

REX BENHAM

Interview 295a

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Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT:

In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, Georgia native and forester Rex Benham reminisces about his life growing up in Georgia and his career in forestry in Texas. The 5th of 8 brothers, he remembers going to segregated schools and then going through integration, attending the University of Georgia as the first African American forestry student and graduating as the first African American with a forestry degree. He recalls moving to Texas and beginning his work as an inventory forester for Champion in Livingston and then moving around the area as his job and the company owners changed. He reflects on the changes in forest management practices, the nature of the forestry industry, and ownership, as well as being the only degreed African American forester with a private company in East Texas for much of his career.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Today's date is July 16, 2020. My name is Jonathan Gerland and we are at The History Center today. I'm with Mr. Rex Benham and we are going to do an oral history and I thought Rex, is it okay to call you Rex?

Rex Benham (hereafter RB): Absolutely!

JG: Alright Rex, let's just start maybe with telling us when and where you were born.

RB: Well, I was born November 2, 1959 in a small community northwest of Atlanta called Cartersville. So, I grew up in the hills of Georgia.

JG: The hills of Georgia. Well, talk a little bit about growing up.

RB: Well, my parents, Alfred and Mamie had 8 sons, no daughters, and I turned out to be number 5. It was at that time, when I was born in '59 schools were segregated and so was society, and Cartersville wasn't no different. I remember going to the backdoor of restaurants, sitting in the balcony of theaters and going to all black schools. They desegregated the schools in Cartersville when I was going to the 3rd grade. So, from the third grade on, I went to a desegregated school.

JG: Okay, but you do remember going to an all-black school?

RB: Yes sir, the first two years.

JG: Well, there's a lot of questions I could ask about all that. So, I do want to come back to the schools and maybe the differences, if you can remember the differences, but tell me a little bit more about your parents. Tell me about your father.

RB: Well, my father was a laborer, worked at the local Goodyear Tire mill there in Cartersville. At that particular mill they made the fabric for the tires. I don't think at the time they had come out with the steel belted radials, and so you had the polyester fiber in the tires. And that is basically what they manufactured at that place, so they could ship it out and was doing the tire manufacturing that was placed inside the tires.

JG: Had he worked there a long time?

RB: Yes, he had. He worked there for the majority of my life, at least as far as I remember. He did have a small tenure with the local Lockheed Mill that was down in Marietta, which is about 20 miles south of Cartersville. All this is up and down Interstate 75. (**JG:** okay) He worked there a little while with his brother and for some reason, I don't know why, he ended up working there at the Goodyear Mill there in Cartersville.

JG: Okay, was that unionized?

RB: Yes, it was. I think later in his career he was actually the union foreman.

JG: Okay. Was the union in any regards segregated?

RB: I don't think so, at least from my recollection. I'm pretty sure there was probably some power structure there that was more favorable towards the whites than it was to blacks, but as far as I can remember in my later years, I think it eased up.

JG: I do definitely want to get to school, but talk a little bit more...well let's not neglect your mother. Tell me about your mother and maybe her family.

RB: My mother was the oldest of three sisters; there was three of them. She was a laborer as well, worked at one of the mills that made gloves. She worked there for the majority of my childhood until it got to the point to where her fingers were so damaged from that type of work that she had to find other employment.

JG: What kind of gloves?

RB: The kind you wear, hand gloves.

JG: Like ladies' gloves or working gloves?

RB: Well, I think it was more of a fashion type design. I mean I just remember they called it the glove factory.

JG: Glove factory!

RB: There was various mills around there. Cartersville is known for carpet. It is the number two carpet manufacturer in the country and Dalton, GA which is to the north is number one.

JG: Wow!

RB: If you worked in Cartersville growing up you had a whole bunch of choices. You were going to work at a carpet mill or you were going to work at a carpet mill and I worked at several during my time. But she done that until, like I said, she couldn't, and started doing domestic work.

JG: What about your brothers?

RB: My brothers basically worked through high school at some of the mills and as they got older, my oldest brother joined the Air Force. As a matter of fact, he did not graduate high school. And he went into the Air Force I think before he graduated. My second oldest brother graduated high school and went to a junior college there in Georgia and later transferred to the University.

JG: So, the University of Georgia. The University.

RB: Yes, the University. Yes, and my third oldest we called him the smart one. He was a National Merit Scholarship recipient.

JG: Really?

RB: Yes, and he went directly to the University.

JG: And what was his name?

RB: His name is Steve.

JG: Steve, okay.

RB: There was 8 of us: my oldest is Alfred Jr., then Barry, then Steve, then Michael, then myself, then Patrick, Marlon and Vernon.

JG: How many went to college?

RB: Three of us did, and we all went to the University of Georgia.

JG: I definitely want to talk a little bit about that too. We will probably jump around a good bit if that is okay, but I want to talk a little bit more about segregated society. So, what are some of your first memories of, for lack of a better word, race? Seeing it, where did the family shop? When did you interact with other races?

RB: Well, I think for the majority of the time, it was basically, you recognized it was there but you didn't know why things were done the way they were. I know that you went into a public store and people would follow you around to make sure...

JG: You say people you mean...

RB: Store tenders

JG: And they were white?

RB: Yes. None of the stores in downtown Cartersville were owned by black people.

JG: What was the population of Cartersville?

RB: When I was growing up it was about 15,000.

JG: Okay, now how often, when you would go to the store would you go with your parents?

RB: It would be with my parents, yes. It was only until maybe teenage years that you start venturing out on your own.

JG: Okay.

RB: And then by that time things were a little bit different. You still had the tension, but it wasn't nearly as severe as it was when I was say, 5.

JG: Was that typically on like a Saturday or...?

RB: You would normally venture out on the weekends, because the rest of the time you were either at school or you were making sure your chores were done before your parents got home. And that was something that we definitely made sure happened. Even though sometimes we would wait until an hour before they were due home, but we made sure that things were tidy when they got home.

JG: So, what were your chores?

RB: We were basically cleaning house, sweeping, mopping, going to the...y'all call them washaterias, we call them laundromats.

JG: Laundromats, yes.

RB: It was one that was in the neighborhood that most of the people in the neighborhood visited, and we would load up the clothes and carry them like a back sack in a sheet and go down to the washer mat and do laundry and come back with them and fold them when we got home; and that kind of stuff you know. It took up a pretty good bit of our time.

JG: Did your mama supervise that pretty closely?

RB: No, I think we was pretty much independent, from the standpoint that we knew what we had to do and we got it done, you know. We got encouragement by a couple of whippings. They don't call it spankings, but you know.

JG: Belt whippings?

RB: Switches.

JG: Switches.

RB: Well, it got to the point that almost anything went, you know, belts, race track parts. You'd get beat with your toys, you know, that kind of stuff.

JG: Now, you say race track you mean like hot wheel tracks?

RB: Hot wheels tracks, you know, it got ridiculous when you start getting beat with your own toys, you know, but I think we responded well to discipline, I mean of course, there was a wild streak.

JG: But eight boys, right?

RB: Right.

JG: Well, that wasn't common.

RB: The fact there were no girls, you know, it was different.

JG: Did your mom ever talk about that? Did you ever have a conversation with your mom about that; about her having to raise eight boys and no daughters?

RB: Well, she wanted one but I think when number 8 came by she recognized that 8 is enough and she quit after that. I think by us being all boys it gave us an opportunity to learn some skills that we probably wouldn't have learned any other way. Like, I'm a pretty good cook and I think most of my brothers are, not afraid of doing house work and that kind of stuff.

JG: So, both your parents worked during the daytime hours. I mean did they do any shift work?

RB: My father as he got older switched to the third shift.

JG: At the Goodyear plant?

RB: At the Goodyear plant, as we started vacating the house it was really not a need for him to be there at night but our mother was.

JG: So, y'all never were home alone so to speak?

RB: Well I mean...

JG: Of course, y'all were spaced out in ages I guess huh?

RB: For the most part we were two years apart.

JG: Two years apart.

RB: Except for number seven and number eight they were five years. That was a surprise. But for the most part we're two years apart.

JG: Any particular thing that they taught you, say about being black?

RB: You know you hear about "the talk" that you hear a lot of black parents give, but I don't think I received that...

JG: Really?

RB: ...if I did, I don't recall it that much. I recognized early on that there are differences and there are always going to be people that might try to hurt you, you know, but I think I had more difficulty with my black neighbors than I did anybody white, you know.

JG: Talk a little bit about that. What do you mean by that?

RB: Well, the fact that there was competition between the families because there was always this deal to where one family might be two steps above your family and so there was a tendency to believe that they were better than you.

JG: So more of a class thing?

