

ALBERT FRENCH
I [of 2]
August 3, 1960

Also present: William Russell

1.

(Interview conducted at home of Albert French, 2722 Robert Street
New Orleans)

Albert French was born November 16, 1910 on Green Street in the Carrollton section [of New Orleans]. His father, Bob "Baba" French (brother of Morris French [trombone] of La Place and of Johnny French, Trumpet, now of Baton Rouge) was from Laplace; Bob played brass bass with many bands around New Orleans including that of Kid Rena. Bob died in 1925 at the age of about fifty. Dave Perkins was Bob's teacher although he had played in Laplace before; AF also took a few lessons from Perkins in later years. Bob was in about the same age bracket as Papa Celestin and Pinchback Tureaud. Of the French brothers, Bob was oldest; next was Johnny, then Morris, and last, a brother who didn't play music. [Cf. Morris French, reel ?] Bob French played with the Tuxedo Brass Band once [i.e. one time or at one time? RBA] (the Eureka Brass Band was in existence during the time, also), and with many other brass bands; he played dances for years at the Bulls Club (now the Elks Club), with Kid Rena.

Morris French was a regular member of Kid Rena's band for about twenty years, at the same time Bob French was in the band. [Cf. George Lewis, reel ? Morris French, reel? Richard Mc Lean, reel? Joe Rena, reel]

Sharkey [Bonano] has the same style as Kid Rena, although Sharkey doesn't play as high as Rena did; Sharkey learned Rena's style, following him around from job to job.

Besides Rena on trumpet, Bob French on Bass and Morris French on trombone, others in Rena's band were: Chester Zardis, string bass [plus brass bass, as above?] Zeb [Leneries] clarinet; Joe René [sic]. brother of Kid Rena, drums; a guitar player. AF thinks Zeb was from Saint John Parish; he was about the same age as Bob French. Rena was a little bit older than Louis [Armstrong]; WR mentions a TV interview program with Rena ["Wordless"] RE used to imitate Louis' singing

Morris French, born in Laplace, came to New Orleans about the same time as Bob French. Some of the bands, other than Rena's, that Morris played with: Taft, [Crune ?], of Monroe [Louisiana]; Jack Carey (at times). AF knew Jack Carey's brother, Mutt Carey; Mutt would come around The Alamo when AF was working there with Willie "Kaiser" Joseph (brother of bassist John Joseph); AF was at The Alamo about three and one half years.

Johnny French played with "toot" Johnson, of Baton Rouge. He moved to Baton Rouge, playing New Orleans rarely. He played in dance and brass bands. (WR mentions that he was in Baton Rouge, interviewing, and that the only person they could find was Willie Foster, guitar and banjo, brother of George "pop" Foster; Foster was taking care of his aged mother (one-hundred and six years old). AF says George "Pop" Foster was in New Orleans when a band he [AF] was working with played "A Night In Old New Orleans." [At this time Eddie Pierson introduced RBA to GF. RBA thinks that Celestin was alive then. In any event, it was Celestin's band.]

AF has liked music since he was a child; his family had a pianola, which they played and used as accompaniment for their singing; when AF was about sixteen or seventeen years old, he bought a ukelele, from which he graduated to banjo (about 1927, he says, comparing date of purchase with death of his father, in 1925). AF's first job was with pianist Peter :Hicks in Marrero. Sometime later, he began playing a few jobs with a cousin, trumpet player [Fat," (real name?) (check sp?)] around Laplace; "Fat" also had a son who played trumpet. Af's next band was that of Earl Vinet, of St. Rose; AF remained in that vicinity (lived in Destrahan) about six months (during this time, he took lessons from Dave Perkins). [Soard's Cf. Jack Laine, reel] AF took lessons from

Perkins for about one year, around 1931-32 (AF was driving a truck out of Good Hope, coming to New Orleans every day); Perkins taught the entire Vinet band (individually and together) at Vinet's house on Sunday, in St. Rose. AF used the Morris method [book] for learning banjo; WR [Manuel] Manetta uses the same method now. Perkins taught the band Dixieland and standard [i. e. popular pieces] numbers; he wrote the parts for some of the tunes, using stock arrangements for others. AF says Perkins was a fine teacher, that most of the older New Orleans musicians took lessons from him. AF later took a few lessons from Jim Humphrey (grandfather of Percy Humphrey); he also took a few lessons from Willie Foster, who he considers a fine teacher.

