

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

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[Begin Side 1, Tape 1 of 2]

BC: Aloysius Lawrence at his home in Valley Lee. The date is the 17th of September 1996.

Mr. Lawrence, I want you to know that if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you don't need to answer them if you don't want to.

We will start by asking you: What were times like when you were a child? Things like how did your family live? What did they eat, and how you got along with your sisters and brothers?

AJL: What you want to know first?

BC: [laughter] What kind of things did y'all eat?

AJL: Well, we always raised a good garden in the summertime, ate a awful lot of vegetables, and we raised hogs. We had hog meat during the winter months, and we always raised chickens and made chicken stew. During the winter, most of the time we ate awful lot of dry beans which was, call them butter beans. They were dry beans, and we eat vegetable soups. On Sundays, we always had a very big dinner: beef, chicken, ham. Each of those.

We had those out. Weekends, mostly on Sundays. That's the most of the time when we had a what it considered today as a balanced meal: meats, vegetables, starch, fruits.

BC: Well, I guess the first thing I should have asked you is: Where did you live?

AJL: We lived in Great Mills, Maryland until I was about 12 years old.

BC: Okay. Where? Can you describe exactly where?

AJL: Yes, it was about a mile below the light on Great Mills, the light on Route 5 and -- What is that?

BC: 246.

AJL: 246. It was about a mile below that.

BC: A mile south of the light.

AJL: A mile south of the light.

BC: Okay. Did you live on Route 5? How far off of Route 5?

AJL: Oh, we lived at least 3/4 of a mile. Oh, not 3/4's. I would say about 3/10th of a mile off of Route 5 in the woods. And, this was --Yes, I was about --I think I was 12 years old when we moved from there over here in the Valley Lee area. When we moved to Valley Lee area, we moved to my father's home place where he was raised.

BC: Okay. Where is that?

AJL: This is off of Route 249 between, the road was between Clarence Smith's place and who else? It was just south of Clarence Smith's place. There's a road that used to go into our property.

BC: Okay. About how far off of 245 -- 249 did you live then?

AJL: Oh, it was a 1/2 mile. It was at least a 1/2 mile off of 249.

BC: Okay. And, your father had a farm?

AJL: My father bought a farm. He bought my grandfather's place, and it was 28 acres, and he begin farming at the time.

BC: When you lived over in Great Mills, you lived on a farm there or --?

AJL: We lived on a farm, but we didn't do any farming. My father worked sawmill

BC: Okay, but you still had a garden. You always had a garden.

AJL: We always had a large garden.

BC: Okay. Okay. Do you think the times were better back then than they are now?

AJL: In a way. I mean to me, things didn't seem to be too bad because we always -- the house was fairly nice. The house was just like the homes at that time. It was cold in the winter; hot in the summer, but it was nice. We always had plenty to eat. We had always had plenty food to eat, and I remember in -- I didn't know anything about the -- the --what happened in '29?

BC: Oh, the Depression.

AJL: The Depression. Depression didn't hit us. As far as I'm concerned, until about '33. At that time, my father wasn't working too much and seemed like me we were getting a little help from the County or State or somebody and -- because I know at that time, we used to eat a awful lot of surplus food that came from the government. And, I remember it in '33. and '34 we ate quite a bit of that type food. Wasn't the best tasting food either, but -
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BC: It was food.

AJL: It was food. Yes.

BC: Okay. So, where -- where-- Do you think that times are better now or is there too much of a difference to really say which is the best?

AJL: Well, with me, times are better now. With me because happen to be in a position now where I can go out and buy just about anything I want almost, and my home is much, much, much better, and these types things. But, but at that time, things were cheap, but no use to being cheap when you didn't have the money to buy no way. Matter of fact, I remember when a loaf of bread was maybe 5 cents, maybe 7 cents. You --you couldn't afford to buy a loaf of bread at times.

And also, that the newspaper was one thing I really don't -- we couldn't afford to buy a newspaper. If you read a newspaper, we had a newspaper during that time. It was one that somebody gave you. And a lots of times, we didn't have batteries for the radio. We only had the radio battery, no electricity. Only had radio batteries, and a lot of times we didn't have batteries in the radio, so you didn't actually keep up with what was going on nowhere. No place. And, that's the only thing that, I see, made it kind of bad at that time.

And like I told you before, my mother always raised chickens. And with the eggs that the chickens produced, we always exchanged them at the store for salt, pepper, sugar those type things.

BC: Okay. You was talking earlier about on Sunday, you would have ham and beef and whatever. Those things that you, your family, you didn't buy those.

AJL: Oh yes.

BC: You bought those.

AJL: Yes. Most of the time, we bought those.

BC: Oh okay.

AJL: See, because after the winter months, our meats were gone. In fact, around March, we ran out of hog meat. So to, most of the meats after that, we had to buy, and it was, like I said, it was beef, but we always had our chickens. It was beef, ham, those type meats.

BC: And a lot of this was bought with the egg money.

AJL: No. No.

BC: I mean, you said your father worked at the saw mill, too.

AJL: Yes. Yes. Right. When he worked, we always had good food to eat. We always bought food.

BC: What is your earliest memory?

AJL: My earliest memory. Believe it or not, when I was about four years old. Now, the only thing I remember about that is that I didn't know how to tie my shoes. I couldn't tie my shoes, and Grace and Louise at that time were going to school. Each week, one of them had to tie my shoes before they went to school. Grace was very nice about it. She'd tie my shoes very nice. The week Louise had to tie them [laughter], she'd pull it -- used to wear these little high-top shoes. She'd pull the strings around my ankles so tight that about a half an hour after she'd tied them, started to swelling in my legs. [laughter] And every morning, she would grumble about tying my shoes because my mother would say to them, which one of you young ladies, it's time to tie Sonny's shoes before you leave.