RB: Yes, and the think I always thought was somewhat amusing was the fact that we were all poor, you know, and we all living for the most part like we grew up in low rent housing and so we was segregated to certain parts of the city and having been that way, you were around certain people the vast majority of your life. Because once you get in low rent housing, you don't move. You basically stay in that area unless you move out of low rent housing. There wasn't a whole lot of turnover in tenants.

JG: When you say low rent housing is it a housing complex or individual buildings?

RB: It was a housing complex. You might have a row of apartments here followed by 100 feet difference there might be another.

JG: But not a house, you lived under one roof. You weren't the only family under one roof?

RB: No, it was a common roof.

JG: A common roof. Was it multi-story?

RB: Some of them were, it just depends on what particular needs you have because it was different room sizes, different number of bedrooms available.

JG: So, how many, having eight or seven siblings, all boys, I imagine y'all had to share a bed.

RB: Oh yes, we mostly lived in a four-bedroom apartment; Mom and Dad had one and the rest of the brothers at the beginning maybe there was one able to sleep in a room by himself, but as the rest of us came, you know, that got changed over time. Then as the older brothers left the nest, then we were able to move out and spread out a little bit more.

JG: Probably a little competition there too?

RB: Well for the most part it went according...

JG: By age?

RB: According to age you know, we always had to do those kinds of things, especially when it came down to watching TV. We were assigned a day and you learned negotiation skills because the older brothers might have wanted to watch a program on your day and so he had to barter with you.

JG: So close enough to the bigger...Atlanta, right? Is Atlanta pretty close?

RB: We was about 45 miles north of Atlanta.

JG: So, did you get Atlanta TV stations?

RB: Yes.

JG: So, you had more than one channel, I guess?

RB: Yes, we did; not too many but as a matter of fact we used to watch Ted Turner's station when he first came out on Channel 17, but it was on the U section of the dial.

JG: UHF.

RB: Yes, so you had to really, really manipulate that dial to bring his station in.

JG: I remember some TV's we had a pair of pliers, the knob had broke and you had to put that knob half way through a click.

RB: Yes, or go outside and turn the antenna just right, you know, so you can get better reception.

JG: Yes, so do you remember some of the TV shows you watched? And since one brother preferred one over another what were your favorite shows?

RB: I always liked the scary movies, the horror movies. We could get a station out of Chattanooga Tennessee which was about 81 miles from us and on Friday nights they would show what I guess you would call a horror movie, and we used to love to do that.

JG: Did you watch the Vincent Price ones?

RB: Oh absolutely! The Frankenstein movies, the werewolves, all those. We used to wait till Friday nights; we enjoyed Friday night!

JG: So, all of y'all, all your brothers?

RB: Oh yes, we would more or less get around and watch those kind of TV shows together. We also enjoyed reading comic books together. We would sit around and have about four or five editions of the Spider Man's, the Fantastic Four's and all those type super hero comic books and sit around and pass them around. We spent a lot of time together.

JG: So how did y'all get your money to buy comic books and things?

RB: Oh, selling bottles and aluminum cans, mowing grass and doing anything that someone else didn't want to do but we could get a dollar or two for doing it.

JG: Now doing that did y'all venture into say the segregated white areas?

RB: Eventually you had to because they were the only ones that were selling those type things, you know. I don't want to give you the impression that Cartersville was a horrible place to live. Most of my memories were after I started going to desegregated schools. I do remember the first two years and anything prior to that is somewhat fuzzy.

JG: Okay, well let's jump to school then. I don't know where's the best place to start, but since you did have a little bit of time in say one way and you had a little time the rest was a different way what differences did you notice or any particular memories.

RB: Well, the most obvious thing was the quality of the textbooks, the quality of the facilities.

JG: Did you have white teachers too?

RB: Yes, and there was a couple of blacks that rolled over from the black schools, because what they done in Cartersville was not so much shut down the old black schools but incorporated them into the school system. So, the schools that were “all black” now had desegregated populations.

JG: Was there any busing going on?

RB: Only if you wanted to. I mean, I had ridden a bus a couple of times but that was when I was going to my part of town to the high school which is about 3 to 4 miles away. But there was no mandatory busing.

JG: So, the school you went to pre-integration and the school you went to...or were they different schools? Did you go to a different building?

RB: Yes, you went to different campuses.

JG: Okay so, what was that like? Did you...I guess what I'm getting at is, was the first one close to your house where you lived and then the second father away or?

RB: Well, when...the third grade we went to what was called Gilmore Street Elementary School, which was basically a mile away from where I lived.

JG: Was it all white before?

RB: Yes, it was all white before. And so, it was just common for you to walk to school, regardless of where it was, you know.

JG: How close was the other school you went to?

RB: Some was a little further away. The furthest was the high school, but the elementary and junior high school, matter of fact the former all black school was turned into a junior high school, so that was right in my neighborhood. So that was no problem walking to that school and by general nature we walked anyway.

JG: Right.

RB: It was no big deal to walk to school.

JG: Did your mom and dad have a car?

RB: Yes, but...

JG: I mean in early days when you were really young?

RB: Well...

JG: Did they both have one or you had one between them?

RB: We had one vehicle, most of the time you car pooled. Most of the time, the way it worked out is that there was someone else in the neighborhood that also worked at that particular factory and they would come by and pick you up. That is how it was handled for the most part. Later on, in my childhood yes, you got some old clunkers, but it was never anything new.

JG: Yes, talk about some of the classes. You mentioned the text books so I assume the textbooks the black schools got were the old textbooks from the white school.

RB: Yes, it was old editions and a lot of it was in...well the way it always worked, was the white schools got the new editions and the old editions went to the black schools. I'm pretty sure that was pretty common across the country. We didn't have air conditioning in the black schools, but you did in the white schools and things along those nature. For the most part the biggest thing that was difficult for me, well it really wasn't difficult, but different, was having not being around white folks, I didn't know what to expect and just as they were curious about me, I was curious about them.

JG: You're talking about classmates?

RB: Yes, you saw people, you saw whites in general population, but as far as interacting with them on a personal level, that never happened until I started third grade.

JG: Well, how did that go were you one of the ones that was able to make friends across the aisle, so to speak, or did you see others that it was easier or more difficult?

RB: I think we all had different levels of transition. One of the difficult things was to be in a class by yourself, and when I mean by yourself, being the only black there.

JG: The only black.

RB: It was extremely difficult for me to make that adjustment because I've always thought I was an outgoing individual and to have no one to talk to for an extended period of time, unless you see somebody during class break that you can talk to that looks like you. Now there were no overtures on my classmates as far as recognizing me as an individual or a person until they recognized that some of the things that they believed about black folks were not true.

JG: Now how long did that take?

RB: It probably took the first couple of years, because I remember 4th grade, I used to have fights all the time but it was not of my doing. I mean...

JG: Fights with whites?

RB: With fellow students, fellow white students; and it was none of my doing, I mean, just the fact that I'm there and I'm a black guy and they are going to fight me. That went on for three or four years.

JG: Really?

RB: I remember sixth grade was probably the last time I had a fight with a white student, but third to sixth yes, I used to have them quite frequently.

JG: Now was that pretty common with your black friends?

RB: Yes, for the most part, for the most part it was, but for some reason they always seemed to pick me out. But as time went by, they like I said, the recognition on their part that some of the stereotypes they had believed over the years weren't true and the walls started coming down and things got better.

JG: So, Cartersville Schools integrated in about what year?

RB: I'd say '67, something like that.

JG: Okay. Do you remember your parents talking about integration? Like, did y'all eat meals together, did y'all eat the supper meal together and have conversations?

RB: Yes, but you know at that time, it was something that my parents didn't really openly talk about and being an adult right now I can understand that from the standpoint of my father was working in a situation where no matter what he did, he did not have any control over how he could live his life because it was dictated by someone else. No matter what he did, he had no control over that. The mental anguish that must have created in him, to see that no matter what he did, he did not have any control over it. I recognize that today as my father was a lot stronger than I thought he was because it takes tremendous courage to put up with that.

JG: Restraint, huh?

RB: Yes, absolutely.

JG: And he was probably doing that for y'all.

RB: He was, because it was the only thing he could do to provide for his family and knowing that one misspoken word could ... who knows how that could have been as far as the impact that could have had on his ability to provide for his family. You see that even today, you know!

JG: Is your father still alive?

RB: No, he passed away in 2000 and my mom passed away I want to say it was '05, yes. No, it was in '13, she passed away in '13.

JG: And they continued to live in Cartersville?

RB: Lived in Cartersville all their lives, you know. My mom spent some time out here in Texas with me.

JG: After your father passed away?

RB: Yes, but for the most part she lived in Georgia all their life.

JG: Now were their parents native Georgians also?

RB: Yes.

JG: I'm jumping back again, but were there any family stories about people in your family that you never met?

RB: Absolutely, especially on my father's side of the family. (**JG:** okay) His father had a large family, several brothers, and we always heard stories, because when they left Georgia a lot of them left during the great migration and went to California, went to Chicago, went to Philadelphia.

