

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Alexander Lewis

Well, I meant, what I wanted to get into was segregation. You take at Schofield. I had to go, I went to the PX officer, you know, to get permission to sell our equipment. Our special--our hair tonics and stuffs that Negroes usually use, you know, in the PX. And then also get girls and men, too, to work in the PX, some of our people. I had to go to the commanding general before we could get anything done, but we did. I found the girls, three of them, put them in and specially tutored them. Told them the problems we're going to have and everything. And we got the newspapers, there are about two, three papers that we got, these colored papers. And we got the face lotion and stuff like that.

Alexander Lewis, the son of store owners, was born December 10, 1910 in Robeson County, North Carolina. He graduated from Johnson C. Smith University in 1935 and subsequently earned a bachelor's and master's degree in divinity.

He joined the U.S. Army in 1942 and served as a chaplain. He was stationed at Schofield Barracks, Hawai'i in 1958. He retired in 1964.

Lewis later established a counseling service and worked for ten years (1969-1979) as a counselor at Leahi Hospital.

He was active in the NAACP.

Lewis passed away on March 22, 1990.

Tape No. 18-10-1-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Alexander Lewis (AL)

June 2, 1988

Mililani, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: We are taping in Mililani at the home of Addie and Alex Lewis and the date is June 2, 1988.

Mr. Lewis, can you tell me a bit about your early life, where and when you were born and about your family, and what you would do as a child and what it was like.

AL: I was born December 10, 1910 in Robeson County in a small town known as St. Pauls, North Carolina. I grew up in the community as an ordinary child, went to school, elementary school, high school and I finished college.

KT: What kind of jobs did people have in that time period, men and women, Black men and Black women?

AL: Well, in my community, we did miscellaneous work. Most of them, I would say, were farmers. They grew many different types of fruits and vegetables, tobacco, and so forth. Most of the ladies assisted the husbands in doing the farm work and etcetera.

KT: And what about ownership? Did people own their property or did they work other people's property? How was it?

AL: In my county, 90 percent of the people owned their own property. They still do. Not, well, now, they don't, but they did then. They owned their own property.

KT: And do you know the history of how people came to own their own property?

AL: Oh, yes.

KT: Can you tell us about that?

AL: You think that would be. . . . (Chuckles)

KT: No, it's history. This is history.

AL: Well, in this particular county, Robeson County, most of the people, the Negroes, were farmers and they bought their land. Some were given to them because of the previous circumstances in that community. And that was about the way they accumulated the land. They just had it handed down from father to son and so on.

KT: When you speak of previous circumstances, are you referring all the way back to the days of slavery?

AL: That's correct.

KT: And then some of the masters would bequeath the land to their [Black] children?

AL: That is correct.

KT: Was that an unusual thing to happen?

AL: No, that was a normal thing. (Chuckles) That was pretty well normal.

KT: I see.

AL: Most of them did that. You find a lot of them, they owned that land from that source.

KT: Mm hmm. So in other words, these were children of the slave masters.

AL: That's right.

KT: And somehow the slave masters had a sympathy or a love for the children . . .

AL: That's right.

KT: . . . and passed on the land or . . . Did they give them their freedom at the same time? Or at their death?

AL: They got the land, later on that came, well, that came at a different time. They had the land before--I guess you call it set free or whatever you call it.

KT: Mm hmm.

AL: Before they received their freedom.

KT: So this would be about how many landowning families in that particular county, say dated from far back?

AL: Oh, brother, let's see, I would say, 90 percent of the Negroes in that day owned their own land.

KT: And how many Negroes would there be in that county?

AL: Quite a few. Quite a few.

KT: I mean a thousand or. . . .

AL: Well, there'd be more than a thousand. Had some big . . .

KT: A lot of families . . .

AL: . . . had some big families in there. (Chuckles) And if you count each one individually, there would be more than, there would be, I would say, 3[,000] or 4,000 people or more.

KT: And then what proportion would that be to White people in that county? Maybe 10 percent or. . . .

AL: I would say about 10 percent.

KT: So did you run into any kind of prejudice or discrimination while you were growing up in that town or were you protected?

AL: There was prejudice there. But I didn't run into too much of it. Very little that I ran into. I would say this, that in my situation, my family was, I guess, we owned a store. My grandfather owned it and I stayed with him a while. Then it was handed down to us. In fact, store just was closed, oh, four, five years ago. And there I had the opportunity of meeting a lot of people. I was supposedly a smart little boy and I was always eager in education. I wanted to learn. I wanted to go to school. I will not tell you how it happened, but my wish came true. And in my case, I didn't have it too difficult myself. I didn't get into any trouble. That was my situation. And I did finish school, as I planned. Went on to and finished a boarding school in a town in Robeson County, one of the largest, well, the largest county in North Carolina. And went on to college and so on.

KT: Where did you go to college?

AL: I went to Johnson C. Smith [University in Charlotte, N. C.]. And I went to---well, Johnson C. Smith, that was your basic college. I earned my A.B. [Bachelor of Arts] degree. And then, since that time I have finished the other colleges.

KT: Were you aware of any prejudice or discrimination? Could you possibly . . .

AL: Oh, yes, sure, I was aware of it.

KT: Can you tell me about that, how you became aware of it? How did you become aware that there was a difference between people? (AL sighs.) And the treatment of people.

AL: Well, I knew from, say, four years old, I knew it was different. And I could see the difference. And no one---they didn't tell me that, I just saw it with my own eyes. And I think where it was most outstanding was that I could tell that it was prejudice. . . . Being farmers, whenever we finished our farm, the people would go somewhere else and work, see. Work to make money. So I remember time after time that I have been visiting with my family to other people and I would help out, like weighing the cotton in the afternoon. Grading the tobacco, stuff like that. Particular, I remember one day, we were weighing the cotton and the cotton, the weight was not real correct. And I spoke to the guy about it. And he said this was his land, owned it, I had nothing to do with it and he would call it as he saw fit. I said, "You supposed to call it by the scales. That's what the scales are for." And we argued there a while and I said, "Well, my people would not come back to you. We'll not help you out anymore. We don't have to do it and we won't do it. We got our own place, we got enough there to take care of us." Well, now, that was my first time. And in that time I determined, I determined before that time because I had, every time anybody would come in to our store, I'd ask them to teach me how to count certain numbers. And I knew how to write up to a thousand or 2,000 or more when I was in the fourth grade. So I would tell them that's how I learned. And when I not working in the store, I was reading me a book. I always liked books so reading me a book. In that way I developed pretty good in the community. And I was a little leader for the baseball game. I was always a pitcher or a manager of it. When we had spelling matches, and things of that type in the community, I've always taken that lead, see. And, I don't know. It just, it just happened to me.

KT: Was there any contact with the White world besides when you weighed in . . .

AL: Oh, yeah.

KT: . . . farming?

AL: We played together. The Kimberly boys, we played together. Right next to us, still is. One of the big families there live next to us now. It developed about, I guess, couple generations, I reckon. But their family goes back a long ways and some of the children are still there. I saw some of them the last time I was home. They were right down there seeing my mother.

KT: So you could play together?

AL: We played together.

KT: Could you eat together . . .

AL: Ate together, ate together and everything. Slept together, slept together.

KT: Would you say this was an ordinary situation in the South?

AL: Well, it's still going on in the South, but it's not, I would say, it's not--I would say, a small percentage. Everybody, [it] didn't happen to everybody, but a small percentage and it's still going on. Oh, yeah. Well, some people [e.g., slave owners] felt that you bother one of his Negroes, you bothered him. They'd fight for it. See, they'd fight for each other. And the guys would go off to ballgames and things of that type. That was one of the biggest social events they ever had--picnics and ballgames, stuff like that. If you bother somebody that on that farm close by, you had the White guy to fight, too. And that's the way it was. But there was a difference. Now in some situations, it was better than others. By that I mean, it was segregation, not segregation, but prejudice was not as strong in certain areas as it was in other areas. But in my area, it was pretty good, but it was there. And of course, they finally learned not to bother me.

KT: How did they learn not to bother you?

AL: Because I'd speak up. I'd speak up. I can remember a time when I was in high school. A situation developed there, like this. In those days, especially the farmers, the stores in this town they would let them buy food and plants and seeds, whatever they needed for the year, and they paid it back in the fall.

KT: Kind of on credit?

AL: Yeah, on credit. So, in my own situation, we followed suit, and not because we had to, but we did. Because we made enough from Mama's store to keep us in good shape and not having to carry over, but we fall in line to be in line with the rest of them, people in our community. A situation developed like this. The big landowner there in town wanted to extend credit to us and we're not, no signing, see. Our father told me about it, and so I went to see him. I'm in high school now, I went to see him. And he wanted to know, what right did I have to come down, and so I told him. I told him I was the oldest child and I was in school, and it's not right, the supplies that we get, we want you to put it on a piece of paper, on a receipt, and give us a copy and you keep a copy, and at the end of the year we come and we take care of it. Well, he didn't have to do that. He owned half the county. I said, "Well, you may own--(chuckles) [but] you don't own our land. And you don't own a lot of land in that [area] close by. So you don't own it." But I said, "I want that [receipt]."

