

Interviewed by Allison Wonsick on November 2, 2010 in Claremont, North Carolina.

AW Can I get you to state your full name for me?

ES My name is Eubert Lawrence Sigmon.

AW And what year were you born?

ES I was born in 1935.

AW And where were you born?

ES Here in Catawba County.

AW What did your parents do?

ES My father was a carpenter, and my mother worked in a glove mill.

AW In Catawba County?

ES Mmm hmm.

AW Did you have siblings?

ES Yeah, I had one brother and two sisters.

AW And what was life like at home?

ES Well, we lived on a small farm, twenty-five acres. And my father worked at public works and my mother stayed at home. And we farmed. We raised cotton, corn, peanuts...anything we needed or something to make money off of. We had a big garden. Tomatoes, onions, cucumbers and all that stuff. And, uh, we had cows and a couple old mules [laughs].

AW You said your dad worked for public works? What did you mean by that?

ES Yeah, he worked at public...well, he went to work on carpenter work back about, when I was about...three. About three or four years old. Anyway, in 1944, in July, we was hauling' wheat into the barn, bundles of wheat, and I was eight years old, I guess...and I was eight years old. We were hauling in wheat. I was up in the top of the barn packing the wheat in the barn, the bundles of wheat. And we got, took, a break about 9:30, 10 o'clock, and it was about a couple hundred yards from the house to the mailbox. So, I was real hot and sweaty and I got out and got on my bicycle and went to the mailbox. Looked, checked the mail. And when I come back, I got sick. Just, out of the blue.

AW What do you mean?

ES Got sick on my stomach. Just deathly sick. And we didn't think too much about it right then but as the day went on I didn't get any better. And my mother took me to the doctor that afternoon. He said that he wasn't sure what was wrong, but he thought it might be polio, but to go home and if I got any worse than to come back the next day. So, we went home and that night, I got worse and I had a lot of pain in my legs and arms and my mother rubbed me with alcohol and all kinds of stuff but I was in a lot of bad pain in my muscles. Anyway, I was being paralyzed but I didn't know it at the time. Anyway, next day we went to the doctor and he sent me up to the emergency hospital there in Hickory, the polio hospital that the Army corps of engineers set up. They set up an emergency hospital there because of so many cases of polio and they had a little admitting building about 10 foot square, like, it shows it in that magazine that Life magazine. Anyway they admitted me and put me in Ward 3, it was wards that the army corps of engineers had built, it had a wood floor and wood sides up to about half way and the top half of it was tent and I don't know how many kids was in that, in that ward, probably 15 or more. Anyway, they had three of those buildings there and they filled up real quick. And they, they really didn't do much for us to start with except they give us shots all the time. Shots every little bit...of something, I don't know what it was. But anyway they started the program of hot bathing and after I'd been there awhile, I think I spent three months in that first ward and then they put me... they built a new building, and I went to it, Ward 7, there was a lot of people in it. They had iron lungs in there and all that stuff. Several people died from their lungs, their muscles were paralyzed. That's what you used the iron lungs for, to make 'em breathe. In other words, it was a primitive, uh, what you call that machine that you put people on to make 'em breathe? A resuscitator or something like that? Anyway I stayed in that ward three months. And uh we had, we had it pretty good in there, we had hot baths, and they had, they used wool army blankets and they tore them up in strips and used them for hot packs. They'd have 'em and put 'em in hot water and squeeze em and fold em up for they'd stay hot so they'd put 'em on you and they'd wrap a bunch of 'em around you, your leg, your affected parts when they put 'em on you and which was my left leg mainly. They was real hot, really hot. Almost burn you. They'd leave them on you for quite awhile 'til they'd cooled down. And then we had bath tub therapy, too, in hot water. They had a big bath tub and they'd put about a half dozen in there at a time [laughs], we kind of enjoyed that. And they had a sun porch where they'd take us out on that sun porch maybe once or twice a week, if the sun was shining. And we would get some fresh air. Anyway, I stayed in there six months in all and they let me come home for Christmas. It was July when I went in there and they let me come home for Christmas. I had to go back for a couple weeks, I can't remember exactly how long. And they decided to move the hospital all to Gastonia. But they sent me home. I didn't have to go there. So, that's the story of the hospital deal. I can't go into much detail because I really don't remember a lot. I remember a lot but not of the medical part of it.

AW Before you had polio would you describe yourself as being healthy?

ES Real healthy. I could run real fast and had no problems.

AW Did anyone else in your family have any serious illnesses?

ES No, no.

AW Did anyone else have polio?

