

unedited first draft

JOHN C. POPE
REEL I [only]
May 1, 1959

INTERVIEWER: William R. Russell
ALSO PRESENT: Mike Slatter, one
of J.P.'s daughters, a priest
NOTES: Richard B. Allen
SUMMARY: Dan Weisman
TYPING: Dan Weisman

[William Russell begins by asking, first, for the subject's name which is John C. Pope. This is in Mobile, of course, and the address is 506 South Dearborn Street.]

I was born 1883. [On] November-the-23rd. I'll be 76 [years old] this year.

Now, as I'm saying, the Excelsior Band [of Mobile, Ala.] was practically born, you understand, on the day when I was born. They were getting together - my father, and his friends - and they organized the band, and named it the Excelsior band, you see.

I don't know why they chose the name, but it was in honor of my birth. My father was Alexander Pope. I don't know exactly the date [when he was born]. I know he would have been, just a matter of weeks...that when he died, he would have been 88 years old. He died about seven, or eight, years ago.

I'm saying that back in his days, they practically done almost the same work that we done during my career which I taken over--oh, I should say around 1908, 1907, or 1908. I carried on for about 28 years.

I played the trumpet. My father played the E-flat cornet.

We had about four [cornet or trumpet] players at all times.

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[There were] 14 [persons] in the Excelsior Band at all times. We used four trumpet; three alto players, you know the old-time alto; and two trombones, baritone, bass, two drummers.

Once in a while, we'd pick up a clarinet player. Not all the time. They had saxophones in those days, but we didn't use them. In the latter days, we did. I'll say around the [19]20's, we started to use saxophones.

We played funeral parades on an average of two, or three, times a week. I guess that's been now 20 years [since we stopped playing funerals.] They don't use them at all now.

All the organizations in Mobile, each one would have - when a member would die - they would, of course, use music. We'd play such music as funeral marches going out to the cemetery. Coming back, we played records, popular music.

In other words, I remember when we played "So Glad You'll Be Going, You Rascal You," (laughter) "Bye You Blackbird," and all those kind of things. Yes, great days.

Then, we'd make parades for the different organizations. We'd parade in the afternoon from 3:00 until 6:00. Any day in the week. Monday and Wednesday was the regular days.

On that night, we'd return about eight o'clock to that place where they would have the dance. Same band, and same instruments.

We played all the popular airs, just as they come up. That was colored--the parades, and all.

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We played all the white dances Downtown which we had there down in town. We played at the Batthe House, the Country Club, the Atherton Club...[We'd usually play written music,], but sometimes we'd pick up a little something. We were very good at that.

[Coming back from the cemetery,] we had music. Sure. We always used music. We'd rehearse, on an average, twice a week. Then, if a member of the band wasn't there at that time, why he was fined. Back in those days, 25 cents.

Mike Slatter mentions the Trenier brothers [dancers?], and I knew their father. They're very famous right now because they just left [Las] Vegas, [Nevada], I think, [and] went back home.

They moved from Mobile, out to Los Angeles. He's one [of the Excelsior Band members] that still lives.

There's another one that still lives now that's called Willie [Ballero?, an original member of the band]. He was one the late members. We trained him when he come along during the years. But, the father practically lived it out.

[A mailman who played music, and met WR downtown told him of a musician named "Chicken," and that was the younger Ballero.]

He's still in town, and used to play alto with the original Excelsior Band. One of those players, (imitating) scats [the] alto part. You know what I'm talking about.

[This mailman I met, WR notes. His name is Thomas Dailey

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Sr., and he knows this man. He knows you too. He mentioned that this other man was about your age, maybe a little older.] He may be a year older than I am. That's Ballero.

Now, Thomas Dailey. I think you might have met some of the younger...[He was a younger man, WR notes. He was the mailman.]

I don't think he played with the Excelsior Band. [WR says he plays sax, clarinet, and trumpet--the three instruments]. I agree.

I had what you call a valve trombone [first]. That was very shortly, probably a month or so, [before] I changed to the trumpet.

A man by the name of Mr. Norman Cox - he's dead now - gave me lessons, and Pompei Nett. Those were the teachers back in those days. I'd get one of those fellows. Most all of us did.

[They played] kind of the jazzy kind [of] ragtime back in those days. You might call it ragtime. That's right. We played all the famous marches like Sousa's marches, all heavy marches.

We kicked the beegum out of...beat those bands from St. Louis, Chicago, down here for Carnival. We cut a bunch. I got a few.

[Our] 14-piece band, put them out of commission. Used to blast away. (Laughs.) They'd have, probably, forty or fifty members of the band.

I don't know just exactly [why they stopped playing

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funerals]. I think it was financial conditions. I think so.

[The lodges, and organizations don't exist in Mobile today.]
The insurance [requirements] put those people out of business,
most of them. They didn't provide [accident liability insurance]-
-the state lodges, and so on. Finally, they give it up.

Those organizations, I'm saying...they had quite a few in
Mobile. They used to give picnics, once or twice a year.
Accumulate a few hundred dollars, and we used to play those
picnics for them.

That was cut out, after the band broke up. I blame myself,
in a way. I give it all up. [Interest was lost?], and so, I
gradually put the band out of business.