He said, "Well." We argued there for a while. And he said what he would do to me. I said, "No, you won't do that to me."

KT: What did he say he would do to you?

AL: What? Well. . . . (Chuckles)

KT: He threatened you?

AL: Oh, he threatened me.

KT: Did he say he would---I mean, was it something terrible? Did he say he would lynch you or something like that?

AL: No, didn't say lynch. He said he would . . .

KT: Castrate you or something?

AL: No, no, it weren't nothing like that.

KT: Oh.

AL: Yeah.

KT: But anyway, it was rude?

AL: Yeah, it was rude. Of course, I told him he wouldn't, he wouldn't do it. Not to me he wouldn't. That incident and another incident were the two incidents [of prejudice] that I had in the community. Actually, there were three. First one was weighing of that cotton. And I caught---he was not weighing it right, see. Next one was when we went to the store with the bills (that I had demanded to keep accurate records and not be cheated). And the next one was, I'm a grown man now. I had that same, well not, similar situation. I was at Fort Benning, so . . .

KT: Fort Benning, Georgia?

AL: Yeah, I was there in the service. So I went, my mother wanted me to come home, so I came home. And what had happened, my father got into a little trouble. He (sighs) dealt in poplar wood. So he had a truck and a tractor and all those kinds of things . . .

KT: What's poplar wood?

AL: Poplar wood is the wood that you build furniture out of.

KT: Oh, okay.

AL: Something like that.

KT: I see.

AL: And it's very popular down there in that area. So he had a wreck. He ran into---in crossing the highway, he ran into an individual. And the individual was hurt very seriously. So they locked him up that night in jail. My mother called me and told me about it. So I came home. Well, in the meantime, he only stayed there one night. I got him out the next day. Came home. Well, my mother got excited. And before I got there, she gave--when we stood his bond,

she gave a note on a certain area of land that we had there. Our land was divided into two large areas, three large areas. So she gave the lawyer who took his case, a note on it. So, when I got to get there, I investigated the situation and found out what had happened. And he didn't give my mother a receipt. So, I went to his office to see him about it in the little town there. He told me to get out of his office, so he kicked me out, [saying that] I had no right to see him. I said, "I'm not moving out of this office." I said, "If you. . . ." And he put his hand in his desk. I had on my army coat. It was in the winter. I said, "If you take that hand out of there, you won't be able to use it." I said, "I'm not going to give my life for the country and my mother right here living in this community, an outstanding citizen, and she has a little trouble, and she gives a note on a portion of our land as a fee to protect my father because you requested that. And then you're not going to give her a receipt?" I said, "You see I'm in the service. See that's what I'm fighting for. And I'd die before I let you get away with that. So you're going to give it to her now. And don't you tell me that [as] a lawyer, you don't know what a receipt is." I said, "If you don't, I'll contact the commanding general in Washington right now and have you appear before a board for doing work unbecoming to a lawyer," you see. And he trembled, he started trembling. I said, "You move that hand, you won't take it, you won't be able to use it anymore." I didn't have nothing in my pocket. But he didn't know that. So, he didn't [move his hand]. And he tried to beg my pardon and so on. And then, I walked out of his office and out of the room. And he wanted to know from my father, "Who was that fellow?"

He told him, "My oldest," his oldest son. And he was still shaking. I saw him as he came by the door. And so I left.

Now, those were the only two things that I was confronted with from a state of prejudice. Now, that was a way of life with them, with those people. They thought they hadn't done anything wrong, that's the way it was. And for them not to give receipts and things of that type. And then, at end of the year, they could charge what they wanted. To back that up, in high school, my mother said, "Well, I'm going to put everything in your name," and she did. And this day . . .

KT: When you were in high school?

AL: That's right.

KT: That's how responsible you were . . .

AL: That's right.

KT: . . . to do that.

AL: That's right. And even today, right now, my mother's living.

KT: What is her name?

AL: Emma Jane.

KT: Emma Jane . . .

AL: Emma Jane Lewis.

KT: Lewis.

AL: That's right. So right to this date, all, everything is in my name. I control it. And the kids and all respect me as like more so than they do their father and mother, what few they have living now. I've lost two brothers within. . . . One died in March. And one died last week. I had to debate whether to go to the--they called me--whether to go to this funeral or go to this conference, see.

KT: Convention? Democratic convention?

AL: Yeah, Democratic convention. So, I decided, since I'd already promised and already made preparations, there's nothing I could do. And my third oldest brother, he live right down the place. They all got--well, about five, six of them got homes, big homes right there on the place. Brick homes. Everybody live about three miles outside of town. So I didn't go. So his funeral was Saturday. And till today, I mean all the land, I'm the administrator.

KT: How many acres would you say you folks have down there?

AL: Oh, I would say, 2,000 acres.

KT: A good amount.

AL: Yes, it's a good amount.

KT: So in other words, then, you would say that the farmers, the Black farmers that were there, were fairly affluent in that particular county?

AL: That's right, that's right. That was then. Of course, now it's a little different, it's a different situation now. Right now, most of the--well, a lot of the fathers, a large percentage of the fathers have passed on and the land fell to their sons and daughters. And a lot of them sold it and went North somewhere. And not like it used to be. But they live very decent down there in North Carolina.

KT: So then, you went to this boarding school [Red Stone Academy]. Was that a customary thing for people to do, again?

AL: Well, it was customary for those who went to school, yeah, it was customary. Because we had two high schools, the boarding high schools down there in the next town. Town of Lumberton. And one

was a Baptist school and one was a Presbyterian school. I was Presbyterian so I went to the Presbyterian school. And so in those days, they had separate schools. And we did have a state school . . .

KT: Is that a public school?

AL: Public school, yes. We did have one. And we had two boarding schools.

KT: Well, what was the public school like?

AL: Well, it was, you know, like the ordinary schools, but they was the ordinary schools. They're separate, just separate.

KT: Segregated.

AL: Yeah, segregated schools.

KT: But they would have all the teachers . . .

AL: All the teachers.

KT: . . . the White schools would have and all the books the White schools would have.

AL: That's right. The only [different] thing what they had, they just went to different schools. And of course, for a long time now, in that area, North Carolina, Robeson County, which is in North Carolina, we were one of the first communities to become educational. They were not prejudiced. Prejudice was not prevalent in our community. For a long time, even before I left there, things had begun to change. I've been gone a good while. So, if you used the library, we used the playground together, things of that type, in the town nearby there.

KT: That's why it seems unusual to me.

AL: Yeah.

KT: So then, after you finished the college at North Carolina--what was that college?

AL: [AL attended Johnson C. Smith University, receiving Bachelor of Arts degrees in history and sociology in 1935, a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1942, and a Master of Divinity degree in 1973.] Oh, I went to Columbia University [in 1965]. Queen's College in Columbia University.

KT: Was that directly after college?

AL: No, I taught school [beginning in 1939]. I taught school in the county [Robeson County, North Carolina] for--until the war started,

until 1941, something like that.

KT: And where did you teach?

AL: I taught in the high school right---well, I was the principal of the high school.

KT: Principal?

AL: Yeah, oh, I was principal of a high school there [Cedar Grove High School]. I started off in an elementary school. We had eight or nine teachers, I forgot which, somewhere along in there. And then, I worked myself up to---I was very outstanding in the community there when we fought for equalization of salary? I was one of the leaders there. It came to the attention of the state department in Raleigh. Then I was transferred to a high school in North Carolina.

KT: Was this an integrated high school or still segregated?

AL: Well, it was integrated, but not with White. Well, we had some partial Whites there, but it was, I would say, yes and no. We had Indians going . . .

KT: Indians. Native Americans?

AL: Yeah. They all went there. They went to the same school in most cases. And so I stayed there until I went into the service.

KT: What was the relationship like between the Blacks and the Indians?

AL: Don't bother the--well, don't bother the Negroes, unless you want to contend with the Indians. Now if the Indians and Negroes fell out, it was a pretty serious situation. They would burn you up.

KT: They would what?

AL: Burn you, burn you out, I would say. Set fire to your place, something like that or kill you.

KT: Oooh.

AL: Yeah, the Indians was rough. Yeah. They . . .

KT: What tribe was this, do you remember?

AL: No, I don't remember what tribe. I did know. I forgot now, I didn't--so long.

KT: There was not a friendly feeling between, I mean, of school age?

AL: Yeah, they were friendly, but if you happen to fall out with each other, you know, for something, for some reason, which didn't happen too often, sure, well, they would burn you up or kill you.

(Chuckles) That was a sure thing.

KT: And did they live in the community or on a special land?

AL: No, they lived in the community. It's a funny thing. In those days, we didn't have a single Indian family that lived in town. (Chuckles) But now they all over the town. They came in on, I guess, they get in the Civil Rights deal, on the influence of the Negroes' coattail, I guess. They came in, too, on that situation. So, for a while they had their own schools. Of course, all of them didn't go to their schools. They came to where our community, especially the Negro schools. If they were closer [to the school] in that community, if they were close by, some of them went to the Negro schools. But you didn't have the Whites going to school with them.

KT: They would either have their own schools or go with Blacks?

AL: That's right.