JG: Now, say for the recording what you mean by the great migration.

RB: When the early thirties, a lot of lynching was going on in Georgia, and a lot of blacks left the south and they pursued lifestyles in other parts of the country.

JG: So, I guess, I know in Texas the early twenties was the big KKK and about the same time there in Georgia, okay.

RB: Yes.

JG: So, they would tell those stories of...

RB: You would hear some of the nicknames. I have one uncle, well he was a great uncle but we all called him uncles, no distinction between great uncles and regular uncles, everybody is family.

JG: Everybody is uncle!

RB: Yes, everybody is uncle, but you would hear that this one particular uncle loved to use a knife and he was known as a great knife fighter, you know, and that kind of stuff. My grandfather, he left and went to Philadelphia. I never met him.

JG: That would be your father's father?

RB: That would be my father's father, never met him, but you would hear those kinds of stories though.

JG: Any stories back to slavery?

RB: No. I regret that too because we never really got a good feel for my family's history past my grandfathers.

JG: Past your grandfathers, so did your mom ever talk about integration? I would think if you were number 5 and the last two were a little farther apart, you're not quite in the middle, but you had older siblings. Was your oldest brother through school by the time of integration or was he still in school?

RB: Let me think.

JG: I'm just thinking of you being sort of there in the middle you know, you had two or three years of one way and then so you could see the differences. Did your mom ever pull you aside and say, "hey Rex listen here this is going to be" or not?

RB: No, for the most part my mom recognized that there wasn't a whole lot that could be done about the current situation. I think we were taught to excel, that our biggest advantage would be education and that anything we did that would hinder that progress as far as our education, wasn't going to be tolerated. So, I focused on studying, you know, it kept me from getting into a lot of the issues that some of the others, potential people, because there were some hell raisers in the black community that when they went into the desegregated portions of our community. It was tough; I mean, especially by time high school life turned around, it was tough. But, as far as me being intimidated or even restricted by being in those type of environments I really, it really, I don't think it had a negative effect on me because I was able to function and excel in those situations and environments.

JG: Now do you remember a vibrant African American business community before integration? Before the civil rights act?

RB: A lot of that stuff happened...

JG: You were too young?

RB: It was so much...well there wasn't a...there was a section of Cartersville that was where most of the black businesses were housed at.

JG: Like grocery stores?

RB: That kind of stuff.

JG: The laundromats.

RB: Yes, those were in the black community and they served a function because you couldn't go anywhere else. As they integrated society, a lot of those businesses closed and so that was pretty widespread.

JG: Did you know any children of those business owners? Were you close to any? I mean to experience that difference because that was something that happened, you know?

RB: It was and as a matter of fact one of my cousins had a clothing store, he eventually became one of the city council members of Cartersville, pretty well known in Cartersville now.

JG: What is his name?

RB: His name was Clarence Benham and his son is Robert Benham, who is Supreme Court Justice in Georgia, so we pretty proud of that.

JG: Yes, yes.

RB: He is retiring this year, but he has been on the Supreme Court, first elected state wide elected judge in the history of Georgia.

JG: Wow! How about that!

RB: That is alright.

JG: So, his father was a business owner?

RB: Yes, and a city council member as well.

JG: And a council member.

RB: Yes, he went to the University of Georgia law school.

JG: Okay, but I guess what I was getting at is if you had any experience with, you know, black business owners and then the changes that that brought to those communities when people are now free, maybe not encouraged, but free to patronize any place they wanted.

RB: Yes, and a lot of that was just opportunity of location, because a lot of them were still able to prevail when that flipped, because they was conveniently located and there was no other non-black owned business that could compete with them. So, from that stand point...

JG: I know I've interviewed white people in the Beaumont community who remember being teenagers before your time. You were born in 1959, so '55-'56 being teenagers and they talk about going to the segregated black business part of downtown Beaumont because that was the only place you could buy rock and roll music; even Elvis Presley you had to go to a black record store to buy rock and roll and blues music. So, people who later had some perspective on life, even from the white community could see how vibrant, as they shared with me, everything the white community had the black community had too, and not to say that integration wasn't a good thing, but those people kind of got left behind because the black community now had an opportunity to go somewhere else. Because they were denied that they tended to go there just because they could now but that really impacted those black communities.

RB: Yes.

JG: Did you see any relations on that?

RB: I'm sure it was on a level probably on a higher plane than probably what I recognize right now, because I mean I didn't have any money.

JG: I hear what you're saying.

RB: And so, to actually witness and experience some of that stuff was not something that happened to me growing up.

JG: You're probably too young to see the impact of the Civil Rights Act, things like that and maybe that...well did you witness some of the turmoil after that? This would be late sixties, you're still pretty young.

RB: I'm still pretty young but at the same time when you're in the third grade and you hear that kind of stuff, and having a TV was not something that was real common in my household growing up. You didn't get the newspaper, so basically communication was word of mouth on a level that.

JG: Do you remember hearing about Martin Luther King?

RB: Vaguely.

JG: Yes, just too young and not really like you said being tuned in.

RB: Wasn't tuned into that kind of stuff at that time because we didn't have the resources to be tuned in. It disappoints me to a certain degree, because I would have loved to have had that experience; the emotional experience anyway.

JG: I had one of my questions here and you mentioned it earlier, so we may have covered it already, kind of like class distinctions, you were saying there was competition even in the black community, and so like I said you may have already covered it but I just

wanted to formally ask you that. Is there anything you can elaborate on that in the community that you might have witnessed, some class distinctions even within the African American community?

RB: Absolutely, and a lot of it was self-inflicted by the black community on itself, to see that because I lived in low rent housing that some of the blacks who did not had the tendency to think that they were superior to us. A lot of it was also just envy; I think at least for the most part the Benham name, at least in Cartersville among the black community, was perceived to be a family of achievers. There was a lot of families in our immediate surroundings that were not, and so from an envy standpoint a lot of that...we were targeted.

JG: It's an interesting word choice there, achievers, yes, I like that. Anything you want to elaborate by what you mean by that.

RB: Well, I think, like I mentioned earlier my brother was a National Merit Scholar. They don't give those out to just anybody you know. We have always when we finished high school we were in the top parts of our class. We always, I think we promoted excellence among ourselves inside of our family core group.

JG: Now so obviously your parents definitely encouraged you to do that. Did both your parents finish school?

RB: They finished high school.

JG: High school okay, through 12th grade.

RB: Yes, and I think living in Cartersville you had to at least from my point of view, you had to be okay with either working in a factory the rest of your life or you were going to further your education.

JG: So, was it kind of a way for your father, "hey I want something better" for you. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

RB: Well not so much my father saying that as it was my brothers showing me that that can happen because it's real hard to aspire to do something when you don't see nobody doing it that looks like you.

JG: Right.

RB: So, by my brother, especially Steve, he is brother number 3, when he went through high school, he more or less established a level or set the bar so dang gone high that when I came in a couple of years after him all the teachers that he had, I now have, and the question they always asked me was are you smart like your brother Steve? So, it left me in a situation like what the heck I'm going to do now. I had nowhere to go but up,

because I felt if I didn't then I would let my brother Steve down. And so, there was some internal pride going on there, and we kind of done that to each other.

JG: Was it a little bit maybe of resentment at the time, but later appreciation?

RB: Of course, I mean I hated the fact because I lost my identity because everybody said you look just like Steve, are you smart like Steve? I heard that for years.

JG: Now when you say everybody is that white people?

RB: That is everybody!

JG: Okay, white and black.

RB: So, I felt like at one time I lost my identity, because everybody thought I was Steve, Jr. or Steve part 2. And, it goes back to the fact like you mentioned earlier, I was kind of in the middle. I had four brothers above me and three brothers below me. The four brothers above me considered me to be too young to hang with them and I considered myself to be too old to hang with the three brothers that were below me, but I had no choice but to hang with those three brothers below me because my older brothers wouldn't let me.

JG: Did you see yourself, maybe without knowing it in those terms but sort of as a role model to your younger brothers?

RB: I think so, because even to this day my younger brother, the one immediately below me, talks about times where he used to come to Athens, Georgia and spend weekends with me and that kind of stuff and he thoroughly enjoyed that time. What it all goes back to is that we were a very knit close family. We didn't have a whole lot, but we had each other and we took advantage of the time we were spending with each other. We had a lot of good times.

JG: Let's see here I want to talk more about education. I know there is more we could discuss about public schools and everything, but to keep moving I want to get to forestry as well.

RB: Okay.

JG: Let's talk about how you wound up at the University of Georgia and you know, feel free to go back and tie it...was it all your decision, did your parents push you that way or your older brother?

RB: Well, it's a long story.

JG: Go ahead.