ES None of the people who lived around in the neighborhood had any illnesses either. Back then everyone lived on a small farm. All the people out here in the country. I lived a half a mile back the road from where, from where I grew up. But anyway, none of the neighbors or kin people, anybody had the problem. Just me. I was the lucky one.

AW So it sounded like your mom tried home remedies before she took you?

ES Yeah, well, I had a lot of pain in my muscles; she rubbed them and tried to make me comfortable which didn't help a whole lot. But nobody ever... explained to me what causes it. Not really. They thought it was contagious, everything was quarantined, school was closed and everything. But I never did think it was contagious 'cause I wasn't around anybody who had it and anybody who was ever around me didn't get it. So I didn't think it was contagious.

Paralyzing!

AW Well how did you think you got it?

ES I don't know. Don't know where it come from. Just one of them gifts, I guess [laughs].

AW So what do you remember about arriving at the hospital?

ES I remember the doctor there had to put a square building outside, wasn't big enough to get in hardly, and he checked me over, yeah, you got it. I thought I was paralyzed. The next morning I couldn't walk. My whole left side was affected but mainly my left leg. And...he admitted me. And that 'bout it, I mean, it was real primitive, the hospital was, there to start with.

AW Did your family have to leave you there?

ES Yeah, they couldn't, they couldn't visit for awhile. And then they started...the building had a screen on the sides, and they had a tent roof with the fold down flaps on each side and well they'd raise them flaps up and they could come visit and talk to me to the screen but you couldn't come inside. After a couple months, the first three months they couldn't, well they did visit some, talk to me to through the screen, but it was not, not soon after I went up there. It was quite awhile 'fore they could visit.

AW And you said you were eight years old?

ES Yeah.

AW Must have been pretty scary.

ES Yeah, it was. Then [laughs].
AW How did your family react to your diagnosis?

ES I really don't know. They never did, I never did talk to them about it much, how they felt about it. But, we just coped with whatever come up, you know.

AW What was the community's reaction, do you remember?

ES The community, well, it was like, everybody was quarantined at the time. And it was a big thing but it wasn't a lot of people in the community, none at that time, that had it that I know of. Just me. And you know that was quite a thing for the whole area to be quarantined and only one or two people had it, you know. It may have been a couple other ones later on but at the time I had it I don't know if anyone had it, not from around here. There was some people in the hospital up there from different places, around. One from Hickory, I remember a boy. And one from Hendersonville, just things that I can remember...from that time.

AW Did you make friends?

ES Oh yeah, we had a good time. In Ward 7 we used to get out of the bed at night and crawl around on the floor and everybody else could get back into bed but I couldn't [laughs]. I could get out but I couldn't get back in. My bed was pretty high up off the floor. They'd always catch me and put me back in the bed.

AW What do you remember about the nursing staff?

ES Well, they had a couple of nurses that were nurses, you know, real nurses. Then they had a bunch of girls, young, probably 20 years old or something like that, that were prisoners, female prisoners that worked there a lot. They worked, some of them full time, well, every night or every day, you know. But they was good. They took care of us.

AW Did the prisoners help with treatment or what was their role?

ES They was like nurses.

AW Do you know where else the staff came from?

ES I don't know really, where the, where the staff come from. It was...there was a couple doctors there that I remember when I was in the ward, Dr. Gaul [?] was one of them, he was one of the main doctors. I don't know where he came from. But they had some good care. We had good food people donated. They didn't charge anything for you being in the hospital; you could make a contribution, but they didn't charge. They didn't tell you any different price you know for being there. But I spent 6 months there. Mother and daddy gave 'em some money but I don't know how much.

AW What was a typical day like for you?

ES You'd wake up early in the morning. At the crack of dawn. And have breakfast. Cereal and milk, something. Mostly cereals. But it was, just a routine day. After you eat breakfast you get hot packs then you get swimming pool therapy in hot water. They had a big old pool made out of sheet metal, it was a big one, in the back of the building and they'd put us in that hot water in there, for therapy. And they exercised our muscles a lot. You'd be laying flat and they'd be picking your leg up and down, up and down.

AW This was the nurses doing this?

ES Yeah, mm hmm.

AW Do you remember any of the nurses in particular?

ES I don't...not, not distinctly. I don't remember any of them's names or anything. You don't remember much from that time. With something like that, there's so much going on. Like their names, I'm not good at remembering names anyway and I don't remember anybody's names. I remember some of the kids' names that were in there. Kelsey Anderson was from Hendersonville and Arnold Jordan, I don't know exactly where he's from, somewhere from around Hickory, and Johnny Brumley was from Hickory; he was one of the kids that was associated with Belk stores. You know, it used to be Belk-Brumley. He was one of their kids. Anyway, that's the only one, the only names I can remember.

