

**Interviewee: Lawrence, Cherry**

**Interview Date: April 30, 2011**

**Oral History Transcript  
Ms. Cherry Polk Lawrence  
30 April 2011**

**Sandra Davidson (SD):** Hello, my name is Sandra Davidson. Today is Saturday, April 30 and I'm talking to Ms. Cherry Lawrence. We are at 3715 Florinda Street in Houston, Texas. Good morning.

**Cherry Lawrence (CL):** Good morning.

**SD:** If you would please, tell me what your full name is.

**CL:** My name is Cherry Lene Lawrence.

**SD:** And what was your maiden name?

**CL:** Polk.

**SD:** P-O-L-K?

**CL:** P-O-L-K. Mmm hmm.

**SD:** Alrighty. And where and when were you born?

**CL:** I was born in a little town called Morbihan, Louisiana. But it's in New Iberia, the country part of

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New Iberia, Louisiana.

**SD:** Would you spell that for me please? The town name?

**CL:** New Iberia?

**SD:** No.

**CL:** Morbihan?

**SD:** Yes.

**CL:** M-O-R-B-I-H-A-N.

**SD:** Okay. And when were you born?

**CL:** September 11. I was a twin.

**SD:** Oh, well that must've made life kind of exciting around your house. What was that like?

**CL:** No, he passed away when we were five months old. He died of pneumonia.

**SD:** Well, I'm sorry. So what was life like in Louisiana at that time?

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**CL:** Well, at the time, compared to now, it was good because we didn't have all the stuff we have going on now. We were living in the country. I was raised on the farm. My dad was a sharecropper. So we raised all our eggs and vegetables. He raised okra. I hated picking okra.

**SD:** Why is that?

**CL:** [Laughs] They sting! It's all right to pick a few but when you got to pick 'em to sell, that's plenty.

**SD:** So did ya'll have a garden?

**CL:** Yeah, we had a large garden. We raised all our vegetables. I was in the 4-H Club. I loved to garden. I loved the outside.

**SD:** How did you get involved in 4-H?

**CL:** School. School.

**SD:** Was that popular then in your school?

**CL:** Back then, yeah. Yeah.

**SD:** That's wonderful.

**CL:** In the country there wasn't too much to do so you made up as you went along. 'Cause when it came time to—you know it was back then that we didn't have toys and stuff like we have now. We made our ball out of old socks with cotton and used a broomstick for a bat. But it was good.

**SD:** Did you have other brothers and sisters?

**CL:** Yeah, I come from a family of sixteen.

**SD:** So there were fourteen children?

**CL:** There were sixteen children.

**SD:** Oh, okay. And where were you in that? Are you at the front part, the back part, or the middle part?

**CL:** In the middle.

**SD:** Alrighty.

**CL:** I was in the middle.

**SD:** And did your mother work outside the home or did she work in the home?

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housework for the ladies around there. At that time of year they didn't have too much for women to do.

They cleaned houses, took care of children and stuff like that.

**SD:** And when is sugarcane season? When was it that she had to cut sugarcane?**CL:** From September to December. I did a little of that, too.**SD:** Okay. And what was that like?

**CL:** It was hard because a couple of weeks a year I'd have to miss school and I hated to miss school. I had to miss school so I could help her. I would take the row up a ways so she could work in the middle. It was good. The only thing, I hated to miss school 'cause when I went back I had to catch up.

**SD:** Okay. Tell me what your school was like.

**CL:** Well, in the country before I went to the high school, it was a little three-room country school. And we had three teachers. The classes went from first to sixth then you went to New Iberia where they had a bigger school. You had to ride a bus or walk but it was—walking was seven miles.

**SD:** So when you were in—what?--seventh grade is when you would go to New Iberia?**CL:** Yeah. We had to walk to catch the bus. Even when we were in elementary school it was three

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miles from our house to the school. And I remember I used to hate my teacher because when you're late, she'd whip you. And one time we were late and it was cold and my hands was freezing and when she hit me with that strap, it looked like my hand would break [laughs]. We came up the rough side of the river, the rough side of the mountain. But it was a lesson learned, you know.

