

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

JAMES MELVIN COATES

Interviewed by Brenda Coates
December 11, 1996
at St. Mary's Nursing Center
Transcribed by Bonnie Elward on February 24, 1998
Edited by Bonnie Elward
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Original format is one cassette tape
58 minutes, 37 seconds

[Begin Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]

Brenda Coates: ... at St. Mary's Nursing – Rehabilitation Center and today's date is December the 11th 1996. Mr. Coates, I just want to let you know if you are uncomfortable answering these questions, feel free not to answer.

First of all where do you live?

James Coates: I live in Hollywood.

BC: Oh, Okay.

JC: Maryland -- St. Mary's County Maryland.

BC: Okay, give me a location some -- locations around -- now you live sort of behind the old Hollywood School.

JC: Oh, yeah, the old Hollywood School...the First National ... I would say.

BC: Okay, where were you born?

JC: Where was I born?

BC: Umm hmm [yes].

JC: In Pierson

BC: And where is that?

JC: I think what they call that place Cedar Point, that's inside the Base.

BC: Yes that's inside the Base. What was your father's occupation?

JC: Farmer

BC: Okay, and your mother?

JC: Hum

BC: What was your mother's occupation?

JC: No, no she --

BC: She was a home maker she --

JC: Home maker

BC: About how much land did you all live off of?

JC: It wasn't much land ...farmer.

BC: Was he a tenant farmer or he had his own.

JC: No, he was a tenant farmer.

BC: He was a tenant farmer, okay.

JC: No, he was a tenant farmer.

BC: How long did you live in Pierson?

JC: I lived there until about 10 years old.

BC: Until you were about 10 years old?

JC: 10 years old right. ...after the base now before we came up before the base. The family was ready to move out and we found a place called Arcade that's up there -
- Souci Plaza. You know where that is?

BC: Oh, umm, hmm [yes]

JC: That was a place called Arcade had a little farmer there. In that area there, there's an old graveyard there you might see it when you go by there.

BC: At San Souci?

JC: Yeah at San Souci

BC: It's a little graveyard up there.

JC: A little graveyard yeah. That used to be in our back yard.

BC: Okay so and you lived there how long?

JC: Oh I live there until I went to CC Camp. It was up round 35'm 36' or something like that.

BC: You lived there until about 36'. Okay.

So did -- What kinds of foods did you all eat? Did you eat mostly what you grew on the farm or --

JC: We grow most of our food

BC: Okay

JC: Yeah, yeah we grow most of our food. Course we had to buy some things from the store you know. But as for meat cattle and all that that kind of stuff we raised it -- that kind of stuff. Of course you had to buy some kind of stuff.

BC: What church did your family go to?

JC: St. Nichols

BC: St. Nichols, that was on the base?

JC: Yeah that was on the base

BC: Okay. Do you remember you family taking any trips?

JC: No, no not any trips like what some people might go on to the city and come back down. We didn't take trips to much. We'd visit children and like that ... we go and visit children and something like that. Trips I don't know ... vacations and stuff like that.

BC: Was your family involved in any community activities or anything?

JC: No baby, we wasn't involved in nothing ... just farming

BC: Okay. Do you think times were better or worst then they are now?

JC: Times are better now then it ever was.

BC: Times are better now? Why? Why do you feel times are better now?

JC: O yeah, I would say now because everything is better now no out house, can sit in the house and can see outside, can stay inside and try to keep warm. It's all different from when I come along. What they had then -- what they had now and didn't have then they didn't have then. It's almost 100% better that I can remember. Now other people have told me "worsen" from times; school and things -- everything else. Go to school and get books and all. White peoples left over books ... for the time I went to school. I could go to much school because I had to.

BC: What were your family's health concerns? Do you remember you mother making any home remedies?

JC: I don't remember, I heard somebody say, well she – well she would go out and work for what you might call it. She worked for different white people on different days. I ... might call that. That was no job

BC: Did she – did she make -- I mean -- When your family was sick did she make any home medicines?

JC: Oh, I see. Well she made – she had to because then ... I can't give you up to date because I was the youngest. Do you understand what I mean. From that point of view, but I do know she used to make a whole lot of stuff. When the children would catch a cold, you'd make cough syrup. ... For cold and that kind of stuff. Is that what you mean?

