

"Butch" Cage
Reel I
May 13, 1967

Notes: Richard B. Allen
Summary: Kay L. Wicker
Check: Richard B. Allen
Retype: Kay L. Wicker
Date Completed: March 28, 1977

Also present: Rosie (Mrs. James "Butch") Cage
Dick Cook
Eleanor D. Ellis
Richard B. Allen
Robert Pete Williams

BC's address is 5131 Old Slaughter Road in Zachary, Louisiana. His [real] name is James Cage, but he was nicknamed "Butch" by his mother and has been called that name since he was small. BC was born in Franklin County, Mississippi near Hamburg. The nearest big town was Natchez, and Meadville was also close by. He was born in May of 1894; he's not sure of the exact date, but usually goes by May sixteenth.

12:28 When he was young, he heard bands of fifes and drums. He still has his fife. Two of BC's sisters and one brother played accordion. Another brother also played. BC's mother was an old-time dancer, the best in Franklin County. She did all kinds of dances; they didn't have a special name. RC says some [dances were?] called "Swing Out." One "could do any kind of step." She did the soft shoe dance in sand. [RBA leading here.] She didn't dance on stage; she danced at balls at people's houses. People didn't dance the buck and wing in the yard at that time. At balls, there was a figure caller who would call dances for groups
12:56 of four, eight, sixteen or thirty-two people. Four was the smallest

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number you could dance with. They would "dance round" [i.e., round dances? square dances?], and they used to swing partners. Bands had fiddles and drums. They would play "Yankee Doodle," "Dixie," some blues, "all kinds" [of tunes?]. (RC adds "old breakdown[s?].")

BC's fife was given to him by Mr. Harry [Oster]. It's not a homemade fife. BC used to make them out of cane as he was not able to buy one. There were some end-blown fifes, but BC didn't have that kind. His is cross-blown. Drums were store-bought. They used two kettle drums, a bass drum, and a fife. People had picnics under the trees. BC used to play "Listen to the Mockingbird" and "Love Somebody" for picnics but can't play them now. "Love Somebody" was in 2/4 time. People would dance sometimes under the trees, sometimes in the house. Outside, "we'd march around with the drum and [half?] the people would follow."

1:36 BC lived in Franklin County until 1919. He was exempt from the war [World War I] [because?] he had two children. He moved to Meadville in 1919 where his house and two of his children burned up. (BC is confused by RC briefly.) He moved to Slaughter, Louisiana [check spelling], then to Lindsay [check spelling]. He "ran off" from Lindsay in 1922 and moved back to Mississippi until 1927. BC was under a hard taskmaster in Lindsay.

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1:52 "I got tired of it and I slipped off." In 1922 and 1923, he lived in Natchez and moved to Fayette in 1924. From Fayette, he moved to Port Gibson and then to [Cedars?], Mississippi which is about seven miles south of Vicksburg.

1:58 BC didn't know the Wolcotts of Wolcott's Rabbit Foot Minstrels (in Port Gibson). They had two Rabbit Foot shows. He remembers "Snowball" or some similar name [connected with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels?]. BC liked the minstrel shows, but now he likes TV.

2:06 In 1927, BC moved to Zachary and has been there ever since. He built this house and has been living in it since about 1944.

Cal Williams and Frank Feltus (violinists) taught BC in Franklin and Jefferson County [Mississippi]. There were few guitarists there (about twenty-one miles east of Natchez).

2:18 BC wouldn't work for anyone. His father died when he was ten years old. BC worked for six months for a dollar a month and paid \$6.00 on his father's coffin. It was a "sharpshooter," one with a big top and small bottom, and the total cost was \$11.00.

2:25 BC's mother gave him away three times, but he would run off each time. She wasn't able to take care of him after his father died in 1905.

BC was then playing cane fife and could earn \$2.00 or \$3.00 or \$1.00 a night for playing. In 1913 he got married and got a barrel of flour for \$5.00. He was doing railroad work then, [shuffling ties?], replacing ties, and tamping ties. He would

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sometimes sing while working: "When you hear my bulldog barking, when he bark, somebody round, somebody round." The workers would tamp the tie at "round." BC also ran jack, i.e., jacked up [the track?] in order to replace old ties, and lined track. They used anything to sing. "Nigger lick [mo]lasses, lick out of a pan." [Cf. Texas Alexander. See notes in folder.]

3:01 Fiddle pieces that BC knew were "Arkansas Traveller," "Leather Britches," which was then popular, and "Yellow Jacket." He does not know "Soldier's Joy."

3:08 BC's father farmed cotton and corn. He was not a sharecropper.

3:11 BC has heard of Stack O'Dollars. BC used to play "Stack O'Lee," but he doesn't know the person. He never saw Billy Kersands. Clarence and Cornelius Edwards [who recorded for Folklyric] live in Alson, Louisiana.

