

Mississippi Oral History Program

An Oral History

with

Mr. L.L. Fletcher Jr.

Interviewer: Dr. Charles Bolton

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This is an interview with L.L. Fletcher Jr. and is being recorded at his home in Hancock County. The date is May 14, 1993. The interviewer is Dr. Charles Bolton.

Dr. Bolton: I just want to start off and get a little bit of background information about you. Could you just tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up, that kind of stuff.

Mr. Fletcher: Well, I grew up in southwest Louisiana. My father was a mechanic and things got pretty bad and he couldn't collect his bills from all the people that he was working for, so he decided he was going to farm. So he moved out on a farm and started rice farming.

Dr. Bolton: Moved over here?

Mr. Fletcher: What?

Dr. Bolton: Moved over here or was this in Louisiana?

Mr. Fletcher: No, southwest Louisiana.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Fletcher: He was farming about two miles south of Gueydan, Louisiana. I went to school and I graduated in 1931. Then I started working on the farm, running a power plant, pumping water on the rice and everything. I did that for several years and then I went to LSU for about two years. I counted cabbage worms in the morning and in the afternoon until I got tired. [laughter] My money ran out so I came back home and I went to farming.

Dr. Bolton: Also rice farming?

Mr. Fletcher: Always rice farming. That's always what we had. We rented land and we owned a farm, a hundred and sixty acres. But I worked doing everything. I started out from the bottom up, pitching rice. In the old days when we had a thrashing machine, we cut the rice with a binder and stacked it. They called it sharpening it in the fields. Then when it dried we hauled it to the thrashing machine and thrashed it. And I dragged sacks with an old man there and I checked the rice through. I had a triple job so I did fairly well. [laughter]

Dr. Bolton: You did it all.

Mr. Fletcher: Did fairly well.

Dr. Bolton: Well, how did you end up in Mississippi then?

Mr. Fletcher: Well, you couldn't buy any more land in Louisiana. Land was too expensive and I wanted to expand a little bit. And I came over here and about the only prospect I could see was land here that was cut-over land, cut-over pine land. It was similar to land in Louisiana around Eunice, Louisiana, and all through that upper part of Louisiana that had once been in pine forests. The analysis of that land and this land here was pretty much the same.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Fletcher: And that land was a real good producer of long-grain rice. So I was able to buy raw land here for thirty dollars an acre. I bought a section of it and then I moved over here. And the first thing I did was cut all the pine trees off of it. [laughter] Then I leveled it out and went to putting levees down and dug a well. I had an artesian well at six hundred and sixty feet and that took care of my needs in flooding that rice that I had planted there.

Dr. Bolton: How big would these levees be that you were talking about?

Mr. Fletcher: Oh, they have a base of about twelve feet and they come up to a point.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Fletcher: They are made with a terracer. Amoco makes a terracer that puts up that levee. You don't have to use a grader. Originally, we used a little grader and we had to keep working and piling it and piling it. But once they made that terracer, and a larger tractor, you could get the work done in a hurry with it. It made a fine levee.

Dr. Bolton: What year was that that you came to Mississippi, about when?

Mr. Fletcher: I was looking at this land and got real serious about it in '48.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Fletcher: And I moved over here and camped. My family stayed back in Louisiana when I was working here. I had an old Frenchman helping me, and we camped out here, cut the trees down and cleared brush and piled stuff and burned it up. Then I planted my first crop in '52. The first crop I planted, I planted short-grain rice. I planted Zenith. And I made about twenty-two barrels to the acre. A barrel is a hundred and sixty-two pounds. But my biggest trouble was getting it to the railroad and loading it in boxcars and shipping it to---most of it went to Beaumont, Texas, that year, that first rice that I raised.

Dr. Bolton: Was that a problem because the roads weren't good?

Mr. Fletcher: No, the roads were good and all, but you had to put in an order for the boxcars. They had to spot them on a certain day. And you had to have them loaded out on a certain other day so they could pull them out, or they wanted to charge you extra for them. You had to get in

and get it done and get it out. That's the way it was.