BC: Yeah

JC: A ... and a whole lot of candy stuff like that. Stuff I remember she used to make ... for a cold she give people cod liver oil and sugar. She takes that on. Too many drops of ... I remember that to break up colds for children. For chest she'd rub your chest with mutton ... you'd save from the beef. Called mutton tauller. You'd save that and rub your chest with that. It set your body to heat and it would break up a cold. She used to do all that.

She would give them the candies and stuff like that. And they would brake up the cold and stuff and corn sugar and that would help and the stuff they save for the beef and that was called Muscat, Muscat, and you spread the chest with it and let it sit awhile and let it get cold.

BC: Do you remember any doctor's coming to your house?

JC: Yeah Dr. Bean.

BC: Dr. Bean?

JC: Yeah.

BC: Okay

JC: And Dr. Brown.

BC: And where did he live?

JC: Over there before Leonardtown. Over there you know where that sheet metal place is on Route 5?

BC: Winters sheet metal?

JC: Yeah over there

BC: Is that where Dr. Brown live?

JC: Yeah, Dr. Brown used to live in there. Of course Dr. Bean, you know where he lived.

BC: Umm, hmm, and they made house calls?

JC: Yeah he made house calls, they made house calls. Dr. Brown was the one who -- he tried to start that hospital over there. But never did ...by the sheet metal place. He had an office over there.

BC: And he tried to start a hospital there?

JC: Yeah

BC: When you were coming – when you were growing up how did the black people get there news?

JC: News?

BC: Umm Hmm [yes].

JC: Well we couldn't read but still couldn't write I would say. There wasn't too many old ones ahead of me that couldn't read or write too much. Somebody could read something to them when they bought a newspaper out. Nobody had no money to buy a newspaper with. ... Got the newspaper because they could afford to buy it. The average person didn't have the money to buy a newspaper.

BC: So did they have to depend on a lot of word of mouth to get the news?

JC: That's all you did, there wasn't no radio. I don't remember having any.

BC: Do you remember any special programs that when you did get a radio that you use to listen to?

JC: No, what I know when I heard it, I ... concern like you do now. Of course music and stuff like that.

BC: Okay, let me stop. [Tape cuts off]

What kind of things did you do as a child? What kind of games did you play?

JC: Oh, I did so much we played dodge ball and run relay. But we didn't have nothing football ... basketball learn how to do that.

BC: What kind of chores did you have to do?

JC: Ha [what]

BC: What kind of chores did you have to do?

JC: Well we chores, we used to go to the field ... toys ... really gave you a chance to run on field days...

BC: Okay, what kind of jobs did y'all have to do around the house?

JC: Oh,

BC: What kind of jobs did you have to do?

JC: Oh, we have to do the homework and we had to feed the -- and lot of work to do with the stuff we had to raise. We had to milk to cows and cut the wood feed the horses and cows and all that stuff. Watered and work with them and take care of them. There was very few machinery then, all you had then was animals to work. We only had horses and cows, very few had tractors.

BC: How did you get along with your brothers and sisters?

JC: Got along alright I guess. Yeah of course ... as they go away they want to try something new, to seek a better job but of course a farm couldn't afford to pay us no money the ones we work for. So they -- as you got older you went away so they can find a better job ... at home but they just wasn't making any money because they couldn't afford to pay them. Because they wasn't making no money, so they had to go...making on farming.

BC: Did your parents have to discipline you?

JC: Ha [what]

BC: Did your parents have to discipline you?

JC: Did they have to?

BC: Yes

JC: No ...

BC: You never got in trouble?

JC: I remember going to jail one time I was I don't know I was a man then...

BC: Do you think that your parents prepared you well for life?

JC: Ha [what]

BC: Do you think that your parents prepared you well for life?

JC: If I had of stayed with it, I probably would have. I mean see they didn't take no chances there. See because that place were they lived at, I know they bought that place for \$200.

BC: Down at Cedar Point?

JC: Down at the last place that I left I was about – CC Camp making a dollar a day then. Up at San Souci Plaza there you know where that's at?

BC: Up to San Souci? You could have bought that for \$200?