**SD:** And your school in New Iberia—did a lot of children go to that school?

**CL:** Yeah.

**SD:** Was that an integrated school or a segregated school?

**CL:** Segregated.

**SD:** When you were growing up, tell us a little bit about your mom's role in the kitchen. Did you have a place in the kitchen with your mother helping her do things?

**CL:** Yes, ma'am.

**SD:** What was that like?

**CL:** We had to have that kitchen clean when she came in so she could get in there and cook. But I loved to work with her in the kitchen 'cause we didn't have electricity or nothin'. We had the wood stove. I'd get the stove fire going in the stove. But I learned a lot from her because I used to watch her.

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They didn't have recipes and stuff so I just wondered how all that come in her head, you know, where she prepared these foods. And they were good! She was a good cook. And that's where—I guess that's where I got my cooking from because I do the same thing. I love to cook.

**SD:** Did she learn from her mother? Were those things that had passed down in your family?

**CL:** No. Her mother—her mother was an Indian. She didn't—she didn't speak too much English. I used to make her angry because I'd tell her, “You talk to me like I talk to you [laughs]. I don't know what you're saying. If you don't say it in English, you don't get it.”

**SD:** What tribe was she from, do you know?

**CL:** Cherokee. Yeah, I got a little Indian in me. They didn't live around us. When my mama married my daddy, he was from Morbihan. But they were in a little town called Jeanerette.

**SD:** How do you spell that one?

**CL:** J-E-A-N-E-R-E-T-T-E. Jeanerette, Louisiana. We would go visit them. But they wasn't around 'til when she got sick, sick. Then my mama took her to live with us so she could take care of her. But by that time, my mama wasn't working out of the house because we had got bigger, and everybody had little jobs. But she lived with us until she died.

**SD:** Was there a big cultural difference between your grandmother and your mother?

**CL:** No, no.

**SD:** Culture, I guess, meaning like—for instance with cooking. Do you think your grandmother did a lot of cooking in the same ways maybe that your mama did?

**CL:** Well, I don't know too much about that because she died when we were still all children, you know, still at home.

**SD:** I see.

**CL:** But when she came to live with us, she didn't do any cooking or anything. She was kind of bedridden and we had to take care of her.

**SD:** I see. So did your mother work out of the home a lot? Like most of the year, would you say or no?

**CL:** Well, she did housework for people most of the year.

**SD:** So if she was gone--

**CL:** During the sugarcane time she would work because my daddy was a sharecropper so they had to work the land to keep a house to keep a roof over our heads [laughs]. But she worked. She worked a



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lot. And me and my mom was real close. Very close.

**SD:** So if she was working, then who was sort of in charge of preparing the meals? Or would she make them before she went to work?

**CL:** She would get up in the morning and cook breakfast. We always had grits and bacon 'cause they had their own pigs and cows. We had our own milk and everything. And she would get up and make biscuits. I used to make biscuits when my kids were small, but when canned biscuits came out--  
“Thank you, Jesus!”

**SD:** [Laughs] What kinds of food was your mom known for?

**CL:** My mom? Well, she raised okra. She loved to—she made good okra. And I got that tradition still today. She would put chicken and sausage because they made their own sausage. They had their smokehouse and stuff. And she would make that with some tomatoes, and just make a one-big-pot meal and cook a pot of rice. We had a meal then, and it was good.

**SD:** So is that something that you started doing as well with your family?

**CL:** Mmm hmm. They love that because I'll take it and put chicken and shrimp and sausage, okra and tomato and make a big pot and fix some rice.

**SD:** Is that your specialty?

**CL:** [Laughs] I think I prefer—that's a good one, but I think I prefer making gumbo.

**SD:** And how do you make your gumbo?

**CL:** I use—I make my roux with flour and a little oil. You brown it then you add water, onions and celery and garlic. And you add your water to it. Then I take and cut up my chicken. I have my chicken in the oven, you know, just to get the blood out of it before you put it in there. And then I put my chicken and sausage and shrimp. And sometimes crabs 'cause the kids love crab. But the crab is getting expensive. But that's a good—that's a good deal. You make a big pot and it goes a long way.