She'd grab my foot and snatch it! [laughter] I'll be glad when this old boy can tie his shoes! But, that's my earliest memory. And of course, some time during that time when I was about four years old, my mother showed me how to tie my own shoes, and I was glad of that.

BC: Okay. Describe your relationship with your brothers and sisters, besides Louise!

[laughter]

AJL: We had a very good relationship. I mean we all got along nice together, and Louise was little on the evil side. I -- Now, this I don't remember, but my mother told me that we always had a wood stove. She had a bucket of chips sitting by the stove one day. Louise was sitting on the bucket by the stove. I cried to sit on the bucket. Louise, my mother made Louise get off the bucket, let me sit down, and my mother always believed that when she got up and I sit down, she walked away and pushed me on the stove, and burnt the entire side of my face. But she always did tell me, AI always will believe Louise pushed you on the stove, and Louise said she didn't push you. ... [laughter] But, I don't remember that. I really don't remember that.

But otherwise, we always got along real good together. I mean -- I don't know. I was kind of -- off from them, to a certain extent. I mean, I got along with them alright, but I never did play any games, anything with those kids. I mean, they would -- If they were playing cards, I could sit there and watch them. These kinds of -- Most of all the games they played, the girls played among themselves. And course, my other brother was so much younger than I was, so he was just a baby. And, the other girls played all the games by their self and all I did was sit there and watch. But, we always got along. Most of the time.

BC: What church did you go to at the time?

AJL: Well, when we were living in Great Mills, we went to Holy Faces. And of course, after

we moved over here in Valley Lee area, my mother still always went to Holy Face Church.

BC: And that's where it is now?

AJL: That's where -- No. This church, where the church is now, was built in '40 or '41. The church that we used to attend, which was Holy Face, was on Chingville -- not Chingville Road. The road going up by --It was on Indian Bridge Road, up above the store that is there.

BC: Cecil's Store.

AJL: Cecil's Store.

BC: Okay.

AJL: It was just on the other side of Cecil's Store right off of Indian Bridge Road.

BC: So, it was closer to you when you were in Great Mills than where the one is now?

AJL: Yes. Yes, it was. It was closer.

BC: Okay. Do you remember taking any trips as a child?

AJL: I do. I, I used to ride to Baltimore on the truck with Mr. Tom Briscoe. Used to haul freight for most of the farms here in the lower part of the county. And, I remember going to Baltimore with him several times when I was six, seven years old. I wasn't even big enough to get in the truck. He'd put me up in the truck, and I would go to Baltimore with him. But, it was always a very nice trip. It was a long trip at that time because it would take anywhere between four and five hours to drive from here to Baltimore.

BC: Okay. How about any other trips? Remember taking any other trips as a child?

AJL: Well, the only -- I started going to Washington, probably when I was about 13 years old

with my uncles and cousins. And of course, I fell in love with Washington because it was, seemed to be a very clean city. I have never liked Baltimore. Baltimore always looked like it was a big, old, dirty city, and I never cared for Baltimore. But when I went to Washington, it seemed to be just so beautiful.

BC: And this is about when you were 13?

AJL: Yeah. That was when I was about 13.

BC: Okay. How were senior citizens treated when you were coming up? You know, what happened to them when they got too old to care for themselves?

AJL: Well, ah, most of the time, it was done by the family, I guess. I know when we moved here in Valley Lee, my grandfather -- my father's father was about: Let's see. He must have been 73, 74 years old, and he was getting to be, at that time, not able to live by himself. See, he was living by himself and he wasn't able to live by himself to take care of himself, and that was -- that was the reason we moved over here.

BC: To be close to your grandfather?

AJL: Yeah.

BC: Okay.

AJL: Had to help take care of him.

BC: So, as far as you know, there were no nursing facilities available for senior citizens who weren't able to take care of themselves.

AJL: They had one nursing facility here in the county at that time which was a great, big, old house they had at, where the County Fair -- where they hold the County Fair today?

BC: Um hm. Right across from that?

AJL: No. It was on that property.

BC: Oh!

AJL: On that same side, I think, where the County Fair is, and I remember they used to call it DePaul's House. And, they used to have several senior citizens there and of course, not for **our** people. I don't know of any of our people lived there. [laughter]

BC: Okay. What were your health concerns, and how did your parents deal with health and illness?

AJL: Well, most of the time, they were the doctors and nurses. I remember when my teeth were loose, my first teeth were loose, losing my first teeth, they put a string on them and pull them out! I always had bad teeth. When the others came back, they were bad. I always had a toothaches, and things of that sort, and it was always -- I can't remember what they used to give me for a toothache, but I do remember when they used to have ear aches. They used have what you call sweet oil. You warm it up. My mother put it in the spoon. Warm it up over the heat and put it in the ear for an ear ache.

Used to have awful colds. Used to have awful colds during those days, and sugar and kerosene was for colds and now and then, you might get a spoonful of what was called, 3 6's. [laughter]

BC: Cough syrup.

AJL: Cough syrup.

BC: Okay.

AJL: But a lot of times they didn't have that, so we used kerosene and sugar.

BC: Okay. So, your family relied -- Did they rely a lot on home remedies?

AJL: Well, yes they did. But if you got real bad, they would take you to the doctor.

BC: Okay. So, there were doctors, hospitals and other medical facilities available.

AJL: They were. We had -- I remember in the early 30's, we had Dr. Brown who lived at Red Gate where Winter's Sheet Metal is today. That was his property, and we also had Dr. Bean, which used to lived on 246. And of course, you had --Well, Dr. Bean probably was the family doctor, but you went to whoever you could get service from.

BC: Were there other medical facilities, you know?