AF discusses low salaries and playing for the love of it.

AF worked at the Alamo, a jitney dance on Canal (near where McCrory 5 and 10 Store is now located, and near the Budweiser, another dance hall); leader was Willie Joseph; AF was there about three and one half years. He went with Joseph to a place in Exchange Alley; others in the Joseph band (from time to time) : Percy Hymphrey; Sidney Carrere [sp?] (tenor sax); Earl Foster [drums]; [big or Little?] Cato (p9ano), later replaced by Charlie Hamilton (piano and banjo). When AF left Joseph, he got work at the Caliente (Bienville and Burgundy), which was at another time known as the Magnolia Room (WR says Paul Barbarin worked there one summer about fifteen years ago). At one time, AF worked with [William [bebe] Ridgley, after Ridgley had split with Celestin; George McCullum was in the band (trumpet) ; Joe Harris played alto [sax]; Sam Dutrey, Jr., tenor sax and others. The band was called Ridgley's Band. AF has been with the Celestin Band a bit more than ten years; he first replaced Harrison Verrett, who returned to the band later;

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then left again, to be permanently replaced by AF. Joining the band under Celestin's leadership, AF continued under Eddie Pierson when Celestin died, and himself took over the band two years ago when Pierson died. In the band at this time: AF, Albert "Fernandez" Walters, Louis Barbarin, Joe "Brother Cornbread" Thomas, Jeanette Kimball, Norwood [Correctly, Narvin] Kimball and sometimes Stuart Davis (both play string bass, Kimball on out-of-town jobs, Davis in town. [Trombonist? See reel II, p. five] (WR mentions interviewing Sidney ["Jim Little[, or "Little Jim"] Brown, bass player [once recently with French]; Brown has quit playing except in church, says AF.) [Narvin] Kimball is the ex-husband of Jeanette Kimball.

AF worked with Kid Clayton at one time. He worked with drummer George Williams also. AF worked with Percy Humphrey when the gather, Willie [E] Humphrey (the elder) led the band. The elder Humphrey had band; AF worked with him around 1936, on quite a few dates. Others in the band when AF played: Percy Humphrey, [trumpet]; Willie Humphrey (the younger), (clarinet); Mercedes ^[Gorman Fields?] piano;

End of Reel I

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four years ago), whose band was called The Footwarmers; some other members: Joe Harris, [sax]; Sammy Penn, [drums]; John Joseph [playing ?]; Tom Harris, bass; Sam Dutrey [Jr.?, on clarinet?]; Freddie Jones and Theodore Mizell, (died about five years ago; originally from Laplace), trumpet. (Jones still plays, lives in Monroe.)

AF's own band worked about five years (three nights a week) at AL's , on Franklin Avenue near Jones [Waifs'] Home. After that, AF [and his band?] worked about four years at the Shadowland (Washington Avenue near Danne^el). WR was there one night, when "Wooden Joe" [Nicholas] was playing. AF says the building is still there, doing business as a bar, but not as a dance hall. AF later worked about six months at Le Rendezvous (Gentilly Road). Latter job was around 1942; AF figures the Shadowland job was around 1940-1941. AF worked another regular job at Peniston and Magazine [streets]; he also worked a lot [Campbell's Tavern, the Elbow Room, others?RBA] of the spot [i. e., casual, one time] jobs. AF's present band The Old Papa Celestin band is at present [1960] spot jobbing.

AF remembers singing with the pianola in his home; he was in a quartet [at an early age]; he has been singing with bands for about twenty-five years now. AF heard a lot of church music when he was young; the quartet he was in sang in concerts (with other groups) at various churches, and also at halls sometimes. Most of the churches were Baptist. Some of Af's people are Baptists, some are Catholic, like most [Negro?] families [in New Orleans?]. AF thinks Papa Cleestin and /or Louis Armstrong made playing and singing of spirituals with jazz bands popular; WR mentions Sam Morgan's recording of several spirituals years ago [1927]. AF says brass bands played spirituals; AF's father had a brass band when AF was small; The band would rehearse on Sunday; they played a lot of spirituals.