Dr. Bolton: Whereabouts was your land that you started farming in the early '50s?

Mr. Fletcher: It's four miles down the road from right here where I live now, four miles west of here on a Texas Flat Road.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. So it's on that part of the road that's---

Mr. Fletcher: In a buffer zone.

Dr. Bolton: In a buffer zone, okay. When did you first hear that this government agency might be coming in and taking over the land where you had been farming, I guess for about ten years?

Mr. Fletcher: Yes. We didn't have much warning that it was coming at all. The first thing you know it was just like a bolt of lightning; it dropped in on you and, "You're going to have to move out of there. That's it."

Dr. Bolton: Yes.

Mr. Fletcher: And they came in here and most of these unimproved places and everything they just picked that land up for a little bit of nothing. And I had an improved rice farm there which was making a pretty good living for me at that time. And they came there and offered me about a hundred thousand dollars less than my land was worth. I didn't accept it and I stayed in court with them, I think it was almost ten or twelve years, and we finally won. I won the value I had set on it, which I had substantiated everything that I claimed, you know. It's just that they had people that weren't familiar with that type farm and everything. And the appraiser had no idea of the value of the land. He didn't know what he was looking at.

Dr. Bolton: Were most of the people that lived in the area, like your neighbors, were they also pretty shocked that this was happening when they found out?

Mr. Fletcher: "Oh no, we can't do nothing. That's the government. We've got to go along with them. We've got to move out. We've got to move out."

Well, we knew we had to move out, but that didn't give them the right to take our land for nothing. And they promised us when we moved out of the buffer zone that they would hire a patrol and they would keep the patrol on the roads and keep the thieves out and everything else. Well, they gave the supervisor here enough money to hire a guy to ride the roads for about, I believe he rode the roads for about three months. Then they didn't give him any money anymore. Well, when he didn't get anymore money, there wasn't no more patrol. And then the stealing began.

Dr. Bolton: What kind of stealing?

Mr. Fletcher: Oh, everything. I had three big boxes of tools, big old tool boxes, expensive. I had about three thousand dollars' worth of tools, and I hadn't been able to move them right away, you know. We didn't have no help or anything. So I left the tool boxes there with a big padlock on them and everything else. They went there at night with a cutting torch, and they cut the padlocks off of it and took all my tools, every bit of tools that I had. Then a little later on in the game they started stealing cattle, a few at a time, a few at a time, and then it got worse and worse and worse. Until one night they stole a whole bunch of them from me. But that was going on all over there. And I had a shed, it was about I guess thirty feet wide and a hundred feet long, galvanized iron on it, heavy gauge. They stole all the sides to it and the roof. In one night they stole the whole works. Then I had rented eighty acres of land from a guy, and I fenced it with barbed wire and posts and everything. One moonlit night they stole the whole fence. [laughter] And that kept on all the time. I'd haul a pump out there while I was farming, and it was a diesel. I had two diesel pumps. And they wanted to steal them, and they were set in a frame and they didn't have sense enough to just pick up the whole thing and load it. They cut the engine and the pump out of the frame and left the frame.

Dr. Bolton: So you were still farming out there while your court decision was going on?

Mr. Fletcher: Yes, oh, yes. Oh, they harassed me in court about---back in Louisiana we had a little building by each one of our wells. And the man that took care of the well at night, the building was screened and everything so the mosquitos didn't eat him up. And I told them, I testified that I had to have a little building to stay in and everything and pay people to stay there. And boy, they tried to make me out a liar, oh, no. Well, I found out later, the first thing the guy did he ran to the telephone and phoned a friend of mine back in Louisiana. I had farmed right next to that guy, a fellow by the name of Grady Hardy, one of the foremost rice farmers in that section. "Hey, man," he says, "well, that's a common practice here. Everybody has some mosquito house." When the fellow asked him, he said, "Do you stay in there day and night?" He said, "No, not the same man, but a man has to be there at night while the pump's running. I'm there in the daytime."

