

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

JOSEPH "SONNY" ALOYSIUS LAWRENCE

Interviewed by Brenda Coates
September 17, 1996
At his home in Valley Lee Maryland
Logged by Tania Jordon on January 21, 2008
A verbatim transcript is available
Original format is two cassette tapes
1 hour, 22 minutes, 6 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 2 (Tape 1, side 1)

Track 01

0:00 Introduction

00:25 What did you eat as a child? They had a garden and raised hogs and chickens. They ate dried beans in the winter. They ate different types of soups. They always had a good dinner on Sunday's with beef, chicken or ham. The always had a balanced meal on Sundays.

2:00 Where did you live and where were you born? He lived in Great Mills until he was 12 years old. They lived on Route 5 about a mile south of Route 246. They lived at least 3/10 of a mile off Route 5 in the woods. He then moved to Valley Lee to his father's home place off Route 249 just below Clarence Smith's. The house was at least ½ mile from the road. His father bought his grandfathers 28 acre farm. When they lived in Great Mills his father worked at the saw mill. They always had a large garden.

Track 02

4:23 What were times like when you were a child? They had a nice house that was hot in the summer and cold in the winter. They always had plenty of food to eat. He didn't know about the depression in 1929 until about 1933. At that time his father wasn't working very much and they were getting a little help from the county or state. At that time they ate quite a bit of surplus food that came from the government (1933-1934). It wasn't the best tasting food, but it was food. He feels that times are better now because he can buy almost anything he wants and his home is better. In the old days things were cheaper (\$0.05 for a loaf of bread) but it didn't make any

difference if you didn't have any money. They couldn't afford a newspaper in those days. If they had a paper somebody had given it to them. They couldn't listen to the radio if they didn't have any batteries. This kept them from keeping up on what was going on in the world.

They raised chickens and exchanged the eggs at the store for flour, sugar and salt. They would have to buy their meat in the winter after their meat ran out.

Track 03

8:50 What is your earliest memory? He remembers that he couldn't tie his shoes at 4 years old. His sisters Louise or Grace would have to tie his shoes before they went to school. Grace was nice about it and Louise would pull the strings around his ankles so tight that they would swell within a half hour. He was glad when his mother taught him how to tie his shoes.

10:30 Describe your relationship with your siblings? They had a good relationship. They all got along. "Louise was a little on the evil side". His mother told him that when he was little and wanted to sit on a bucket by the stove. Louise was sitting on it and she thinks Louise pushed him into the stove when her mother made her get up to let him sit down. He burned the side of his face during this incident. He got along with them but he never played any games with them. The girls played their games by themselves and he would watch. His brother was too young for him to play with.

Track 04

12:34 What church did you attend? They went to Holy Face Church. They went to the one next to Cecil's store on Indian Bridge Road until the newer church was Built in 1941.

13:40 Did you take trips as a child? He would ride on the truck to Baltimore with Mr. Tom Briscoe. He would haul freight to Baltimore for most of the farmers in the lower part of the county. The ride would take four to five hours in those days. He was about six or seven year old. He starting going to Washington when he was 13 years old with his uncles and cousins. He always liked Washington because it was clean and beautiful. He never liked Baltimore because it looked like a "big ole dirty city".

15:15 How were senior citizens cared for when they got old? They were cared for by their family. When his paternal grandfather was about 73 years old, he was to old to stay by himself. That was the main reason, they moved from Great Mills to his grandfather's house. In those days they had one nursing facility for white seniors that was referred to as the poor house. It

was a big old house that was on the property of the current location of the county fairgrounds.

Track 05

17:02 What were your health and your family's health concerns? He always had bad teeth. They would pull his teeth out when they were loose. If he had an ear ache his mother would warm up some "sweet oil" to put in his ear. She would give them sugar and kerosene for colds or "three sixes". If they were really sick their mother would take them to the doctor. In the 1930's Dr. Brown lived in Red Gate where Winter's Sheet Metal is currently located. They also went to Dr. Bean who lived off Route 246. St. Mary's Hospital was available but he didn't know many people who went to the hospital. Most of the time the doctor made house calls or you could go to their offices in the evening. Dr. Bean was a couple of miles away and Dr. Brown was about four miles away.

Track 06

20:25 What did you do as a child? He always had something to do once he was about seven. He helped his uncle and aunt (William and Blanche ...) during the summer months. They were share cropping on Frank Hayden's property which was located at the Greenview Knowles. He would plant corn and tobacco, set up wheat bundles, and cut the strings on the bundles before they went through the wheat thrasher. He did this until he moved to Valley Lee. He and his mother would pick black berries when they were in season. They picked about three buckets when they would walk from their house to Greenview Knowles. They would leave their house at 4:00 am and would be home by 8:00am. His mother canned the berries. When they gathered fruit on people's farms, they did a 50/50 split. He picked a lot of cherries because his never weighed much and was able to get out on the limbs of the tree. His sister Rosalie was also good at picking cherries.