RB: Growing up we had a high school teacher that would take the neighborhood boys up on the lake. There is Lake Allatoona, which is six miles outside of Cartersville and there was an old Boy Scout camp there. It hadn't been used by the Boy Scout Council for years, but this teacher used to be a former Boy Scout Master, counselor, whatever that title was, and we would go up on a Friday and come back on a Sunday and ...

JG: Now was this integrated?

RB: No this is all black.

JG: Were you a Boy Scout?

RB: No.

JG: Okay, you weren't.

RB: We called it ghetto scouts. There were formal Boy Scout troops in the city but...

JG: Did you know Mr. Jeffro by any chance? Algenon Jeffro of Lufkin?

RB: No, I didn't.

JG: He was involved with the Boy Scouts. He is a black man and much older and actually he taught the New Farmers of America which was the African American Future Farmers of America, but anyways he talks a lot about some of the integration of the Boy Scouts. I'm sorry to interrupt your story, go ahead.

RB: So, I was 8th grade, 9th grade, 10th grade, somewhere in there and we would spend those weekends up there and that was my first exposure to being outdoors, and enjoyed it, loved it. Walking in the woods was no big deal.

JG: Now how many boys would there be?

RB: It would be somewhere from ten to fifteen.

JG: Okay.

RB: And, you know, we pitched the tents and do the fires and...

JG: Kind of did things Boy Scouts did but you weren't really...

RB: It wasn't official Boy Scouts, but we did the Boy Scout stuff.

JG: Did this teacher did you see that he was trying to reach out to you?

RB: I believe so, and it was basically allowing us to have an outlet for the time we had on our hands instead of getting in trouble.

JG: He just did it on his own?

RB: Yes, on his own.

JG: It wasn't part of school or anything like that?

RB: No, but he was...

JG: Do you remember his name?

RB: His name was Mr. Cotton, we called him Mr. Cotton. His first name was Robert.

JG: Are you saying Cotton?

RB: Cotton, c-o-t-t-o-n.

JG: The plant, okay.

RB: Robert Cotton. I went to school with one of his sons, we were in the same grade together and we would go up on Lake Allatoona on the weekends and camp out.

JG: And do camp crafts and work with hatchets and axes?

RB: Yes, and like I said, that was my first exposure to being outdoors and of course some of my older brothers were there and my youngest brother was there. Another one of those opportunities to spend time together plus kids from all over the neighborhood and sometimes from all over the city, but basically the black parts of the city. Yes, fell in love with it, loved it!

JG: Being outdoors?

RB: Yes, being outdoors.

JG: Did y'all get in canoes and go on the water, fish?

RB: Yes, we did all those things, you know, and it was exciting. It was really enjoyable.

JG: Did he try to teach you about the different kinds of trees and plants?

RB: No, he didn't that wasn't his bag. His bag was to basically get us out of the city and expose us to something different.

JG: The adventure part.

RB: Yes, and I believe his main thrust was to find us something to do to keep us out of trouble.

JG: How did y'all get up there?

RB: He would provide the transportation, yes it was neat. And so, as I progressed through high school it was time to make a decision about what I wanted to do past high school. By that time, I had several jobs in some of the local carpet mills and had more or less decided that staying in Cartersville wasn't an option that I was going to try to pursue.

JG: Did you ever try to work at the... was the Goodyear plant something for...?

RG: I had a summer job there.

JG: They did hire boys there.

RB: Oh yes, I had a summer job there and a couple of other jobs at the mills during the summer when I wasn't in school; both high school and college.

JG: So, you did enough to know that is not really what you wanted to do.

RB: Yes, that is not what I want to do because especially one particular place...

JG: Yes, you had to be like Steve, huh?

RB: (laughter) One particular place I worked second shift, worse shift I could have ever worked.

JG: Now what was the hours of the second shift?

RB: The second shift was four to eleven, four o'clock pm to eleven o'clock pm so you go in and the sun is up and you come out the sun is down, so you feel like you spent your whole entire day there. I didn't like that at all, but I have worked third shift as well. I like third shift a lot better, also at a carpet mill. But as I said as I got to the point about making a decision about what I wanted to do my first love was electrical engineering. I wanted to do that.

JG: Why is that?

RB: I used to buy the Radio Shack kits. They used to have those little electronic kits that you can assemble. Radio Shack used to have them and used to by those things by the droves. That really was something I wanted to do was build something on that level so electrical engineering was an interest of mine.

JG: Why didn't that work out?

RB: Well, my choice was, it came down to two options. One was if I choose the electrical engineering route, I would go to Georgia Tech there in Atlanta. If I couldn't go to Georgia Tech, I would go to Forestry at the University of Georgia and needless to say I didn't go the Georgia Tech route. Also, during that time my brother was a senior at the University of Georgia; I would have been a freshman, so he asked me he said, "man you might as well come to Athens I'm already going there," so it was the easiest route to take.

JG: What was he majoring in?

RB: He was majoring in biology. His desire at that time was to become a doctor and so.

JG: Do you think his biology interest maybe he wanted you...he preferred forestry over electrical work or not necessarily?

RB: Not necessarily...

JG: Or relationship?

RB: ...I never received an acceptance from Georgia Tech, so that more or less made it a little easier.

JG: Made it easier. Now, how did you finance college?

RB: Student aid.

JG: Student aid. Is that how your brother had gone as well?

RB: Well like I said, my brother Steve won a National Merit Scholarship, so that took care of that.

JG: Oh, okay.

RB: My older...my brother number 2 named Barry he went to a junior college and then transferred to the university and it was financial aid, student aid as well. I did a lot of work study when I was in school. During that transition, the PELL grants got slashed tremendously when I was at Georgia, so I had to switch a lot of my money as far as earnings, I had to do work studies as opposed to get PELL Grants.

JG: When did you graduate high school?

RB: I graduated high school in 1977.

JG: In '77 okay, then did you go in that fall?

RB: Yes, started September of '77.

JG: Alright and you went in from day one forestry major?

RB: Sure did.

JG: Never regretted it?

RB: No, I mean of course there were some times there. You talk about racism, yes, I encountered that in Forestry School as well. I think it was more prevalent in Forestry School than it was in high school, or even some of my lesser classes. Because being the first black to graduate that was a lot of...I don't want to say resistance, but that is basically what it was.

JG: Now you say first black to graduate, what do you mean?

RB: The Forestry School at the University.

JG: Really?

RB: Yes sir.

JG: Wow!

RB: That happened in 1982, but you had instructors that was knowledgeable of that fact and they didn't want that to happen.

JG: Really?

RB: You get professors from South Africa and at that time Apartheid was still prevalent and they didn't want that to happen.

JG: How would that be manifested?

RB: By comments they would make, you know, they graded you a little differently than what you can see how they graded people for the same questions, that kind of stuff. It becomes obvious by the comments they make, their attitude they show towards you when you asked them questions and things of that nature.

JG: Wow! So, you were the first; does that also mean you were the only one at the time, only student?

RB: Yes, I was the only black student going through the program.

JG: Wow!

RB: And there was some more similarities. Through high school I found myself being the only black in certain classes because I was going college prep as far as my high school degree, and same thing in college, you know, you find yourself being the only black there once you get into your core curriculum. Especially when I got in Forestry School, I mean yes, no doubt. There was girls there, but I was the only black.

JG: Wow. I'm trying to think of something to ask about it. (laughter) Any particular classes in forestry that you preferred over others?

RB: I enjoyed, I had a silviculture teacher that he was a character. I had a real good classic dendrology teacher.

JG: Now that is the history of?

RB: It's the study of trees.

JG: Oh okay.

RB: By the time I was going through school, these guys had been in school...had been teaching professors for a long time.

JG: You care to mention their names?

RB: Well, I had one guy, my dendrology teacher was named Dr. Rhinus.

JG: How do you spell that?

RB: R-h-i-n-u-s, something like that. (**JG:** okay) and I had a silviculture teacher his name was Fitzgerald (**JG:** okay). I had a biometrics teacher his name was Clutter, and he had written a lot of books about pine management and all that kind of stuff so I had...

JG: So, did you like the subject or the professor or both?

RB: It was a little bit of both.

JG: I mean did the professor's teaching style and excitement maybe influence your enjoyment of those classes?

RB: Absolutely, had a tremendous impact because I had a grass student, I'm pretty sure that is what it was, teaching me aerial photography and interpretation, and most boring class I ever had in my life. (laughter) I couldn't understand him clearly because he had a foreign accent and it just...but the rest of it. I had a soil physiology class, the teacher was engaging and I loved that class. I didn't do very well in it! But those are the kind of things that makes it bearable and makes it interesting, when they can relate with you on a level that makes you interested in what their teaching as opposed to going through the

motions. I've had lots of professors that, you know, you could tell that if they could, they would be somewhere else.

JG: Yes, burned out!