KT: I see. Did they feel themselves the same [as Blacks] or did they feel a strong sense of being Indian? Or American?

AL: No, they felt just about like the Negroes felt. That's right. They didn't particularly care for the White man. They had---in fact, prejudice was practiced among the Indians (chuckles), stronger than it was among the Negroes. Because I don't know of any situation during my days back in the Mainland where the Indians had as much authority as Negroes had. They had nothing in the city there. Even though they paid their taxes there, they couldn't---there was nobody in there. Of course, it's different now. There's no . . .

KT: What do you mean? They couldn't live in the city?

AL: Couldn't live in the city. They didn't even---couldn't live in the city. They didn't live in the city. They didn't work in the office.

KT: They couldn't get jobs?

AL: No, couldn't get city jobs, stuff like that. Or county jobs, other than what they made them work for themselves. And had some good, pretty good carpenters around there, very good. But it's all changed now. I was down there when we had that little trouble, you know. (Chuckles) I was right at it. That was the last day they were giving your tax. And while I was down there, I decided to give them my tax, you see. That's when my first brother passed [away]. So, I couldn't get into town. And all cops every which a way. I said, "What happened?" Several of the friends down there, cops down there, are my friends, we came up [i.e., grew up] together. And he told me. And I did find [out a] little bit on this radio. But I figured there was nothing to it. So, I finally got into the courthouse. I had to park about five blocks away and walk because

they didn't--had the traffic blocked off, you see. And everybody was looking to see what was going to happen.

KT: And what was the incident, I forget.

AL: Oh. I understand a Negro got [into] some trouble. I think he was shot, I think. So the Indians took it up. They say he was shot unjustly. So, they went into the local [news]paper office and held up [as hostages] the clerks and everybody in the office. And that lasted for about, oh, must have been [i.e., began] about ten o'clock and it lasted all day. And finally, in the afternoon, they decided to give up. They sent for the governor. And the governor at first didn't come. And they said well they weren't going to give up until the governor came. And he still didn't come, but he sent word, sent a representative down there. Over sixty miles [away], so he sent a representative down there and told him he would talk to them at another date. He was tied up, he couldn't come. So that's what it was supposed to have been about. And then, too, they [the Indians] felt that they weren't getting their justice. And what they supposed to have been, that's what they started off with. A Negro had been mistreated. And they came to his rescue.

KT: And would that have been common even when you were growing up where occasionally Blacks or Indians would go to the rescue of each other, kind of look out for each other, or . . .

AL: No, I would think. . . . No, I can't remember a single situation where that would happen. Now, they would, if it's right on the spot, if something happen like that with Negroes around, I think they would come to the rescue of a Negro. I think. I don't remember any situation like that happening right now, but I know some must have happened.

KT: What about interracial marriage, either between Blacks or Whites, or Blacks and Indians, or Whites and Indians . . .

AL: Then, since or now?

KT: Then and now, either.

AL: Well now, there are several of them [i.e., Blacks] there married to Whites, and several [married to] Indians, too, right now . . .

KT: And that from being neighbors to each other or they came from the North and moved down there?

AL: No, they came---a lot of them grew up right there.

KT: Uh huh.

AL: Yeah, grew up right there. It's pretty reasonable there now. I mean, of course, the Negroes have always been in better circumstances than the Indians. Everything, I guess, other than

work. Now the Indians work hard. They work hard and now they have accumulated quite a bit. They own their own land now, a lot of them. But I don't think there's as many [Indians] as Negroes that own the land. But conditions as a whole, the conditions have improved quite a bit among all of them.

KT: And then in the early days, intermarriage, it wouldn't be a legal marriage, it would just be like common law?

AL: It would be common law. Not to marry, right there, to grow up and marry right there, would not---it was not tolerated then. I can remember a situation when I was in high school and we had one Chinese family lived in town. Lived out on the edge of town. They had a family, maybe about five or six in the family. Father had died and then the son took over. And . . .

KT: Were they farmers?

AL: No, no. They're laundrymen. They run the laundry there. So, I was working at the hotel at night and the Rotary Club met there. And of course, naturally, I was delegated to wait on them, you know. I was a bellboy, but I was delegated to wait on the Rotary [members]. And any big party they had, I helped out. I was the only Negro that helped out. (Chuckles) I guess the manager's wife liked me very much, and the manager himself. So, they were from South Carolina. So, one night, this is why I'm telling you this, this particular situation. One night, they happened to be having a meeting. The policeman was there, and some of the deputies, and some of the wealthy Whites were there. Persons that I knew very well. I knew everybody that was anybody there in those days, because I worked at night and . . . They took care of me and when they needed anything, they would always call on me. And during the nighttime, I would serve as a waiter, help out with the other waiters, White ladies. And so, they waited until all the women went out. They got down to business. The police said, "Well, we got a guy here, we got a situation here, we got to nip right now." Sam, who was the Chinese guy, I think, he found him a girl in Wilmington, and he wants to bring her here and marry her. He said, "No, we can't have no Indians, no Chinese, doing that here to us. So if he insists on it, then we going to have to put him out of town." (Chuckles)

Well, I'm sitting there waiting, you know. You know, waiting on them and we've already served the food and I'm waiting there in case they need something else. I'm there. Well, I'm not supposed to know anything, you see, I'm just a little fellow. (Chuckles) But when the police--I knew the policemen well--when he said that, I said, "Brother, ain't this something." I didn't say anything. I got up and walked out, you know. And I got a pitcher and walk out as if I was going out for some water. (Chuckles) And I walked off to cool off a little bit. So I came back and sat and listened. So they agreed to leave it up to the sheriff to use what all means he wanted to stop it. I said, "All this stuff was nothing, man. Once they get---it's better for him to marry his own race than try to

marry someone else." That was when, I don't know how I felt that particular night. I really don't. I didn't feel normal. And I changed my opinion of the policeman.

KT: Who had been your friends . . .

AL: Yeah, had been my friend, see. There was a situation, which I don't think is necessary for this situation, that put me or any Negro fellow, particular guys in my class, pretty close to the Whites because we were there and we would--well, everybody thought very highly of us and when you find out how a man really thinks then you start thinking, you know.

KT: If they'll do it to someone else, then they'll do it to you.

AL: Oh, yes, oh, yes. And, for an example, when I left to go to college, to go to Johnson C. Smith, I was working at the hotel. The manager of the hotel, and his wife, they bought me shirts and a whole lot of clothes to wear, see. And he had a brother that was living in Charlotte in a hotel. He was in the hotel business. He arranged for me to get a job working at a hotel in Charlotte. So I worked at the hotel at night. And every party there, I worked at the parties. He wanted me to work at parties. And, if I wanted to work as a bellhop, okay, at certain nights, when and if I could. And they made it very nice for me. And I had no problem. This guy in Charlotte, his friends, he got some of his friends, close friends, they looked out for me. So, I got along fine. But, I don't know why I'm telling you all this, I haven't (chuckles). . . .

KT: It's history and it's good that . . .

AL: You're not going to write anything. I don't see nothing that you can write in the book about that, about this. Yeah, well, you can touch one or two things . . .

KT: Well, we can edit it together.

AL: But, I will say this, in growing up, I had a very nice time in the community where I lived. Never been in any trouble. And I think I had preference over many of the other kids.

KT: That's right. Yes, it seems like you had a rather privileged situation.

AL: I did. I've always . . .

KT: How did you join the military and how did you get all the way over here to Hawai'i?

AL: Well, in the military you mean? Or just why I joined military?

KT: What made you join? Did you get drafted?

AL: Well, I didn't get drafted. I [appealed to the local board of selection because] I was in college. I told them I would volunteer and go if they let me finish college. And that same period, they drafted two of my brothers (chuckles), one of them that passed [away] last week. He got hurt. He was in the 92nd. He went to Italy. When I graduated [in 1942], then I went into the service. You know, just went--well, I had to go wherever they sent me.

KT: And where did you go? What countries did you go?

AL: Oh, I served two tours in Europe, Okinawa, well, three tours in the Far East. I went to Okinawa, Guam, Japan, Korea, I've been there three times in that area. And I did very little time in the Mainland, in the states.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

AL: (I came through here on my way to Okinawa in 1944 on a dependent boat. I spent about ten days here, and we'd travel through the islands each day on sightseeing tours.) And so, I decided I was impressed with this place [Hawai'i], so it stayed on my mind and I said, "Well, I had already built me my own individual house on the Mainland. When I get out of the service, I'll go back to the Mainland where I built my house there on the land," and I did. So I kept thinking about this place. The weather, I liked the weather. The people were very nice. So, that's how I fell in love with it, that's why I'm here. Now, when I came through here, I was the only Negro on that ship.

KT: Were you in the navy?

AL: Army.

KT: Army.

AL: Yeah. And we rode---we took a tour around the island [of O'ahu] and we stopped over there in Kāne'ohe. There was a lot of women on the ship. And even on the tour, there were quite a few. And we stopped there and got lunch at a cafe, and I've often tried to think of [the name of] that cafe, but I can't think of it. On the--somewhere over there in Kāne'ohe, I don't know where. But anyway, that's where all the buses stopped. And on the trip, going from here to there, one little lady was sitting right behind me and she had two little boys, they were going to Okinawa or Guam. And she said--I'm going to tell you exactly what she said now and no reflection on the place now, I guess it's not like that place now--she said, "This place look like nigger town back in. . . ." She was from Louisiana.

