

LOUIS NELSON  
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April 18, 1960

Also present: William Russell  
Ralph Collins

Louis Hall Nelson, Sr. lives at 1419 Touro Street, New Orleans, in the house where he was born (and where this interview was conducted). When LN was about two months old, his father, a doctor, moved the family to Napoleonville, Louisiana, where he practiced medicine; they returned to New Orleans about twenty-five years later. LN was born September 17, 1902. LN's mother, a native of Springfield, Massachusetts, was a pianist, and a graduate of the Boston Conservatory [of Music]. LN first studied with Claiborne Williams, of Donaldsonville, who traveled the twelve miles to Napoleonville for the lessons; LN's first instrument was also horn; he was around sixteen years old at the time. LN admired the trombone playing of [his?] <sup>^</sup>cousin Lawrence [Johnson? See Onward Brass Band, Reel ? <sup>^</sup>?] who went to Snreveport with Paul Jones (LN says there was a wonderful brass band there); LN decided that he wanted to play trombone like Lawrence, so he had Professor Williams teach him that instrument; Williams taught LN what LN considers the most important part of playing--breathing--and LN decided he knew enough. LN joined the six-piece band of Joseph Nelson (no relation), a violinist who couldn't see at night and could see very poorly in the day; JN would bring sheet music to LN's house, have the mother play it; he would learn the new pieces in that way. Then LN played a couple of dates with Claiborne Williams' band. After LN had married and become the father of a son, he joined the band of Joe Gabriel, of Thibodaux; the band was about ten pieces, and

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kept LN busy Wednesday through Sunday. LN remembers Louis [check spelling] James, who, with some of his brothers, played with the Gabriel band [see Louis James interview]; LN tells of Gabriel's split with the James Brothers, and of their forming a band under their name. LN got his first trombone when he was about twenty years old. When he came back to New Orleans [about 1920, he joined the band of trumpeter Kid Harris. Claiborne Williams, primarily a violinist, taught all instruments. He had a wonderful band; once the band played in New Orleans at the Pelican Roof Garden, to turn away attendance. Williams' brother played trombone, staying in the high register; he died of consumption. LN doesn't know that Williams had a brother who played with [W. C.] Handy; he says the only kin of Williams he knew were a brother who played bass and a son, George Williams, who now has a fine band in Baton Rouge. The Claiborne Williams band used almost all stock arrangements, having very few specials.

LN was heard by Eugene Ware, trumpeter with Sidney Desvignes's orchestra, when LN was rehearsing with Kid Harris. LN's wife died, and about a year later LN was at the Bulls' Club; Ware and Desvigne were there, and Desvigne asked LN to come to a rehearsal aboard the Streckfus boat, City of New Orleans (succeeded by the Capitol); LN was hired after the rehearsal, and stayed with Desvigne a number of years. LN worked with Desvigne on an excursion boat exclusively for colored, the Idlewild, which was moored at Napoleon Avenue, for a couple of weeks. The band also used to go up the river to

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St. Paul, Minnesota, every year [summer] for five or six years [on Streckfus boats]. LN names some of the men he worked with in the Desvigne band--Ware, trumpet; George Fleming; Louis Barbarin, drums; Ransom Knowling, bass; [Burroughs] Lovingood, piano; Steve Lewis, piano; Professor [Osceola] Blanchet, piano [each at different times]; Sam Dutrey, Jr., tenor sax. After the boat jobs, the band began playing in New Orleans, in hotels, restaurants, etc. They played only one night a week for the colored, Monday night at the Pythian Temple Roof Garden. LN also made a trip to St. Louis (with Desvigne) on the steamer President, and one only as far as Memphis on the [non-Streckfus] Island Queen (they would have gone further, perhaps to the home port of Cincinnati, but the weather was too cold). After LN left Desvigne, Earl Humphrey, brother of Willie and Percy Humphrey, joined that band; Humphrey left because he liked to travel, which he did, with circuses and other shows; WR says he lives in Virginia now [moved to New Orleans in 1963], and plays bass. LN then played with Buddy Petit, and with Kid Rena. He played only a couple of times with Petit; Sammy Penn [drums, now in the Kid Thomas band with LN] was a regular member of the Petit band then; Petit could "spell" music, but used mostly head arrangements; the band was easy to play with; Petit's style was a good bit like Louis Armstrong's; he was more popular than even Papa Celestin in those days; he didn't use mutes; Punch [Miller] would use a water bucket for a mute when he played "Margie". [LN apparently played a few jobs at least with him in the Twenties]; he was powerful.