AJL: Yeah. St. Mary's Hospital always was there. I don't remember. I don't know too many of us attending that --You know, years back, which I'm sure people did, but a --.

BC: You didn't know of too many.

AJL: No. I didn't know of too many.

BC: Okay. So, you -- So, the Red Gate was about how far, you know, to get to that doctor, about how far did your family have to travel?

AJL: How far?

BC: Or, did the doctor come to you?

AJL: Most of the time, doctors came to you, but you could go to his office in the afternoon or at night, and Dr. Brown --Let's see -- would be --I don't know. About four miles I guess to Dr. Brown's and we could go to Dr. Bean's and it would only be a couple of miles.

BC: Oh, okay. What kind of things did you do as a child?

AJL: As a child. Well, I can remember, from the time I was about seven years old, I was always doing something. About -- about age seven, I used to -- My uncle and aunt, William and Blanche Garner, were sharecropping on Frank Hayden's farm which is

where Greenview Knolls is today.

BC: On Chancellor's Run Road?

AJL: On Chancellor's Run Road. During the summer months, I would go up there and work with them. He planted tobacco. This is the only crop he planted on the farm, but they always raised corn and wheat. I don't know of anything else, but I knew what they loaded was corn and wheat. And, I would --At that time, corn was planted by hand. They would put three grains of corn in a hill when they planted corn. When the corn came up, it was up to about 6 or 7", then you pull out what they called filling corn, you pull three of them stalks. I mean, you pull out two stalks and left the best stalk there, which that was called filling corn. I used to do a lot of that. At that age, I used to drop tobacco plants for him, put sticks at the rows.

And, I remember when they cut wheat in the summer in June. When they cut wheat the summer in June, the wheat was cut with the machine and it was kicked out in bundles. When these bundles come off the machine, the men had to walk behind this machine and set this wheat, and I remember setting up a awful lot of wheat. And also, in August, August, August, August -- No, July. In July, a machine would come along which they called a wheat thatcher. Thatch this wheat out, and those couple of weeks that the wheat thatcher was operating, I mostly worked with the wheat thatcher. And, what I did when I seven, eight, nine years old: These bundles were tied up with string. So before they went into the machine, that string had to be cut. So, my job was --I had a very sharp knife -- was cut the bands, cut these strings on these bundles of wheat before it went to the machine.

BC: Okay.

AJL: And, oh I did this from the time I was seven years old until -- In fact, the whole time I lived in Great Mills until we moved over here in the Valley Lee area. That's where I, and my mother and I, we used to pick blackberries in season, when blackberries was in season. She and I would walk from where we lived in Great Mills sometimes as far as Greenview Knolls to pick blackberries. And, we would always get three buckets. Well, there were quite a few farms on that road; and at that time, people didn't have the machinery or horses and things and all to help to plow the fields.

And a lot of times, fields went idle five and six years. And doing that time, you had a awful lot of grass and blackberries bushes and things grow up on those fields. And when blackberries was in season, during that time, my mother and I, a lot of time, would [pick] blackberries every day, and we'd leave home, most of the time, 4:00, 4:30 in the morning. And, you would be where the blackberries were by the time it got light, just about, and tried to get back home by 8, 8:30 in the morning. And, I would have a 8-quart bucket and she would have two 8 or 10 quart buckets. And, we walked with our blackberries and went home, and my mother canned them.

And, and also, we --When we were living in Great Mills, a lot of different people had fruit trees and if you gathered fruit, you gathered 50/50. We got a bucket of apples; we'd have to pick a bucket of apples for them, or --

BC: Oh! Okay.

AJL: And the same thing, most every --People in the area --I was a very light-weight fellow. I didn't weigh too much, and I picked cherries on three or four different farms in the Great

Mills area when cherries were ripe enough because I could get out on them little limbs and wouldn't break them and pick the cherries. And, picked cherries 50/50, and we had cherries. My mother would have cherries. And of course, Rosalie was very good at that also, and she and I worked together doing that.

BC: What kind of chores -- I mean, besides these things -- What kind of chores did you do at home?

AJL: At home, we had, we had: Water -- We had to go to the spring and get our water, and spring was, well I could say, almost 2/10ths of a mile from the house. And, you had to go to the spring to get your water. We always burnt wood, so the girls and I -- In fact, most of the time it would be Rosalie and I, we cut most of the wood that we burned. Course, my father would put it on the wood pile in long slabs, and the girls and I would use a cross-cut saw to saw them up. And, this was summer or winter. And most of the time, during the winter months when we got home from school, it would be dark or almost dark. And by the time you got your water, you a -- Most of the time, you cut that wood by lantern light. You'd have a lantern out on that wood pile to cut the wood.

And also, you always had hogs. You had hogs. You had to water the hogs. If, during the garden season, you had to, had to bug the potatoes. We had to bug the potatoes, and I remember when my father used to dig sweet potatoes. He'd dig sweet potatoes, sometimes October, around the first of October, and he would always lay them out during the day in the sun. Course, he told me he had to sweeten them potatoes up. But at night, you had to go out there and take the vines and put over the potatoes, stop frost because frost -- Then you'd get frosted. And, you had to make sure you covered

them up at night and take them vines off in the morning. Before you went to school, you take the vines off the potatoes so they'd get sun.

BC: How long did that last?

AJL: That didn't last, oh, a couple weeks.

BC: Oh, okay.

AJL: It was a couple of week's thing.

BC: So, you did the regular type of chores--

AJL: Yes.

BC: That you would do on a small farm.

AJL: Right. Right.

BC: Okay. How did your parents treat you? What did they do with you that you remember best?

AJL: In what way? Discipline?

BC: Well, not just discipline but, I mean, I guess -- I'm not really sure exactly how to, how to just --

AJL: Word it.

