don't talk back to white women. You don't sass white women. You don't even find yourself in the presence of white women alone, okay? I can work in the drug store and have a discussion with Ms. Alma, the woman who was in there. Or Glen, who is a young high school boy just like I am working there--but he's got a better position. Ms. Alma is in charge, and you talk, you know, about the issues of work. The floor is dirty, there is dust on the products, and what have you. But, you don't talk about sex. You don't talk about religion. You don't talk about politics. You don't talk about any of these things. Whether you considered that to be unfair or not, it's not a fair question, because it's not a question of our childhood.

We had to walk to school, so, you're talking about being able to survive in this Jim Crow jungle as a very young child. Skillful, skillful. If you had any money, you could catch the bus to a certain distance. You had to get in the back. You go in, and you put your little three cents or penny, whatever it is, and if the bus is full of whites, because up front whites are sitting on the bus. Your seats are all the way in the back. If it's full of whites all the way down the aisle, you put your penny or three cents in and get off the bus and go to the back door. You go to the back of the bus. If the seats are full of blacks and there are empty seats up there in the white section, you don't go, you just stand up and hold on and what have you. You don't challenge it. You know what type of communities to go right through. You know when you're interfacing with a white male what psychology to use --depending on the situation--whether to get the hell out of there or to stand and engage in a submissive form. You knew that the black girls going back and forth to school never should be going home alone. There always was a need for a boy to be with a girl. You knew that, as soon as a white man who might have his eyes on a young black girl came along in an automobile, you were to detain him in some kind of questioning way, while the girls hurried along. All of you stayed together and then, chances are, that you are not going to be bothered.

I can remember three of us that lived on the south end part of Natchez, Canal Street, Bobby Ferguson and Thomas Parker and myself, were coming right across from the bank. A group of white boys came along and hollered the "N" word. That's a no-no if you're white boys. That's a no-no calling us Niggers, okay? A whole car full of them. So, we say, "Your mama is a nigger, " all right? That means fighting. So, they're going down a one-way street, and we know we got some space to run. But, what they do is corner us in this alley right here. So, we're on this end, and they're coming down here, okay. We're getting ready to throw down. I think one of us had a knife. The deal was we were going to stand back-to-back and take on these whites. It just so happened, that as we got closer, one of the whites recognized me from being at the Hoggatt's place. His name was Dooney White, and he said, "Daniel, is that you?" You know, I'm Daniel Boone to them because we all hunted in the woods, and I was good in the woods. I said, "Dooney, is that you?" Then, we all kind of just shucked it off and exchanged unpleasantries and whatever. "Man, you guys getting ready to get beat up, good thing it's you. Yeah, we were going to kick ya'll ass ... " and all that kind of stuff.

The Jim Crow norm was to say, "Yes Ma'am," and "No Sir," especially to whites here in Natchez, Mississippi. In 1955, I dropped out of school and went to work at Gilbert's Drugstore. I used to deliver drugs all over Natchez for \$18 a week, riding a bicycle for six and a half days a week. I would never say, "Yes Ma'am" and "No Ma'am" to the whites when I went to deliver the drugs. I remember there was a cleaners down at the end of Main Street, Days Cleaners. I went to take some drugs down there, and I didn't say "Yes Ma'am" to the lady, and she called and tried to get me fired.

But then, there were times in growing up here in Jim Crow Natchez where you had to use survival psychology, especially when you came in contact with the frontline oppressors, the police. We call it "black psychology." That's the time when I would grin, shuffle, say "Yes Sir" or "No Sir," look down. All of those things that said that you were inferior, you know. But, that was a survival tactic. Even at a very young age, we understood how to survive in a racist and very violent system. You know, oppression that was supported by police and mob violence that very clearly delineated what your movements could be, what the codes of social relationships were between white and black, and the demand that blacks be submissive to white dominance. For example, the police represented the possibility of death, a beating, or jail, the works. So, you gave the stereotypical response to the police in order to avoid to being subjected to any of this horrific kind of treatment that could come down on you.

On the Schools

The Catholic school, to me, was wonderful. The teachers were, you know, they were stern ... matter of fact; they beat the hell out of you. I guess I was a typical youngster who got into all kinds of devilment and mischievousness, and a sister named Sister Mary Cletus took hold of me. I guess she was a fourth grade teacher. She took hold of me and insisted that I straighten out and that I get through school. She was like my guardian angel. Sister Mary Cletus still has a warm spot in my heart. Often, when I came home for a visit, I would go look her up at the Catholic school. It was fun going to the all black Catholic school. A child's life is food, the movies, and whatever else we had as values or what have you. We didn't have that adult baggage that white and black adults had to deal with. It was a way of life. You know, we were not crusaders or anything of that sort. We were basketball players, we were marble shooters, we were cowboys and Indians, and we were fellows and girls who had their favorite boyfriends, and we were people who would put tacks in the desks of each other's seat. We were spitball throwers. But, we were never disrespectful to a teacher, we were never disobedient in the presence of a teacher or an adult. But, in fact, we were disobedient at our own peer level, in our own culture level, you know, youth culture.