RB: I had one math...I remember I was taking calculus when I was going through the deal and weird. That is all you can say about this guy. He would be doing his equations on the chalk board and he would hide it from you and that kind of stuff. Just quirky people, you run into all kind of quirky people.

JG: I can recall some quirky math, even in junior high. (laughter)

RB: Yes, but I had a great time when I was at The University, had a great time.

JG: Well, talk a little bit about that. I know you went to school with Herschel Walker and Dominique Wilkins. Did you watch or go to many games?

RB: The first year I was there we didn't really...wasn't really into football games. The team wasn't all that good, and the basketball team was even worse. But when Herschel got there our interest increased a million-fold and went to just about every home game for all the while he was there, you know. At that time, you could pay a dollar to get in.

JG: A dollar? Student ticket huh?

RB: Yes, get that ticket and we were there on the 50-yard line. It was real convenient because we had...I stayed in Hill Hall on the campus there, and I stayed in dormitories the whole while I was there and we had a little core group of other black students that stayed in the same dorm and we called ourselves the Sugar Hill gang in reference to the rap group. It was about a dozen of us, and you would have to buy your football tickets, you would have to get them at the basketball coliseum, which was just down the street from the Forestry School, s, it was real easy...

JG: Everybody wanted you to get tickets.

RB: Yes, it was real easy for me to go, I just needed their student ID and a buck and because I was getting them, they would pay for my ticket. So, we got some of the best tickets; same thing for the basketball, you know. They would sell tickets there at the coliseum and you got in basketball games for free, but you still needed the ticket and there it is; here we go again. So, we watched football and basketball on a regular basis.

JG: And Herschel won the Heisman in '82?

RB: In '81.

JG: In '81, okay.

RB: He should have won it in '80 and '81. They were National Champs in '80, and he should have won it then, but he won it in '81.

JG: When was Billy Simms?

RB: I think he was '83.

JG: Okay, he was later.

RB: I think so.

JG: And, Earl Campbell was in the seventies.

RB: Yes, he was before.

JG: I had an aunt and uncle and cousins that lived in Tyler area and my girl cousins were in the band and they would sometimes play Tyler and so I never got to see him play, but even as a kid they were older than me and my aunt and uncle used to talk about watching him play. Of course, you know, he went to the Oilers so, you know you kept up with it whether you were rooting for the Oilers or not he was so good.

RB: He was!

JG: I know he was just run to death and he is suffering today because of it.

RB: Absolutely.

JG: But I remember my Uncle saying well that is the way it was in high school. They didn't have any play except give the ball to Earl. They said he would drag...if he didn't run them over or out run them, he would drag them.

RB: Yes.

JG: All the way to the goal line.

RB: And seeing some of Herschel's high school football, that guy was phenomenal.

JG: They said they were similar built.

RB: You look at him right now Herschel is younger than I am but he can still play football I bet you.

JG: CIA...remember he was wanting to be in the CIA?

RB: Yes, so he could kill people. (laughter) I think Herschel is 58 years old.

JG: 58, okay.

RB: And the guy is in excellent shape.

JG: Yes, well he was always in good shape when he played. That is the first time I remember hearing about body fat, you know, and percentages, he was so lean.

RB: Yes, like 3 percent body fat.

JG: Yes, he was pretty lean, yes. That would have been something if he would have gone straight to the NFL instead of The Generals.

RB: Yes, that was the most heart-breaking moment to see him do that and for who he done it for.

JG: So, let's say it's your senior year there at the University of Georgia, you're finishing up Forestry School and you're thinking about a job. Walk us through that process. What was going through your mind? What were your opportunities? What were you thinking?

RB: One good thing about the University, they had a good counselor staff and if it weren't for them, I probably don't know what I would have done. They gave me tremendous guidance because I was thinking, you know, my best option might be going through the Federal Government, working for the U.S. Forest Service, somewhere along those lines. It just so happened that one of our faculty assistants was real familiar with...I can't recall his name and he passed away, but Champion had an operation here in East Texas. They were headquartered out of Huntsville at that time, and the vice-president and the executive for the Texas region was a grad of the University of Georgia Forestry School. So, that connection was made and I came out here for an interview in March, no...yes, the latter part of March 1982, and I was offered a job and started working April of 1982.

JG: Wow and you graduated in '82.

RB: In March, yes.

JG: Wow that is pretty good.

RB: It was about a month lag between when I graduated and when I started work and I came out here.

JG: What were you hired to do?

RB: The first job I was hired to do was inventory forestry.

JG: Inventory forestry, tell us what that was.

RB: What that was we call it cruising today. What that encompass is I like to liken it to taking a poll where you find out people's opinions and you go around and you ask each person certain questions. Well, I go around and I ask each tree certain questions. I ask him his diameter, I ask him his height, and his species and once you compile all that in a systematic way you can estimate volume just like you can estimate opinions. You compile all that information, and I provided that information on the blocks of land within my area of responsibility and provided information back to Huntsville so they could calculate their volume over that property, so they can develop long-term cutting plans and budgets and all that kind of stuff.

JG: So how, I don't quite know how to ask what I'm thinking...I know cruising timber has been going on ever since there have been lumber companies, so was this part of a new way of doing things or were you re-cruising properties that say had been cruised 20 years earlier? Or had it been cut and not been cruised since it had been cut or thinned?

RB: At the time Champion didn't do any thinning it was all clear cuts.

JG: All clear cuts.

RB: All clear cuts.

JG: So, now were they still providing for the paper mill, the mills?

RB: At the time all they had, at the time I got here, it was just the plywood plants.

JG: Oh okay, not for the paper mill

RB: Only when they merged with St. Regis in '84 did they acquire the paper mills.

JG: Oh okay, I see what you're saying, yes. I was jumping ahead. So, this is pretty big timber then?

RB: Yes, it was all-natural timber.

JG: All natural.

RB: And the way they done it back then, was they cut it line to line.

JG: What do you mean by that?

RB: Well, when most of the boundaries of a tract of land, in order to determine its ownership or to show its ownership, the perimeter of the track is painted a certain color. At that time Champion used burnt orange.

JG: Burnt orange, okay; and Temple was blue wasn't it.

RB: Temple was blue, yes. So, if you had a 750-acre block, well they cut the entire 750-acre block.

JG: Everything.

RB: Everything, what you would call stringers, creek bottoms, whatever was on that 750 acres got cut.

JG: No management zones?

RB: No management zones at all.

JG: Really?

RB: It was line to line basically. You could stand at this line and you could see the other line.

JG: Go right through the creeks; hardwoods and everything.

RB: Absolutely, hardwoods and everything.

JG: What did they do with the hardwoods?

RB: A lot of time if they couldn't find a market for it, they burned it up.

JG: Really?

RB: Yes.

JG: Did Champion come back in and replant?

RB: Yes, they did and...

JG: All pine?

RB: All pine including the creek bottoms that we just...

JG: Loblolly?

RB: Yes, it was strictly loblolly. In some places they had...when I got here there was some slash pine planted, but it was not in the proper sites. Slash pine historically is on your wetter sites. When you go to Florida and you see slash pine, it's on some of your wetter sites but over here, they were planting it on drier sites. I don't know what they were thinking, but it was a big chunk of land.

JG: Nobody is planting slash anymore are they?

RB: No.

JG: It is not native here.

RB: No, it's not.

JG: Yes. So, wow, there is a lot of questions to ask. So, you were inventorying the forest and about how much were you responsible for? You said a block and different things, but how much land did Champion have at the time?

RB: Champion had about a half million acres.

JG: Okay, 500,000.

RB: And a lot of it was basically some Lufkin North, but the majority of it was Polk County, Tyler County, south. A lot of the...when I first got here, I was operating out of what we called the Livingston District. So, I lived in Livingston when I first came to Texas and everything basically from Livingston to the Sabine River, north of 190 was the area if there was Company land inside that strip, then I was responsible for it as far as inventorying the timber on it.

JG: Were you the only timber estimator?

RB: No, I wasn't. (**JG:** okay) Some because of the land that was south of 190 was handled by somebody else.

JG: Oh okay.

RB: And, so my main area was Livingston east, north of 190.

JG: Okay, who was your first supervisor?

RB: A woman named Phyllis Breedlove, and she was stationed out of the Huntsville office.

JG: Had you ever worked for a female before?

RB: Never had.

JG: Anything you want to share with that?

RB: Well, I mean she was fair to me.

JG: A white woman?

RB: Yes, didn't have any issues with her. I was there to work; I mean when I came here in '82 they paid me \$17,500 a year and that was the biggest raise I ever got in my life.

JG: \$17,500.

RB: Yes, so I wasn't about to try to do anything to jeopardize that, I mean, yes, \$17,500.

JG: Oh, we could talk about so many different things; technology changes, management changes, so, I don't know if you know a better way to handle it just say.