BC: Well, word it but get it down so that -- I guess what I want to say -- Well, okay. How did they discipline you?

AJL: Well, everybody was disciplined about the same. You know, my father would use his belt when things were-- when you did something that was bad enough, which not too often. My father didn't do too much, but my mother always had a switch in every room [laughter] which She did most of it. She corrected us most of the time, and, but they

weren't too hard on you. They weren't hard at all, as far as I'm concerned.

BC: What kinds of things did they discipline you for?

AJL: Well, all of it was mostly talking back, I guess. Back talk. And, not moving fast enough when they said something to you about doing something or doing things. That was mostly about it, I guess.

BC: Okay. Did they play with y'all at any time? Or, you know, like I said, do things with the kids?

AJL: With the kids. My father, as far as I know of, as I can remember, was very little he did with the kids, but my mother was always involved with whatever -- whatever programs we were involved in. My mother was always involved. Now, the only thing I remember my father doing with us -- Oh well, when we visited some of the relatives, some of my mother's sisters and things, he would go with the family. And on 4th of July, they always had a large affair at St. Francis Hall. Yeah, St. Francis Hall. That was up on 235 across from where the Bingo Hall was.

BC: Bingo Hall. Right. Okay.

AJL: Well, on the 4th of July, they always had an affair there, and they always had a lot of things for children to do at that time, and we always went there on the 4th of July. Lets see -- They used to have quite a few affairs at St. Nicholas, too, but I don't remember going there, oh, a couple of times. But those types of things, my father was always with us. But otherwise, Mother was always involved in everything that we did.

BC: Okay. Do you think they prepared you well for life?

AJL: They did the best they could because they were always on us about school, you know,

about attending school and how much you would need the education and things of that sort, and they tried to prepare you for life in that way.

BC: You told me earlier about your education. You told me that you went to the Great Mills Elementary School which, at that time, was where the old dump was on Route 249 in Callaway, or Valley Lee. And that you went to Jarboesville High School, and at that time, it was on where the Base is. It was on the, across from where Eagan/McAllister Building is now.

AJL: True.

BC: On --

AJL: 235.

BC: 235 South.

AJL: Right.

BC: Okay. Now, how did you get to school? How did you get to Great Mills Elementary? Did you walk or did they --?

AJL: We walked. We walked which was close to five miles one way, and we walked to Great Mills Elementary. Now when we started going to high school, there was a bus for us. We had bus transportation at that time.

BC: The Great Mills Elementary School, was that one of the one-room schoolhouses or was it a bigger one, or what?

AJL: Well, we had two rooms. We had the 1st, 2nd, 3rd Grade in one room and we had 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th in the other. We had a two-room schoolhouse.

BC: Okay. Do you remember any of your teachers?

AJL: I remember all my teachers, just about.

BC: Who was your favorite?

AJL: My favorite teacher was my 1st Grade teacher, I guess. Miss Parris was her name; and in 2nd Grade, I had a teacher by the name of Miss Saunders. In 3rd Grade was Miss Mercer Kay Briscoe. When I was in 3rd Grade that was her first year here.

BC: [laughter]

AJL: And, 4th Grade, I -- Miss Jamison. She was a very good teacher. I liked her. She was a very good teacher.

BC: So, each one of the --Even though the school was just two rooms, each grade had a teacher.

AJL: No. No, Miss Mercer taught 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Grade, and Miss Jamison taught 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th.

BC: Oh, okay.

AJL: We only had two teachers.

BC: Okay. So, okay. So, who was -- of those that you named, who was your favorite and why?

AJL: I don't know. Miss Parris was, like I said, the first year in school, and she was very comfortable to me, and as far I know, ... because I'd been around children all my life. But, I liked her. I really liked her, and I thought Miss Jamison was very good. She was very good to students. She was a very good teacher, and she was a very good [with] student's problems. Course, nothing worse with Miss Mercer. Miss Mercer was nice. All of them, nice.

BC: So, you didn't have a least favorite?

AJL: That's right. I really didn't. I really didn't.

BC: Okay. As a young adult, what did you dream of becoming?

AJL: I always wanted to be an automobile mechanic. That was my dream: to become an automobile mechanic, and I still want to be an automobile mechanic, but I don't want to get my hands greasy. [laughter] Really, that's what I wanted to do, I thought. But after going into the Service, I came out and started as an apprentice bricklayer and I became a bricklayer. And of course, I went to school. I went to school for mechanic. '49 -- '49, I went to Chicago and I went to a school: Commercial Trades Institute for diesel mechanic, and I was out there about a year taking the course. But at that time, there were no diesel vehicles on the East Coast but them Greyhounds and Trailways buses, so it wasn't any use of getting a job at any of those places as a diesel mechanic because they told me -- I asked about a job, and they told me you had to have 15 years experience. Well, if nobody going to give you a job, how you going to get the experience? So therefore, I, I didn't.

I also applied for a job in the government as a diesel mechanic, but the examination papers: They sent me a copy of the type of examination I would have to take, and the, you know, they sent me some of it. You know, what it was like. What I saw on that, I had never seen before in my life. So therefore, I didn't even try to take the examination.

BC: Oh!

AJL: So, I forgot all about that and went back to Great Mills.

BC: Okay. You said you were in the Service. What branch and for how long?

AJL: I was in the Navy for -- Lets see: It was March, April, May -- I was in the Navy for 28 months. Twenty-eight months in the Navy.

BC: And, when -- You said that you went to diesel school after you got out of the Navy.

AJL: Yeah. I went on the GI Bill.

BC: Oh, okay. And then after you found that you weren't going to be able to get a job doing diesel mechanics, --.

AJL: Right.

BC: Then you went to bricklayer's school or --?