Track 07

26:42 What chores did you do at home? He would get water from the spring. The spring was about 2/10 of a mile from the house. He, Rosalie, and Ann would cut wood. They used a cross cut saw. They had to do this in the summer and winter. It was dark when they got home so they had to cut wood by lamp light. They had to feed the hogs and "bug the potatoes". They would cover the sweet potatoes with vines at night to keep them from being frost bitten and they would remove the vines in the morning.

29:20 How did your parents discipline you? His father would beat him with his belt if they did something wrong. He didn't beat them very often. His mother "had a switch in every room". "She corrected us most of the time.

They weren't too hard on you". They got disciplined for "back talking" and not moving fast enough when they were told to do something.

His father didn't do too much with the children. His mother was always involved in any programs they participated in. His father would go with them to visit his mother's family. On the 4th of July, they would go to St. Francis Hall on Route 235 across from the Bingo Hall. There were a lot of things for children to do. They also went to St. Nicholas Hall.

Track 08

32:49 Did your parents prepare you well for life? They did the best they could. They were always on us about attending school and getting their education.

33:25 Tell me about your formal Schooling? He went to Great Mills Elementary (located at the old dump site) in Valley Lee and Jarboesville High School (across from Eaglin McAllister) on Route 235. They walked to Great Mills Elementary. It was about five miles one-way. He caught the bus to Jarboesville. Great Mills was a two room school house. One room held the 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades and the other held 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grades.

35:00 Who were your favorite Teachers? His teachers were Miss Paris, Miss Sanders, Miss Mercer T. Briscoe and Miss Jamison. He liked all of his teachers.

Track 09

36:48 What did you dream of becoming as an adult? He always wanted to be an automobile mechanic. He still wants to be a mechanic but he doesn't want to get his hands greasy. When he came out of the service he started out as an apprentice brick layer. In 1949 he went to the Commercial Trade Institute in Chicago to become a diesel mechanic. He completed his coursework, but at that time there were no diesel vehicle on the east coast except at Greyhound and Trailways. When he went to get a job, they told him that he had to have 15 years of experience.

His was in the Navy for 28 months. He went to diesel school under the G.I. Bill. He was already a full fledge brick layer when he went to diesel school.

40:20 Did your parents let you court? As a teenager, his parents let him do what he wanted to do. He spent a lot of his time at Happyland Club. He would go to the movies, play baseball and softball and pitch horseshoes.

Track 10

41:47 What was it like when you went out on your own? How was your money situation? He first left home when he was 16. He worked in a lunch room in DC. He made \$18 per week. He worked five days per week. His room rent was \$3.00 per week, which included at least one meal. The rest of his meals he ate at the lunch room. "He did very well at the lunch room". He was there from August of 1941 to January of 1942. He came back home and started working at the Torpedo Base in Piney Point. He worked there until 1943.

CD 1 of 2 (Tape 1, side 2)

Track 01

44:41 At that time they started taking out income tax so he quit work for few weeks because he didn't want to pay income tax. He stayed there before he was drafted. He was drafted within six weeks after he registered for the services.

45:35 What kind of work have you done to support yourself? He drove trucks on the base, teacher's aide, brick layer (1 year) instructor at the Tech Center and drove school buses (20 years) and brick layer (10 years).

When he moved to Valley Lee he did farm work for the local farmers until he was sixteen. He had to draw, plant and cut tobacco. From 1937 until 1941 he made from \$0.35 per day to \$1.00 per hour (cutting) [Editor's note: I think he meant \$1.00 per day]. He would work eight or nine hours per day cutting tobacco. "At \$0.75 per hour I was rich. Eight hours per day was considered a short day".

When he came back home from DC, he made \$0.875 per hour (\$7.00 per day) working at the Torpedo Base as a laborer. He stayed at home but always paid room and board. His mother always got 1/3 of the money he made. "When you're not working, you eat and sleep for free".

The Torpedo Base contractor provided transportation to work. A truck would pick them up.

What did it mean to you to have these jobs? "It meant a lot to me because I knew I could support myself and I didn't have to beg anybody for money".

Track 02

50:22 What do you remember about your wedding? He was married in June 3, 1951. "We probably met at some of the places we use to go". He got married after he and Florence had dated for three years. "He liked her and wanted to marry her". They didn't have a honeymoon. They were married at the Holy Face Rectory. Jerome Saxon and Louise Brown were their witnesses.

52:45 What has your family life like? His marriage has been quiet. They never had any children and have gotten along well.