3:24 BC belonged to the Sanctified Church, but he is now out of the church. He played fiddle in church -- that was the biggest place he played [i.e., principal place]. He had a partner on guitar. BC's son plays in church and is a preacher.

3:30 In Natchez, Mississippi, Jefferson Hall burned up and around two-hundred and fifty people "got burned up." BC played there and was married there in 1919. His first wife died. [See Walter

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Barnes material.] BC doesn't remember songs written about the fire. BC was baptised in the Mississippi River in Natchez. He says the preacher talked and there was some singing.

3:43 BC remembers "Under the Bamboo Tree," which he sometimes plays. (RC talks.)

RBA asks about quilting parties. BC says they would usually have coffee and teacakes. There would be singing, and BC played the violin there sometimes. His mother quilted.

RC speaks to Robert Pete Williams. RPW doesn't drink.
[Robert Pete Williams has arrived.]

3:44 BC says he has never been at a "jam session." [BC is not sure of the meaning of the phrase "jam session."] RBA describes it as musicians getting together for their own fun, and BC understands. This type of meeting was rare.

BC says that Cal Williams and Frank Feltus were good musicians. They were violinists. There were lots of good guitarists like Joe and [Artie? Ollie?] Feltus. These musicians played near Natchez, around [Fafney Station]. BC has heard of a coonjine but doesn't know much about it.

BC played waltzes like "Over the Waves" and others, but he never knew the names of many that he played.

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BC has done some traveling recently. He went to Manhattan, Philadelphia, Newport, and Boston on the first trip. He went in 1961 and 1962, both times with Willie B. [Thomas]. BC heard few fiddlers. At Newport there was one from [Canada or Connecticut?] who could play good. There were lots of guitarists on stage. One guitarist was "Mexican or something." He was the best [there?]. There were many songsters there. Young people know the old songs. BC took up fiddle in 1911.

End of Reel I.

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Ira Higgenbotham

BC gives the words to "Black Nigger Baby" and another song. RBA suggests that the latter must be from slavery times, and BC agrees. [The words include "be free."] BC says he knows many from that era.

12:00 BC was not good at cane cutting. He ruined more than he cut by cutting it too short or too long. Sometimes he would sing while cutting. BC got behind sometimes. He cut cane in [Smithfield?] (across the river from Baton Rouge), Wildwood, Napoleonville, and Enola. He was a grown man then and was expected to "tighten up" (meaning to keep up with the gang).

1:16 EDE asks questions on the first song BC played that day, "You Don't Know My Mind." BC didn't know Henry Sims who recorded it. The song was frequently played by BC. [BC gives lyrics,] "When you see me laughing, I'm laughing to keep from crying." BC had a cylinder machine. He liked to listen to records of [he quotes lyrics,] "You like-a me like I like-a you..." [i.e., "Under the Bamboo Tree"], "Why won't you come home, Bill Bailey" [i.e.,

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"Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home," and "Babe, Please Don't Let Me Fall," [also sung as] "Boys, Boys, Please Don't Let Me Fall." He listened to the records of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bessie Smith, "Mama" [i.e., Ma] Rainey, whom he never saw. BC tries to remember the name of another female blues singer who played guitar [and sounded like Ma Rainey?] whom he saw and heard. RBA mentions Memphis Minnie. The blues singer BC is trying to remember was "colored," and he heard
The Mississippi [sic]
her sing "Weepin' Willow Blues" recently at Newport, Rhode Island.
[See information on the Newport Folk Festival.] That song was also sung by Bessie Smith. BC quotes the lyrics of "Weepin' Willow Blues," which he used to play. RBA adds
Punch Miller, who worked with Silas Green for a long time, still plays it. BC says, "I ain't been far."

2:57 BC's mother was the best dancer in Franklin County, but his father didn't dance. Two sisters and one brother played the accordion. BC doesn't think they're living. He lost contact with the living siblings -- there were thirteen altogether. His brother Fred played guitar. BC has a son, who plays guitar, in Syracuse [New York]. RBA asks for his address.

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3:18 BC played in church in his early years. They weren't able to get trumpets or other instruments, but BC and his brother got some drums. [They made a fife???] They ordered some drums. In Meadville [Mississippi], if they had a show with a band, they were not allowed in by the white people. BC says, "Meadville ain't no size, no how." It was not a big enough town to have street parades or festivals.

In Natchez [Mississippi] BC saw bands marching in the streets. Bands would be used "for different things" in Natchez. Someone would beat drums when people died. BC doesn't think they used any other instruments. "Drums are an old-time standby." They beat the drums going to the cemetery and coming back. This was done by a society or lodge or something similar. Now BC belongs to the Benevolent Society, and the Masonic Hall, where the society
3:59 is also, is across the street. It's called benevolent, but it really isn't. There is a sign on the building reading "Ruth Chapter of [RBA thinks] Free and Accepted Masons. The society pays \$2.50 per week when a member is sick in bed; this is the reason he says "it ain't no benevolent." He thinks he pays a dime [i.e., ten cents per month?]. Members must pay 50¢ every time a member dies, or 25¢ a month if no one dies. RBA says it is like a tax when a member dies.