**SD:** And what were holidays like at your house?

**CL:** Ooh, girl! When I was younger or now [laughs]?

**SD:** Well, how 'bout both?

**CL:** Well, even when we'd go back home, after we all branched out, we'd go back home and everybody would just get in the kitchen cooking their dish. And we'd have food for days.

**SD:** What kinds of things would be prepared?

**CL:** Pork roast, turkey, ham, chicken, pies.

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**SD:** What kinds of pies?

**CL:** Sweet potato, apple. I like sweet potato pie. That's my specialty. I make sweet potato pie.

**SD:** And you know, what's your secret on that? Do you have a secret?

**CL:** [Laughs] No. It's just the one I like. And I don't have no problem making it because it's easy.

**SD:** So how do you make it?

**CL:** I take it—I'm a person I prepare ahead of time. I have to.

**SD:** Okay, what do you mean by that?

**CL:** Like if I'm making a sweet potato pie and like if I have a holiday or something coming up, I'll start it like a week ahead. And I'll take it and fix my potatoes and put them in freezer bags and put them in the freezer. And then if I'm making mustard greens, I'll get my greens and wash them, put my ham hock in them and cook them, and put them in a freezer bag and put them to freeze. And then when that time comes, you got all your food ready, you know. You just have to bake the turkey or cook the ham or whatever you're doing, and make your other little side dishes. And I'll get my pie shells and thaw out my filling and fill my pie shells and cook them that day and it's easy. Not so much work. I do it at night at the church. They don't understand why I want things ahead of time. I say, "I like to know

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what I'm doing and what I have to do" because I'm cooking for like seventy-five people on Tuesday.

So I go do my preparing, buying my stuff on Monday, and bring it to the church so I'll have it there.

**SD:** And which church is that?

**CL:** Lilly Grove.

**SD:** And what is it that you cook for? What event is it?

**CL:** It's the seniors.

**SD:** Okay. Is that once a week or once a month?

**CL:** Once a week, every Tuesday. Sometimes we go out. Like last Tuesday, we went out to a movie and we ate lunch out. But when we're at the church I fix lunch, me and a couple of other people. But I do the cooking.

**SD:** So you do all the cooking for the seventy people?

**CL:** Mmm hmm.

**SD:** What kinds of things do you make for that?

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**CL:** [Laughs] Well, sometimes I have baked chicken with mashed potatoes and green beans, or I fix spaghetti with a salad and garlic bread, fettuccine, chicken fettuccine, with a salad and dinner rolls. They always have something, a dessert and something to drink. Sometimes we have tea or punch, very seldom sodas because the lady over it don't like--'cause a lot of people are diabetic, you know. She tries to stay away from it, even though they do drink it [laughs] 'cause I do the same thing. Sometimes you have to have something sweet.

**SD:** So do you have help in the preparation?

**CL:** Well, I have a couple of ladies. I got Sister Wesley. She'll come in there if we're having garlic bread. She makes the punch every week, punch or tea. And then I have one lady help clean up, and then we have two or three that serve. But when it comes to the major cooking, I do the cooking. I used to work at a hospital so I know how to work, cook a lot.

**SD:** And which hospital did you work at?

**CL:** I worked—well, it was Medical Center del Oro over there off of Fannin. I started there as a cook and then when I ended up, I was Assistant to the Food Service Director.

**SD:** How long were you there?

**CL:** Fifteen years. I was Cook, then I was Supervisor, then I was Assistant to the Director. It all was work though. You didn't stop working. It just was a position.

**SD:** How did you get started there?

**CL:** Cooking.

**SD:** Well, no, but I mean--

**CL:** I went and I applied—I was workin'. We used to own a barbecue place out in the Heights. And after my husband died, I had problems with help and stuff and my health was getting bad. I was having blood pressure problems and the doctor advised me to get out from under that because it was too much pressure on me. And so then the hospital—they had an opening at the hospital for a cook. I went and applied and got hired the same day.