AW Did you stay in touch with any of them?

ES Don't know where they are. I tried to find 'em, find 'em...but I don't...I haven't been able to locate anybody.

AW Who was in charge of the hospital?

ES I don't know, I guess that Dr. Gaul was; he was the main doctor. I guess he was the boss man.

AW What were some rules at the hospital?

ES Well, they didn't have to have many rules because the kids couldn't none of them get up and walk. So they was in the bed. Unless you crawl down and get on the floor at night [laughs]. But, it was, you could have projects you worked on. I built model airplanes. I started when I was in the hospital...they, some organization, brought me a bunch of cardboard models and I had a good bit of trouble with those things, and I got started building model airplanes, stuff like that. We listened to the radio. We had radios. I had a radio. We listened to stories, on the radio, The Lone Ranger, Hop Harrigan... [laughs] that kind of stuff, you know.

AW What other kind of entertainment was there?

ES I really can't remember any type of entertainment that they had except take us out on the sun porch every once in awhile. And we'd crawl around out there. They'd put blankets down on the...it was a wood floor, like a patio, really, and they'd put blankets down on the floor and we'd crawl around on them around out there and play a little bit and get some sunshine then we'd go back in. I've got a picture there somewhere in that stuff that was made out on that sun porch, of me and a bunch of other kids. I don't know where it is in this mess. I know I'm not doing your recording any good right now. This is a story I wrote. This is a book that somebody wrote, ya seen that? I supposed you'd seen this one, too. This "Miracle of Hickory" that was printed back then? How long's that thing run?

AW I think about two hours.

ES Oh! Well we've got plenty of time [shuffling papers]. That's the picture out on the sun porch and that's me right there.

AW Now who do you think that is in the background? Is that a nurse? Or a volunteer?

ES It was probably a volunteer. They had a lot of volunteer people up there. And, I can't remember...that looks like a black woman, don't it?

AW Maybe. Do you remember any African American nurses?

ES Yeah, there was a couple up there but there wasn't no black kids there. That's a picture of me and mother after I come home. I had to walk with a cane for a long time. That's blown up, that's the same thing.

AW Would you have one nurse that did all your care?

ES No, it was a bunch of different nurses.

AW Did you like one better than any of the others?

ES Not really, I didn't really have a preference 'cause they was all nice to us. Now these boys here, I remember their faces real well and some of their names. That's Johnny Brumley right there and Arnold Jordan and I remember their faces but I don't remember their names. Do you want one of these pictures? I have two. That's the original one.

AW Did the nurses live at the camp? *Since he seems interested in talking about the photos, you might have followed up with a couple of questions.*

ES I think so. I don't really know where they stayed.

AW Do you remember talking your friends in the camp about nurses or doctors?

ES No, we didn't know much about that. Kids, you know, you don't, you don't know about that kind of stuff to know what's going on. Really what all we knew was one day to the next and that's about all we knew. ✓

AW So did you hear any outside news while you were in the hospital?

ES My father worked in Oak Ridge, Tennessee on the plant where they split the atom to build the atomic bomb with, he was working up there when I got sick and he came home a couple weeks later and started working around here, he had to quit his job up there.

AW Because you were sick?

ES He come home and got a job, local.

AW What else did nurses do for you?

ES Well, they did everything. They carried the bedpans, they brought your food, kept everything you need made sure you had plenty of juices to drink, all that kind of stuff.

AW Was there any special relationship, children without their parents...

ES No...I just knew the kids that was in there, the immediate ones around me some of the people in the ward I didn't even know, didn't talk to them. But we all got along real good, we didn't have any problems. But that's the way kids are, kids can cope. Kids can adjust to any situation. That's one thing I learned in the experience, that you can adjust to live with whatever you got.

AW So after you went back after Christmas then how did you find out that you got to go home for good?

ES Well I didn't know they were going to move to Gastonia until I went back after Christmas and I heard they was going to move and I thought I was going to have to go down there but luckily I didn't have to, they let me go home.

AW Did they tell you why?

ES Well...no...I had been there six months. And I was far enough along that I could walk with a cane. And that's the reason they let me go home, I guess. They figured they had done all they could do for me.

AW Who taught you to walk with a cane?

ES The nurses that were there.

AW So it was like physical therapy at that point?

ES Yeah, all the time. Every day. Yeah.

AW They didn't really know how to cure it...

ES They were using...Sister Kenny, you've heard tell of her. They were using her techniques. They started using that at first when I went up there with the physical exercise and the hot water baths and the hot packs. Had to keep the muscles hot, it was better for you. And they did a lot, they had a lot of exercises everyday they'd come around and give you physical therapy, exercise all your muscles.