AJL: No. No, I had already been to -- I started in '46 after I came out of the Service, and then came out of the Service. Starting in '46, I was an apprentice bricklayer.

BC: Oh, okay.

AJL: I started as an apprentice and became a full-fledged bricklayer. I worked after an apprenticeship. Of course, mine was only a two-year apprenticeship.

BC: Okay.

AJL: I was a bricklayer, full-fledged bricklayer when I started school, went to school for the diesel mechanic.

BC: Oh, okay. Okay. As a teenager, did your parents let you court?

AJL: Well, as a teenager, my parents let me do what I wanted to do! [laughter]

BC: Okay. Well, where would you go and what kind of things did you do?

AJL: I would --

BC: You don't have to get real personal.

AJL: No!

BC: But --

AJL: Well, I spent a lot of my time at Happyland [laughter] as a teenager.

BC: Okay, and at that time, it was sort of right up the street from you.

AJL: Right.

BC: Right up the road.

AJL: True.

BC: What other kind of things did y'all used to do? Did you -- I know that it was places like the St. Francis Hall and places like that. Did you go there for dances?

AJL: No. No, I didn't. The only time I would go to St. Francis Hall, and most times, like I said, was 4th of July, and they used to have several dances at St. Nicholas, which I never attended any of those. And like this, as a teenager, most of the time I was tend And course, we pitched horseshoes and doing the summer, we played softball, baseball, and things like that.

BC: What was it like when you first went out on your own? Where did you go? What did you do? And, how was your money situation?

AJL: [laughter]

BC: No money?

AJL: Money?! [laughter] Money was really tight! [laughter] This was, when I started going out, I imagine it was about --

BC: No, on your own. When you went out, moved away from home.

AJL: Oh, when I moved away from home? Oh, when I moved away from home --Well, I

didn't actually move away until I went to the Service, but off and on, you understand, I was in and out. But, I, when I first left home, I was 16 and went to D.C. and worked in a lunchroom. When was this? Must have been '40, '41, '42 maybe, and the job paid \$18 a week. You worked five days a week: \$18 a week, and room rent was only about \$3 a week. And, this lady used to give me at least one meal for that \$3 a week. And of course, the rest of the meals I ate in the lunchroom. And so, I did very well doing that, and I was up there -- When did I spend? I must have spent the winter up there. Didn't spend quite the winter. I went up there in August or something like that and came back in January because when I came back, they -- I must have been 17 when I started there at the Base down here at Piney Point because I went to the Base at Piney Point.

BC: That was part of the government Base?

AJL: Yes.

BC: Okay.

AJL: Yes, that was the government Base, torpedo testing. They had started building that, and I came down there, and I went to work there. I know I went to work there in January and worked till August. It was '43. At that time, they started taking out income tax for the working people which they had never done before. So, I quit work because I didn't want to pay income tax.

BC: [laughter]

AJL: I didn't stay off long. I went back to work.

[End of Side 1, Tape 1]

[Begin Side 2, Tape 1]

AJL: I was off a couple weeks and I decided that it looks like I'm going to have to pay the income tax, so I went on back to work. And, I stayed there until -- until I was called to go into the Service which --I registered for the Service December the 13th in '43. By the middle of January, I had been called, had my examination and had been, was inducted into the Service about the last of January. In fact, it was six weeks after I registered, I was in the Service.

BC: Okay. What kind of work have you done to support yourself?

BC: You tell me that you used to be a truck driver on Base. You were a teacher's aide at one time. You were a bus driver, a school bus driver for 20 years. A bricklayer. An instructor at a Tech Center in Leonardtown for a year. A bricklayer for 10 years. What other?

AJL: Well before that, after we moved here in Valley Lee, I worked with the farmers until I was 16. The first four years I was here in Valley Lee, I worked with these farmers, and mostly it was in tobacco. I would draw the tobacco plants, help plant tobacco, used to have to cut tobacco. And from '37 until '41, I had worked -- during that time, I worked as much as 35 cents a day, from 35 cents a day up to a dollar an hour. I had worked eight

or nine hours in the tobacco fields for 35 cents a day.

BC: Whew!

AJL: And that was cutting tobacco. Also, did the price up to 50 cents a day. When they got to 75 cents a day, they were making me rich. I'm telling you.

BC: 75 cents a day for cutting tobacco all day?

AJL: Yeah.

BC: Eight or nine hours?

AJL: That's right. That was in tobacco, and you never --Well, eight hours was what they considered a short day. It was always nine or 10 hours.

BC: And you were how old at this time, 16?

AJL: No, no, no. That's when I was 13, 14. In that -- in that area.

BC: Okay. So once you finished your jobs with the farmers and got older and, you know, did other type of work, where was this?

AJL: Well, the other type of work --like I said when I was 16 until out of high school, that's when I went to DC and started working in the lunchroom.

BC: Okay, and you got \$18 --

AJL: A week.

BC: A week there.

AJL: Yes.

BC: Okay. And then, how about when you came back?

AJL: When I came back, I came back home and lived with my mother and father and worked down here to Torpedo Range as a laborer. And at that time, the wages were 87.5 cents an

hour which was --It was \$7 a day. And quite natural, I was staying home, but I had always paid room and board. Not only that, whenever I worked and was staying home, Mother always got some of that money. She would ask you what kind of money were you making? If it was 50 cents a day, you worked three days, she was going to get 1/3 of it. She was going to get 50 cents of that money. Because like she says, when you're not working, you eat and sleep for nothing. When you're working, you're going have to come up with something. So, that was it.

BC: I see.

AJL: And when I worked at Piney Point, I think my wages were \$7 a day, a little better.

Anyway, my wife, my mother got \$7 a week out of that.

