

GEORGE WILLIAMS
Reel I--Digest--Retyped
March 17, 1959

Also present:
William Russell
members of GW's family
Ralph Collins

George Williams was born October 25, 1910, around Dryades and Third [streets, New Orleans]. His first instrument was the violin, which he studied under a Professor Taylor [perhaps George H. Taylor--see Soards Directory, early 1920's--PRC] for a while; he then studied with Dave Perkins, taking drum lessons from him for about two to three years. Then "they" [Perkins' students?--RBA] made up a little band of their own. GW played on pots and pans [when he was just beginning, not in a band?]. GW was fifteen when he took up violin; he was playing tin pans, too, and liked them better than the violin, so he got a job shining shoes and was able to buy his first set of drums (from Grunewald Music Co.), paying \$1 per week. After about a month with the drums, he began playing a house parties, with piano the only other instrument at the parties. GW took a few lessons on piano, and could play a little, but he didn't play piano at the parties; he played most of his house parties with "Big Eye Louis" [Robinson on piano--not Nelson, the clarinetist--PRC]. Because he wanted to play in a "big" band, he began taking lessons from Perkins. Eventually GW was hired to work with [Jimmy] Kid Clayton and George Guesnon at the Hummingbird [cabaret] (Bienville and Marais)--the District was still running then--where he worked for a year or two. He then moved to the Entertainer's [cabaret] for a while. GW then went with Chris Kelly (Sam Morgan's drummer, Roy Evans, had been hit with a brick on an advertising job, so Morgan, needing a drummer [apparently got the

drummer from Kelly's band], leaving an opening for GW), joining him when Kelly opened at the Bulls' [Club, now Elks' Club, on Eighth Street near Danneel--PRC], where they worked for about three years. Year was about 1925, as GW had been married a short time before opening with Kelly. The band also played out-of-town jobs. Leaving Kelly, GW joined George McCullum (who also had a brass band, although GW didn't work in it); McCullum's band rehearsed several nights at GW's home on First Street. Bill Matthews and others wanted GW to play in the Excelsior Brass Band (Peter Bocage, leader), too; the first job GW (youngest in band, sixteen-seventeen) played with that band, on bass drum, was in the place of [Albert Jiles, Sr.], father of Albert Jiles [leading by WR here]; the snare drummer was Old Man [Louis] Cottrell [Sr.]. Others in the band: Joe Payan, melophone; Georgie Hooker, [brass] bass; Charlie Love, trumpet; Pete [Bocage], George McCullum [trumpets]; Oliver Alcorn, [saxophone?]; Buddy Johnson, trombone. GW played with the Excelsior perhaps two to three years. He then joined the Tuxedo Brass Band, led by Eddie Jackson (tuba), playing in that band quite a while. When Jackson died, about 1935, the band broke up; GW was with the band about two years. [Eddie Jackson buried on April Fool's Day, according to Red Clark. Cf. obituary in newspapers.] (The Young Tuxedo Brass Band, led by John Casimir, had not been formed at this time; the Tuxedo had originally been led by Papa Celestin, and was taken over by Jackson when Celestin left it.) GW also played with Jackson's dance band; GW doesn't remember that

Jackson played string bass (as in a dance band), but he was one of the greatest tuba players, "dance band and walking," in New Orleans. GW was about eighteen when he worked with Jackson's dance band. Others in Jackson's dance band: Maurice Durand, trumpet; Willie [J.] Humphrey [the younger], clarinet and sax (Humphrey played when he was not on the [Streckfus] boat with Fate Marable). GW mentions that he also worked a long time in the band of Old Man [Willie E.] Humphrey [the elder, father of previous].

When he left Humphrey, he formed his own band--George Williams' Dukes of Rhythm--which he had until he began playing at the Paddock [Lounge], four years ago; he had his band from about 1945 [until about 1955]. WR mentions seeing a sign advertising George Williams' Band at the Capri (says Williams), about three years ago; Williams says it was his band [cf. dates]. (WR says someone told him it might be the band of George Williams, the son of Claiborne Williams; not so, says GW; that George Williams is in Baton Rouge, he has a pretty nice band, too.) GW's band became "famous" at the College Inn, Thibodaux [Louisiana]. GW (when a boy) also played with Sonny Williams's band. [2940]
In GW's band at the Capri (on/Elysian Fields Avenue) were: Ernest Poree [saxophone]; [check Union book] Lang, piano; Ricard [Alexis], bass. McNeal Breaux was the original bass player.

Talk about Professor Taylor--Taylor played mostly church affairs; he rubbed [drinking] glasses as a novelty musical act. Taylor had

many "scholars"; he lived on Toledano and Dryades, not far from Perkins.