JC: Yeah, It was \$200 there and all back up in there was Steve Watts. Back there Harry Thomas ... It was a little farm, I don't know how many acres. I swear I could have got it for \$200 but I was younger then and no body had it then. If you had it, you wouldn't give it up. I know I didn't have it, you couldn't make no money then. You couldn't borrow no money. ...Before I went to work there at the CC Camp I was making \$1 a day. ...for a dollar a day, five dollars a month some ...25 to come home. ... I was telling at that time, I could have gotten it for that price of money. All that road up there ... 50¢ an acre all the way up that line. Ups where the I don't know where they call that place now see it was round about fifty cents an acre. You couldn't give it away. It was rough out there baby I mean compared to what it is now. I mean ... a whole lot of children ... now. As far as living and convenience you could consider a whole lot of this, I tell you the truth. hard times then it ever was before and moving. There wasn't no house to move into. You'd heat the outside as much as the inside. Then you would

have to go out there and cut the wood to keep warm couldn't cut wood and just freeze.

BC: Okay.

JC: It was rough.

BC: Describe your schooling for me? You told me you went to Jarboesville Elementary School.

JC: Yeah

BC: And then St. Francis Elementary School?

JC: It was a St. Nicholas School, I went to Jarboesville School and then it was St. Francis I forgot to say that. School I believe there was another school I believe it was St. Nichols then Jarboesville. I had to walk eleven miles to school that back. St. Nicholas was in the base St. Nicholas hall and then the school there and that's where I went to school.

BC: And you had to walk eleven miles to school?

JC: Deed I did towards the last at St. Jarboesville I mean St. Francis.

BC: Oh that was St. Francis?

JC: Yeah. It wasn't quite that far to St. Nichols. See St. Nichols School wasn't that far from St. Nicholas Church. You remember where that is on the base.

BC: Right.

JC: The school used to over there to the right. Down that bottom, there use to be a school there. That little school there it was round St. Nichols Hall. People use to have hall. Society people would have affairs ... they built a new hall there and

stuff like that so they used them really for schools, the society for schooling yeah that's what it was, St. Nicolas

BC: Do you remember any of your teachers?

JC: Yeah, I remember Miss Allen, she was my last teacher no she wasn't my last – this lady Miss Allen. She was at St. Francis and Theresa was my last teacher.

BC: Theresa Somerville? [Laughter]

JC: Yeah

BC: Okay

JC: Yeah! I got to laugh too. I remember the last year I was at school she had and old 33' Ford. St. taught at St. Nicolas – St. Francis. She use to let me drive. She use to like ... but I use to tease her. But you she used to let me drive the old car to the store to get the children something. You know how the teacher would do the children. Up there in California, there wasn't but one store down there in California. There was one in Jarboesville that was on a hill at Cedar Point. So anyway I remember that woman she was something else. She would say I could drive and take the car to go get the children -- you know so then would buy them children stuff cake and candy you know stuff like that there. That was the days. Miss Jones she, she was a nice little teacher down at St. Nichols she was a very good teacher. Oh yeah there was another one ... Bell's wife, Mrs. Bell. Martin Bell's son – wife. That's all I remember. Then I had ... until the time I had to stay home and work.

BC: Okay and you said you didn't go past the eighth grade because you had to go to work?

JC: Yeah had to go to work had to work half my time

BC: While you were going to school you were working part time?

JC: Yeah I work at home to help my father

BC: Oh help your father on the farm?

JC: See I couldn't put much time in school back then.

BC: Okay, as a child what did you dream of becoming?

Tell you one thing I couldn't get my mind set on nothing but I know that I couldn't get by doing the same thing I was doing that was a farmer. I was sick of that but I ended up doing more of that later. Of course things like that I had to do to work on a farm and make your own living. I hadn't set my mind – I hadn't got to the stage where I could set my mind whatever thing I want. I would have liked to take up a trade or something like that. was working you know but I was ok but I couldn't get myself to find out what I wanted to do so I just take it as it come to me.

BC: As a teenager where did you parents approve of you going?

JC: Do you mean where did they trust me to go out? Is that what you mean?

BC: Yeah did they only allow you to go to church functions or --

JC: Oh yeah they'd let you go to church. Things like that she didn't approve of you going to a whole lot of -- as a Catholic -- raised up as a Catholic there was a restriction on whether you could go to Methodist or Catholic. They had camp meetings. Do you remember that?