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LN mentions the practice of advertising dances, etc. by using bands on wagons or trucks, and says that when Petit and Kid Rena met while advertising, they would have "bucking" contests. LN played with Kid Rena at the La <sup>Vida</sup>Veeda, a [taxi] dance hall; Rena wasn't loud, but he could play well, make plenty of variations. Rena was a high note specialist, but the La Veeda job wore him down; LN says the band played all night long, from eight PM, with no break except for each man to have lunch, and that he remembers playing some nights until seven the next morning. Others in that band besides Rena and LN were "Sport" Young [sax], his brother [Austin Young], bass, Walter Decou, piano, [Butler] "Guyé" [Rapp] (who was killed in a fight at the hall [by Decou]) [guitar], and Joe Rene, Rena's brother, on drums. Joe was a "one-beat" [that is, played only in one style] drummer; he could keep time and hit the cymbal. WR heard Kid Rena at the Cadillac, on St. Claude, in 1942; he seemed tired. LN played only one night with Chris Kelly, at a big sporting house in the District; he says he asked Kelly for his pay at the end of the evening, and Kelly pointed to several empty whiskey bottles, saying that there it was--Kelly [and the rest of the band?] had drunk all the pay, and LN was not even drinking then; he didn't want to play with Kelly any more. LN didn't play in any of the other houses or bars in the District; he used to stop at Pete Lala's after his work with Desvigne, but he doesn't remember anyone in the house band there except Ernest Trepagnier.

LN thinks he moved back to New Orleans in 1926; his daughter, born in 1927, in New Orleans, and his son, born in 1925, was born in the country. LN says he was the only trombone player in the country, with the exception of Claiborne Williams' brother and one of the James brothers (whose main instrument was bass). LN's first trombone was an old one he bought from Claiborne Williams; when he began playing with Desvigne, he traded it in for a C. G. Conn; then he switched to Buescher, the same horn he has now; he prefers Buescher, which is large-bore, large-bell; he bought it when he was with the W.P.A. band. Professor Martinez was leader of the W.P.A. band, and Louis Dumaine led it in Martinez's absence; Martinez used to be pianist at the Saenger Theater. Martinez didn't want the (brass) band to play jazz; he liked overtures. When LN joined the W.P.A. band, there were about twenty-five trombone players; Frankie Duson was playing first trombone, LN third. When headquarters was moved to the Tulane Club (same as present-day club), Martinez held examinations for all the players; all but five trombonists were eliminated, and LN was playing first; the entire band, about 100 pieces to begin, was cut to about 40. Some of the people in the W.P.A. band [before and after the purge?] were Gilbert Young, Sidney Montague, Josiah Frazier, Ernest Trepagnier, Manuel Paul, Ricard Alexis, Papa Celestin. LN was in the band until it ceased to exist. LN didn't play any dances with the W.P.A., but there were some held at the Tulane Club. He played in the picked orchestra that played once a week at Parish Prison, and at the [Milne] Boys' Home (headed by Captain Jones).

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LN's mother taught piano in Napoleonville, and played for the church. She taught mathematics in the school there. She played only classical music. LN tells about her showing a clerk in a music store that she could play very difficult music. LN's father studied medicine at Straight University, New Orleans (now part of Dillard University); he worked at the old Flint-Goodridge Hospital on Canal at Robertson (now on Louisiana Avenue at Freret), and taught, among others, Dr. Rivers Frederick. Dr. Nelson is eighty-eight years old [born c. 1872]; he was a lieutenant in the Spanish-American War, was in the charge up San Juan Hill, Cuba. He cannot now hear or see. WR and LN talk about a session WR recorded in LN's home; "Big Eye" louis [Nelson], "Wooden Joe" [Nicholas], Austin Young, Ernest Rogers, Albert Jiles and Ann Cook were there [at various times?]; there was a piano there then; it belonged to LN's mother.

Talk about the Streckfus boat jobs--Desvigne used stock arrangements; the captain set the tempos for the bands, because there were twelve numbers [sets] to play during a night, and the bands had to play them all. Captain Roy Streckfus was the timekeeper and tempo setter, but he took orders from Captain Joe Streckfus, who lived in St. Louis, who was a stickler for order. The band had a rehearsal every Tuesday morning at ten. LN tells of the long day's work they had to put in when working out of St. Paul; some of the rehearsals, however, were eliminated by the captain, because of the long work hours. They were in St. Paul eleven weeks.

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There was not much dancing on the boat during the day, but the crowds [that is, of dancers?] were good at night. The pay for musicians was twenty-five dollars a week, plus room and board. They ate and slept on the boat. The Desvigne band played about a week in New Orleans on the President, went with it to St. Louis (LN thinks it went for repairs) and were sent back back to New Orleans on the train. They worked on the boat in New Orleans in the wintertime one year....

End of Reel I

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Speaking of the Streckfus steamers--the steamer Capitol, which wintered in New Orleans, would make a trip each summer to St. Paul [Minnesota], where it remained all that season; then it returned for the [fall and ] winter [and spring] in New Orleans. The piano player working the steamer, be he [Burroughs] Lovingood, Steve Lewis, Osceola Blanchet or some other, played the calliope on the boat. Steve Lewis, a very good jazz pianist, disliked playing the "whooper," as he called it, but the captain and casual listeners enjoyed his playing, as he played the calliope in the same jazz style as he played piano. (Lewis worked for years with Professor [A. J.] Piron, at some country club in Jefferson Parish, and also at [Tranchina's Restaurant at] Spanish Fort.) The calliope was played as the boat was coming to a town for landing; then it was played a short time before the evening dance began, to let the people know that the boat was there [and a dance was to begin].