And I was sitting on the front seat there. There was a White lady

sitting in the front, I mean, right with me. She asked me if she could sit with me, she'd never been overseas and didn't know nobody. I said, "Sure." So, that's what this lady behind me said.

She said, "This looks like nigger town, like home."

And I looked back, I said, "Madam, you in the army now. It'll make it very bad for you, and especially your husband, if something like this was reported and the wrong people got hold of it." I said, "In the army, they try to be decent people and respect each other."

And the girl who was sitting with me, she said, "Well, you certainly told her off."

Okay, one woman, it scared her to death almost. "Well, I didn't mean no harm, I didn't know, I never been away from home," she said.

I said, "Okay, as long as you don't do it again."

So, we stopped to get lunch. And there was--oh, I must tell you this. This is one of the things that caused me to settle here. There were several local boys at the cafe and they were sitting out there under a shed-like. And they came over and they say, "Say, could I speak to you?"

Asked me if I was a soldier, I told them, "Yes, a soldier."

They said, "Where are you going?" I told him. He said, "We don't like, we don't care for anything for Haoles."

I said, "What you mean by Haoles?"

He said, "I see you were talking with this White girl and we don't like them. We don't like for our people," he said, "to be bothered with them."

Well, I. . . . I said, "I'm just sitting with her. I'm not causing any trouble."

"You see, you don't understand. We don't want none of our people or people close to us bothering with them. And you're close to us."

(Chuckles) So I told them, "Well, okay." I would respect them and we were overseated now and I had to wait until we got back, but I would remember what they told me. Okay. I said, "Well, that seem to be pretty good country to live in, that's the way they feel about it in their country."

Now, this other lady that sat behind me, her kids, two little boys, and they started, "Mother, we're hungry. We want something to eat."

I heard them. I said, "Madam, you're not going to give the boys anything to eat?"

She said, "Mister, I don't have a penny to my name. We spent the money we had. I didn't know how to spend money, I spent too much. And so, we don't have any money."

I said, "Well, okay. I'll give the boys--kids, you know, they got to have something to eat--so I'll give them as one soldier to another, I'll buy them some lunch." And I did. I bought them hot dog and Cokes, so on. And she begged me for my pardon, you see.

I said, well, she didn't mean no harm. I said, "Well, we forget about that now." But what the [local] boy said, though, was the thing that caused me to fall in love and also the climate. That's why I'm here.

KT: Okay, I think I'm going to. . . . Do you want to stop now?

AL: Oh, yeah, I'll stop now.

KT: You said you don't have much time.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 18-21-2-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Alexander Lewis (AL)

July 21, 1988

Mililani, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: We're here in Mililani today with Major [Alexander] Lewis. This is July 21, 1988. And the second part of the interview by Kathryn Takara.

Major Lewis, can you tell me a little bit about your experience in the military? I think you said you were a chaplain.

AL: Yes, I . . .

KT: Where you went and any noteworthy experiences that you had that would reflect being a Black man in the military, and then also just what the military gave to you, what you felt about the military.

AL: Well, I entered the military [in 1942] and had quite an experience. I think you'd be interested in knowing just some of my assignments. I left the latter part of [1942]--no, yes, for World War II in Europe.

KT: And you started from where? Where did you join up at?

AL: I . . .

KT: Were you in North Carolina?

AL: No, I was in Georgia. (Pause) Yeah, that's where I went in, from Georgia. I went there. I was at the time, prior to that, I was a Boy Scout executive and. . . . I had promised to go into the service my last year in school in the seminary [at Johnson C. Smith University], but I got a good job [with the Boy Scouts] and so (chuckles) I didn't go. But they [i.e., the government] reminded me, so I went. And then after I finished my basic [training], I went from Georgia to Fort Devens. That's where I completed my basic training.

KT: Where was that, Fort Devens?

AL: Fort Devens, Mass.

KT: Massachusetts?

AL: Massachusetts.

KT: Thank you.

AL: Mm hmm. And from there, I was assigned to a unit, Camp Clayburn. That was my first assignment. Thirteen-thirty-first, joined the service regiment. It was a regiment. A regiment composed of about, oh, maybe they must have had 3,000 men. Then we went to Europe.

KT: Where was Fort Devens?

AL: Fort Devens was Fort Devens, Mass.

KT: Massachusetts. Okay.

AL: Yeah. And from Fort Devens, Camp Clayburn, that's where I joined the unit. And then from there, overseas to Europe. We landed in France. And up and down France, portions of Italy that's where we did our work until the war ended. We also took part in the--oh, brother--in the Normandy invasion [D-Day, June 6, 1944]. Yeah, that's the one I wanted, Normandy invasion. From there, after the invasion, they pulled us out and put us on the road to Okinawa for the invasion [of 1945].

KT: Oh, wait now. Before you leave Europe, what was the treatment that Black soldiers received there in Europe. Can you speak a little bit about that, please?

AL: Well, there was a little prejudice, not with the soldiers as such. (Chuckles) But you had situations like this. Some of the Whites didn't care to see mixed couples, you know, and things like that. See, the guys, you know, they'd go out with the German girls, the French girls, and whatever. And there was a little trouble there and course, it'd be fights once in a while. Fights, fair fights, not fights that they kill each other as such. Course, once in a while a guy got hurt. But that was about the extent of it.

KT: Was the army segregated then or . . .

AL: Oh, the army was segregated then. It was segregated.

KT: And so the officers would be Black or White?

AL: Well, if we had one, we had a few colored and the other was White. In my outfit, let's see. There were two colored officers in my outfit--three in my outfit. One captain, one warrant officer, and myself [the chaplain]. And I guess you couldn't--could you kind of press me. There's so much, tell me just what you want to hear.

KT: Well, just any other incidents of prejudice. You felt there was mainly---there was intermixed dating. Were there other occasions where people were resentful of Blacks?

AL: Yeah, well, here's a situation that, as I said, there were prejudice among the Whites and the Blacks, soldiers and the officers. And this was about the mingling, see. And, but, that didn't keep them from slipping out and going. And course, we had some run-ins, something like--we had trouble, court-martials. And the method of conducting these court-martials was not the best. By that I mean, okay, when I--I would hate to say it, but I don't see where probably there's very much purpose of putting it in, but I leave that up to you. Sometime, well, we had a lot of girls over there and, course, a lot of them made their living with the soldiers. And if maybe a soldier didn't pay off, well then she'd come and report to the commanding officer. And three or four o'clock in the morning, one o'clock, the guys, since we were segregated, there were soldiers, well, then they were called a formation and all of the guys were lined up outside. I didn't care too much for that and I tried to fight--well, I fought it, but that didn't--I was not too successful.

And I had good cooperation from my commanding officer. I was on the staff and he was a very, very nice officer, colonel, and I enjoyed working with him. That phase of it is not an ideal situation. But, it's part of the army. It goes on with the army and you can't keep the men and women together from being apart--well, you don't intend to. But the idea of the way it was---the way they treated them and taking the girl's word where she'd pick out somebody, somebody maybe she didn't like. She'd pick him out and get him court-martialed.

KT: So in other words, what you're saying or what I think you're saying, is that there was an unequal treatment for the Black soldiers and the White soldiers when it came to certain areas. Is that what you're trying to say?

AL: That's right, that's a portion of it, yeah, that's right. That's right.

KT: The Blacks would be court-martialed more easily? I don't . . . (AL chuckles.) For the same offense?

AL: Well, put it this way, when I came here, I mean, one jump, I mean you're going to line it up, whatever you want to put in or line up. When I came here at Schofield [Barracks], must have been--when did I come here? In ('58), I believe it was. (Fifty-eight.) I think it was ('58).

KT: Yes.

AL: Maybe I shouldn't jump that far?

KT: No, that's okay. If it's relevant, that's fine to jump and then we'll go on . . .

AL: Well, I meant, what I wanted to get in[to] was the segregation. You take at Schofield. I had to go, I went to the PX [post exchange] officer, you know, to get permission to sell our equipment. Our special--our hair tonics and stuffs that Negroes usually use, you know, in the PX. And then also get girls and men, too, to work in the PX, some of our people. [I] had to go to the commanding general before we could get anything done, but we did. I found the girls, three of them, put them in and specially tutored them. Told them the problems we're going to have and everything. And we got the [news]papers, there are about two, three papers that we got, these colored papers. And we got the face lotion and stuff like that.

KT: So what you're saying is that the needs of Black people were not being taken care of by the military until their attention was called to it?

AL: Well, it . . .

KT: In terms of their beauty products and just certain cultural products, maybe?

AL: Well, they didn't get in the PX until someone went to bat, yeah, I'll put it that way. It's little complicated (chuckles), but not--since I am retired from the military, there are things that are pretty bad that I wouldn't want to see it in print. But I just want to mention it. When I came here, things were bad here. The guys, the only place they'd go here was down on [Smith and Hotel] Streets. Was it [Smith] Street? What street was that? I forget. I think it was [Smith or Hotel] Street.

