

ALFRED WILLIAMS
Reel I--Summary--Retyped
April 30, 1960

Others Present:
William Russell
Richard B. Allen
Ralph Collins
Andrew Anderson

This interview was recorded at Alfred Williams' home on 418 North Prieur. He was born in New Orleans in the 3rd Ward on Liberty Street between Lafayette and Poydras, on September 1, 1900. [Other musicians say he is older; check. RBA.]

Alfred says that he was an only child and the only musician in his family. The first music he remembers was at the 10th of May parades. "There were more [parades] then," with a picnic at the Fair Grounds at night. The first bands he heard, the Onward, the Excelsior, and Papa Celestin's Tuxedo Band [Original], then "Baba" Ridgley's Tuxedo Band [Celestin had brass band; Ridgley led dance orchestra at this time], were at those parades. His "famous" [i.e. favorite] drummer was Henry Martin, who was left handed like him and who taught him.

His first job, at age 16, was with the Columbia Band at Butcher Hill, a dance hall on Oak Street and the protection levee. Russell states that he has heard about the hall from Johnny St. Cyr. The leader of the band was Tig Chambers [cornet] and the drummer for whom Alfred substituted was called Nini; also in the band were Ernest Kelly, "Duck" Ernest Johnson [bass], Emmett [sp?] on guitar, and Roy Palmer on trombone.

Mr. Russell saw Roy Palmer last summer in Chicago where he works in a steel mill. Roy still works hard.

Alfred was about eight years old when he first picked up drums, playing on the front steps. He would use his mother's

April 30, 1960

dish pan, pots, and in the house he would play on the safe [i.e. kitchen cabinet]. Alfred always liked drums; he never cared about the other toys and games that other children played. "I was a lover of drums." Alfred had been playing for two or three years before he was able to get a set of drums. He would rent his drum from Dave Perkins for \$1.50 a week. Alfred never took lessons as a kid. Alfred was always left handed and picked up drums naturally; it was just like it was a gift.

Kid Ory's band was Alfred's second job when he played in Henry Martin's place. Henry Martin was playing at the Bungalow at West End. Saturdays and Sundays were his busiest nights, and he was unable to get off. Ory heard Alfred play with Tig Chambers and wanted to try him out. Ernest Kelly put in a good word for Alfred saying Alfred was going to make a good drummer. The job was at the Palm Gardens on Rampart, between Sixth and Seventh. That was when it was Rampart all the way rather than Danneel. The place was run by Vickey Adams. They had a dance there every Sunday night, and Alfred played there with Ory on several occasions. With Ory at that time were: Mutt Carey, trumpet; Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Emile Bigard, violin; Lorenzo Staulz, guitar; Eddie Garland, bass. Alfred played with Ory about two years before he [Alfred] went to Los Angeles.

Alfred was playing with Buddy Petit when he went to Los Angeles in 1919. Mr. Russell says that Fess Manetta tells of organizing the group here to go out there. He got some of the

men from Walter Decou's band out at the Bungalow or at the Lake. Alfred wasn't working with Walter, Mutt or Wade Whaley, but they all went to California together. Wade Whaley has a brother who lives in the [French] Quarter.

Another drummer whom Alfred liked, besides Henry Martin, was Henry Zeno who "resembled" [i.e. played like] Alfred. He was playing with William "Baba" Ridgley's Tuxedo Band. Ernest Trepagnier was another drummer, but Alfred didn't like his orchestra drumming. Ernest was a fine bass drummer in a brass band. He also played with Ridgley's Tuxedo Brass Band [i.e. Celestin's Tuxedo Brass Band. See Ridgley's interviews.] Henry Martin was Alfred's "real drummer." Baby Dodds played with Ridgley's Tuxedo Band for awhile. Baby played with him around 1917 or 1918.

King Oliver joined Ory at Pete Lala's right before Storyville closed. On Saturdays and Sundays King Oliver would go play with Ory. Louis Armstrong played in Oliver's place and Alfred played in the drummer's place. In the band also were Morris French, trombone; Steve Lewis, piano; and old man Valteau, violin. This was in 1917 just before Storyville was closed. Louis Prevost played clarinet--a quiet kind of fellow.

Red Happy [Bolton] played with Ory a while with King Oliver.

Ernest Rogers, who was older than Alfred, was playing but not with known bands.