BC: I remember talking of them.

JC: I was catholic you see so I used to go there and there were a lot of girls there. Mother didn't approve of liquor. It was illegal then, I remember that. Because Roy Cutchember, we were good friends. We used to go out ... that's the way ... only ways we had to go.

BC: Did they let you date?

JC: Let me date ...

BC: Well where did you go? What kind of places did you go to?

JC: I went to you can have fun everywhere, make your own fun. They had house parties, you could have fun. If you had \$2, you had a whole lot of money. .. Or something like that, or go to house parties. We never really had no dances until you got to those church festivals. Like I tell you at the hall, they had them once a year. And you'd go out to – everybody go out we go out then you got to be back home at a certain time. When the sun go down you better get me home, that's as far as that goes. They let you go out then, well when you were young.

BC: What was it like when you first went out on your own? Where did you go when you left home?

JC: I went to Washington and stay around there from job to job to job ... the one I could make the most money from.

BC: Did you stay with one of your sisters or brothers?

JC: Yeah when I first went out there.

BC: Okay, what kind of things did you do for entertainment when you first moved to Washington?

JC: Entertainment? What do you mean? You mean work entertainment?

BC: Yeah Entertainment, where did you go?

JC: To the beer garden.

[End of Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]

[Begin Side 2, Tape 1 of 1]

BC: Ok, now you say -- you did odd jobs when you first went to Washington do you remember about how much money you made? How much money you were paid an hour?

JC: It was 32¢ an hour.

BC: 32¢ an hour?

JC: And that wasn't no full time job either. I worked in the drug store, you made tips see you do good and you make more by making tips then regular job. It was how you react to the people you live with – I mean work with. Your delivering stuff from the drug store and cooking the food. In them days you – there was a lot of work but the money was so you earn – you had to rely on your tips for service. The better you would be at it the more money you make. They didn't pay you no whole lot of money; the drug store didn't pay you no salary. I remember one time I was up to maybe fifteen dollars a week. Up they're at one of the liquor stores or something and that was good money for me then.

BC: And this was in when this was in aha the late 30's

JC: Had to been in the late 30's because I was 36 when my father died and it was so long after that before I went on? Because he died in '36.

BC: And you were talking about the CC Camp

JC: Yeah

BC: And you say you made a dollar a day?

JC: Yeah, \$30 a month. Went there twice and well yes sir.

BC: How did you meet your wife?

JC: I went to school with her. Yep went to school with her.

BC: Why did you decide to get married?

JC: Ha [What]

BC: Why did you decide to get married?

JC: I don't know no better. [Laughter] I made out alright.

BC: Okay, what was your wedding date? Do you remember when you got married?

JC: 12th of June 1938.

BC: Do you remember who was your best man and your maid of honor?

JC: Yeah it was Woodrow Fredrick he was living in Washington then he was related.

You might know Purnell Frederick in Hollywood, he use to grow up in Hollywood. He was related to me. Fredrick told him ... he was to old for you, of course he was way older. ... Black people you know. Fact I don't know to many ... people from there except for a few. One's I did know done moved out.

BC: Okay, What has your family life been like? How was your marriage and how did you --?

JC: Well I tell you I guess I did as best I could and as bad as I could. [Laughter] I did the best I could. I tell you what though it wasn't no easy thing to raise a family in those days. Of course you had to do a lot of different things. To make things

meet, you had to come up but I say it could have been worse. But I was lucky enough to have a job towards the last for outside ... they let me stay with him to get a retirement when I come out. When I worked I didn't really make no money. I should have worked for the government that was a better paying job and that give you more money. Just the name to the government any government but they ain't paying off like what they do now. You just get a little something but it wasn't much,

BC: Right

JC: And that give you mean and some kind of standings didn't mean that you had a little job and you quit everything was gone see. Like social security, when I first started paying social security they took two cent a day -- a week or something or other. They started taking that in 1937. I'll never forget that cause you see you didn't have to take it out because it wasn't compelled. So I said, "Well I wasn't making it, so I went on and let hem that it out." Think it was two cents a week no wait a minute it was two cent a day it must have been any how it did not amount to much. For what it did amount up to when I retired from Supply in 1981 I didn't have to pay up to the four quarters I had enough in there to draw four quarter of social security and my wife to draw social security to before she died she got half of mine. I didn't know that until she died and she never did work. But she got half of mine.