BC: So when you were working in Piney Point, how did you get to work?

AJL: They had a -- They had a truck to pick us up. The truck to pick us up.

BC: The torpedo place--.

AJL: Yes.

BC: Provided transportation.

AJL: Yes, sir. They provided. This was contractor, now. This was a contractor that was building the Base, he provided the transportation for us.

BC: Okay. What did it mean to you to have these jobs?

AJL: What you mean, all the jobs that I've had or --?

BC: Well, especially once you finished school.

AJL: Well, it meant an awful lot to me because I, I think --Well, I'm supporting myself, you know. I'm out -- I mean, I'm able to get out on my own and support myself, and I knew I

could support myself. Didn't have to worry about begging nobody for anything.

BC: Okay. Now, what do you remember about your wedding? What year did you get married?

AJL: We were married in '51.

BC: Okay. Do you remember the date?

AJL: June the 3rd.

BC: June 3, 1951.

AJL: '51.

BC: Okay. How did you meet your wife?

AJL: [laughter]

BC: I couldn't hear that!

AJL: [laughter] We probably met at summer from the places we used to go, I guess. [laughter]

BC: Okay. Why did you decide to get married?

AJL: I don't know. Florence and I had been going together about three years, and I liked her. I liked her and wanted to marry her. [laughter]

BC: Okay. Did y'all have a honeymoon?

AJL: No, we did not.

BC: No honeymoon?

AJL: No honeymoon.

BC: Okay. Well, what do you remember about your wedding?

AJL: Florence and I were married at the Rectory at Holy Face were the church is today, and we had made an appointment to be married at the Rectory. And when we get over there, the

priest was not there that was supposed to marry us, and I really don't know where he was, on his way. I don't remember where he was on his way, but I think there was a secretary there, and I think she caught up with him at St. Joseph's. And, he came on back and married Florence and I.

BC: Who was at your wedding?

AJL: Oh, we only had two other people be the witnesses: Jerome Saxon and Louise Brown.

BC: So, that was similar to what they do at the --

AJL: Courthouse?

BC: Courthouse.

AJL: I imagine so. I imagine so.

BC: What has your family life been like? Describe your marital relationship with your wife.

AJL: Well, our marriage has been a very quiet one. Never had any children and, but we have gotten along very well together. That's about it.

BC: That's about it. Okay. Okay. How about religion? What -- you said you've always, when you were growing up, you always attended Holy Face Church.

AJL: Umm hmm [yes].

BC: Holy Face Catholic Church.

AJL: Right.

BC: What church do you attend now?

AJL: We attend St. George's Catholic Church.

BC: In Valley Lee?

AJL: In Valley Lee.

BC: Okay. What does the church mean to you?

AJL: Well, over the years, I have, always did believe that there was a Superior Being and what is here on earth, and that you should -- you should worship him. Because I believe there is a hereafter, and I would very much like to reach that goal! [laughter] But, I really believe that there is -- And then, the church, the church, I figure also helped a lot of people. You know, I mean the poor people, people in need. I think the church does a lot to help them. And of course, the church can't do it unless the people are attending church --gives them the means to help their less needy. And...I think that should be a big function of the church which Uncle Sam, looks like our government is gonna put it in that light today. That welfare system: They going to be messing that up and a lot of people are going to be looking forward to --

BC: To the church helping out.

AJL: The churches and things like that.

BC: What church activities do you participate in?

AJL: Well, today I don't participate in any, but through the years -- Of course, my health doesn't allow me to do it anymore --But I always participated in the church dinners. And at one time, we used to have a little Bingo thing going. For a couple years, I was the Bingo caller. And I used to-- Florence and I used to, for three or four years, Florence and I used to cut a awful lot of grass at church. Cutting grass. I would help, when they had the old hall there, I helped them to paint the old hall a couple of times. These types' things.

BC: Okay, you belong --Did you belong to the St. Vincent De Paul Society?

AJL: Yes. Yes, Florence and I both belonged to the St. Vincent De Paul Society, and I was the Treasurer of that.

BC: What other community activities do you participate in?

AJL: Today, not any.

BC: Or, as you say, your health doesn't allow you now, but, you know, in the past, what have you?

AJL: In the community like I said, the only thing I can remember was St. Vincent De Paul. What else? I looked forward to Little League Ball. Four or five years, I used to be involved with Little League Ball, and I enjoyed that, being with boys, and most of my job was transporting. I used to transport the bus. Most of the time, wherever I went, I was near a park, and I enjoyed that. But lets see, nothing else that I can remember at any community activity.

BC: Well, how do you feel about life in general in, today, in St. Mary's County? In what ways is it different than what it used to be?

AJL: Yeah, life is different. I mean, oh, like I said before that we have transportation now. Most people have an automobile that they can -- Highways are fairly nice, and you don't have -- and you have the type of jobs today where, and years ago you didn't have -- You always had to depend on the gentleman that you were working for a lots of times. But today, you have to have a job wherein if you spend your money correctly like you should to take care of yourself, you can support yourself and don't have to worry about other one, you know, other people for help, unless it's really something large.

BC: Do you think the quality of life is better now than it used to be?

AJL: Yes, the quality of life is much better. We have, we have much better – Well I quite --I know the doctors are better. The doctors are much better today. Hospitals is much better for people, and life is just, just better.

BC: Well, what about the crime situation? Taking that in consideration.

AJL: Well of course crime is a much bigger thing today than it was years ago. I remember years ago when the County had one State Policeman, and most of the time we had a Sheriff and probably a couple of Deputies. And of course, at that time, there wasn't any crime. But today, I think that, as far as I'm concerned, I believe drugs play an awful lot of part, awful large part of crime here in this county. I believe it's more from the drug situation than anything else.