Alfred went to California with Ory and didn't play with any-

one but Ory. After the band broke up, after so many raids, Alfred got a job working for the railroad cleaning cars for the Southern Pacific. Ory, Wade, and Mutt went to [Los Angeles or] Frisco with Curtis Mosby who had night clubs [and was a band leader.] Alfred stayed in Los Angeles from October 1 or 2, 1919, to March 4, 1921. They played in the Cadillac.

Jelly Roll Morton was in California at that time, and Fess [Manetta] tells of his coming early in the morning to play the piano, but Alfred says he never came back to hear the band. Alfred never met Jelly Roll Morton. Jelly Roll was working with the Spike Brothers, Reb and Johnny Spikes. Alfred's band played at the Dreamland for the Spike Brothers after they left the Cadillac. The police raided the Dreamland and beat poor Johnny something terrible. Johnny was the tenor player. It was prohibition times then and liquor was being sold undercover; that is probably why they were raided. [See other interviews with Alfred.] The Dreamland Cafe was at 4th and Stanford.

Alfred knew Dink Johnson who, Mr. Russell adds, died in 1954 in Portland at his brother's place. Bill Johnson, bass player, was one of his brothers. Another brother played guitar or another instrument. Dink was born in 1892; he was eight years older than Alfred. Dink was about 62 when he died. Alfred heard Dink was from over the Lake, perhaps Slidell. He never played with Alfred in California. He played with the Black and Tan with Ernest Johnson. Harry Southern, trombone, was the leader.

Ernest Johnson was Pill's brother. His real name was Ernest "Nini" Coycault, but he changed it to Johnson in California. Dink used to tell people Ernest was their brother or cousin although they were not related at all. Lawrence Marrero told Mr. Allen that Ernest played with the Superior Brass Band. Ernest had been in Los Angeles a long time when Alfred got out there. Mr. Allen tells about Ernest, cornet, playing out there with and recording with Sonny Clay, a drummer and piano player.

Alfred doesn't remember Ben Borders who was the drummer with the Black and Tan.

The local music was not like the New Orleans music in Los Angeles thus making possible their success. The Black and Tan Band was the best band there. They tried to play New Orleans style, but they just didn't have the style.

Buddy Petit and Frankie Duson went to California before Alfred. Joe ["King"] Oliver took his band out to San Francisco in 1921, and they also stopped in Los Angeles. Alfred was already back here by then.

Alfred doesn't remember his first brass band jobs. He was a member of Manuel Perez's Onward Brass Band. That was the first time Alfred was a regular member of a brass band. There were ten members in the band. There were three trumpets: Manuel Perez, Maurice Durand, and sometimes Ricard Alexis. Alfred forgets the other regular trumpet player. The trombones were Yank Johnson and Butler "Guy-A" Rapp. Butler Rapp played trombone

for them and also could play banjo. He played trombone in the brass band a long time. Old man [Isidore] Barbarin played the real alto [i.e. horn, not sax]. Adolph Alexander [Sr.], Tat's daddy, played baritone. Joe Watson played clarinet. Alfred played the snare drum and Henry Martin played the bass drum. Black Benny [Williams] played until he got killed, and then Henry Martin joined the band and stayed until the band broke up.

Mr. Russell asks Alfred what kind of player Manuel Perez really was. Perez was a legitimate trumpet player. He was not a hot trumpet player, not a jazz trumpet player like today. He liked strictly music. He had a nice tone, but it wasn't a fine tone. It was more of a rough, loud brass band tone. He could play high. Alfred, Maurice Durand and Buddy Johnson (Yank's brother) worked with Perez on the Roof Garden for two years from '25 to '27. They had Manuel Perez, Buddy Johnson [trombone], Alfred, Eddie Cherrie [tenor], Caffrey Darenbourg on guitar, [Adolph] "Tats" Alexander [Jr.] on alto, and Mercedes Gorman Fields played piano with them for two years. After she left they had Oceolo Blanchard. Oceolo Blanchard is a teacher at [McDonogh No.] 35 at Rampart and Girard [sp.?]. Then they had Dandy Lewis on bass. After Buddy Johnson left, Earl Humphrey played trombone. Then Manuel Manetta played with them awhile. They used to have two bands, Celestin's band and Perez's band, for the big Carnival balls. Sometimes they would hire Fate Marable; Fate would bring his band off the boat and play late, after his job on the boat.