KT: In town?

AL: In town.

KT: Hotel?

AL: Hotel Street. That was about the only place they can go for the cafe when I came over here. So I went down, made a survey of what I saw. But, that was all over. But yet, in spite of all that, our boys did a good job. They did their work. Even in Europe--I go back to Europe now--even in Europe, they had segregation. I know the boys told me we had segregation. We were in France and getting ready for the invasion. And we always had to--no matter where we are--we had to send men to the headquarters every day. We call them the runners. You know, they get information, pick up the distribution, and so on. So the guys reported to me that they go down there and at twelve o'clock, they couldn't get anything to eat. And, I mean they couldn't go in there and sit down and eat. (Chuckles) So, I went down there to check. Not far, that was only about ninety miles. So I went down there, and they go every day. And I was there for a meal. And they, it was true, they had a special table there for me to sit. And, well, I sat for a while

until, then I got up and left. I complained about it, but they said that was the regulation down there, that's the way it was.

KT: Where was this? In France?

AL: This in France. In France. Yeah.

KT: In southern France?

AL: Well, let's see. What was the name of the town, southern France. That was all over France.

KT: I see.

AL: Yeah, all over France.

KT: I see.

AL: And, of course, I reported it, course, to [General Douglas] MacArthur's headquarters--not MacArthur, [Dwight] Eisenhower. (Chuckles) Don't get me started on him. I, oh, don't want to, 'cause he was prejudiced himself. [AL was under Gen. Eisenhower's command in Europe.]

KT: Was he a general?

AL: Yeah, he was the commanding general. Yeah, he was the commanding general for the whole---he was in command for the whole--at that particular operation. Yeah, he was top man over there.

KT: And how do you feel that he was prejudiced?

AL: Oh, well, he went along with the program. (Chuckles) You see how he acted whenever they were trying to get Little Rock [Arkansas] integrated. We had to put a lot our pressure on him to even send troops down there [in 1957]. No, he was president then. I mean, . . .

KT: Little Rock.

AL: Yeah, Little Rock. We had put a lot of pressure on him. He was prejudiced. Well, it was just--that was the thing of the day, I guess.

KT: Well, is it not true that when Black soldiers fought in the Second World War that they sometimes performed in heroic ways and got medals?

AL: That's right. We had to get some guys. Well, we had soldiers that performed like professional soldiers, in spite of the situation. In spite of the rough things that we had to go through. You go to Paris. I always like to come down to Paris whenever, oh, bring some of the soldiers, maybe ten or fifteen truckloads of guys, bring them

down, let them, when we got a little time off. And those soldiers, how beautiful they looked, there was a guard. There was a MP [military police] company there and they controlled certain portions of France. Specifically, hmm, the capital of France. I forget all of that.

KT: Paris.

AL: Paris. Paree. And the guys come up there. It was a pleasure just to see those guys walking on the street, stop a car, stand at attention, shoes shined so you could see like glass down there. And that was the manner and way they presented themselves. And they did an outstanding job. Usually we had programs and things of that type, military, recreational programs and they always took the trophies and things of that type. So, they did their work. Very outstanding work. Soldiers, but it was little. . . . Now, you don't have to---don't put this in the paper. During, prior to the war, prior to the invasion, we had--up until that time--we had men who were in all kinds of units except infantry.

KT: That's fighting?

AL: Fighting with the gun. We had tanks to build bridges and roads and stuff like that. And take care of our ration dumps, where the food, you know, was brought out there. We didn't have houses, we had tents and stuff like that. We had soldiers walking guard all night. Now, when the war got pretty hot, just prior to the invasion, that's pretty hot in France, a lot of the guys, well, we. . . . Our men could not fight with a gun. I mean, they were there with the gun, but they couldn't go up on the lines and fight. Now, this is just for your information, well, in order for a guy--okay, when it got so bad, I guess a lot of the White soldiers wrote home about it. They had to do all the guard duty, dangerous duty [e.g., combat], Negro soldiers didn't do then. I think Eisenhower was--I forget who was president then. But anyway, they finally decided to let them in, let our fellows join the infantry. We only had one infantry unit, that's the 25th, and that was in Italy. [COH has not been able to verify these statements. Please see discrepancy on the following page.] And that was left over from World War I. Now, so after these complaints were made, they decided to let the Negroes go up on the line.

KT: I think I've heard this before. I might even have it in my book, in my history book about--my Black history book.

AL: Yeah, I didn't think much of that. Okay now, if that was the way it was going to be, well okay, but they went further than that. Many men had become, you know, NCOs [noncommissioned officers]. And if they went up on the lines, they had to give up their rank down to private.

KT: Black and White?

AL: No, no, just Black.

KT: Just Black.

AL: That's right.

KT: But if they were an officer and they went up on the front line, then they had to give up their rank?

AL: No, a lot of the men wanted to go up on the line and fight, you know, with their guns, see. If they [Black NCO's] went, they had to give up their rank. Now, officers as such, [the] one or two we had, didn't [have to give up their rank]. . . . That was not just to be up on the line to fight. That didn't affect them, I mean, that didn't involve them because some of them, we had one or two [officers] that had to go up to fight and they served with us, but still we were segregated. We were segregated.

KT: Even on the front line.

AL: Even on the front line. (Chuckles) Here's when we had then Negro groups. And a few of them, it all depends on what unit you went into. We had several kinds of infantry units. Some just used the guns. Some used the tanks and various things of that type. So, it's bad that they'd be reduced to a private to go up on the line to fight.

KT: For your country.

AL: For your country. (Chuckles) Well, that was pretty rough. Well, but the guys did it. They fought. Some of them came back up. Some, they never got their rank back. Well, those things are very hard and yet, our boys did a good job. All of them were not angels but quite a few of them, and they could soldier, they were good soldiers.

KT: When did you see things start to change?

AL: Well, actually, things didn't change until who was president? [Harry S] Truman. Truman.

KT: Was Truman after or before Eisenhower?

AL: Oh, Truman was after, yeah [Truman served as president before Eisenhower]. No, he [Eisenhower] wouldn't do anything like integration--well, Eisenhower, I didn't care too much for him. But whenever Truman became president [1945], that's where he made his famous rule, stand, you know. [Executive Order 8891 of 1948 directed "equality of treatment and opportunity" in the United States Armed Forces.] "The bull [i.e., buck] will stop right here," I think. And. . . .

KT: And where were you when Truman made his change? Were you in Europe still or you had moved . . .

AL: No, we'd left Europe, see we left Europe. Were you born when there was the invasion of Okinawa?

KT: I don't know. Don't ask me on tape.

(Laughter)

AL: Well, after the invasion, we still went to, from the invasion, we went--some of us to Korea, some went to Japan, all over. And of course, during that time, or shortly thereafter, MacArthur, we were over there with MacArthur in '48, and MacArthur was the commanding general over there. Truman became president. And of course, the thing [i.e., desegregation] was, in the working before he came to office. After, let's see, who was president before Truman? [Franklin Delano Roosevelt died in office in 1945.] But anyway, it was during Truman's time whenever, we started to cut out segregation. We were in Korea. I remember it very well. I know my commanding officer called me in the office several times, wanted to know, the army getting ready to integrate now, how do you think we should do it? [Should the army] still have a company of White soldiers and a company of Negro soldiers?

I said, "No, Colonel, I would, see, I would recommend that whenever a man came to this unit, whatever his MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] was, put him there. Don't separate him by company. Send him according to the man's qualifications or if he was an infantry soldier, put him in there, if he's in the rifle platoon, put him in the rifle platoon or whatever. Don't segregate them." I said, "Because we still are not segre---we are still segregating if we going to do it that way."

He said, "Well, I just wanted to be sure."

Now, at that time, my unit was an all-Negro unit. And . . .

KT: How many people, about, were in your unit?

AL: About twenty. . . . Well, off and on, I would say from about 25[00] to 3,000.

KT: Twenty-five to 3,000?

AL: Yeah.

KT: Twenty-five hundred?

AL: Twenty-five hundred to 3,000. Yeah, you see we had, of course, we all were separated now from the Whites. But whenever this [desegregation] started, that's when we started segregation [integration]. And it was a time we had a little--few run-ins, but

that's to be expected. But things worked pretty good. So, that's when things got a little better.

Now, I'm going to jump. Now, you can bring us this up to date. I'm going to jump back to France. One thing I didn't like over there. When we were off the lines after Normandy was over, we were all in the big staging area at Marseilles, ready to go to Okinawa. Took us ninety some-odd days to make that trip. And we came, we didn't come back through the [United] States. We went came through Panama and went out that route. Now, we had fights. We had fights in the staging area and, oh, we had some rough situations. Well, the chaplains had to--they played an important part.

KT: You were a chaplain?

AL: Yes. (I had a regiment. I was in charge of the social activities, athletic officer, education officer, PX officer and others.)

KT: This whole time?

AL: Yeah. [AL was a chaplain from 1942 to 1962.] We played an important part. We had to, you know, go in some dangerous places. Guys, you know, fighting, we had to go in and break it up. Had MPs but sometimes that made it worst. Even right there in the staging area.

