

WALTER NELSON
I [of 2]
October 6, 1960

Also present: William Russell, Ralph Collins

(Interview conducted at [Alphonse] Picou's bar, in the dance hall part, at the corner of Robertson and Ursulines [New Orleans])

Walter Nelson [also known as "Black Walter" and "Rawhead" RBA] was born March 21, 1904, in St. Bernard Parish at Verretville [sp?]. An older brother played music. Verretville is about 18 miles from New Orleans, and is a few miles past Violet. WN moved to N.O. when he was about 10 years old; he began playing guitar at the age of 8; he was self-taught. There was a dance hall in Verretville; WR says there was one in Violet, where he heard Bunk Johnson, with George Lewis and others, about 15 years ago. WN's brother was Henry "Stacks" Nelson, now dead; he played guitar; he was 6 or 7 years older than WN.

Guitar players and blues singers WN mentions: "Season", WN, Edward "Noon" Johnson, "Hamp", Stacks Nelson, and "Dingy Wingy." They played in bar rooms and other places. Noon played second guitar with WN. Noon also plays bazooka; WN says he and Noon made the bazooka; they were playing with another guitarist, Bebe Hall, who also played kazoo. The first bazooka they made was out of rubber hose, without a slide. The man who really [i.e., first?] made the bazooka was John Hudson of N.O. who played with WN and NJ, guitars. After Noon had his bazooka, they played for Pat O'Brien, who sent them to play in Fort Walton, Florida. When they returned they met Walter Coquille, "The Mayor of Bayou Pom Pom," and appeared with him on radio; "and that's how Bob Burns got the bazooka." The band consisted of 2 guitars and bazooka; WN played first guitar.

WN's first professional job was with Kid Ernest [Moliere], at the Silver Star on St. Bernard at St. Claude; Herbert Morand was in the band then. WN mentions the H&J, where he worked in a band with [Joseph] "Brother Cornbread"

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[Thomas]. George Lewis was in the band with WN on St. Claude; the job was WN's. Others in the band: [Sidney] "Jim Little" [Brown], Sadie [Goodson?] piano, and Richard Hall, drums.

Talk of WN's uncle, Butler "Guye" Rapp, who played banjo, guitar and trombone; he was from the same place as WN, coming to N.O. before WN was born. Rapp played with Chris Kelly, Sam Morgan; he worked at the taxi dance hall La Veeda, Burgundy at Iberville, or at the Budweiser, also known as the Fern, where he was killed. WR says Johnny St. Cyr played there [?], and that Kid Rena worked there in later days. Rapp also worked with Rena. WN played with Chris Kelly; WN remembers that Cleo was the bass player, but he doesn't remember the others, saying that musicians were changed in the band so much. WN played mostly guitar, but also played banjo, and fooled around with the bass some; he played banjo with bands, but it was a long time ago. He began playing electric guitar about six months after the instrument was introduced; it was some time before the war [World War II]. A client named Mr. Kirby Sicobi [sp?] bought the electric guitar for WN; WN would break strings on his old guitar, so Sicobi bought him the new one, which was electric.

Butler Rapp helped WN with music; WN's brother also helped him. WN also studied with the old man [Manuel] Manetta for about six months; he learned to read music then.

There were a lot of good guitar players in N.O. when WN moved here; he thinks he was about the best of them. The guitarists would have contests, the music consisting mainly of blues. WN doesn't sing, but he composes his own blues; he dreamed of a blues one night, and has been playing it ever since. The name of that blues is "Walter's Special." He has another song, "Walter's Lullaby."

WN plays two nights a week at a dance in a bar in Boscoville [sp?], which is out St. Bernard Street about 15 minutes from N.O. [Picou's Bar?]; Leroy [Thompson, trumpet?], King, [drums?], and Sylvester Handy, (left-handed) bass are the other members of the group. Walter "Blue" Robertson, about 43 years old, has played 2nd trumpet with the group sometimes; WR says he heard Robertson quit playing after WW II, but WN says Robertson still tries to play. WN works at Picou's only on Saturday nights; Picou doesn't play with them since he broke his arm; he used to play with the band almost every time they played at his place. WN has been playing music with Picou for over 25 years; WN has been playing at Picou's for "going on" six years. WN also worked at the place Picou had on London Avenue; it was where WN met her [(Miss, Mrs.) Picou]; WR says the place opened in 1952, with Picou's band; Picou was then working at the Paddock [Lounge], and played at his place that night, which was his night off from the Paddock. Picou still owns the building, which is at London and Dorgenois. The present Picou place was opened about six years ago. At the London Avenue place, WN worked with Leroy [Thompson, trumpet?] King [?] (Leroy also plays at the present Picou's on Saturday nights), and Manuel Paul, sax; they played there until they [Picou?] moved to the present location. Then WN played at Luthjen's, Almonaster at Marais, which has burned; others in the band at Luthjen's: Blue Robertson; a pianist named Sammy [Hopkins?]; a drummer, King. The job ended less than a year ago. WN played at Luthjen's two separate periods. His guitar and amplifier, and the drums were burned in the fire.