LN demonstrates how Claiborne Williams taught him to take breath for playing his instrument. LN says Williams' son, George Williams [now of Baton Rouge], was a wonderful musician, like his father; George can play piano, trumpet and sax; WR thinks George was in New Orleans four or five years ago. George's sister, Bella, was a good pianist. Claiborne Williams' band played very few [special] arrangements, using mostly stocks; Williams composed a beautiful waltz, "The Logical Point," which his brother [trombonist] played in the high register; the brother, suffering from lung trouble, had to be helped off the stand after a performance of the number. Claiborne seldom led his band while playing the violin, nor did he lead with a baton; he sat and played, while the

trumpet player, Lawrence Hall, kicked off the band. Claiborne also collected tickets. Joe Gabriel handled his band the same way. Gabriel often went to sleep while playing, and would even fall asleep while playing cards. Most of Claiborne's teaching was done in his home, although he did travel to nearby towns to teach students living in and near those towns. He had more white pupils than he did colored. He charged fifty cents for a lesson lasting from one-half to one hour; LN says when he came to the Nelson house he might stay a long time, talking to his father. He was quite strict, expecting a pupil to have his lesson ready on time. LN demonstrates how he was taught to keep time with his foot.

Sometimes at the Bulls' Club on Tuesday nights [a regular job], there would be three bands to accomodate all the people; Sidney Desvigne's band [with LN] would be in the yard on one side, Papa Celestin's band in the yard on the other side, and Kid Rena's band inside the downstairs dancing area; there would always be at least two bands on Tuesday nights.

Joe Gabriel had [most of] the work in towns around Bayou Lafourche, from Thibodaux to L'Abadieville; Claiborne Williams had [most of] the work in towns along the Mississippi River as far down as Napoleonville.

LN's favorite trumpet player is [and was] Louis Armstrong; asked to compare Armstrong with Buddy Petit and Kid Rena, LN says Petit was about the best here after Armstrong left New Orleans. Petit was a short man who wore stiff straw hats in summer and a brown derby in the winter; he did not use his derby for a mute.

When LN was with Desvigne, he used all the mutes including a megaphone; he came up with his stype of accompanying blues singers-- he says he just fills in--when Kid Thomas [Valentine] brought him the old flattened tea kettle he now uses for a [wa-wa type] mute. LN began playing with Thomas near the end of Thomas' twelve-year [approximate] engagement at "Specs" Moulin Rouge [dance hall in Marrero]; LN joined Thomas just before going to work for the post office, the job he took not quite six years ago. LN, asked to compare Thomas' band with older groups, says he looks at all Dixieland bands the same way; they will all play the same numbers, give the same beat, etc; he says you just follow the drummer. LN likes the drumming of Sammy Penn, Thomas' drummer. LN does not know chord formations, but has a good ear; when he was with Desvigne, he could play melody, but not jazz, which just came to him, because he can follow his ear. He has a good memory for music (in Desvigne's band he could learn an orchestration in one reading), but can't remember names, addresses and telephone numbers.

LN has played with many of the local brass bands--John Casimir and the Young Tuxedo, Percy Humphrey and the Eureka, George Williams, Kid Howard; he tells about playing with young trombonists who were eager to play a lot at the beginning of the job, but by not pacing themselves were worn out long before the job was finished. LN can't play regularly with brass bands because he has to drive his post office truck every Sunday, when most of the brass band jobs occur.

LN tells about Pritchard's symphony orchestra, saying the Grand Lodge had a convention at Shreveport, where the Pritchard bunch played two nights; after the first night concert, the Dixieland band, led by [Willie] Pajaud, played for a dance, and also after the second night; then all returned to New Orleans; the symphony orchestra broke up because Pritchard couldn't get musicians~~a~~ to stick with it.

Osceola Blanchet is still living, still teaching at [McDonogh] No. 35 [school], Girod and Rampart; he teaches an academic subject, not music.

LN played a couple of nights with Papa Celestin; he and the interviewers talk of his playing at Mardi Gras with the Eureka one year, Kid Thomas (on a float) one year. After being with Kid Rena, LN went [back] with Desvigne, staying until things got bad and Desvigne moved to California (where he has since died).

LN's brother [George H., Jr.] played sax for a while, but not much professionally. He was born in 1900. His father plays [or did play] piano and organ at the church. LN talks about his father as a doctor, and about the isolation of Napoleonville and environs when his father practiced there. LN had known Bunk Johnson for years, although he never got to play with him; Bunk knew Dr. Nelson, even calling LN "Dr. Nelson's son" [probably to differentiate between him and "Big Eye" Louis Nelson (Delisle)]. Manuel Manetta played with the Kid Harris when LN did. LN heard Joe "King" Oliver and "King" Manuel Perez, playing with the latter

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one day at Citrus. LN never heard Kid Ory; Frankie Duson was big then [in later Twenties, when LN moved back to New Orleans, Ory had been elsewhere for several years]; Harrison Barnes was strong; LN heard Jack Carey; Sunny Henry was here; Jim Robinson was here: LN doesn't know anything about George Fihle or Zue Robertson.

End of Reel II