Continuing about the band of Willie Humphrey (the elder); Mercedes [Gorman Fields] played piano;--WR says Percy Humphrey played drums at one time, asks if he were the drummer; AF says Cie [Frazier] was the drummer, that Percy played trumpet; AF played [banjo, and/or guitar, and Willie Humphrey (the younger) played clarinet]. The band played every Saturday night at a "sort of" jitney dance in Luling; they also played jobs in Raceland, Bayou Des Allemands, and other small towns in the same general area. AF thinks the elder Willie gave up playing music some time during the last [World War II] war.

AF worked with Kid Thomas [Valentine] "a pretty good while," playing at the Moulin Rouge (across the river) and at various small towns in the vicinity.

Before playing with Thomas, AF worked four or five years with tuba player Eddie Jackson; they had a job in Gretna, playing Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, and they usually played for picnics on Sunday, also. Jackson died about 1948, AF thinks, or 1944, perhaps [buried on April Fool's Day according to Red Clark. RBA]; AF had left the band about four years before Jackson's death; Jackson played until about two months before his death, when he was taken ill. AF says he was a great tuba player, Others in the band: Batiste Mosely, drums; "Loochie" [Albert Jackson?], trombone; Emanuel Paul, alto sax (of The Eureka Brass Band); Dude Lewis, trumpet (Lewis' brother, Foster Lewis, played trombone).

Leaving Jackson, AF formed his own band; members: Dude Lewis trumpet; Sammy Penn, drums; Peter [Hayes, Hicks?], piano; Tom Harris, (died about ten years ago), bass; others. AF comments that most musicians play until they die.

AF also worked sometimes with banjo player Mack Dorsey, (died about four ye

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The old Celsetin band (now led by AF) has lasted through two other managers i.e. other than Celsetin, Eddie Pierson and AF have managed the band still plays a lot of society jobs, and still plays the boat, [sic] jobs [for Mississippi Shipping Co., or Delta Lines (now called, I think--PRC) ship sailings, once a week]; AF has been playing the boat jobs for about ten years. The band plays a lot of out-of-town jobs; they play a lot of Army bases.

He comments that the band plays better if there are tired or short [of men].

Talk of sizes of various bands; George Lewis is mentioned as another who used seven pieces (including banjo, played by Lawrence [Marrero()], in the past. WR says Johnny ST. Cyr complains that Kid Ory won't use a banjo or guitar anymore. AF saw Ory at the Levee in San Francisco recently, which Ory operates and where he plays. AF mentions trumpet player "Dick" Smith.

End of Reel II

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When AF played at various night clubs (Shadowland, Le Rendezvous, etc.), he played guitar, but when he came back to Celestin's band, he changed back to banjo; he says banjo is better for Dixieland. AF tried to play sax once upon a time, but was not very successful. He has played bass drum in parades--with Earl Vinet, St. S. Rose, Laplace and other towns; he has played bass drum [with the Celestin band] for advertising (he mentions a job for D. H. Holmes Company, at which the band marched around in the store; Louis Barbarin played snare drum then). [WR. is confusing the two Celestin bands. Celestin fronted at the Paddock with Happy Goldston. His own band had AF, banjo, RBA.] Dave Bartholomew's father, a tuba player, was in the Vinet band during the same time as AF. AF has not played any regular New Orleans parades -- just advertising jobs, as mentioned.

One of AF's favorite banjo players is Eddie Peabody; he also likes John Chaffe. The oldtimers he liked [when he was younger] were Ernest Penn, Manuel Sayles, Norwood [correctly, Narvin] Kimball (Was AF's favorite, and left-handed), and George Guesnon (who was playing with Sam Morgan "during those times;" Kid Howard was playing trumpet with Morgan).

AF took banjo lesson from [Dave] Perkins and from Willie Foster; he figured out guitar himself.

When Eddie Pierson died, AF tried to get Morris French, his uncle, to come out of retirement to play trombone; Morris would not. AF got Wendall Eugene, "a wonderful trombone player." Sometimes [Waldron] "Frog Joseph", or others, will play trombone.