RB: Well, it was, you know, you get back to that point you asked me did I ever regret any of it yes, it really made it hard when you are out in the middle of the forest and it's hot and you can't take a step unless you beat your way through it, I mean, yaupon, briars, everything, you question – you went to school for this, you know, and I've had that situation...

JG: It's not setting up the tent and playing anymore; now it's work.

RB: And the biggest contrast was back home in Georgia, you didn't have the insect issue. The woods were open, I mean bugs were rare. You come out here everything either bites you, stings you, gives you a rash, and I mean it is 99 degrees with 80% humidity. It gets hot back home but not like it does here.

JG: That was one of the questions I had was describe the differences between say the natural landscape and the social landscape, but now since we are talking about the natural; you just described some of the differences, but why was there a difference?

RB: I think because of the elevation. When you look at a map and you see just the closeness to the Gulf Coast influences the weather here tremendously. When you get over to north of Atlanta you find that you get a lot more of a north easterly, north westerly wind.

JG: What is the elevation of where you grew up approximately?

RB: Oh, 2300 feet.

JG: Really, okay!

RB: When you look at it geographically it is called the foothills of Appalachians and you can...I mean...

JG: We are around 200 to 300 here.

RB: If you're lucky! (laughter)

JG: If you're in a high up truck.

RB: Yes, and it's all about location.

JG: Now was there any difference in say the history of the way the forest had been managed? You mentioned it was more open, I mean was there more burning, management burning as much as here?

RB: No, you just have different species composition. I mean here, especially in Polk County where I was at the time in Livingston, yaupon grows like grass down in that particular part of the world. There is no yaupon in northwest Georgia.

JG: Really?

RB: Yes.

JG: And it's not because of that they burned it more often or anything.

RB: No, it just doesn't grow. You find most of your yaupon along the southern Gulf Coast strip.

JG: So, it's the elevation.

RB: It's elevation, yes, and it goes from basically east Texas all the way to the Panhandle of Florida.

JG: What about some of the hardwoods, which, well the one that first comes to mind is sweetgum? Today you clear any land and you've got a billion sweet gum saplings coming up. Was that the case in Georgia?

RB: You have sweetgum there, I mean you have your three oaks, sweetgum, hickory's, it just grows to a different degree of quality, you know. The hardwood there is a lot better than it is here. In most of the natural forest areas mostly hardwoods components, you know, and over here sweet gum we spend quite a bit of money trying to kill sweet gum in our forest lands. But yes, it's just a different climate over there.

JG: Now, do y'all use fire as a management tool?

RB: We do, we do and a lot of that...

JG: And we're talking about now and let's just say for the recording who is your employer now?

RB: I work for Resource Management Services; they are headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama. They bought the I.P [International Products] timberlands for the most part, from here all the way around to North Carolina.

JG: Okay, so y'all do use fire?

RB: We do, and when I first came to Texas in '82, fire was used very frequently. It was very wide spread.

JG: Champion was using it?

RB: Champion was using fire. My first fond memories of carrying a drip torch was across clear cuts that they had cut line to line, as I said, and yes we would put so much smoke up it would make it rain.

JG: Wow!

RB: Yes.

JG: When would y'all burn back then? Is there any difference in then and now?

RB: No not really. You want to burn in this time of the year.

JG: Are you able to do that now?

RB: Yes!

JG: Really!

RB: Yes, you just have to be mindful of the fact that there is less opportunity now because a lot more people are sensitive to the smoke issue than they were 38 years ago, you know, but back then yes.

JG: Did you know Ike McWhorter? He is with the U.S. Forest Service.

RB: The name doesn't sound familiar.

JG: I've had some interesting discussions with him about fire and that is what he has always told me is the burns that the Forest Service does in February, he said it's for aesthetics, it is for looks. I remember we had a discussion and he said you have got to burn when most of the life of the plant is above ground not below ground.

RB: That is true. If you're going to control that vegetation.

JG: Right, right; and I said well when is that and he said July and August. (laughter) He laughed, but I may have misunderstood him so I don't want to be wrong for the recording here but I think he was just saying that was so impractical to do.

RB: Well, if you are going to manage timber...

JG: As far as responsibilities.

RB: If you are going to manage timber burning a standing stand of timber in July and August is the wrong thing to do. You want to do it where you got a whole lot of other things on your side such as prevailing winds, higher humidity, and a little cooler temperature, because once you kill that terminal bud on that pine tree it is over. Burning in July and August will definitely kill that terminal bud.

JG: I guess that is also true because most of the trees are loblolly's, which as you know is an old Indian word for mud puddle.

RB: Back when there was a lot more longleaf in this country you could probably get away with it a lot more than you could.

JG: Even short leaf too if it was mature enough, but yes with loblolly being the species now.

RB: Yes, and we used to burn like I was saying, back in the old Champion days when I first came here, we burned a lot, did a lot of site prep burning. But, as time went by and management, not necessarily of different companies, but of different people inside the company philosophies changed, and the thought was you don't necessarily have to do site prep burning, so they stopped that from the time I left in '84 and came back in '04, they had...when I say came back, back to that Livingston area.

JG: When you say left you didn't leave Texas?

RB: No, I just left different areas of the state working with the same companies to where management regimes were different, even though working for the same company. You could go to Nacogdoches and they would be doing site prep burning, but you could go to Livingston and they wouldn't be doing site prep burning. So, after I made all the bases because I left Livingston, came to Lufkin and then with the I.P merger I went to Nacogdoches and then went to Center, and then came back to Livingston. In '04 I came back to Livingston so like I said when I made all the bases, come back down to Livingston and they are not burning and yaupon is everywhere, because if you don't treat the yaupon from a management standpoint, it will outgrow your pine trees and severely stunt that growth. So, after we had the severe drought in 2010 and 2011 and the wildfires were completely out of control during that period, we made the decision that it's best we burn it before someone else does. So, that is when we started introducing burning back into the regime down in the land base.

JG: Around 2012?

RB: Yes.

JG: Try to keep the fuel load down.

RB: Absolutely, we've been doing site prep burning and control burning on the land base that I have managed down in Polk and Tyler Counties since then.

JG: Okay, you were talking about some management changes. What about, one of the things you mentioned earlier was y'all were cutting line to line and through creeks and no streamside management zones, things like that. When did that change?

RB: That changed in around '95, '96.

JG: Okay.

RB: That is when the Sustainable Forestry Initiative made the scene and started doing things more towards sustainable yields on land and being more concerned about wildlife and water quality. Texas had already started at that time what we call BMP's, Best Management Practices, when it comes to...

JG: Was that universal or was each company doing their own BMP's?

RB: It was spear headed by the Texas Forest Service, so everybody was doing it the same way; maybe not getting the same results but...

JG: But S.F.I [Sustainable Forestry Initiative] was a bigger initiative, right?

RB: That was more of a national initiative as opposed to state, and so basically what a lot of the companies done was combine the two and we used BMP's [Best Management Practices] that the Texas Forest Service issues in relationship to streamside management zones and that stuff and then we use the Sustainable Forestry Initiative to manage our wildlife component, our clear-cut size, water quality and that kind of stuff.

JG: How was...what was the acceptance or the eagerness or lack of eagerness to get behind those initiatives?

RB: I think at the time you had integrated companies, they owned the land, they owned the mills, all that kind of stuff, and it was I believe personally, it was a business strategy. Because at that time everybody was talking about having your wood certified, SFI, and it was going to be a market plus and that kind of stuff.

JG: ISO and number 9401...

RB: Yes, all that good old stuff, you know, so from a business standpoint it was a good thing to do because if you didn't have the stamp, then chances of somebody buying your particular product, if they was that conscious about the environment, they would be more inclined to buy yours since you got the stamp as opposed to someone who doesn't. So, it became a marketing tool.

JG: How...were you ever close to that or was your job always around that? I mean were...how did your particular job change through the years?

RB: Well as I progressed in my career, I went from an inventory manager, inventory forester rather, to where I got into the land management where we actually did the reforestation. Then with the merger with St. Regis in 1984 or 1985, I got into the logging part of the business, to where I was actually supervising logging jobs to where we had to do the SMZ's and the RMZ's and all that kind of stuff as it impacted work.

JG: So y'all contracted the logging out, but you held them accountable?

RB: Yes.

JG: Did you mark those zones or were you responsible for marking them as well as...

RB: No, the way we done it at that time we had kind of silos. You had the Procurement Department over here and you had the Land Department over here, and the land department did all that land stuff as far as marking the SMZ's and then the only thing we did was take what they gave us as far as a cutting budget and then cut the tracts that they included in their budgets.

JG: Okay, so who made the decisions when to cut and what to cut, the land department?

RB: The land department decided what was going to be cut because they had constraints on how much money they had to generate in any given year, and so they provided the wood and we provided the resources to move the wood from the woods to the mills.