BC: Half of your social security.

JC: Yeah but a as she passed I couldn't get the money that she was getting of mine. Anyway!

BC: What church do you attend now?

JC: Church that I'm in? I'm in St. John's

BC: St. John's Catholic Church?

JC: Umm hmm [yes].

BC: Do you participate in any of the churches activities?

JC: No I don't -- I don't I just give them a little donation not now. I go there and give something to the church and go. Church festivals ... children ... everybody ... all the folks ahead of me anyways. Very few blacks go there now anyhow. But anyway, that wouldn't make much difference as far as that went.

BC: Do you participate in any community activities?

JC: No, the fire department, church, rescue squad.

BC: You say you did participate in those?

JC: Yeah fire and rescue squad we had ... to make every week

BC: So you donated to the fire department and rescue squad, okay. How do you feel about life in general in St. Mary's County?

JC: Life in general.

BC: In what ways is it different from what it used to be?

JC: The living conditions now are 100% better then when I come along.

BC: Are people different from what they used to be?

JC: Yeah they different.

BC: How?

JC: One thing now you can't even speak to some body before there asking you what the hell you speak to me for. When I was coming along if you didn't speak,

they'd tell you parents about why you couldn't speak to them. I don't be listening because you speak to anybody because that's the first thing if you want to know them. Speak some question let them know who you is an what it is you looking for that's the way I look at it but you go out there now and speak to somebody now they take the gun and shot you down. What can you do about it. Then it might look like somebody you know in your family and you might say "ain't you so and so son," then you got questions and you can't ask them kind of questions to some young guys out there now if you want to live. Because they'll take a something and shot you. So I don't say anything to them, I don't know them I just don't know them.

BC: Yeah, so it's not as friendly as it used to be?

JC: Oh no one time you could ...

BC: How were race relations when you were coming along?

JC: Oh that was different to ... it was way rough then very rough ... go I used to tell mama ... play with little white boys and play with them all day and everything, and then when it was time to go home and eat. He'd go home to eat ... he'd come to my house to eat, but he didn't want you to go to his house and eat. All that stuff is different now. You know how it is my mother used to feed them and they used to eat and wasn't no other choice. I wasn't too much for eating there no how we belong in the kitchen.

BC: Now when you --

JC: That was right rough.

BC: You lived in Washington for a while? Which did you like better living in the city or here in the country?

JC: I could live in the city anytime then. Yeah, but I didn't much care for the city...

BC: Because you were raising a family?

JC: Right

BC: But you did like the city better?

JC: I like the city better yes. Yeah she was alright then ... I remember when it was so hot that we live in a apartment house and the weather would be so hot, I tell you. We used to got downstairs and sit out there half -- all night. Time you woke up it was time you go to work. Be so hot there. You can even go to the store hardly up there now. I remember when we use to go to the store you would run down stairs and run cross to the liquor store get what you want. Can't go up there now and call yourself gonna go cross the street. ...because now people out there waiting for you.

BC: What do you think have been the biggest changes in the county?

JC: Well, they get it together. On thing about it, putting -- putting them people together mostly. But racially, that's one big thing. Because they never will get it all out of them see but that was real smart of them putting them all together but that still ain't gonna get it all out of them. Got to far into them, so some bad as the people back then but they getting better a whole lot better. And that way if they have to work together it makes them better.

BC: Okay, so race relations are getting better?

JC: Yeah, yeah I would say that.

BC: Okay, what are your feelings about the Navy Base? Where any of your family put off of that property because of the government took the land for the base?

JC: Well my father had come off that land before it happened, about a year or so before it happened. He didn't have no -- didn't own no land course that was he a was getting cut off. When you get to old to farm by himself and there wasn't nobody but me and so he had to give it up he couldn't stand farming out there in the rain and he couldn't drive no equipment all he could do was drive a horse and team. And he was too old to drive all the equipment even if he had it. He didn't have nothing so it wasn't not choice for him to do.