BC: Do you think people are different than they used to be?

AJL: Ahh, my, my.

BC: And if you did, in what way?

AJL: Yes, yes, to a certain extent, people are different. I mean, I remember when, when we were small and our parents were telling us all, and they visited different people. People did more visiting at home, and, which today, most of us do not do that, but it was a lot of home visitation, you know, between friends.

BC: Okay. So, in that sense, it's, it was better then.

AJL: Yes. Yes.

BC: It was better then because of the people, the families visiting within their friends --

AJL: Right.

BC: Rather than now where maybe you have phone calls --

AJL: True. True.

BC: Faxes.

AJL: That's right.

BC: You don't visit. Do you think the teenagers are different today than they used to be?

AJL: Teenager, teenagers. Lets see.

[Cassette is turned off briefly while someone is answering a phone call.]

BC: Okay. I was asking about teenagers, you know, what you know or see of the teenagers.

You know, how are they different than they used to be when you were coming along?

AJL: Well, one thing I notice: They don't have the type of manners that we had when we were teenagers. They don't --As far as I'm concerned, they don't have any respect for older people. I mean, they just want to walk over there, walk over top of you. They walk by you. They don't speak and all these types things which, when we were teenagers, and I didn't do that type of stuff. I --And of course, they have more today than we had, and they --I still don't believe I don't see the teenagers today taking the responsibility or --or they give me the impression that they are not gonna have to work to make a living. I mean, they go to school. They don't seem to try to learn what's being taught to help themselves, and I see a lot of that which is bad for them and for the community.

BC: What do you think caused this, these changes, you know, in the teenager's attitude toward life, towards working?

AJL: Well, actually, as far as I'm concerned, I blame a lot of the parents for it because I don't

think the parents really beat it into these kids' heads that, --When you finish school --I'm going to send you to school. When you finish school, you're going to have to get out there and make yourself a living. And, this has to be done from the time the kids start school until they come out of school. You've got to remind that kid that you, since you're going to school, you learn all you can and do the best you can in school so that you'll be able to make yourself a decent living when you get out because you're going to have to make yourself a living. But, the kids today find that if I don't do, I can go home and sit down on Mama and Dad and they still take care of me, and some of them are out there taking care of grown men and women, which they should be out there on their own.

BC: I'm gonna ask you a couple questions about the race relations. Are race relations different today in the County and, you know, how are they different, and why do you think that they, if they are different, why do you think that they are?

AJL: Well, race relations are different today because, as far as I'm concerned, the only reason I believe it's different is because of the law, because of the law. I don't -- Because some of those people are, the people are nice people, but I still want to believe that the majority of the Caucasians still going to think you are a second-class citizen. That you should not be on the same level with them, and that's the way I think.

BC: And you still think that that's still the same attitude today?

AJL: Same attitude today. The only reason that I believe that majority of them will treat you better is because of the law.

BC: Were you ever afraid of a group or a particular person who practiced hate?

AJL: No. No. I was not. I never was afraid of that because I didn't know of any of it here in this county. And if it was happening, I didn't know anything about it.

BC: How do you feel about living in the country, well, in this county?

AJL: In this county?

BC: Um hm. You said that you lived for a short while in Washington, and so, you know, do you like living in the country better than the city and why?

AJL: Well, I liked, at the time I was living in the city, I liked living in the city because of the job situation. Well, one thing about it: I could always find a job in the city doing something wherein here in the country, you could not. But, this county is getting to be something else to live in today. Well, with these laws and rules and regulations that they have with this County & Zoning Commission and all these types of things, it's really getting to be something nowadays to try to do anything in this county. I mean, you supposed to own your land which you do not. No way, and you can't put a box on it unless you get a permit from them, and this is going to cost you, and you got to get the permits. You got to off to Leonardtown to these different organizations, four or five different times and spend all kinds of money and all kinds of time and, which is really getting be something to do anything here in the county.

And right now, they're talking about closing up this St. Andrews Landfill. They got to cap that with this money that they didn't charge to people or the trash haulers to have the money in reserve to cap it, and they don't know whether they want to put in the new landfill or not. These types of things should be did in advance, and I blame our County Commissioners for these things.

BC: So, are you saying that --Are you trying to say that living in the country and living in the city is getting to be not a big difference now, because --

AJL: No. No, it's not.

BC: Of all of this stuff that's coming on?

AJL: Right. True. That's true.

BC: Do you think there's a difference between the county people and outsiders?

AJL: Well, I --Well, the only difference I would say would be the educational level probably. That's the main difference.

BC: You find that outsiders are --

AJL: Much better, much better educated than the people here in the county. That's right.

BC: But besides that point, you don' -- You don't -- You aren't able to see a big difference --

AJL: No.

BC: Between them?

AJL: No.

BC: Okay. With their attitude toward different things or whatever?

AJL: No.

BC: Okay.

AJL: No.

BC: So, it's just their educational level. Do you interact with outsiders who live in the county?

AJL: Yes, I --

BC: And in what way?

AJL: I-- Well, the only thing I will do, I will talk to a few people, especially if they a softball fan, and I meet several people at softball games, and a awful lot of them are not from here in the county, you know. They are outside people. We will have nice conversations.

BC: Besides living for Washington for that period of time and Chicago for a year, have you traveled much outside of the county?

AJL: Well, no. Not exactly. I mean, I have done some traveling. I mean, especially when I was on the bus. I used to drive mostly field trips, and I went to all the different museums in the Virginia area and West Virginia and a lot of places in Pennsylvania. I met an awful lot of different people, you know, from different areas at that time.

BC: Do you interact with the people in the different areas of the county; for instance, down in the 1st District Ridge or the 7th District, and for what reasons?