KT: Are you talking one on one fights or group fights?

AL: Group fights. Group fights. And I remember another thing. Don't write this. I remember that day very well while we were there. We stayed in staging area about, oh. . . . Staging area was where the soldiers gathered and get ready to go overseas. We were getting ready to leave France and come to . . .

KT: Okinawa.

AL: Okinawa. So we must have spent two, three weeks there, you know, getting packed up with clothing and equipment and stuff like that. In the paper, now this is, now I don't think that people cared whether or not what happened. But, in the paper, we. . . . What paper was that? Well, it was--I forgot which one it was. But it came over there and it was there for us to read.

KT: This was an American paper?

AL: Yeah, American paper.

KT: A White newspaper.

AL: Yeah, a White newspaper. And it. . . . I don't know.

KT: That's okay. It was just in an American paper. That's good enough.

- AL: Yeah, the regular paper. And when, you know, they always treated like Negroes, you know, didn't do too much for the war, stuff like that. But, no, I won't tell that, that's . . . (Chuckles)
- KT: You know, Major Lewis, I really feel that we have to get this history right. And I know that with Black historians in recent times, it has come out how well the Black regiments performed . . .
- AL: They have. Well, now you . . .
- KT: . . . and you have to bring this out because if--in the past, I hear that the Black newspapers at that time would talk about the good things and talk about the fights . . .
- AL: That's right.
- KT: . . . and all that were going on.
- AL: Well, now, since you---I'll mention it. Now, there in the staging area, we're getting ready to go, we getting ready to go across the sea. We might not have been able to read the paper. Might not be able to read our paper. Give the boys a little encouragement for something in some way or another, but yet they expect you to soldier and be just like the other guys, do your job, and yet you are hindered from doing it because, well, he say, "Why should I do so and so and I can't even read my own paper here." What are they going to do? That's why, within that area, that's why I didn't want to mention that, things of that type.

But, our soldiers, I will say this, I'll emphasize this, we had some, we had a few soldiers that didn't do their job. What I mean, they got into trouble. They did a lot of things that they shouldn't have done. But a lot of people did that. Everybody was doing that, see. A lot of soldiers would sell their PX supplies. They'd take these sailors, you see them coming overseas for a few days. They'd have so much stuff to bring over and sell it. When I left Korea, I didn't even have clothes to wear because the clothes we had in the PX, there were all big clothes, you couldn't wear them. The clothing and things like that were sold to the local people. And, well, who was selling? Well, in overseas areas, those days, we had to use men, the soldiers, and we had to use civilians, too. Then, of course, the civilians took the stuff. And some of the soldiers sold it too, you see. It's just everything there all together.

- KT: This was part of the army life.
- AL: Yeah.
- KT: Everybody.
- AL: That's right. That's the way it is. So. But as far as soldiering, our men, under adverse conditions, did a good outstanding job.

KT: What happened to this disturbance down there in Marseilles? How did it work itself out?

AL: Well, we kept MPs. . . . We kept MPs there around the clock, added more MPs. That's how we were able--and, then with the chaplains taking an active part, we had to take an active part in it. Stop them.

KT: What was the incident that started it? What started people getting angry?

AL: Well, a lot of them didn't (chuckles) want to go and leave France and go to Europe, I mean go to the Far East. And, course, a lot of them, well, some, they fought over the girls. And the guys didn't want to see Negroes, you know, out with the White girl. They didn't want to see that and a lot of them started from that.

KT: So, in other words, there were several incidents. It wasn't just one time. It was a building up of pressure from both sides and then something explodes . . .

AL: That right. Sure, sure. A lot of them just did it purposely, I mean, and I would say most of the fights were started by the other group [i.e., the White soldiers].

So, we going to Okinawa now. There's nothing in Okinawa but that's a portion of Japan. Mostly they were, other than these troops, the local people and things were pretty good in Okinawa.

KT: They didn't react in a negative way? Or did they react in a negative way or positive way to the Black soldiers?

AL: No, the people, they were glad to have them there. They were very glad to have them there, and I think every [American] family there just about had a maid. (Chuckles) You know, some of them had two or three to give them work, you know. And the people were very nice there. And was no problem there. Everybody got along pretty good. The clubs now, the clubs were mixed, and there's no problem there. So, then we leave there, then we go to Guam. Guam was okay. Guam was okay. And then we left Guam on that same tour and went to Korea. And I spent---I was in Korea three times. And, well, there, it's almost like it is now, of course, the guys did a pretty good job over there. And now, well, I don't know. It's kind of hard to just tell too many things, you see. But it was nice. The soldiers did their job even though we were getting integrated then, things worked out pretty good. And. . . .

KT: So people would live in similar areas and go to eat in similar areas?

AL: Yeah, we had clubs and they didn't---by the time we got to Korea the second time, the integration had started and it was no problem. Of

course, they had a few little ends and odds, just like any place else. But things worked out nicely. And that's about it.

KT: Well, I know that I've spoken to quite a few Black soldiers in the past . . .

AL: Right.

KT: . . . who felt that there were some disparities in promotion, and I was wondering if you had any comment on that from how you saw it from the beginning to how it developed in your time in the army.

AL: Well, from my time in the army, from the beginning, things developed, oh, I would say on a large scale. (Chuckles) Yeah, things developed. I know when I was doing my training at Fort Devens, I was the only Negro in my class and we had people from all over. We had about, what, 250 or more in the class, guys from all over the country. And that was the first time I had ever been treated when I got sick. They removed my tonsils. So, I asked my first sergeant. See, each week, we had a different group of officers. We acted as officers among ourselves. So, they took out my tonsils. So I asked the doctor would I have to report to work, to duty today.

He said, "Yes. You would have to report to duty tomorrow because tonsils are no trouble." And it was so cold there.

But anyway, some of the White chaplains resented me for being in there [i.e., the infirmary]. I know one night we had a--went on a march, and we had a . . . I was sick during the time I was--not sick but I just had that operation that night, that day. So there was a couple Catholic chaplains there [in the infirmary]. And this guy who was acting as our leader that night came and told me, "You know, we got this hike and I want you to look out for the two chaplains."

I said, "Me look out for them and I'm sick, too?" I said, "Not on your dead body."

He said, "Why don't I report you tomorrow."

I said, "Report me. Report me. I'm supposed to look after those guys, what am I"--pshaw. Now, well, now, you have had stuff like that. Now, it went from that point, it went from that point as my first entrance in the army. And when I left the army, when I came here, I was the post chaplain at the--in Brooklyn, Fort Hamilton. When I came here [in 1958], when I was here, well, I was assistant post chaplain here and we had about . . .

KT: At what base?

AL: Right here.

KT: Schofield?

AL: Schofield.

KT: Yeah. For people that don't know, we have to say these names because of what if people don't know.

AL: Yeah.

KT: At Schofield.

AL: So, at that point, I skipped and showed you how I. . . . Nothing like that would happen when I first came in the service. No, you couldn't.

KT: So you were the assistant chaplain for how many people?

AL: Here?

KT: Uh huh [yes].

AL: Well, it's kind of hard to say how many. Let's see. I take my, take my. . . . Well, I would say 2,000 to 2,500 people.

KT: All colors?

AL: All colors. All colors. And so . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

KT: So, now, when you came to Hawai'i, what did you feel like the racial situation was when you first came? Were people familiar with Blacks at that time or skeptical? Or did they have stereotypes? What was the situation?

AL: Well, the situation when I came back here, when I was assigned here . . .

KT: That was what year?

AL: Must have been ('58). When I came here from--I knew this was going to be my last assignment and I asked for Hawai'i. I asked for Hawai'i because when I came here and spent those ten days [in 1944], I fell in love with the place.

KT: Why?

AL: Well, I had just come back from combat, you know, from Europe. And first, it was warm, the climate was good. The people were very nice

to me. Very nice to me. I had no problem. And so that was the reason. And course, while I was---before I came here, I made my round. I had planned to retire in North Carolina, see.

KT: That's where the family land was?

AL: Yeah.

KT: And the family.

AL: That's right. So when I got back here--[actually] just before I got here from Fort Hamilton--I got my orders. So when I got my orders, my orders said, "Korea." So, I went to Washington. "Oh, my," I said. "I've been to Korea three times and I think, I had planned, and I had hoped that I would get a good assignment."

[They] said, "Where would you like to go?"

I said, "Well, I would like to go to Hawai'i. This is my last time overseas." It was considered overseas then.

So, they said, "Well, you go on back to Fort Hamilton. Your orders will be changed. We don't know where you'll go, but it won't--it probably might be Hawai'i or it might be somewhere else. We'll change it. We didn't. . . ." So, okay.

KT: Fort Hamilton is where?

AL: In New York.

KT: In New York. Okay.

AL: In Brooklyn.

KT: Okay.

AL: During the time I was there [Fort Hamilton], during that time when the last month when they find--the guys right in the barracks--they found out that I had my orders. They said, "You coming to Hawai'i? How you get a job like that? That's not for your people. (Chuckles) That's for the boys on the other side of the street."