At that time Fate had Dewey Jackson, a fine trumpet player. Harvey Langford, trombone, a light fellow out of St. Louis who had a band of his own after that, was with Fate then. He [Langford] is on a record. Fate had Floyd Campbell, a singing drummer who lives in Chicago now, on piano, Nat Story on trombone, from St. Louis, was with Fate. Sometimes Fate had old man [Henry] Kimball on bass. Fate had a banjo player, a light fellow, who has since gone to the penitentiary for killing a man in New York in the early thirties. He was a fine banjo player. Alfred says that Fate's band was better than Perez's.

Alfred played with Sam Morgan [cornet] from 1921-1925. Sam had Alfred, who "was fair," Yank Johnson, [trombone], Joe Watson, [clarinet], Buddy Manaday [sp.?] on guitar. That was before Manaday went with Buddy Petit. Eddie "'Ti' Boy" Gilmore on bass. That was the original band. After Eddie Gilmore left, they took Simon Marrero who played with them a long time. When Buddy Manaday left they took Butler "Guy-A" Rapp who stayed with them about three years. Alfred left in 1925 and went to the Roof Garden with Manuel Perez ('25-'27). When Alfred left Manuel Perez, he went to the La Vida which was a taxi dance hall. Their band at the La Vida consisted of: Raymond "Clifford" Brown, [trumpet], who lived in San Francisco and who is a nephew of Bat Brown; John Handy, [clarinet and alto sax]; Ernest Kelly, [trombone], Louis Givens, [piano]; and Sidney Pflueger, [guitar and banjo]. Alfred stayed at the La Vida about a year. The hours were terrible,

they could take breaks one at a time. Raymond Brown could play drums and even John Handy could relieve on drums.

Ridgley's and Celestin's band broke up about 1928 and Alfred left the La Vida and went with Ridgley. Ridgley played at Pete Herman's place, the Plantation, for about a year and then they jobbed around. That band consisted of Alfred, Ridgley [trombone], Emma Barrett [piano], Shots [Madison [trumpet], John Handy, Manuel Sayles [banjo and guitar]. John Handy played alto and clarinet. He played lots of clarinet then. He was a fine clarinet player. Alfred doesn't remember who was on bass.

Sayles was a nice, fine guitar player. He was always a musician; he learned the right way.

Alfred played with Piron's band from 1932 to 1935 at the New Orleans Country Club, at Eddie Grochelle's [sp.? (located probably at Bienville and Franklin, now Crozat)]. Piron's band when Alfred first started playing with him consisted of Alfred, Piron [violin], Allegret [sp.?] Alexander [piano], Eddie Pierson on trombone, Joe Phillips [trumpet], Leo Dejan [trumpet], Manuel Sayles, Arthur Derbigney [sax], Elliot Taylor [sax], and Simon Marrero on bass and Harry Wells was their singer. Harry Wells died of T.B. He was a fine singer.

END OF REEL I

ALFRED WILLIAMS
Reel II--Summary--Retyped
April 30, 1960

Others Present:
William Russell
Ralph Collins,
Richard B. Allen

Alfred never made any records. [Had recorded with Eureka] Ory made some in California about 1921, but Alfred was gone then. Fred Washington was on the Ory records. Alfred had played with Fred Washington. Alfred knew Fred here; he used to play at Pete Lala's night club. There was a band at Pete Lala's. It was just a pick-up band, but so was Joe Oliver's.

Other piano players around town were Steve Lewis, and Tony Jackson. Alfred did not know Tony Jackson, just knew of him. Mr. Allen asks Alfred if he knew the piano player here named Alfred Wilson, but he didn't know him nor did he know Alfred Carrall. Alfred knew Allegreta Alexander who played with Alfred with Piron's band. Alfred knew Udell Wilson--"who wouldn't know Udell?" Alfred doesn't remember Frank Ahaynia. Alfred has heard of Arthur Campbell because Steve Lewis used to talk about him all the time. Alfred remembers [Richard M.] "My-knee" [sp.?] Jones, a cripple fellow, and Buddy Christain and Clarence Williams. Buddy Christian played down at Pete Lala's too.