JG: Okay, so who was running land departments, foresters or accountants?

RB: A little bit of both. (laughter)

JG: Who was running the forestry side, foresters?

RB: Well yes, when it comes to here in Lufkin, Aubrey Bratten was one of (JG: I know Aubrey) he was one of the district managers out at the 103 East office, well west 103 West. Champion had an office out there they turned into...I think it started as a St. Regis office and when we merged with them it became a Champion office just like the office there at the Papermill.

JG: Yes, well I guess I find that interesting that the land department was the ones kind of calling the shots so to speak.

RB: Well to a certain degree, to a certain degree. They would provide us with the wood source, the fiber, the logs, but if we didn't cut those tracts and haul them, they wouldn't generate the money they needed to generate to make their budgets which was dictated by headquarters there in Huntsville. So, we kind of all relied on each other but at the same

time it depends on who you had at the Procurement office. Wayne Foster was the procurement guy for what we call Northern Logging and Procurement. You had someone different there for the Camden operation and then someone different down in what we had at Cleveland. So, we had three procurement areas that overlaid or overlapped three land management areas so each area had their own logging force.

JG: So now were you logging for Building Products as well as Paper?

RB: Yes, at that time we had the Papermill in Lufkin and we had the Plywood Plants there in Corrigan and Camden.

JG: Okay so not...so plywood still, not lumber, not solid wood.

RB: Yes, we never got...of course they would cut lumber at the Camden facility, two by fours mostly.

JG: Yes, did y'all ever sell timber to other companies?

RB: Yes, we used to do the transfers.

JG: Did you handle that as well?

RB: No, as far as not actually doing the contracts, but as far as directing volume to go here or go there yes. We handled the guys in the field handling the logging jobs would dictate and direct where products out of that wood went. If we were hauling hardwood or pulpwood well, we decided where we was going with that hardwood, pulpwood, that kind of stuff.

JG: And I don't know where this answer is going to go but if you can in layman's terms give us how you got from those first few years to RMS today and part of that is kind of your story but also the history of those companies. And is RMS a TIMO, Timber Investment Management Organization?

RB: Yes, it is.

JG: Then maybe in that context too talk about the differences in working for a company that owns the land, owns the timber, owns the mills and now you are a company that owns just land. So, talk about that.

RB: Like I said in '82 I came to Texas and at the time it was just Champion and in '84-'85 they merged with St. Regis and I was transferred from Livingston to Lufkin and that is when I got into the logging part. That went on until 2000 where Champion and International Paper [IP] merged and at that time it was a god-awful amount of land because I.P. was a pretty big land owner in East Texas as well. Their property was basically Lufkin North, whereas all the St. Regis and Champion land was basically Lufkin south. When Champion and St. Regis merged their combined acreage approached

a million acres and when Champion and IP merged well you are talking at least another half million acres here in East Texas.

JG: So, about a million and a half.

RB: About a million and a half and then IP's property also lapped over into Louisiana around that Mansfield area because they had a papermill in Mansfield, IP did. So, that went along until there was the notion that if you break up the assets of some of these companies then the shareholders would benefit tremendously from that and the notion that people start selling off timberlands and it happened to IP. They decided to sell their timberlands and that is when RMS came in and like you said their a TIMO, Timber Investment Management Organization, and what the difference is between a C-Corp, as IP is and a TIMO is that to me they got all the advantages but none of the disadvantages of being a C-Corp.

JG: Now say that again, C-Corp. What is that?

RB: A vertical company where you own the land, you own the mills, and basically ...

JG: So, you're saying the letter C?

RB: Yes.

JG: And corp, like corporation?

RB: Yes. (JG: okay) And a TIMO is managing the same property that a Champion or International paper would but their doing it for the benefit of their clients as opposed to the benefit of their shareholders. There is certain tax advantages and all that kind of stuff that I don't know about.

JG: Some people will argue they're not necessarily managing the timber or the land their managing the investment.

RB: Yes, that is true but you got to recognize that the land is the source of the investment though because without the land, I mean you can't generate the income because you don't have the timber to harvest. I like working for a TIMO. I think it's more personable, you get to know the leadership a lot better than you would under any other circumstances. Our headquarters is in Birmingham and I mean you get a family feeling.

JG: You think it's because it's more narrowly focused because it's one thing rather than the other ones you've got the mills and you've got the marketing side of the product and all that? Where as here it's just the land is that part of it?

RB: Yes, and you're able to focus more on what you are good at as opposed to trying to herd cats. We all got different agendas and all got different points of views and I think you loose something because people get so kingdom minded when you work for big

corporations that they want to keep their arms around things on a level that prevents any kind of creativity and prevents anybody from coming up with good ideas because there is resistance to accept it because it's not theirs. When you flatten out the hierarchy in any organization to where you can see the top as well as you can see the bottom and there is not a whole lot of difference there, I mean I think people tend to cooperate a lot better when there's...when you flatten out and take out all those layers.

JG: How many employees does RMS have in Texas now?

RB: Twelve.

JG: Did you...when RMS came to Texas was that when you went to RMS or had they been here a little while and then?

RB: No RMS had traditionally been a company really focused in Alabama. They started the management for Hancock Properties and when they lost the management for the Hancock Properties things got real lean for them and they were doing just a lot of acquisition cruising and things of that nature and they were down to maybe something like 12 to 15 employees for the whole company. They were able to get investors, enough investors together to buy the IP timberlands with a little exception for the stuff that went with the Mansfield Mill. And, they now have a presence in 8 states.

JG: We talked a little bit earlier about the natural landscape differences so now I want to talk about the social landscape. Of course, I realize you never were a forester in Georgia, or an employed forester, working for a company but all your experience has been in Texas but basically what I'm getting at is race. What was your first impression of east Texas? (laughter) You came from north of Atlanta and Georgia. Had you ever been to Texas before, any part of Texas?

RB: I never had.

JG: Okay.

RB: But you know like most of the folks who haven't been here you heard all the stories; you watch all the movies and when I first got here, I didn't know what to expect. I had a lot of friends back in Georgia asked me several times why am I going to Texas. There're no trees in Texas was the comment because of the movies, you know, all you see is tumbleweed and that kind of stuff but when I came to Texas I was really fascinated by the history.

JG: Where did you interview for your job? Did you interview there in Georgia?

RB: No, they flew me out here and interviewed me in Huntsville.

JG: Huntsville, okay. Flew into Houston, I guess.

RB: Yes.

JG: Flew out of Atlanta?

RB: Yes and I remember especially as I moved up to this part, when I relocated to Lufkin and was chasing logging contractors, you know, I covered a tremendously large area of land from Crockett to Jacksonville, to you name it, all of them, just all of east Texas, you know, because not only did we log company land we also logged timber that our timber buying part had bought from private individuals.

JG: Yes, that you had bought the timber, yes.

RB: Carthage, you know, you name it we was all over the place. I was always passing these roadside markers and I would stop and read the markers.

JG: The historical markers, yes.

RB: The historical markers and I was real impressed by that. I said “my goodness their everywhere.” (laughter)

JG: The old joke was it won’t be long before you’ll back out of your driveway and hit your neighbor’s historical marker. (laughter)

RB: Yes, I really enjoyed that.

JG: I think Texas has more than any other state.

RB: I can believe it.

JG: And, several added together.

RB: Yes, I can believe it but yes that really fascinated me; I enjoyed doing that. I would stop and read historical markers.

JG: That is interesting. So, let’s talk about, again we were talking earlier and my question was are you the only African American Forester in Texas and then you said you were chasing and running down logging contractors. How did that go? How many logging contractors were white? How many were black?

RB: In the 38 years that I’ve been in east Texas I have had the privilege of managing two black logging crews.

JG: Two in 38 years.

RB: Yes, out of 38 years I only came across two. There is more than two out there but they didn’t work for the company that I was with at that time. One was out of Wells named Clydell Adams and another one was...what is his name...names escape me.

JG: You'll think about it when we turn the recorder off.

RB: I remember Clydell, he lived out of Wells.

JG: Did you experience any racism in doing that, I mean, some of the logging contractors?

RB: At the beginning there was resistance and then, you know, I've always thought there will be a test. They will try you. They will see what they can get away with and until they recognize that you are not against them, they have no good reason to be against you. And I've been able to develop, I feel, lasting relationships with a lot of logging contractors. I'm dealing with second generation on some cases, you know. I say hey I used to work with your dad, you know, and yes but I think overall I set a pretty good standard and I think people recognize that. They know that I shoot fair with them and I told them early on you don't have to respect me but you have to respect my position and I think over time they have accepted that. I think it's been good.