From his youth, GW remembers hearing the Imperial Brass Band, with Manuel Perez [trumpet and leader], and the Onward Brass Band, with Black Benny [Williams]; "Little Jim" Mukes, who later played [bass drum], "second-lined" and carried the bass drum in the parade for Black Benny. Regardless of the section which a band considered home (uptown, downtown, etc.), all the bands played all over town; GW names other bands: the Excelsior was from across the river, "Old Man" [Henry] Allen [Sr., from over the river]. GW played with Allen for quite a while, in the company of young [Henry] "Red" Allen [Jr.]; GW and Red Allen also played together in George McCullum's band. GW answers WR, saying he never knew Red Allen to play bass drum, but he was a great trumpet player; there would be more "second liners" following a band with Red Allen in it than any other band.

GW also played with the band of Kid Thomas [Valentine] for four years; he had so much work (sometimes two to three jobs a day) with Thomas that he moved across the river [to the Algiers side, where Thomas lived and lives] to save the cost of transportation. The Thomas band played mostly on the west side of the river--never in east side New Orleans--in the country, Lafitte, etc. Some members: Henry Harding [spelling?] (had a band at the Rhythm Club years ago) and another, sax (no clarinet); Yank Johnson, trombone (brother of trombonist Buddy Johnson, cousin of Bunk Johnson)--at one time, trombonist "Loochie" [Albert Jackson] played with the Thomas band (Loochie had a son, "Pinky" [Lannix Alberts--check spelling], who played with Sidney Desvigne).

Bill Matthews was GW's tutor in learning to read drum music; he taught GW how to play bass drum in brass bands, [trap] drums in orchestras. BM was a great drummer. The two men still have their friendship, GW working in Matthews's band. WR says Matthews claims GW introduced him to the woman who became his [Matthews's] wife; GW admits it: Matthews came to GW's house to get him to furnish a band to take an extra job, at the Patio Royal [now Brennan's Restaurant], of Papa Celestin's; Matthews saw the woman, a friend of GW and his wife, and asked for an introduction; they were soon married. GW's band was working three or four nights a week before he joined BM.

GW organized his own brass band about 1950 [cf. Ralston Crawford's photographs]; the personnel hasn't and doesn't change much. The Eureka and the Young Tuxedo were the other bands then [i.e., union and organized]. The first job his brass band played was for a cornerstone [laying] for the Odd Fellows, Number 7 Lodge, on Dryades Street. GW has almost always played bass drum in brass bands because he can swing a band with it; he would like to play snare, as he is getting tired (physically) of playing bass, as he usually doesn't have a snare drummer good enough to swing hard with him. He would prefer Cie [Frazier] over his present drummer.

Talk about drum equipment, first set, overhead pedals, etc. At first, GW rented his drums from Dave Perkins. Dave Bailey is mentioned as a drummer who still uses old-time equipment. (Bailey plays with the [E.] Gibson Brass Band, which was originally called the Jackson Band.) [cf. other interviews, e.g., Gibson Brass Band members.] Talk of cymbals. GW never saw a colored brass band [New Orleans-style] in which one man played only cymbals, as in a military band; one of the drummers [almost always the bass

drummer] also played the single cymbal, attached to his drum, by hitting it with a beater made from a wire coat hanger. Bass drum beaters in the old times were more [ob]long than round [as they are today], and were made of rags wrapped tight and hard. GW has also played rock-and-roll and progressive [jazz]. GW can play [trap] bass drum with either foot. GW says the sock cymbal, or high-hat, came into use about 1944-45--at least, that is when he began using it.

End of Reel I

Still talking about drums and cymbals, overhead [bass] drum pedals.

WR says Louis Armstrong talks about Black Benny [Williams], noted for his exceptional bass drumming on parades; GW said he was very good--in fact, the best in the city (as Eddie Jackson was the best bass horn player). Benny played a lot of fancy beats. (Benny and Jackson worked together.) GW reminisces: When the Bulls had their big night parade, there would be six bands--the Onward, the Imperial, the Liberty [Bell?], the Excelsior, others--but the one with Eddie Jackson and Black Benny in it would be leading the entire company. The bands then had eleven men, but present-day bands have only ten. In the old bands: two trombones; melophone; baritone [horn]; E flat clarinet (such as John [Casimir] plays); [three] trumpets; two drums; [bass horn]. Discussion of E flat and B flat clarinets. His current clarinetist plays only B flat. GW says "the man" for clarinet in a brass band is Willie Humphrey [the younger]; WR mentions the Eureka Brass Band, [George] "Sheik" [Colar] and Percy Humphrey, and the fact that there were replacements for them in the Eureka at a particular job; GW won't play a brass band job during the week, as his regular bandsmen have day jobs; he plays only when he can get his regular men.