**SD:** They must've been impressed.

**CL:** [Laughs].

**SD:** And what was the name of your barbecue restaurant?

**CL:** The Hungry Po' Boy.

**SD:** Okay. And how long did you have that?

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Barbecue off of Harrisburg. And then we went into that little business ourselves. And he had heart problems. He passed. And when he passed, my oldest daughter was in junior high so I had six kids to raise. But we made it.

**SD:** What was your husband's name?**CL:** Lawrence. That was my first one. This one was my last one [laughs].**Toni Tipton-Martin (TTM):** How many?**CL:** Three. Three. I had no luck. So I got the Good Lord now. That's my husband, my daddy, my brother, my mama, my whatever. I quit. I've been married three times.**SD:** So what were their names?**CL:** The first one was Lawrence Johnson. The second one was Manfred Moore. And the last one was Herbert Lawrence. And he's been dead twelve years, so I'm single.**SD:** Okay. Are there any particular memories you can think of looking back on your childhood that stand out for you regarding cooking or being in the kitchen?**CL:** Well, the one that really stood out for me, just being in the kitchen with my mother. We'd just talk

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about things. We were very close and we could talk about anything. And I remember one time I made the mistake of telling her she's "storying" and she hit me with a spoon [laughs]. That really stood out! We were talking about something and I said, "Oh, you're storying." [Laughs] I shouldn't have said that because she was stirring a pot at the time.

**SD:** So was that sort of the best place to talk?

**CL:** Yeah, for me and her 'cause whenever she would come in from work, she was in the kitchen and I was right there helping her. That went on through our lifetime. I mean, I was very close to my mother.

**SD:** What lessons do you think that you learned when you were in the kitchen there with her? What kinds of life lessons do you think you learned?

**CL:** Love. Love. Because she taught us that, you see. "You have to love one another," she said, because they were very Christian people. And she'd say, "God is love," and that's what you have to do. And I love people right now. I do things—like my granddaughter asked me—one day we were walking and every time I passed by somebody I spoke, you know. And she said, "Granny, why do you speak to people when they don't speak back?" I said, "If you read your Bible, it's in there. Now you do what you're supposed to do. If they don't do it, that's them. It's on them, you know." That's just the way I am. If I can help somebody, I'll help them.

Yesterday I went to the store and they had some soup meat. I got some soup in the freezer. I got to make some soup because when people are sick I bring them soup. Now the lady across the street from my brother—'cause my brother right now, the little problem with him is he's dementiad. He's



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going into that early Alzheimer's. I try to look after him because I'm the only one here, you know, with him. And so I take him to the doctor. I cook stuff and bring him, or I stop and get a hamburger or something to take him. But this lady, there're Spanish people across the street from him. I just happened to stop by because they were—I know the man was very nice to him during the storm because they took him with them. Because my brother is eighty-three and his wife is ninety-three. So I just stopped to talk to him, you know, and to thank him for looking out for him [my brother]. And his wife had just gotten home from the hospital. And we talked and I asked her, I said, "If I fix you some soup would you eat it?" Because not everybody eats everybody's cooking. I know I don't. And so I went home and I fixed her some chicken noodle soup. I had some chicken breast in the freezer and I cooked it and I added some cream of chicken soup in it and some chicken broth, some noodles, and some celery and onions. I brought it back to her and she ate it. She said, "Thank you, that's what I needed." She said she didn't have no appetite and she had just had surgery so that's why I brought some stuff. I said, "I'm going to go home and make some soup and bring her some." And then they got the lady down the street from me, she's been feeling bad. I'm gonna' make enough to bring her some. I guess I just cook all the time.

**SD:** Do you get that from your mother? Did she also help the sick people or cook for the church?

**CL:** She didn't cook for the church, but she'd always help people. And when she would work for these people, they would give her clothes. And she would take 'em loose and make 'em for kids and give them to kids in the neighborhood.

**SD:** She'd make what?

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**CL:** She'd make clothes. But she made most of our clothes when we were coming up.

**SD:** She sounds like she was very giving like you are.

**CL:** She was. She was.

**Toni Tipton-Martin (TTM):** Hi, she told you a little bit about who I am and why I'm here?

**CL:** No.

[Last part of interview was inadvertently not taped]