Dr. Bolton: They didn't believe you then.

Mr. Fletcher: No, they didn't believe me. But Grady called me the next day, we were good friends, you know. And Grady called me and told me about it.

Dr. Bolton: The problem that you had with the appraiser, was that just because you had an unusual type of farming activity or did other people that you knew about have problems?

Mr. Fletcher: It was new to this section of the country.

Dr. Bolton: Right.

Mr. Fletcher: And the main thing was the appraiser wasn't a fully-educated appraiser familiar with all the rules of appraisal. And that was the whole thing, you know. He didn't know. He didn't know what a levee was, he didn't know what a canal was, he didn't know anything about

that.

Dr. Bolton: Do you think he would have made those mistakes though if you would have been just a truck farmer?

Mr. Fletcher: If he would have been a qualified appraiser. If they were appraising a rice farm, they should have gotten an appraiser from the rice country, like in Louisiana or Arkansas. I had gone to north Mississippi, around Shaw and Benoit and all those places, and I wanted to farm there. The land was better land than here. It was real good land, it was fertile and everything, but it was that old black muck and all.

Dr. Bolton: That's the black prairie.

Mr. Fletcher: You had the dries and you couldn't get enough water and you couldn't keep water on the rice. It was hard to do. Then the first man planted rice up there, he put 24-D on the weeds and he killed all the cotton. [laughter] They seized his farm and ran him out of there and everything.

Dr. Bolton: Oh, really?

Mr. Fletcher: He had a bad start. A fellow by the name of Tambureau. Boy, he raised a terrible rice crop, thirty something barrels to the acre. Boy, he was making money. Then everybody from Louisiana started leaving over there and going to Shaw and all those places up there. And that turned out to be big rice country and it still is today. I have a lot of people I know living up there.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. When you had to relocate, did you find that land prices were higher because of this facility coming in?

Mr. Fletcher: No, no, I was lucky. I found this place here and I bought it, I bought it reasonable.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. And it wasn't very far away, I guess, from the state road.

Mr. Fletcher: That's what I was trying to do, you know, locate something so I could work in the same zone and take care of it. But you couldn't take care of it. When that patrol stopped, it brought all the thieves from all around. They'd steal automobiles. They even stole an eighteen-wheeler truck and brought it back out there and stripped it near a big canal. And when they got through stripping it, they pushed it over in the canal. They didn't find it for years, until years later, and they found the remains of it. And they'd steal a car and bring it back in there and strip it. You'd see the wrecker come from Bay St. Louis, and the sheriff's men would be hauling the stripped, burnt car back into Bay St. Louis.

Dr. Bolton: Do you think the government needed to take all the land that they took in order for this facility?

Mr. Fletcher: No, no. No, they didn't need it. A lot of people tried to make a lot of false claims

and everything when they started testing, but it never was to the point where it would be really bad or bother.

Dr. Bolton: Did they ever give you any reason why they took all that land?

Mr. Fletcher: Yes, they said that the low-level sound waves would make it dangerous for anybody to live in a house back in there. But that wasn't true. That never did prove out at all.

Dr. Bolton: Do you think that having the facility out there has been a good thing for the area? Do you see it as a good thing even though you personally had to---

Mr. Fletcher: Well, it wasn't good for me.

Dr. Bolton: Right.

Mr. Fletcher: Some people it was good for. They got a job and they had a job there. But all in all, if you'd weigh one thing against the other, I don't see that it was that much beneficial. They talk about how it built up Bay St. Louis and everything else. I can't see uprooting people and making them move their graveyards and everything else, and old homesteads that they had lived in since the beginning of time, since they could remember. When you balance all the human things against that, well, I don't see it.