I said, "Yeah, but I. . . ." "Well," I said. "I don't know. I've been living on both sides of the street so I didn't know which side." They had that kind of situation over there.

KT: Who said that to you?

AL: Well, several of the officers in the barracks.

KT: The Blacks or Whites?

AL: Whites.

KT: Oh, and they didn't understand why you would want to come to Hawai'i?

AL: Yeah.

KT: How you got assigned here?

AL: Yeah.

KT: I see.

AL: Yeah, see, and I told them. So things had improved with me and with other persons because whenever I first came in the army, back in '41, ['4]2, the army, we didn't have--we had very few [Black] officers. I could count them on my hand. And course . . .

KT: What about high officers?

AL: Well, I tell you. Well, we had---we finally got a colonel who had been in the war, World War II. No, World War I.

KT: Oh, World War I.

AL: What was his name? His son came in the service and I used to see--I was in that outfit for a while. His son was in the airborne . . .

KT: Was that Davis?

AL: Fort Bragg--Davis.

KT: Benjamin Davis?

AL: Benjamin Davis, yeah.

KT: B.O. Davis?

AL: B.O., that's right, they called him "Tom" in the army. (Chuckles) Well, didn't shake any bushes. He just took it as it was. But anyway, if you want to survive, he knew how to survive. So maybe we had very few officers. I did know but I forgot how many we had now, but we didn't have very many. And we had quite a few made during the World War II. So things had improved greatly. Now, I guess you said I'm a bad fellow to interview. Now, I did this because I couldn't tell some of the things that happened even with me. I couldn't mention anybody. I would say this: I got along very nicely when I was in the service. I enjoyed it and we had a lot of other fellows who did all right in the army. And I guess that's about it.

KT: So then after you left the army and became a civilian, what year did you retire?

AL: It must have been about '62 or ['6]3. [AL retired from the military in 1964.]

KT: That you retired?

AL: Yeah.

KT: And then tell us a little bit about what you've been doing since that time.

AL: Well . . .

KT: How you've been active in the community. I know you've been involved in many activities.

AL: Oh, yeah. Many, many.

KT: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

AL: Well, after I retired from the service, I went back to school.

KT: Where?

AL: I went to Columbia University [in the mid-1960s].

KT: In New York City?

AL: Right. And I got a master's degree in [vocational] counseling, rehabilitation. So while there, I went to school at night, and worked during the day time because I had a--my son was at Stanford. And then from Stanford to Harvard.

KT: What is your son's name?

AL: Same as my name, Alexander Lewis, Jr. Yeah.

KT: And had he been traveling with you all these years?

AL: Well, they traveled. He went to Europe. He went to Okinawa, yes. That's right. So, well, I knew I had to work with that, and then Addie went back to school.

KT: Addie is your wife?

AL: Yeah. And then the young, anyway we had the girl [daughter].

KT: What's her name?

AL: Gertrude.

KT: Gertrude.

AL: So, well, when I finished, I got a job working at night. No, yeah, in the daytime, and going to school at night.

KT: What did you do when you were working in the daytime?

AL: I was a counselor, counselor at Rikers Island [New York]. You ever hear of Rikers Island?

KT: No.

AL: That's that big . . .

KT: Can you spell that?

AL: Rikers? Yeah, I can spell it, I think. (Chuckles) Rikers.

KT: Rikers. Was that R-I-C-U-S? R-I-C-K-U-S?

AL: That's right. Something like that. They'll know who it is. Rikers. Put Rikers Island there. I think it's R-Y-C, yeah, yeah.

KT: R-Y.

AL: Yeah. So I went to school in the daytime---at nighttime, and worked during the nighttime [daytime]. I worked for eight hours a day as a counselor. See, I did my field work, too. And Rikers Island is located right off from. . . . Are you familiar with New York?

KT: A little bit.

AL: Well, you know where.

KT: Not Manhattan. Not Long Island.

AL: No, it's on Long Island. You know up, up---you know where Brooklyn, not Brooklyn. What's the other end . . .

KT: Bronx.

AL: The Bronx. It's right off from the Bronx. Between it, well, if you're going up to LaGuardia [Airport], you pass it on the right. It's on the right next to the water on the left, yeah. Yeah, on the left.

KT: So where were you living while you were working on this island?

AL: Where did I--oh, I lived with my aunt, yeah.

KT: And where did she live?

AL: She lived out in Queens. Francis Lewis Boulevard. In fact, for a while, actually I had a house in New York. I bought a house before I went in the service and I sold it. That's one reason why I went back, to sell it. That was up in the Bronx. And then, but I lived with my aunt after I sold the house.

KT: And then Addie was there and your son and daughter were all there or . . .

AL: Yeah.

KT: . . . everyone was there with your aunt. She had a big house?

AL: No, not while. . . . [Addie stayed in Hawai'i while AL studied at Columbia University.] When I---before that, before I went back to school, you see, I was stationed in New York. That's why I came there so I could get a chance to sell my house. And I lived on the base, then. So I stayed with my aunt when I went back to school, after I retired, went back to school. What was I saying now?

KT: So then you were in New York and then you got your degree and then at that time, what did you decide to do after that?

AL: Okay, when I got my degree, well, I was living here [i.e., Hawai'i] then. See, I was living here.

KT: You were living here and you were also living in New York? I don't understand.

AL: Well, when I retired, see when I retired, I came here. Let me back up. When I left [the military], this was my last station.

KT: Yeah.

AL: Okay, when I retired from here, when I retired [1964], then I decided to go back to school and do some, you know, advanced work. That's when I went back to . . .

KT: New York.

AL: New York. I went back there and I stayed there until I graduated--two years--until I graduated. And during that time, my son was at Harvard then, see.

KT: What was he studying?

AL: Business administration, yeah. He went to New York for about fifteen years. He finished and got his job in New York. (He was a stockbroker on Wall Street.)

So, now, I went to go back to school and got my degree, worked, and after I got my degree, then I was [working] in counseling. And I came back here and my first job here as a civilian was to--I set up a counseling service in downtown in two of the buildings.

KT: What was the name of your business?

AL: Well, I was a counselor, see. I was a counselor. So I set up this counseling service. Had two projects: Mayor Wright [Homes] . . .

KT: Yes.

AL: Yeah, Mayor Wright and one two-story building right over near Fort Shafter. The tall building, the two buildings. That's the first high-rise for the poor that we built in Hawai'i. Well, we set up a building---I set up an office in both buildings. And I conducted this counseling, this service.

KT: And who---were you paid by the individuals or by the state?

AL: No, I was paid by the city. Let me see, state [Department of Human Services] . . . In fact the services are still going on. I think the Catholic church has taken it over now. Yeah, I went in there. I've been in every---Mayor Wright project, I've been in every room in that place there. Yeah, I worked closely with the manager and we had--and the social workers. We all worked together. And, course, and then across over there by Fort Shafter [Kūhiō Park Terrace].

KT: You can tell me later.

AL: Yeah, okay. So I stayed there [in New York] until, I said, well, until I came back, [after I] finished school. In fact I was permanent in New York. (Chuckles) But I didn't plan to stay over there. So, I got to--- came back for a while. I said, "Well, I guess [I'd] better get me a job, another job." So I applied at the U.H. [University of Hawai'i] and I got a job as a counselor down there. And they placed me at that hospital. I would go there every day and I (chuckles) can't think of the name of it. Oh.

KT: Queen's?

AL: Not Queen's. Right beyond--right off from Hawai'i, from the university.

KT: Not Kapi'olani?

AL: No.

KT: Children's? St. Francis?

AL: No, going out on the island. I see, what--Lē'ahi, Lē'ahi.

KT: Lē'ahi, yeah, Lē'ahi.

AL: Yeah. So, I served as a---see, that's where the med school was started off there. So I worked there from about, I guess, from about '60-something. I worked there [about ten] years. Yeah, I was a counselor, and that's where I still work now. I'm a volunteer.

KT: You're still there.

AL: Oh yeah.

KT: So, when do you figure you started working there, about?

AL: I started there about ('69).

KT: About ('69) at Lē'ahi.

AL: Yeah. So, after working there for that length of time, then I worked until I had to retire.

KT: That was about in ('79), more or less?

AL: (Seventy-nine), yeah. So, I still. Well, I promised the ladies I wouldn't forsake them. So they made me president of the thrift shop. And also I'm manager of the thrift shop and president of the whole organization.

KT: Oh my goodness, aren't you something.

AL: Yeah, yeah. So that's what I'm doing now. And I go down three days a week. And course, some . . .

KT: You've also been very active in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], is that correct?

AL: Oh, yes.

KT: Now when did you start that and why?

AL: When did I start?

KT: Yes.

AL: Well, I've always worked for the NAACP. Wherever I went and there was an NAACP, I got involved with it. So I've worked with them ever since I've been here.

KT: And what kind of issues have you all been concerned with?

AL: Oh, everything, anything that affected our people. Not only our people but anything that affected the people of the community.

KT: What are some important things that you remembered that the NAACP has worked on, important?

AL: Well, you take this situation that we sued for. That was . . .

KT: Which situation?