JG: Anything, I know a fellow who has been working on some logging documentaries, film work, and he has been sharing little clips with me and one of the logging contractors was talking about just the dynamics I guess of the job involved, you know, everybody has got a job to do but at the end of the day the job has to get done. You might have particular things to do but he said a lot of times there is a lot of arguments and fighting and bickering among the log crews and he said something like "we'll just fight it out, we will get down off our machines or out of our equipment" and he said "you may whip me and I may whip you but when we get that out of our system we go back to work and we finish the days job and we don't quit until the job is done." Have you experienced any of that? Or anything unique about the logging business?

RB: I think from the standpoint of when the industry is suffering, when the mills are full of wood you know you have a logger that needs to have a certain production level but you can't give it to them because you got nowhere to go with the wood he is producing and tempers can get hot because you've got his livelihood in your hands. That is sometimes difficult to deal with but at the same time just not a whole lot you can do. I haven't had any personal confrontations because of those types of situations but I have heard of those things happening where a logger has made certain comments towards the detriment of an individual but me personally no that has never happened. I imagine words were probably said to my back but never to my face. I've had to tell logging contractors that don't have anything else for you to do and that is never easy but I never had anybody physically threaten me!

JG: Yes, yes. I think this comment was pretty much the crews themselves not between their employers, you know, the logging crew themselves. There's got to be one boss but people not getting along and you know, everybody has got to do it and like you said just get it out of your system then we will go back to work.

RB: Yes, and I'm sure for the most part these logging crews they've been together for a long period of time and I imagine they probably put that behind them a long time ago. At least, I haven't been exposed to any of that or haven't seen any of that, you know, as far as conflict in a logging crew.

JG: What about some of the technology you've seen in any job, like obviously I guess the logging equipment itself has changed but, timber estimating, computers? You know, you were telling me earlier about how this pandemic has affected things and people are able to work remotely; of course I know remote sensing in and of itself has benefited the forestry and logging business so, that is a big question.

RB: It has gone from wow...we used to draw what we called a stand map, when you have a parcel of land and you draw out the different portions say this section might be natural pine hardwood, but this section is pine hardwood or pine plantation; you got a road going through it we were using aerial photograph and we would trace by hand the boundaries of those different timber types; and now you got GIS [Geographic Information System] where you can bring up those same kinds of boundaries.

JG: You got different kinds of photography that will react differently to the shapes of the leaves and temperatures of the plants.

RB: Absolutely! We use aerial photography with satellite photography to decide on what the leaf area index of a particular stand of timber is, you know. Where in the past you had to look up through the canopy to get a gauge of how much leaf area you got and things have gotten to the point where it's all done by computers now.

JG: Now obviously job positions would influence the question I'm fixing to ask; but in general going back to you and why you got into forestry, you like being outdoors, you know, I've joked with some people here and to the layman it might be surprising how little time in the forest a forester spends at time so comment on that. I know it varies with the job, there's the manager and then there's the guy out in the woods that is counting trees or marking trees, but overall has there been a change? Is a forester today spending less time in the forest than they did when you started?

RB: Yes, he is and a lot of that is computer driven technology. A lot of stuff that we used to manually do we still manually do, to a certain degree, but as far as the planning that we do now is more computer based than we ever thought possible. We still measure trees; we can't get around that, you know, but as far as all the volume projections, the revenue projections, the data projections, I mean we do a lot of things that allow our company to get a pretty good idea of how much wood is actually out there in the forest.

JG: And not having ever stepped on the land.

RB: And not ever having stepped on the land. (laughter) Yes, we pretty intensive up front and then periodically through the life of the stand we do checks to see if our growth and year models are on track or not.

JG: Kind of like a sample though right, just a sample?

RB: Yes, right.

JG: How accurate is that? I mean is there any major factors that contribute to inaccuracy's?

RB: Well it's a lot to do with weather, you know, everything is based on a ton and so you trying to estimate standing volume and then convert that to tons and whenever you convert you lose something. So, you can have a situation to where a tree might be running heavy on weight because of there is a lot of soil moisture, you know.

JG: Oh okay.

RB: Or it could be a lack of moisture if you're going through a drought. Trees won't weigh differently and so that messes your conversion up. If you got a tree on the top of a hill as opposed to a side of a bank trees weigh different so that messes your conversion up too.

JG: So, it's like a pine tree that is cut in July same size tree cut in January or February the July one will weigh more right?

RB: Yes.

JG: Because of sap?

RB: Yes.

JG: Okay.

RB: Or if it's at the top of the hill, same month, top of the hill, bottom of the hill they potentially can weigh differently as well.

JG: Now which one would theoretically weigh more?

RB: You would think the one that is at the bottom of the hill because it has access to more soil moisture.

JG: More moisture than maybe the one blown...and of course soils are different too and sandy in the hills, okay.

RB: That is true, a lot of that plays into it but for the most part we spend a lot of money on growth and yield models.

JG: Do y'all know a variable to plan for to address these issues of weight?

RB: No...

JG: I mean is there like say okay all these estimates are on July and so we are going to factor in something verses what we did in February?

RB: No, the growth and yield models are so fine tuned and it's based on years and years of averages that we are talking rocket science here and they got it down. The biometricians is what the official titles are and they are real good at what they are doing now.

JG: So, is that kind of stuff done here in Texas now or is it the Birmingham office has it?

RB: It is at our Birmingham office.

JG: Okay so that is where like the big computations are done huh?

RB: Yes.

JG: Was that kind of stuff done here when it was...

RB: When it was Champion? Yes, it was done in our office at Huntsville.

JG: So, another example of consolidation and of jobs and function's, I guess.

RB: Well, the biometrics is a pretty hot and heavy field in forestry now a days because of the impact of computers and as a matter of fact the biometrician we have right now is...

JG: And that is biometrics and matrician meaning the person who does biometrics?

RB: Yes, and he is a former grad from Georgia and done lots of studies and all this kind of stuff.

JG: So, are these forestry trained people?

RB: Yes.

JG: So, their teaching the computer side within the Forestry School?

RB: Yes.

JG: Okay.

RB: I remember when I was in school, we had to program in Fortran which hadn't been used in a long time but see even then computers were peaking their nose in our business then.

JG: Yes.

RB: And now 38 years later it has only gotten heavier.

JG: Yes. Well, hey I'm sure I have failed to ask you certain questions but is there anything that I haven't asked that you've thought about, you know, hey I think he might ask me this or I hope he ask me this or hope he doesn't ask me that?

RB: No.

JG: Anything I've left out or anything you want to add?

RB: Well, I think over the years, you know, I've run into a lot of good people here in East Texas, different but still good and one of the things I've noticed there is not a whole lot of difference between Georgia and Texas. As far as climate yes, but people no, there is not any different. People are people and the one desire we all have it so be treated with dignity and respect and once you do that the rest of it is easy, you know. I think my track record has shown that is what I try to do.

JG: Yes, well that is good. I guess I could ask you about some of the recent things that have been going on all across the world, the racial protest and everything; anything you want to say on that?

RB: Well, I think that when...if a person has objection to the slogan Black Lives Matter, I think they are not acknowledging the fact there has been a trend in this country to over police black communities. And if you are not willing to accept that and acknowledge that then I think we will never get to the end of this situation in this country. Because I mean, to me it is as obvious as the nose on your face when I get pulled over for a headlight and you're allowed to banish a knife in front of a cop and nothing happens but I think we have to start the conversation somewhere. I think for too long we have not been willing to do that as a country and I think it's time.

JG: I'm glad I asked it in a broad way like that because I might not have gotten that. I think it's something we are all looking at. I mean we are actually looking at our collections and trying to do more to be inclusive. It's not that we weren't doing it before but no matter what you do you can always do it better, you know.

RB: That is right.

JG: So, I mean that is part of our outreach to you today, I mean you've got a great story in and of itself that we need to get. Like I said, I know I didn't cover everything and you know if we think about other things. I think I told you Guessippina is going to get two interviews out of her.

RB: Yes, and then you interviewed my mother-in-law at least three times.

JG: Yes, so you know if you know of other people, you know, any race, you know, people in the forestry community that has a story, you know, we concentrate on paper records and that is important. The written word is important and everybody's written word but it's not all of it so oral traditions and people's stories and that is why we always try to approach these, usually I say "this is your story". I hope I do a good enough job to ask the right questions so it stays your story, you know, but anyway that is what we try to do. So, anybody you know that we need to do more.

RB: Yes, Battelle has a couple of suggestions. I'll have her call you.

JG: Okay, well good, good, that is what we need. Like I said we are being recorded right now so I understand. So, unless you have something else, we will conclude the interview and again I thank you for sitting down with us.

RB: Well, I appreciate the opportunity. I mean, like I told you earlier, I've never done anything like this before.

JG: Kind of a celebrity. (laughter)

RB: Yes, I feel honored and at the same time, I don't know.

JG: Well, we really appreciate it! Thank you!

RB: Thank you!

END OF INTERVIEW