BC: Do you think the Navy base coming to the county was a good move

JC: I think so for the people, very good move.

BC: Do you know of any people who were hostile towards the base for coming down here?

JC: Ha [what]

BC: Do you know of any people who were hostile to the fact that the government took their land for the navy base?

JC: I know some of them, but their dead went that away. But of course they had come then but was nothing that could have been done but some of them take a stand to give them even what they wanted to give them. They had to come out anyway. But most of the black people didn't have no land down there anyhow.

Yes they did, down in Piney Hill. Fordtown – Piney Hill

BC: You said Fordtown?

JC: Yeah, that was the name of it then, black people had their own land back then half an acre or an acre or so something like that. Didn't have enough to build a house on and a little garden or something but there wasn't no farming back then. I think ... had his own place. That wasn't no good. See they work down there and they work down on the farm. See they work for them old people George ..., old man Dorsey, Jarboe's them the ones who took a big hurting and them the ones have all those black folks working for them from sun to sun everyday.

BC: So the government hurt the whites more than they hurt the blacks?

JC: I say yeah because the black people was getting along somewhat but them white people own about 1000's of acres. George Corck owned quite a few acres. I can't remember the exact amount of acres, but he had enough – He had a canning factory down there and got dirt cheap and dirt labor so

BC: Have you done everything in your lifetime that you ever wanted to do?

JC: That's hard to say. Say what you want to do and being able to do it now it's too late now. No I didn't do everything that I wanted to do.

BC: Well what did you want to do?

JC: I always yeah you got me this time well I want to not do or make one thing you life you got a family and you want to make them happy and be happy. We sometime ... do get happy.

BC: If you could go back and change your life what would you change?

JC: Its harder then what it seems, everything tell ... everything hard come to you way it is hard for you to say what it is you want to change. Personally we all have something we going over in our minds so that it you always got a way of always

trying to do things for yourself. Had to go because you got to take care of your children, hard for you to sit down and say to yourself to make what was right and what was wrong do. What you want to do is make things right so you can make something happen, of what you want to do so what you suppose to do now.

People making so much money out there now, it's hard for you to say what you want to do you ain't got no choice you go out and get a better job. Your scared to go on a job -- getting so now that you get a decent job and you go back and forth on the job less it the children. Brenda are -- you a got a good job and people have to watch you now and then? This generation now they raise them up come up on and ready to come in and knock you in the head and come right out the door. So one of, one the world you be poor and you be rich. The best ... You know if you rich they looking for you. Then the one who right these poor be walking around you know them the rich man get the same as he got.

BC: Okay, okay.

JC: Yeah the lost time some much stuff it happen like that out there like that there ... Hang with his buddies and buddies might have some money. Be with him and he get the worst lick. All that kind of stuff because it change in time.

BC: Okay, I think on that note we'll end the interview.

Biographical Data on James Melvin Coates:

P.O. Box 118 Hollywood Md. 20636

Telephone Number: 373-8538

Date of Birth: January 7, 1920

Birth Place: Pierson, Maryland

He went to St. Nicolas Elementary School, Jarboesville Elementary and St. Francis

Elementary. He only went to the 8th grade.

His occupation was farmer and odd job person. He retired from the Supply Department on the Navy Base in 1981

He was married to Eunice Pauline Chase Coates.

Maternal and Paternal Grandparents - He doesn't remember names.

Mother – Laura Lee Coates

Father - Sam Coates

Brothers and Sisters

Agnes Coates Fisher

Alison Coates

Madeline Coates

Beatrice Coates Hogan

Daniel Coates

Priscilla Coates Brown

Jeanette Coates Maiden

Roosevelt Coates

Tillman Coates

Thomas Coates

Warren Coates

Frances Coates Ellerby

Melvin Coates

Children (grandchildren:

Yvonne Maddox (Bernadette, Loretta, Shelia, Brenda, Thomas Jr., Xavier,

Connie, Tyrone, Tracy, Melvin, Michelle, Barbara and Dwayne)

Frances Dickens (Frances, Sharon, Deirdre, Jewel and Julius)

Melva Ann Coates (Monique and Bryan)

Vernon Coates (Jackie)

Saundra Ginyard (Kimberly)

[End of Side 2, Tape 1 of 1]