Alfred worked with Buddy Petit in 1921 when he [Alfred] returned from Los Angeles for about eight months. After Buddy Petit, Alfred joined Sam Morgan's band with whom he worked from 1921 until 1925. Buddy Petit played ragtime music. Ragtime was what they called it before they changed the name to jazz. It had the same beat. Petit played with Scott Joplin numbers. Buddy was not a reading musician, just a routine, trumpet pleyr, but he was very good. Buddy had Simon Marrero in his band at one time,

as well as Zeb Lenoir [sp.?], Edmond Hall, "Pill" [Coycault], Buddy Manaday, George Washington on trombone. The members would change fast, because Buddy was not reliable. Alfred was in the band after [Eddie] "Face-o" [Woods], because "Face-o" left here in the early 1920's. Alfred has inquired about "Face-o", but no one has heard. The last word was they he was in Texas somewhere-- Galveston or San Antonio.

Alfred was in El Paso from 1936 to 1951--all through the war. There was only one boy from here who came out in 1946-- Bob Watts on trumpet. Most of the time Alfred had a mixed band-- whites, Mexicans--at the last there was just Alfred and four Mexicans for about three years until the job closed. The Mexicans played Alfred's kind of music--American. They were fine musicians. They couldn't play New Orleans style music, but they did the best they could. Alfred taught them a lot of "our" tunes, and they had very good ears. After Bob Watts came out there, they learned a lot of the tunes because he could play them. Alfred had a fine tenor man and a clarinet man [possibly one man] who was very good. The people danced jitterbug. They also played Spanish music for them. The white people even liked the Spanish music. They had to play hillbilly music too and American jazz. They were so surprised that Alfred caught on to the Spanish music. Alfred was the manager of the band, but he tried to be open to suggestions so that he could learn. Alfred didn't read, but they would rehearse with him and he would catch right on to it. Some of the

was real hard. They had wonderful trumpet players--"what a tone!"--They had a young trumpet player who was very good and played without music. They had a Mexican floor show with four girls.

After Alfred left Manuel Perez, he went to the La Vida and then went with Baba Ridgley Tuxedo Band when the band split. Alfred was with Ridgley for about a year in 1928. Then Alfred returned to the La Vida in 1929 where he played until 1932 when he went with A. J. Piron. Alfred was with Piron from 1932 to 1935. Alfred went on the boat with Piron in 1934--the J. S. They went only to the Red Wing where the J. S. turned around. The steamer Capitol went all the way to Saint Paul. They only stayed in St. Louis for one day. The J. S. was a tramp steamer, traveling up the Ohio also. The steamer Capitol went to St. Paul and stayed all summer. Piron still had his band intact when Alfred left here in 1936 except for Alfred. Piron had broken up his band about 1932 with Peter Bocage and others and made up the band which had Alfred, Eddie Pierson, Leo Dejan, Joe Phillips, Arthur Derbigny, Elliot Taylor [sp?], Manuel Sayles, Simon Marrero, and Harry Wells who was the singer. They played together from 1932 till 1935 when Alfred left the band and went back to the La Vida where he stayed for five or six months. On February 15, 1936, Alfred left here with the Georgia Minstrels from the Palace Theater. He stayed with them until March 25, 1936, when they

were stranded in El Paso, Texas. But it worked out real well for Alfred, because he stayed there for sixteen years. He played Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Alfred only knew, in the Georgia Minstrels, Kimball Dial [sp.?], who gave Alfred the job. Kimball Dial had played on the boat with Alfred after Elliot Taylor had gotten sick. Simon Marrero had gotten sick on the boat and they got both Kimball Dial on alto and Jimmy Johnson on bass from St. Louis. The show musicians were not from New Orleans, and they played only shows. They played the music just like in a regular nightclub here with a chorus line. The grand finale was fast, but outside of that it was just like a night club job.

After Alfred left Piron and went to the La Vida, the band at the La Vida had Ernest Kelly, Louis Givens, [John] Handy, Raymond Brown, Sidney Pflueger; it was the same band that Alfred had played with before at the La Vida.

Alfred was with Sam Morgan from 1921 to 1925. There were only about two changes in his band: from old man Buddy Manaday to Butler "Guy-A" Rapp. Sam did not use the slap stick as much as Ridgley. Baba Ridgley was the one who really used that; he "originated" the slap stick. Sam took the pattern from Ridgley. When Alfred was with Sam for four years, he was tops. The other change in Sam's band was from Simon Marrero to Eddie "Ti-boy" Gilmore.

END OF REEL II.