There was also a time that I went to the public school called Brumfield. It was around the fourth grade or something like that. I guess I did something to deserve a whipping, and so the vice principal at that time, I guess it was, or one of the officials, who happens to be **Ralph Jennings'** father, and the janitor took me in the basement. In the boiler room and they had a strap. This strap was like a razor strap that you use in the barbershop, but it had holes in it. They'd pull your pants down and expose your bare skin and whip you. That strap would suck, when they pulled it away, and cause this terrible pain. So after that whipping, I jumped the fence and ran home to Providence and told my mother. That was the end of my stay at Brumfield.

You're looking for a place where this oppression doesn't occur. Basically, that's up North. So, you start looking towards getting out of this system of oppression. You don't want to fix flats and do the dirty grime work or what have you. I can remember the teacher asking, "What do you want to be when you finish high school? Where are you going to go to college?" All of these black schools. Being poor, I didn't have any money, I'm not going to college. But luckily, I won an academic scholarship to Utica Institute, a one-room [black] junior college that was up near Jackson. I go to look at it, and it's this long road and this row of trees going up to this one building that's this way across the road as the road comes. I look down there and said, "Nah uh. I'm not going there. I'm going to California with my aunt. I'm going to play football. I'm going to college and become a professional football player."

Migrating West

I had an aunt that, and she was in California and she said I could come to Vallejo. "Valley Joe," I'm going to "Valley Joe" California. Then, when I'm in California, I get some freedom. The Civil Rights Movement is taking hold. We have a Civil Rights Movement, California-style. You know, we're taking on housing discrimination, bank discrimination, discrimination everywhere, employment and whatever. Fair employment acts and all those kinds of things. Whites are not burning crosses--although, there have been some crosses burned in California--they're not burning crosses in front of my house. I can remember very well in California when we were doing demonstrations, I'm the loudest thing. People who were born and raised in California said, "You're too loud." I'm expressing my freedom, you know. I'm free, and I can sing loud, and nobody's going to come and arrest me. The most you're going to get is someone ducking their car at you and yelling the "N" word and throwing water balloons at you. But, that's the most. And, down South, they're beating heads. You know I'm yelling, "We shall overcome." I'm really screaming.

But by and large, especially since I've been back home in Natchez since 1995 from California, I am on guard because I didn't want to come into any action with the southern police force again. That fear of the police followed me to California. Even during the Civil Rights struggles when we

were demonstrating, sitting in and stuff like that, and people going to jail, when the police got to the row in front of me to arrest us, I would get up and leave, because I didn't want to go to jail based on my experience with police from the southern situation.

On Activism

You know, sometimes I look back and say, "Where did all of this advocacy and activism come from that I've been in most of my adult life? Where did it start? Was it always there?" I guess, when I look at it, you know, refusing to be a Baptist like the rest of the children in the neighborhood that I grew up with. Waiting until I'm old enough to be baptized a Catholic. I told my mother I didn't want to go to the high school because they had uniforms. I didn't like that khaki pants, khaki shirt, and a black necktie. I didn't like those at all. So, I guess I could begin to see some of the rebellion, and that remains today in terms of things that I don't like, the injustices that I don't like. To challenge them and take them on, to try to make corrections or whatever the case might be. Refusing to wear the uniform.

Well, there's no experience in the future. You can't learn anything from the future. You show me somebody who has gotten something from the future. Okay? Not only that, growing up here, they told other people that we never did anything, we were never worth anything. So, when I got to California and went to the college at San Mateo in Northern California when it was over in the eucalyptus trees and what have you, I learned that white people cheat, steal, act dumb just like anybody else. So, somewhere in 1963 ... when I left here in 1960, I wanted everything that I'd been denied. I wanted the job that the white man had, I wanted his woman, I wanted a white shirt and tie job, I wanted a white car, I wanted a house that was white and all of that, okay. So, I was on my way to doing that, you know. Working washing pots in the hospital or whatever it is. I'm on my way, I'm on my way up...and in 1963, they bombed that church, they killed these four girls in Birmingham. They blew those girls up.

