



“Boy, you're bad enough.”

That was Leon Gibson's mother's answer whenever he asked why he didn't have any brothers or sisters. Born in 1933, Leon grew up as an only child, raised largely by his mother, grandmother, and aunts. The women in his life worked hard, sacrificed often, and made sure he never went without. More than ninety years later, Leon still speaks of them with deep affection, crediting them with teaching him the values and lessons that guided him throughout his life.

Leon was born on a cotton plantation in Louisiana. His earliest memories were of endless cotton fields and long days spent helping his family pick cotton. Life was not easy, and the work was demanding, but everyone in the family contributed. Leon remembered carrying a sack through the fields as a child and watching his mother work tirelessly to provide for him. Looking back, he often said that he hated picking cotton, but it was simply a part of life.

In 1943, when Leon was ten years old, his family left Louisiana and traveled north to Dayton, Ohio. An uncle had already settled there, and like many families during World War II, they came seeking opportunity. Leon never forgot the journey. After spending his childhood surrounded by cotton fields, arriving in Dayton felt like stepping into a completely different world. Factories, businesses, and jobs seemed to be everywhere. His mother eventually found work at the Veterans Administration hospital, where she would spend decades working in the kitchen. His stepfather worked in the steel industry. Both worked hard to build a better life for their family.

Because his mother and grandmother spent so much time working, Leon often found himself with a great deal of freedom as a young boy. Looking back, he believed that freedom sometimes led him into trouble. He attended Edison, Garfield, and later Dunbar High School, but school never held his attention for long. Instead, he found excitement elsewhere.

Throughout his life, Leon often reflected on mistakes he made when he was younger. Rather than making excuses, he viewed those experiences as lessons. He frequently told younger people that choices made in youth can follow a person throughout life. It was advice he earned through experience and one of the messages he felt most strongly about sharing. Despite the challenges he faced, Leon never doubted the love of the women who raised him. His grandmother held a special place in his heart. Whenever he found himself in trouble, she was often the one who came to his defense. He remembered her kindness, patience, and willingness to stand by him even when he had made mistakes. Together, his mother, grandmother, and aunts made sure he always had what he needed. Growing up surrounded by strong women also shaped the way Leon viewed the world. He often said that he had the highest respect for women because he had seen firsthand the sacrifices they made for him.

Sports became one of Leon's greatest passions. He played basketball and football and eventually took up boxing. While he considered himself shy when it came to talking with girls, sports gave him confidence. On the basketball court, football field, or in the boxing ring, he felt like a different person. He even competed in Golden Gloves boxing and remained proud of his athletic abilities well into his later years.

Leon worked many jobs throughout his life. He delivered newspapers, worked in factories, restaurants, kitchens, nursing homes, and other workplaces around Dayton. He was never afraid of hard work and often found employment wherever opportunities were available.

Faith also played an important role in his life. Leon was baptized at twelve years old and spent much of his childhood attending church with his family. Sundays often included Sunday school, worship services, and church gatherings that seemed to last all day. He loved gospel music and singing in church. Even in later years, he could still break into hymns and gospel songs from memory. The faith passed down through his mother, grandmother, and extended family remains an important part of who he is.

In 1986, Leon married Joyce Gibson, a woman he met at church. He remembered being drawn to her immediately and often spoke warmly of their time together. Though life eventually took them in different directions, he looked back on that chapter of his life with fondness.

Over the course of ninety-plus years, Leon witnessed tremendous changes in America. He remembered World War II, the migration of Southern families to industrial cities like Dayton, the Civil Rights era, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and many other historic moments. Having lived through so much history, he often reflected on how dramatically the world had changed since his childhood in Louisiana.

Animals also held a special place in Leon's heart. One of his favorite companions was a dog named Snow White, whom he considered part of the family. He loved sharing stories about taking Snow White along on trips and treating him to hamburgers.

Today, Leon's memories stretch from the cotton fields of Louisiana to the neighborhoods of Dayton he has called home for most of his life. He remembers picking cotton as a child, playing sports, singing in church, riding a Greyhound north during World War II, and the countless family members, friends, and neighbors who filled those years with stories. At ninety-one years old, Leon has lived through nearly a century of change. Yet many of the things he talks about most are surprisingly simple: family dinners, church music, basketball games, a loyal dog named Snow White, and the women who worked hard to give him a better life. Those memories remain at the center of his story, connecting the boy who grew up in Louisiana with the man who built a life in Dayton.