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Dick [Cook] has no questions.

4:20 BC thinks that the drums were used for burial around 1909 or 1905. He didn't hear them used much later than 1909 though he heard them played in town. Fifes were also used at the burials. They played "Let's Go Down In Jordan," and "different songs." RBA says that BC said that in Memphis they played "Nearer My God To Thee."

4:36 BC doesn't think that many young people want to play fiddle as he does: "They [got?] new music now." Ira Higgenbotham says he has been here for fifty-three years and has only heard BC play [this style?].

Names of all present are given.

4:56 BC is asked for advice to give to young students, but he does not give any, saying, "They don't play my kind. They play rock and roll now." Dick Cook says he never heard a rock and roll violin!

5:02 Robert Pete Williams says he picks his guitar with his dog finger [forefinger] and the thumb of his right hand. He uses all
5:10 the fingers on his left hand. He never uses three-finger picking. The tunings he uses are "C", Flat E minor and Spanish. Flat E minor uses open chords like "Spanish open." He has used a knife

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on Spanish or Flat E minor, but prefers to use his fingers. He has never used [se] vastapool tuning. Cross note [tuning] is the same as Flat e [A?] minor. He mainly uses C Natchez [i.e., natural?]. When he picks, he makes C Natchez sound as though it were Spanish. RPW says people have told him he plays like Lightnin' Hopkins and he voices his music back like Blind Lemon Jefferson. Many musicians were "carried over" by his playing. There were better guitarists in Los Angeles, but they can't imitate RPW's chords.

5:35 RPW started music around 1934. He went to suppers and heard BC before RPW ever played. His [native] home is Zachary. He was born on "Mr. Anderson's place." In 1928 he moved near [Zion] City and "they" have been there ever since, until moving to Scotlandville.

5:43 RPW's first guitar had high strings and he "had to mash 'em down and try to get a sound out." [Cf. interview in Angola] This guitar cost him \$1.50. He learned a little with it, but later

5:55 bought a new, high-priced guitar. This other one was a [Simon?]. It sounded like an electric [guitar]. The woman he bought it from paid \$60.00 for it, but she sold it to RPW for \$4.00. He learned more but did not play the blues yet, ["playing what you call the white folk's music"?] then. He has nearly forgotten it entirely.

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6:03 He played at birthday parties, etc. From then on, he "got on the blues" and played at country suppers for \$1.50 per night. He made a pretty good living at it. Things were cheap then. He played Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. At white folks' parties someone would pass the hat and he might get seven or eight dollars. A musician could set the price at country suppers, perhaps \$2.00.

6:13 RPW joined the church and was told to quit playing blues. After a month he would start playing again. One time he quit for a year but had to play again. He had "this little full." [He went to the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.] The captains there loved the lonesome blues. They would call up their families, and they would listen to him play over the phone. They said he played sad and lonesome. The captains wanted to help RPW get out but couldn't. He worked in the fields one week. He was then taken out of the fields and sent to the milk dairy. There was a mean man there who would hit or kick you. The captains told RPW to raise his hand [as a signal] to the guard [if that happened]. RPW milked cows by hand. A man said he was the best milker because he could out-milk the machine. The man asked how he learned to milk. RPW said that in [19]29, Mr. White, who owned a milk dairy, hired him and taught him how to milk. He spent fifteen years milking at \$12.00 per month to start and \$20.00 per month by the end of his fifteen years. The man [i.e., not Mr. White, but a man at Angola]

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wanted RPW on his farm. He had dogs which RPW trained to catch prisoners. While running through the bushes RPW was accidentally struck in the eye. RPW was called to the office and was asked if anybody had "jumped on" him. He said no, and the man said if they did, they would have to see him. The man told RPW that he had a brother in north Louisiana and that he would try to get RPW out and send him there, because he had a good record. That didn't work out and instead, RPW got out to [work for] Mr. Easterly [check spelling]. As RBA came up, [Harry] Oster used to go there [i.e., Angola] to record RPW. [I went there with HO who made the original contact. RBA, March 24, 1977.] When HO asked him, he recorded the "Family Blues" and a church song for the governor. [When?] the [Pardon] Board [heard?] the church song, Mr. [Rudolph?] "came up there and got me." [Cf. letters, tapes made in Angola, and LP notes.] RPW used to tell the people in the prison that he wasn't going to be there long, because the "man up there" (Jesus Christ) was going to help him. The other people didn't believe him.

End of reel.