Now they came out after awhile, they started rumors that they were going to take even more this way. That they were going to run a big canal down this road here, and they were going to ship all the rocket engines and everything else to the test stands in that canal and all. And go out on into the Bay of St. Louis and then to the Mississippi Sound and come in that way. That was rumored, you know.

Dr. Bolton: Was that after you acquired this place here?

Mr. Fletcher: Yes.

Dr. Bolton: That must not have been too good a feeling when you heard those kind of---

Mr. Fletcher: I guess not, I guess not.

Dr. Bolton: I guess it's been back in the '70s, they were talking about giving some of the buffer zone land back to the landowners too.

Mr. Fletcher: No, they never did, they never did. There was one fellow that he fought them all the time, a Maurigi boy in Bay St. Louis, and he's still fighting. He has a place over near the Zengarling Farm, the Maurigi family. I don't know what his name is.

Dr. Bolton: I think I know who you're talking about, yes.

Mr. Fletcher: He's kin to Bully Zengarling and has land out there. But it's just the people that

kept land in the buffer zone, they could use it and everything else, but it really worked a hardship on them all the time. They'd said, ``Oh, it don't bother you. You can go ahead and raise rice. You can do all what you want on your land," but they'd steal your doggone pump at night and all that kind of mess.

Dr. Bolton: If you're not there to watch out.

Mr. Fletcher: You're not there to watch it. Now Houston Frierson was running cattle on his land back there in the woods and everything. And they were stealing his cattle steady.

Dr. Bolton: Now, this would be on the open range, right?

Mr. Fletcher: Yes.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Fletcher: And he caught the same bunch of fellows that stole all my herd of cattle. He caught them at night on his place. They had two German police dogs and a bull dog and a big tandem trailer that they pulled with a four-wheel drive truck, and they were stealing cattle is what they were doing.

Dr. Bolton: And nobody really there to stop them.

Mr. Fletcher: Boy, he got into it with them, and Houston wouldn't put up with no foolishness from anyone. And he put them out at that place in a hurry. [laughter] And that's about the only way that you could get by, you know. What they said about me, I watched all the time and they had it going around. They said, "You'd better watch that old man, he's crazy, he'll kill you, he'll shoot you." You're doggone right, if they steal my stuff I'll shoot them.

Dr. Bolton: Do you think the government people should have done a better job of patrolling?

Mr. Fletcher: They should have done a better job of taking care of it.

Dr. Bolton: Yes.

Mr. Fletcher: Sure. They didn't do that, they promised that.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. I know that when they first announced all of this, Stennis had this meeting at the Logtown School where he explained all of this to everybody. Did you happen to go to that meeting?

Mr. Fletcher: No, I didn't go to that [meeting].

Dr. Bolton: Because I know that he had promised people some things. Did you ever have any dealing with any of your congressmen or senators to try to get them to help you?

Mr. Fletcher: Oh, yes. I wrote to all of them and all it was was double talk, and they just let it go away.

Dr. Bolton: So they weren't very helpful.

Mr. Fletcher: The biggest trouble I had, not only with that, is that ASC [Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation] office in Poplarville. That's the biggest thorn in the farmer's side here that ever was.

Dr. Bolton: The ASC?

Mr. Fletcher: ASC.

Dr. Bolton: What do they do? What does that office do?

Mr. Fletcher: What do they do? When they are administering the law, they don't know half of the time---like I got into an argument with them when I owned that land over there---I was an operator. If I had a loss I could make a claim and get something. But then when I didn't have the land anymore and I rented land from another man and I lost my crop in 1990, they told me I couldn't collect anything because I was a producer and only the operator could collect. Well, I was the operator, I had rented the land. I had paid a cash rent on the land. I put \$25,000 into my crop that year, and I lost it from sheath blight, and they told me I couldn't collect because I was the producer. Well, a producer, the way I look at it, is a tenant farmer.

Dr. Bolton: The person doing the work.

Mr. Fletcher: Just doing the work. I was doing the work, I was putting up the money, and I was making the crop.

Dr. Bolton: And they didn't see it that way.