My life passed in front of me. All the material things and things that I was pursuing were of no importance for me, unfortunately for my wife and children at the time. They were no longer important to me. They didn't just blow up four girls, they blew up black. So, I wanted to know what it is about being black that we have to be treated this way. That's when I'm beginning to start this questioning, you know, that's what changed me into a human. That's it, exactly. So, from there on, I'm not interested in the white house, the white woman, the white job, any of those kinds of things. I'm interested in justice on the planet. And, the first justice is fixing this injustice that's coming at us because we're black.

Then, I'm pursuing what is it about "black." When I start looking back on what it is to be black, what do I discover eventually? First, I start out with just things from the South. My grandfather's saw, for example. Bringing them for my children because I realized they were raised in California, and they ain't coming South. They are not in the South. They don't know anything about where I come from and what I did and what I used to have to live. And, so I started collecting these little artifacts and storing them. And, then there was a set of adults from down here who were denying, trying to get away from any of it, who said, "I'm not from Mississippi, I'm from New Orleans," because of social stigmatization, or what have you. So, that's really what started me to collecting, and when you look back black, you have to look back to the South and beyond America.

In college, almost every time I had to write about a subject, I wrote about its relativity to blacks in the world. Then, I was a product of the black conscious movement of the mid 1960s, right after the early Civil Rights events, this movement in California and across the rest of the country starts changing culture. We're doing African stuff, man. We're taking on an African name. We're doing African ceremonies, weddings and funerals, and we're African. We aren't letting the Jewish white community, the Selznicks and all of those [Hollywood] people who had defined us in the 1930s and 1940s, say who we are; we aren't letting you say who we are anymore. Man, defiance is coming out of me, you know, all the holes in my body, defiance is coming out.

So, this thing about we have never done anything, never made any contributions to civilization ... when you start looking, you say, "Oh no, it's just the opposite. It's just the opposite." And man, do I eat this stuff up. So, you start collecting images to go with it. I extracted these images that start with the Leakeys findings and Kenya and the Great Zimbabwe and what have you. And the oral stories that go with it. The Mountains of the Moon and hieroglyphic writings and images that tell the story of a people who come up out of Central Africa. So anyway, that's what started me, and, then, when you go to schools in California, and the schools are full of Asians, full of Filipinos, full of Hispanics.

Then, in middle school you've got the whole library plastered with pushpins and duct tape and masking tape images, and you take these students grade by grade and walk them through history and our story. Oh man, that's just so rewarding, so rewarding. And, you know ... it hasn't always been rosy for the Asians in California, it hasn't always been rosy for the Hispanics in California. So, you know, we were all confined. But, you know, that's Jim Crow America.

Why Teach Jim Crow?

When I speak, particularly during Black History Month, and we go all the way back to the 400- or 500-year experience of slavery, I always ask the question: what lessons have we learned from our history? Because I end it with a pair of handcuffs that might have been used in one of those enslavement forts 500, 400, 300 years ago and with a pair of police handcuffs today. What's changed? Now, there are too many of our youngsters that are symbolized by these handcuffs who are in prison. What have we as adults given them to change them? I write in my book *Ancestor's Wisdom*, that this is the only place that says we want to educate our youth so that they *don't* do. And, there's your answer right there: they don't do what we've done. We want to educate our youth so they don't have to go through what we have. But the white supremacy system is alive and well in the world.

Other societies train their adults to transcend and transform, so that they hand the youth a world that is more just and more spiritually balanced. If we learn, we learn from the past. There's nothing to be learned from the future. So, there's your answer. Why teach? Because the life experiences that we have had is what we use in order to teach. There's no such thing as pure mathematics. You have to teach the life applications of the use of mathematics. You have to teach them that your nuclear sciences don't create bombs that destroy the world if you're in harmony with God. Only a fool would create something that would destroy the world the way bombs have been created. If you separate that moral part from the education, then you have failed.

You have failed. Nothing they taught me in school helped me transcend. Nothing they taught me. Are you going to teach me this white supremacy stuff in school? No, I'm challenging you. Especially in college. You're not going to push Abraham Lincoln on me as a good guy. I found some stuff on him, and that's what I'm going to give back to you. When I'm in prison, and you're teaching me this old sad white-dominated whitewashed history, I don't even want to come. When you teach me black history, the jail classes are full. When I teach your white son, white daughter what real human struggle is about and what human success and human triumph are about despite all the odds, at best we hope that it will make him a better human being as he inherits your empire.

One thing I did learn in California. They showed me something--they said education is about teaching you about everybody else's experience and teaching them about yours. I'll never forget it. That that's the purpose of education: them to teach you about other people's experience and you to teach them about yours.