WN has played all around; he played in Nashville, Tennessee with Smiley Lewis; WN, a pianist, Leroy [Thompson?] and one of WN's sons [Papoose? see obit.], a drummer who usually plays with Fats Domino) were on the recording session. WN's other son plays with Jesse Hill, WN's son-in-law. WN's sons, Walter Nelson and Lawrence Nelson, both play guitar and drums; WN taught them guitar, but they learned drums themselves.

WN didn't play in a band with Picou in the old days; they played mostly for backyard parties, just Picou and two guitars. WN knew Picou's brother, who sang a lot of Creole songs, but doesn't know his first name [Ulysses, cf. Alan Lomax, Mr. Jelly Roll, p. 73]; [Ulysses] Picou also played kazoo. WN played a lot of jobs with [Ulysses] Picou on kazoo; there would be another guitar and an old man, Hosey [sp?] Harris, on bass. [Ulysses] Picou made up his own songs. At one place WN and [Ulysses] Picou played, the Roody Woody [sp?], on St. Ann and Robertson, "Slow Drag" [Pavageau] was their bass player. [Ulysses] Picou sang "Eh, La Bas," but the first people WN heard sing that tune were Billie and DeDe [Pierce]; WN heard them sing it when he was a youngster. He doesn't know who wrote it; he says Ricard [Alexis] put it out on a record; WR says [Albert] Burbank also put it out on a record.

WN doesn't remember that anyone in his hometown played any blowing instrument except [Phillip] "Pill" [Coycault], clarinet; he and WN's uncle played together in bands in N.O.

WN's hometown, which was away from (and no longer in existence) was so isolated at one time that it would only be reached by boat. WR says Tom Albert and Manuel Manetta have talked about the town and area (including Delacroix Island); WN says Albert is from down there too [cf. Tom Albert, reel?]. WN says Paul Moliere is from down there, also; one son plays clarinet, [Kid Ernest?RBA] another plays drums; both sons died, one not long ago.

Butler Rapp played with Punch [Miller]; Rapp and Punch were together. Rapp also played with Rena, with Sam Morgan and [in a band?] with Guy Kelly; WR says Kelly came from Baton Rouge. Rapp played banjo, guitar and trombone; he played French horn or [melaphone] (like the one played by old man [Isidore] Barbarin) in parades. Rapp played with various "get-together" brass bands. Rapp died sometime during the Depression, but WN doesn't know when. WR mentions that George Guesnon considered Rapp a fine musician and guitar player.

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Also present: William Russell, Ralph Collins

The last job WN's uncle, Butler "Guye" Rapp, played was at the Budweiser; WR says Johnny St. Cyr, who was not there, told him about it. Rapp was about 20 years older than WN.

WN was 8 years old when his father brought him his first guitar, from New Orleans.

WN's brother, Henry "Stacks" Nelson, played in bands in N.O., but he was active mostly in Raceland [Louisiana]; WN says he never could keep up with him [i.e., his whereabouts]; Henry died about 20 years ago.

WN plays "Walter's Lullaby" and "Walter's Blues," his own compositions, on unamplified guitar. He complains of the difficulties of playing alone. He uses two picks, one on his thumb, the other on his index finger; he uses his thumb mostly on bass notes, picking the melody with his index finger. Talk of vibrato. The guitar he plays, a Gibson, is about 8 years old, cost about \$250; the guitar which was destroyed by the fire [see Reel I] was a Fender.

The guitar players in the country [around WN's hometown] picked the guitar with their fingers, not having picks; some of them played with all their fingers. WN's hometown was destroyed when a crevasse opened in the levee [1915 or 1927?]. WN used to play a lot at Delacroix Island after he became a man and was living in N.O.; he hasn't been down there in about 7 years. WR mentions going to Violet and Pointe a la Hache; Bunk Johnson, George Lewis and others played a dance at the latter, about 15 years ago.

Besides his sons, WN has taught guitar to a lot of people, including Smiley Lewis.

WN plays Friday and Sunday nights out [Boscoville-- see Reel I], and Saturday nights [at Picou's Bar.]

Walter "Blue" [Robertson], who is not in the union, is mentioned. WN's piano player, Sammy Hopkins, is mentioned. WR mentions Leroy Thompson [trumpet].

End of Reel II