Mr. Fletcher: And they didn't see it that way, and I tried, I tried, I tried, I tried. I still have Gene Taylor working on it, but he never did do nothing.

Dr. Bolton: So they weren't very much help.

Mr. Fletcher: All a politician knows is what they call their rhetoric. They've got rhetoric all the time but it's not what is.

Dr. Bolton: Didn't do you much good.

Mr. Fletcher: No.

Dr. Bolton: Are you still farming, Mr. Fletcher?

Mr. Fletcher: No, no. I quit farming two years ago.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Fletcher: I quit farming two years ago.

Dr. Bolton: So are you retired now?

Mr. Fletcher: I don't know what I am. I'm trying to sell a bunch of those old tractors that I still have and get rid of some of that farm equipment and taking care of this place. It's pretty big here, it keeps a man busy all the time. Since the death of my wife, well, I've had to cook, and sew, and housekeep, and cut the grass, and hoe, [laughing] and everything else.

Dr. Bolton: That takes a lot of time. Is there anything else you remember about when the government came in and wanted the land that might be useful?

Mr. Fletcher: No, not offhand. Right now I couldn't think of it. You know, we're all alike. We remember the things that affect us mostly.

Dr. Bolton: Sure, sure.

Mr. Fletcher: But I know poor people, old men, that cried and everything when they had to leave their shack out there in the woods. They didn't know what they were going to do and where they were going to go. Nobody had any feelings for them.

Dr. Bolton: Do you think some people did better than others in terms of---

Mr. Fletcher: Yes, yes.

Dr. Bolton: I've got that feeling, too, from talking to different people.

Mr. Fletcher: Oh, yes.

Dr. Bolton: Why did some people do better and some didn't? What determined that?

Mr. Fletcher: They were insiders.

Dr. Bolton: The insiders---

Mr. Fletcher: Insiders. I'm not going to name no names.

Dr. Bolton: Would it be the people that had that landowners group? Would they do better than say the people who didn't---

Mr. Fletcher: No, I don't they accomplished anything as a group.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Fletcher: But some of them got wind through political channels of things that were going to be done. They were going to build this airport, and they were going to buy cattle, and they were going to send them here and send them there and everywhere. I know a fellow bought a whole bunch of cattle. They promised him that airport was going to have corrals, and they were going to ship them out of there in freighters and everything else. And he was going to double his money on the cows. He didn't double, he lost.

Dr. Bolton: He got bad information.

Mr. Fletcher: {Bad} information, it was bad.

Dr. Bolton: But some people had inside information so they were able to benefit more.

Mr. Fletcher: Well, it looks like they thought they had inside information, and it turned out that their information wasn't too good. Or they did them like they did some of us.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. So some people just got lucky and got better settlements than other people.

Mr. Fletcher: Yes.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Fletcher: And that's what I don't like about politics. You get in and they get these appraisers down here, and they'd get these committeemen down here, and they'd wine them and dine them and everything else. I wasn't going to give those son-of-a-guns a meal, nothing. All I wanted was what was mine.

Dr. Bolton: Would they come to your house and talk to you, these appraisers? Or would they just come and look at the land without you knowing about it?

Mr. Fletcher: They never did even let me know. They wouldn't even come to see me to ask me to go on the land. They acted like they owned it, which I guess they did, they said they did.

Dr. Bolton: What about the Corp people? I guess they had to come talk to you to make an offer to you. Did they come to your house? Were they better than the appraisers?

Mr. Fletcher: No, no. The Corps of Engineers is the most powerful group of people in the United States, whether you know it or not. And there's people that's made studies on it and studied it and written about it. I told you some of the stories that were pulled and everything else and they do say that. The Corps of Engineers is stronger than the President himself.

Dr. Bolton: That's interesting. You've been a big help. Is there anything that you might want to add?

Mr. Fletcher: That's all I can think of right now.

Dr. Bolton: Well, thank you for taking time to talk to me, I appreciate it.