Track 03

53:11 What part has religion played in your life? He attends St. George's Catholic Church in Valley Lee. "Over the years he always believed that there is a superior being is on earth. You should worship him because there is a here-after and he would like to get there. The church also helps a lot of people in need. The church can't do it unless people attend church to meet this need. As far as I'm concerned, that should be a big function of the church. It looks like Uncle Sam is messing up the welfare system so the church will have to take care of the people".

He use to help with bingo, church dinners, cut grass and paint the old church hall before his health deteriorated. He was a member of the St. Vincent DePaul Society.

56:30 Did you participate in community activities? In the past he worked with little league baseball. He would transport the boys to the games.

Track 04

57:31 How do you feel about life today? Most people have transportation, jobs and the highways are nice. "The quality of life is much better. The doctors, hospitals and life are better". Crime is a bigger thing today then it was years ago. I can remember when the county had one State Policeman, One Sheriff and a couple of Deputies. There wasn't much crime. I think that drugs play a large part in the crime in the county".

1:00:00 Do you think people are different? Yes, people use to do more visiting. Most people don't do that today.

1:01:00 Do you think that teenagers are different now? They don't have the manners we had when we were teenagers. They don't have any respect for older people. They have more today then we had. Teenagers today don't take responsibility. They act like they are not going to have to make a living.

I blame parents because I don't think that the parents tell the kids that they are going to have to make a living after they finish school.

Track 05

1:04:07 Are race relations different today? “They are different because of the federal law. Some of the people are nice, but I still believe that the majority of Caucasians still feel that you are a second class citizen and that you should not be on the same level as they are. They have the same attitude today”.

1:05:20 Where you ever afraid of a particular group or person who practiced hate? No.

1:05:55 How do you feel about living in this county? He liked living in the city because of the job situation. “This county is becoming something else to live in today”. You have to spend more money and time at the planning commission to build anything. The want to charge you for everything you do or build. He blames the County Commissioner's for not planning in advance. The county is getting more like the city

Track 06

1:08:37 Do you think there is a difference between county people and outsiders? The only difference is the education level. The outsiders are better educated.

1:09:30 Do you interact with outsiders who live in the county? He meets people at softball games.

1:10:10 Have you traveled much outside the county? He did a lot of traveling when he drove the bus. He's been to places in Virginia, Washington, DC and Pennsylvania.

1:10:00 Do you interact with people in other sections of the county? Yes

Track 07

1:11:27 What do you think of the direct the county is going in today? “I really don't know where we are going. The last set of county Commissioner's messed things up and the ones we have today don't seem to know what to do to correct it.

1:13:00 What are your feelings about the navy base? Where your family hostile about people moving off the base? No, they were not because they knew the base would bring jobs to the county. None of his family lost land from the base.

1:14:00 What are your feels about the changes in the county due to the new growth on the base? The congestion is due to delays in road expansion.

1:14:35 How did black folks get news/information when you were growing up? They got their news from word of mouth. When they did get radio, he listened to the news.

1:15:20 What do you feel has the biggest changes in this county in your lifetime other than the Navy Base? The majority of the blacks own their own homes and better homes.

1:16:20 What was life like for your parents? His mother was a housewife and his father worked at the saw mill for 24 years. When they moved to Valley Lee he did some light farming. After about four years, he did construction work.

Track 08

1:17:10 Have you done everything in life that you wanted or planned do? He wanted to be a diesel mechanic and always wanted to do more traveling in the United States.

1:18:05 If you could go back and live your life again what would you change? He would change his life from 12 to 16 years of age. Working on the farms was hard and terrible. He never like farming.

[Below information is read into original recording at the end. It is not included in the audio CD version.]

Biographical Information

Joseph Aloysius Lawrence aka Sonny Lawrence

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DOB 12/10/1925 in Great Mills, MD

Attended Great Mills Elementary School and Jarboesville High School

Employment: Teachers aide; brick layer instructor, brick layer (10 years), truck driver (10 years). He retired from truck driving in 1965. he was a bus driver (20 years) and retired in 1992.

Wife – Florence Elizabeth Dyson Lawrence

Maternal grandparents – Mary Thompson Mason and Nelson Mason

Paternal grandparents – Maggie Whalen Lawrence and John Francis Lawrence

Mother – Janie Estelle Mason Lawrence

Father – Morris Andrew Lawrence

Siblings (+ self)

Grace Cecilia Blackwell

Mary Louise Mason Brown

Ann Elizabeth Clayton

Joseph Aloysius Lawrence

Margaret Rosalie Clayton

Catherine White Briscoe

Morris Andrew Lawrence, Jr.

Geneva Lawrence

No children or grandchildren

What was segregation like?

What would you have changed?