AL: Down at the club, down at certain of the hotels, certain hotels, they gave our fellows a hard way to go. [In 1986, the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Waikīkī was cited for discriminating against customers on the basis of race at its Spats nightclub.]

KT: Military people?

AL: Yeah, military people. Hard way to go, and some civilians, too.

KT: I see.

AL: But mostly it was military people involved and there's been several civilians have been involved.

KT: And, what would be the problem?

AL: The problem, okay, some of them, particularly with the military. A lot of times they'd have places when they go down there to the cafes, they'd have trouble getting in and out. And . . .

KT: Because of their color, you think?

AL: That's right. They wouldn't serve them, stuff like that. And two lieutenants went. One of them was in my fraternity. But he gave them a good reputation. But the others, the guys. . . . You haven't read about them in the paper?

KT: Yes, but when people are reading the book, they don't know this.

AL: Yeah.

KT: That's why it's important to say all of these things.

AL: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, we . . .

KT: The papers will have passed and they might not be familiar with what has happened.

AL: That's right. Yeah, we've had a lot of problems in that area. And of course, we sued. It took a long time. Now we have to give credit to our president. He stuck with it.

KT: And what is the president? Is that. . . .

AL: The president of the . . .

KT: NAACP.

AL: NAACP, yeah.

KT: Ira Vanterpool?

AL: Vanterpool, that's right. Yeah, he has his faults, but that's one thing I have to give him credit. He stuck with it. And we've had some problems, quite a few problems down at Tripler [Army Medical Center/Hospital], down at the port, here at Schofield, all over [where] we got military, we've had problems. And the problems go from--and especially down at the port. The girls and all, the women soldiers. They've been trying at times. They reported to being taken advantage of. We went to their rescue.

KT: I see.

AL: Things of that type.

KT: And so the NAACP has been able to, with complaints received, been able to put litigation or take things to court, is that what you're saying? Is that what you're saying they've been able to do?

AL: Oh, yes, yes. That's right. We took our case to court and we won. Of course, we didn't get much money. Most of the money went to the [NAACP] headquarters, and then they did make, I think, something like a couple thousand dollars [donation] to the [United] Negro College Fund [Hyatt donated \$50,000 to the charity]. But, well, things of that type. We had many problems and still have them. Schofield, oh brother. (Chuckles)

KT: So, in Hawai'i, even though some people say it's a racial paradise, but you would say that we still have problems that we're working on.

AL: Oh, yeah. That's right. Still got problems we're working on. Things are not so bad. Now I must jump ahead again and say this. Now I have been here since about, what, ('58), I think it was. I can't think of a situation, personally, where I have been segregated. Now I know there are prejudices here, I know that. And I've been involved. When I was assigned to Fort Hamilton, not to Fort Hamilton, but to the hospital.

KT: What hospital?

AL: Lē'ahi. For the whole years that I spent there, in fact I was the only Negro hired down there. The only one. That's right. Let me see if it's still the same. It's still the same. I mean, it's just one of those things. Now, I wouldn't call that prejudice as such, but and even with the sick people, while I was there, we only had one person, one Negro woman from Hickam [Air Force Base] stayed there for about three weeks.

KT: Is that because people are not aware of the hospital . . .

AL: I think they're not aware of it. It's the state hospital. And I don't know why. Well, a lot of them didn't know about it. They just didn't know about it, you see. But, I know prejudice is here and I've been in positions. Well, take for example, for fifteen years, I was the president of the. . . . Boy, I'm slipping . . .

KT: Not the thrift store?

AL: Thrift shop. Not thrift shop, no that's been about, that was about ten years I've been the head of that. But this was the credit union. Credit union.

KT: Credit union. You didn't speak of the credit union.

AL: Yeah, yeah. And I don't know. And course. . . .

KT: In terms of discrimination in the credit union, you never . . .

AL: No, I was the only spot down there. And meetings, we had monthly meetings and, of course, I had to be involved practically every day. You know, I had to sign checks and stuff like that for people who patronize us. And I haven't had any trouble. We had on the staff, let's see, we must have had about, on the board, we had about ten, twelve people on the board. And, then the members themselves, we had the members. I think we must have had, I don't know, we must have had 2,000 people, members.

KT: What credit union?

AL: This is Lē'ahi Hospital Federal Credit Union.

KT: Lē'ahi credit union?

AL: Yeah. When I went there, we were under. . . . Well, you see, when I went there, Lē'ahi was under the University [of Hawai'i] (chuckles).

KT: I see.

AL: And, in fact, they were not in business when I went there. I went in several times. When I worked at the hospital, the U.H. wanted, yeah, they had a very strong board down there and they wanted to absorb Lē'ahi, you see, and let everybody come to them, see, since we were under them, see. That's where the medical school was set up down there, at Lē'ahi, at that hospital. So, I have a---I enjoyed the work and stayed [in] one place that long and at one job, I mean, elected, and I'm the only Negro there, and elected every year. See, we elect the officers every year. Of course, I did a little politicking, you know, on election night. I'd come out standing, I'd get down there early and starting doing--stand at the door, and shake the people's, their hand, (chuckles) so on. And, so that was that. Now let's see. The credit union, thrift shop. And see, in the thrift shop, we had a big business. We had a big business. We had a gift store under the thrift shop. We had a store for the patients under the thrift shop. We contributed money to the library. Every year, we'd give them whatever money they need, and right now, we just spent, we've given as much as \$35,[000] and \$40,000 to the hospital and . . .

KT: Just from the thrift store?

AL: From the thrift shop, and, see, then we operated--we sold books for the library until a few years ago. We sold books for the medical school. We had that whole concession. They had to buy it from us.

KT: So it was a big organization?

AL: Big organization, yes. So, that's been some of the things I've been involved with since I've been here.

KT: In closing, are there any events or people, since you have been in Hawai'i, that you would like to mention as being influential or important in your life? People or events.

AL: Well.

KT: What about your Black beauty pageant?

AL: Yes, we've been operating eleven years, something like that.

KT: And the title of that was, Miss Black Teenage Hawai'i?

AL: Yes, Miss Black Teenage Hawai'i. I'm still the administrator of that.

KT: And why did you start that?

AL: Well, back in the early '60s, I think, as I remember, they were having pageants around and I never did see any of our [Black] girls. And I said, "Well, I don't see why, I guess no one has mentioned it. But I think we ought to have a pageant, too, let some of our girls, give them a chance to get their training, the experience," and that's where we all started. And then I was president of the P.T.A. [Parent-Teacher Association] here at Leilehua [High School]. Leilehua, yeah. We got that gym, here. They didn't have a gym when I got here when I was president. So I went downtown and I helped to get that thing started.

KT: Isn't that something.

AL: That's right.

KT: And they have very strong teams over there now, right?

AL: Oh, yes, yes. That's right, gym. And there's many organizations that, I guess, that I've been tied up with. I've forgot them. That's why, going back to the pageant, that's why I started this pageant. They've had three or four [other Black beauty pageants] around, since we've been operating, and they have just folded up. Some of them would last a year. I think the longest was two years. One out there near at the club, that hotel way out on . . .

KT: Turtle Bay?

AL: Yeah, out in that area.

KT: Or the Makaha side?

AL: Makaha side, yeah, so. So, we still going on. I set up my fraternity, I organized (the local chapter in Hawai'i).

KT: Now, that was which . . .

AL: Phi Beta Sigma.

KT: Phi Beta Sigma. And you were the one that set that up?

AL: That's right.

KT: And again, you set that up because you felt. . . . Why did you set that up?

AL: Well, I figured that, well, just loyalty for my fraternity, I figured that it would be nice to have here. I saw a good need that we could do a good job, but we haven't done it yet. I was on a committee at U.H. I forget the name of the committee. But foreign students used to come here. I was on that committee. And I saw, I helped. I think that might have been the thing that motivated me to get the fraternity going. I said, now, that fraternity could help out and could make a name for itself and plus help a lot of people.

KT: And plus perhaps help give a good impression of Blacks to foreigners?

AL: That's right.

KT: Kind of an international goodwill.

AL: Sure, that's right. In that situation. And I think that's been--well, I'm a member of the Kiwanis Club, that's community work again. And the Boy Scouts, I was interested in Boy Scouts. For years, I was chairman of the local chapter here of the Boy Scouts. Yeah, at one time, I could have--oh, I would say, ten or twelve years ago--I could have been in politics, but . . .

KT: I was about to say, it sounds like you could . . .

AL: Yeah, I could have been. I was encouraged, see, back in, I would say, about '64 or ['6]5, I believe, somewhere along in there. That's when my first knowledge of persons who were running for the [state] House [of Representatives] here. No one running from here and my organization--my club wanted me to run. They said, "We'll support you." But I could have won just like that. I knew that because I knew a lot of people, and I am the president of the P.T.A., and they all knew me. And we had nobody. People are not interested in politics in those years. But I didn't. I said, well, I've been around a long time and I'd better take it easy. I think I'll live longer just doing enough exercise--keep my body active. And many things like that. That's been my life story. Even when, before I came here, I was always in those areas. So that's it.

KT: Well, thank you very much for your time and sharing your story with us and I'll be getting back to you real soon.

END OF INTERVIEW

Oral Histories of African Americans

**Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

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