AW Was that something you looked forward to?

ES Yeah, I didn't mind it. It wasn't nothing painful or anything. It was just something you had to do. They had to get your muscles to come alive again because they were dead.

AW Was the care 24 hours? Was someone on the ward?

ES Oh yeah, there was somebody there all the time. Of course at night they'd turn the lights down real dim everybody'd go to sleep... but there was somebody on you the whole time.

AW Do you remember the March of Dimes coming?

ES Oh yeah.

AW What was that like?

ES Well, they'd put out folders, for the kids, mainly, to fill up with dimes and it was just a good thing that funded the hospital, I guess. Everybody donated to it.

AW Do you remember other visitors?

ES Yeah there was visitors in there all the time, everyday. They had certain hours. We had visitors every day, somebody, you know.

AW Anybody famous?

ES Well, let's see...Fred Kirby came to see us [laughs]. Yeah there was some people came in there but I can't remember just off hand who it was. Couple of movie stars. Guys who played in Western movies, mostly.

AW Now you were in there from July through Christmas time?

ES Through January.

AW Did you miss a lot of school?

ES I missed a whole year of school. They brought my books up there and I kind of kept up with it and they passed me.

AW Who helped you with your school work?

ES Well, the nurses would. Some of the girls that was there, the prisoner population [laughs]. Course they didn't act like prisoners and we didn't really know, we didn't really know they was prisoners at the time, but they were. One of them borrowed my radio one time to listen to something one night and she conveniently forgot to bring it back [laughs]. I had a little problem there, couple weeks of getting my radio back, but we got it back.

AW You had your own radio?

ES Yeah.

AW Who brought you that?

ES My mother.

AW Did everyone have a radio?

ES No, not everybody had a radio. Some did, some didn't.

AW So how has polio affected you over your lifetime?

ES Well, I never could run. I couldn't participate in any kind of sports in school. I did drive a school bus when I was in high school. And when I got out of high school I went to work in a furniture factory and I did alright. I had a little problem walking at times but nothing real bad. And I worked...up until about 1980 I worked at the shops. And I quit, went into business for myself doing custom upholstery furniture and repair work. I worked here for 15 years downstairs. Worked for some decorators in Charlotte, South Carolina...and I got along good up until about 1992, or a little before that. I started getting...I noticed I couldn't lift a sofa like I used to [laughs] but I just got weaker. My muscles just started weakening and this post-polio syndrome, which I had never heard tell of, I got...that hit me. And what it does to you, I had pretty good muscles when I was younger but my muscles have deteriorated, they're not there anymore. And, that's the way it goes. Got to live with what you got.

AW When you first left the hospital did the nurses have to show your parents how to do the exercises?

ES Yeah, they had told me what kind of exercises to do, you know, everything. And I did that for a long time. And I walked with a cane for several years, a year or two. And I got where I could get along. I still got my walking cane. That was a long time ago.

AW How was the transition back to school? What was your classmates' reaction?

ES It worked out pretty good. I didn't have any problems. They all was glad to see me and I was glad to be back.

AW What did they think about your new walking cane?

ES You know kids, they take everything in stride. We just got out there and played. We used to go out and play. We used to have recesses in school, that's something they don't have in school anymore. That was one of my favorite subjects, recess.

AW How was your care different after the hospital?

ES There wasn't much care went on. I just, I got stronger. Like I said, I never could run but other than that I got able to do anything I wanted to do. I hunted, I fished, all kinds of stuff, up until about 1990. '92, I went on disability and ...gradually worsened. I can't walk for to here to that door without hanging onto something. My legs are so weak, I just can't walk.

AW Did you have checkups that you had to go to after?

ES I did for a long time, yeah, went to Gastonia for checkups. I went up here a couple times up here to Hickory where the hospital but that didn't last but a couple times and they sent me to Gastonia. I'd go down there for checkups but they never did, they'd have me to walk...not much they could do for you, not really. Just wanted to see how you was progressing. And I got stronger as time went on and got able to do about anything I wanted to do. Except run, I never could run [laughs].

AW Did you have any other hospitalizations after that?

ES Not for that. Well, I did really, I ... yeah I was in the hospital couple times. I had appendicitis and...which had nothing to do with polio, but then I had... my right knee cap, got dislocated a couple times, had to go into the hospital for surgery on that and then the doctor that operated on my knee...my left foot would turn over, I couldn't control it because of the weak muscles in my leg...it would just turn over and I would fall a lot. But he operated on it and transplanted a couple tendons and stiffened the joint in my ankle where my foot wouldn't turn over. And then he operated on...I had two operations on my foot and one on my knee there in about a six month period. And I was out of work there for about eight months, something like that. I went up to Catawba Tech and took a course in drafting...I didn't go but three months, I had kids...I had four kids then...got married when I was 19 and she was 19 [laughs]. And we had 4 kids pretty fast. There they are, that's the years they finished high school...anyway...