[Louis] Cottrell [Sr.] was "the talk of the town" because of his snare drum work in parades; he was a "proud man" [i.e., took pride in] in his music work. GW talks of Cottrell's folding bass drum; describes it. GW was about eighteen years old when he played in the section with Cottrell.

More talk of drums: GW speaks of plastic drum heads, says he just sold a drum with plastic heads to Santo [Pecoraro], who works

at Grunewald's [Music Company]. [Bill] Hall [of Hall Drum Company] mentioned.

WR mentions [Dee Dee] Chandler and Henry Zeno. GW knew Henry Martin, who played with the Creole Serenaders (and with Kid Ory, says WR); when Martin died, GW was not available, so Noland ["Shine" Williams], who used to play with Sam Morgan, was the replacement. Nolan worked a long time with the Serenaders until stricken by mental illness; then GW replaced him, remaining with the group three years. Peter Bocage, trumpet, was the leader of the Creole Serenaders, but Louis Warnick [like Bocage, an alumnus of A. J. Piron's orchestra] was the manager (WR heard Warnick a couple of times, at Luthjen's, with "Big Eye Louis" [Nelson]). The Serenaders were the band for Dixieland during that time. Beside Bocage on trumpet and Warnick [on saxophone (and clarinet?)], other members were: Henry Bocage, bass; Charlie Bocage, guitar; GW, drums; Dwight Newman, piano. The band worked private parties; also at the Cocanut Grove in Gonzales and at the Old Absinthe House on Bourbon Street, where pianist Walter ["Fats"] Pichon now plays as a single. The Serenaders did radio broadcasts from the Old Absinthe House. They also played at the Patio Royal (now Brennan's), Monteleone Hotel, and at the Court of Two Sisters. GW complains of the lack of work at present.

Chris Kelly was a blues man; he played other kinds of pieces, but he had [Henry] "Red" Allen [Jr.] playing second trumpet with him [so Allen could play the other pieces]; Kelly's band played at the Bulls' every Tuesday night; Kid Rena's band played the same place, same night, opposite sides of the Bulls'. Kelly, who had a very small cornet, used a [straight] mute in his horn, over which he imposed a rubber [plumber's] flusher; he played all the blues, while

Allen took the hot solos. When Allen left, George McCullum was brought into the band; later, Ricard [Alexis] played second trumpet (Alexis was a fine trumpet man, a high-note man, until his jaw was broken; he then took up [string] bass). Alexis has been working with Emma Barrett (his ex-wife), playing Tuesday nights [at the Paddock, among others]. (Cie [Frazier] has been playing drums with the Barrett band, although Chester Jones played as relief when Cie went to Cincinnati with Lawrence [Marrero and Paul Barnes band].) Chris Kelly's band (reduced in number of men) played a lot of house parties, lawn parties, etc. The band also played a lot of advertising jobs. GW talks about them, mentioning [some of] the bands which played them-- Kelly's, Rena's, Buddy Petit's, Kid Ory's, Kid Punch's--and talks about the "bucking" contests. The time period was 1920, 1925--around then.

Talk of drum solos: GW says drummers didn't play solos until Gene Krupa and people like that began doing it; GW still doesn't play many solos. Bill Matthews is mentioned.

[Where GW was currently playing? Check tape
Talk of tempos--fast at the Paddock. Chris Kelly played slow and medium tempos; Sam Morgan had one tempo only, and the dancers really liked it. Slapsticks mentioned (Sam Morgan had one); used as tempo reminder.

Henry Martin had a barbershop on Iberville Street; he rented out drums, also. WR mentions speaking to Martin's mother; also mentioned are Willie Cornish and "Coochie" Martin, guitar-playing brother of Henry. Henry Martin died around 1939, or perhaps before, says GW.

GW mentions Professor [Manuel] Manetta, a personal friend. WR tells GW that Ralph Collins takes clarinet lessons from Manetta. GW did not get to take lessons from Manetta, because he was studying with Bill Matthews, a great drummer--a great trombone player, also, who gave Eddie Pierson his first lessons on trombone. Matthews' brothers, drummers Remus (the oldest) and "Bébé" Matthews are mentioned; GW heard Remus, says he was a drummer in the Excelsior Band, and a fine one. GW compares Remus to [Christopher "Black] Happy" [Goldston], drummer with the Eureka Brass Band, and says Remus was even better than Happy. Remus mostly played snare drum, while Happy played bass drum in the same outfit. GW played with Remus in "Old Man" [Henry] Allen [Sr.]'s brass band, across the river [in Algiers].

Henry Martin rented drums to men from downtown [generally speaking], and Dave Perkins rented drums to men from uptown. Perkins was a good trumpet player [see following]; he had a brass band at one time, seven or eight pieces; they played a lot of carnival parades. Perkins had [played?] valve trombone. Perkins had GW learn to read music before [or at the beginning?] he began teaching GW actually how to play drums.

End of Reel II