AJL: Well, like I said, the only interaction that I have with people are --I know a few people in each area, and we may have something to talk about, and we may talk some.

BC: And then, when you go to ball games?

AJL: Yes.

BC: Okay. What do you think of the direction that the county is going in today? I know you mentioned about the problem with the landfill and other things like that, and you know.

AJL: I really don't know where we are going, to be frank, because it seems to me that the County Commissioners -- Course, I think the last set of County Commissioners started the ball rolling, started messing up, and these that are in there today don't seem to know what to do to, to get the things corrected. And, I, just like they been drumming over the years about this FDR Boulevard. I've got to go along with the people that say that this

should be put in before they start working on 235. Well, the county wants the state to help. If it's going to be a county road, then I can't see why you can't fill the bond, get enough money to build this road. You work on. You wanted \$23 million to put in a new courthouse. Now, it ain't gonna cost \$23 million to build this road, so why can't you just get that same money to put in this road and put this FDR Boulevard in here before they start working on 235.

BC: Okay.

AJL: Because once they start working on 235, if it's not then, you're never gonna -- You're gonna have the worst traffic jams you ever had in your life.

BC: Okay. What are your feelings about the Navy Base? Was your family hostile to the Base, to the government taking any land from the people who were living there?

AJL: No. No, they were not because they knew that was -- My people believed that that was something that was going to help the people of the county.

BC: Okay. So, none of your people had to move off their land?

AJL: No. No.

BC: Okay. So, you're saying that the majority of the blacks were not hostile.

AJL: No. Not as far as I know, they were not.

BC: Okay. What are your feelings about changes in the county because of the new growth on the Base?

AJL: Well, the only thing -- Like I said, the only thing, the only change that I know will be congestion that's going to be over there from 235 from not having the proper highways in place at the time that most of these people get here because they haven't started on them

and some of these people here in '98. That's gonna be trouble.

BC: Okay.

AJL: It will be terrible.

BC: You were telling me about when you were growing up, you couldn't afford to buy newspapers and when you didn't have batteries, you weren't able to listen to the radio to hear any news. How did you get the news?

AJL: Only from word of mouth.

BC: Word of mouth.

AJL: Word of mouth.

BC: When you were able to -- When you had radio and TV, what kind of shows did y'all look at or listen to?

AJL: Well, actually the only thing I listened to was the news and lets see. The kinds of programs were there mostly were all Country Westerns and I didn't go out with that kind of stuff. They had Amos & Andy on and people like that.

BC: Okay. What do you think has been the biggest changes in the county in your lifetime besides the Navy Base coming in?

AJL: Well, like I said, the biggest change I know, and especially the black generation. The majority of the people today, in fact a whole lot of our people today, they own their own homes. They own their own homes. They have better homes than we used to have. That's one of the main things that-- the main changes that I've seen here in the county for us because as teenagers coming along, our people were still living on those peoples farms and things like that. So, a lot of our people have really come a long way.

BC: Can you share any old stories about what life was like in the country, in the county for your parents?

AJL: For my parents?

BC: Uh huh.

AJL: I really can't because I know, of course my mother, she always was a housewife, and my father: he worked sawmill for 24 years. And after he moved over here in Valley Lee, they he did a little light farming. And after we were here about four years, he started doing construction work. But otherwise, I really don't know too much about their situation. Didn't hear too many stories.

BC: Okay. This last question is: Have you done everything in your life that you wanted or planned to do? I know you said earlier --

AJL: No.

BC: As a diesel mechanic, but what else? You know, something that you always wanted to do that you haven't done.

AJL: Something I always wanted to do. Well, I always wanted to do more traveling throughout the country, but, which I haven't done, but I never was interested in going into the foreign countries. I really wanted to -- I would have liked to have done more traveling through this country, but that's about the only thing that I haven't done that I would like to do.

BC: Like to do. Okay. If you could go back and live your life over again, what would you change?

AJL: What would I change? Well, the only thing I -- If it was possible, just through the early

years of my life, I say -- especially from the time I was about 12 years old until about 16 because working with those farmers: That was terrible. That was a terrible life. It was for 35 cents a day, 40 cent, 50 cents a day, and you worked. You worked out in those fields, and I never did care for that, and I never liked farming period. I never did like farming. But, that would be about the only thing I would change. Otherwise, I've had a fairly good life.

BC: Okay. On that note, we'll conclude the interview. Thank you very much.

AJL: You're very welcome.

BC: Biographical information on Joseph Aloysius Lawrence, also known as Sonny Lawrence.

Address: 45044 Hewlett Road, Valley Lee, 20692

Telephone Number: 994-0640

Date of Birth: December 10, 1925

Place of Birth: Great Mills, Maryland

He attended Great Mills Elementary School which was at the site of the old dump in Callaway or Valley Lee; Jarboesville High School which was on the Base before the Base came, across from where the Eagan McAllister Building is now.

He worked as a teacher's aid, a bricklayer instructor at the Tech Center. He was bricklayer for 10 years, a truck driver for 10 years. He retired from that in 1965, and a school bus driver for about 20 years, and he retired in 1992.

His wife's name is Florence Elizabeth Dyson Lawrence. His maternal grandparents were Mary Thompson Mason and Nelson Mason. His paternal grandparents were Maggie Whelan Lawrence and John Francis Lawrence. His mother was Janie Estelle Mason Lawrence. His father: Morris Andrew Lawrence. His siblings are Grace Cecelia Blackwell, Mary Louise Mason Brown, Anne Elizabeth Clayton, himself, Margaret Rosalie Clayton, Catherine White Briscoe, Morris A. Lawrence, Jr. and Geneva Lawrence. He has no children or grandchildren.

That ends the biographical data on Joseph Aloysius Lawrence.

[End of Side 1, Tape 2]