AW What did you tell them about your polio experience? Did you ever talk about it?

ES Oh yeah we've talked about it quite a bit. They know all about it, all the stuff that went on. Of course they're like everybody else, they can't imagine what it was like.

AW When you were in the hospital for your surgeries, how was your nursing care different then?

ES Well it was different because...you know, your nursing in the hospitals...probably better than what it is now. They had more nurses on the floor. Now they've got a skeleton crew in the hospital, usually. But then they had more nurses on the floor...and it was probably better then than what it is now. They had good nursing care then.

AW What was the difference then, do you think?

ES I think a lot of the difference was...there was...things wasn't expensive. When my first daughter was born she was born at Frye Memorial, it was Richard Baker Hospital then, the whole hospital bill was \$92. Think of what it is now when a woman has a kid, thousands of dollars. But, things weren't expensive like they are now. Coca-Cola was a nickel [laughs]...hot dogs was 15 cent [laughs].

AW So when you first started feeling sick later, how did you decide to go to the doctor...

ES Do what now?

AW When you first started feeling ill again in 1990....

ES I didn't really feel ill, I just felt my muscles just started getting weak. I wasn't able to do everything I'd been doing, you know. And they still getting weaker. I don't know when it's going to stop, in the graveyard I reckon.

AW So how did you decide to go to the doctor for that?

ES Nothing they can do for you. They tell you can swim, and that helps. But I haven't...we used to have a pool out...got rid of that thing, it's too much work.

AW So they said you had post-polio syndrome and you had never heard of that?

ES I had never heard tell of it.

AW How did they explain it to you?

ES They explained it like...when I had polio the doctor said that anybody who had polio didn't have to worry about it anymore because you'd never have it again. Well they didn't exactly know what was going to happen because there's a lot of people now that have got the same thing I've got, some of 'em's a lot worse, but...what was your question, I forgot...

AW Uh...how did they explain post-polio to you?

ES They explained it like it's a muscular deterioration problem sort of like...muscular dystrophy or something like that, but not the same. Your muscles just...get weaker and disappear. You don't have much muscle anymore. I used to have big muscles [laughs]...not anymore.

AW What did they tell you you could do for it?

ES Nothing you can do for it. Not anything, really. Except exercise a little bit, but when your muscles get getting weaker, then exercise don't do no good. I'm going to take my shirt off, I went outside this morning it was kind of cool, I put that thing on...I'm going to take it off.

AW Do you remember hearing about when the polio vaccine came out?

ES Oh yeah.

AW What do you remember about that?

ES Well...that was a...when my kids was little. And we all went up to the school house and took the Salk vaccine...the first one they come out with. And they've got better stuff now, I guess. There's still some cases, I heard on TV the other day where...country somewhere they had a polio epidemic going on but I don't...I didn't catch where it was at.

AW Did you ever understand how you might have gotten polio?

ES Some people said it was caused by a mosquito bite, but I don't really know. I don't think it's contagious, I never did think so. They was just taking precautions when they quarantined everybody, closed the schools, told kids not to go out where it was a bunch of other kids and all that stuff. *Amazing, that he still doesn't know it's water-borne.*

AW Did your family stay in contact with any of the nurses or doctors?

ES I don't really know, I'm sure they talked to the doctors, probably when I wasn't listening, but...I don't really know how much they communicated with them.

AW Did your mom do the exercises with you?

ES Yeah, I did some exercises when I come home, but not a lot. I was able to walk then and I got exercise walking, on my feet, doing things.

AW Did your family treat you any differently when you got home?

ES No, not really.

AW Well is there anything else you want to add that we haven't covered?

ES Can't think of anything right now [laughs].

AW Ok, did you want to show me some things in the folder?

ES I'm still...well, I showed you about what I had in here. I didn't have much.

AW Did you remember when the photographer came for Life magazine?

ES Yeah, I remember that and I knew I was turned around backwards in the bed when he made the picture.

AW Was that on purpose?

ES That's a story, a little story I wrote through all of it, I know you wouldn't be interested in that, I don't want you reading my spelling anyway [laughs]. I can't spell very good, never could. Oh well, it will go in there I know. Anything else you want to know?

AW Um, I think that's about it, thank you.

ES You're very welcome.