By GEORGE ROBERTSON, M.D.

What are you doing on fall break? That is the question overheard around town. Most people are going on a trip or taking their families to the beach. Many of the good things are in the planning stages and most families already have hotel or condo reservations for their clan to enjoy.

Remembering back to my childhood brings on a different experience for the fall hiatus. Growing up in West Tennessee, this time of the year was reserved for the fall harvest and especially in Crockett County where the schools would get out for six weeks for cotton picking.

Back in my day there were no mechanical cotton picking machines so that everything was done by hand. It means that the farmers relied on their families or friends, since there were no migrant workers, to get out in the fields and laboriously, one by one, pick the locks of cotton from the spiny boles. Not only was the work hot, backbreaking and dirty, but in the field you were exposed to all kinds of nature landmines such as snakes, spiders, sunburn and poison ivy.

My fall break started with an early morning wake-up time for a ride to the cotton field. The high point for the morning was the weigh-in time when you took your bulging cotton sack to the wagon to see how many pounds you had picked and to get the heavy weight off of your back before going back to the patch with an empty sack.

At lunch time we got a few minutes to eat a sandwich under a shade tree before getting after the cotton again. It was nice to get to recline on the freshly picked white fluffy produce even though it was hot and buggy.

By midafternoon it was weigh-in time again and a short relief from the backbreaking work. The usual tallies were in the range of 75 pounds but some of the fast pickers who didn't worry about getting the sharp spines in their fingers could get up to 100 pounds at a time. My record was 236 pounds for one day when I was trying to keep up with my girlfriend who was picking on the row beside me.

In the late afternoon as we would be riding from the cotton field on a full trailer load, there was a real feeling of accomplishment knowing that we had picked enough for a bale so that tomorrow we could start with an empty wagon. We got between $2.50 and $3 per hundred pounds for our hard work so on my most productive day I probably made $7 to be spent on the midway throwing balls at bowling pins to win a teddy bear for my girlfriend.

In all, fall break wasn't that bad.

Editor's Note: George Robertson is a physician with Family Medical Associates, PC, in Lebanon.