We played all along those [Mobile] Bay boats, going across
on the other side of Baldwin County, [Alabama]. We played dances
on those boats quite often. Excursion boats.

We had a good many of them there. From time-to-time, we had
the Pleasure Bay, the Corney [?], and the Mary Queen--boats of
that kind.

We used to meet at the foot of Dauphine Street, and take
large crowds. That was almost all practically white.

We had [some competition from other bands.] Back in those
days, we had Mr. Drago, Cummings, and all the white bands. Then,
we had a few colored bands, but they never did work up to that
point.

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Orchestras [from New Orleans]...I remember Sam Morgan. And this man, now, that died some time ago. I think he played on the [Riverboat] President.

[Oscar "Papa"] Celestin, people like that. [John] Robichaux, people like that. They's come over here. I don't remember Buddy Pettit, or Chris Kelly. I don't remember Bunk Johnson.

[We'd play] on Mardi Gras day. The king and queen would come in. I played all those. [My father played bugle calls, or flourishes, when they came in.] I don't recall what kind. What do you call the bugle call when they bury you, and so on? [That's what he played.]

As I'm saying, now, at the present time, Mr. E[dward] Langston...has the band together. They get together...for the Carnival.

After I given it up, there was a Charlie Lipscomb that played with me. He took the band over, but it was short-lived, didn't happen very long. After he died, this Langston taken it over.

I like the way they play now very much. They play the regular same music--the popular airs, and all.

I think they must have the same amount [of members], about 14. They use clarinets, saxophones; all B-flat clarinets, they might have one or two.

They have arrangements. They play [written] music. [No more

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funeral music, just parade music.]

Sam Morgan had [a different style of music]. They had that original jazz. Ragtime we called it back in those days.

[The New Orleans bands] surely played more ragtime than we did. In fact, they put me out of business. (Laughs.) When they come over here in the late years, and played that jazz music, what we called ragtime. We played strictly by music.

I never went to New Orleans when I was younger. But, I heard [the New Orleans bands] when they came down.

Back in my father's days, they made trips to New Orleans with the Excelsior Band. Excursions. They played dances over there. On the train. I don't remember [how my father learned his music.]

We had just about as good a uniform as any band in the country. Made by Pettibon. I know the name very well.

Back in those days, they paid as much as \$35, or \$40, for each uniform. Which that was [a lot], back in those days...Cost somebody now about \$80, or \$100.

I do remember one time, they had a dark uniform trimmed in light gold trimming. Very pretty. [Dark] blue, something like that.

Back in my day we had the regular, regulation uniform. Musician uniform. Back in my father's day, why, they had their choice. What I'm saying is when I come along, we had the union -

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the Federation of Musicians' uniforms - style.

[One of John Pope's daughters arrives with a picture of her grandfather, and they look at it. WR notes that JP resembles his father.] I was about 35 years old when I had my picture made. [WR thanks her.]

I have a picture of my four daughters. They stayed there in New York. One died...

They did pretty well. They stayed there quite a while. [I don't have any pictures of the Excelsior Band.]

We all lined up the larger instruments [for marches]. The bass, baritone, two trombones to the fore. Then, the alto players, and the trumpets. Then, the drums in the back. [Always four abreast, WR says.] That's right. With 14 men.

We had a different step, from what they use now. We had a longer stride. Now they use a little short...I don't know, you might call that...

They played just about the same [tempo.] All that was different was the steps than from what they use now.

[We played] "High Society." "Panama," I think that was one of them. We played that one also, [] so many heavy marches.

We were very good. We were pretty good on that. We had cornet parts cued in. We did that with the trumpet. We did all of that.

We used the same brass band lineup - 14 [members] - inside

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for dances. Of course, in the latter days, I organized my own orchestra.

We had another orchestra here by the name of Holman's Orchestra. I played with him 18 years. After that, I organized my own. That was known as Pope's Dreamland Serenaders.

We had an average of around eight-to-nine [pieces.] We had the guitar. We had the bass, piano, trumpet, three saxophones, and drums.

For years, I played principal work in Mobile. All the big society dances Downtown. I played all those dances...

We played, mostly, by music. Sometimes, we picked up something very popular by ear, and [played that]. Sometimes, we were a little ragged, as you say.

We used two drummers. One fellow hitting the bass drum, and one hitting the trap drum--I don't know what they call it now.

[He is confusing the trap drums with the drum kit with foot pedals, according to RBA's notes.] They had a cymbal, wire-beater, all those kinds of things.

We very seldom played without a piano. We played with a piano most of the time, always with a piano player.

I had one of the best piano players, I believe, living in Mobile. He composed for me, was an arranger for some conservatory in Chicago.

[JP's daughter says the arranger was Edward Frank at the

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American Conservatory of Chicago. He's very interesting to talk to. He's in a cast from an automobile accident a couple of years ago.]

I knew [Charles Melvin] "Cootie" Williams. He was with me quite a bit. He played with me quite a bit. In fact, he started out playing with me, right here in Mobile.

I went to New York one time. He and Duke Ellington...he was playing in his band. I told him, about that time, I was just too old, and couldn't compete with those fellows back in those days.

Yes. Cootie played with Duke quite a while. Cootie's teacher was Charles Lipscomb.

(Machine off.)

[An Irish-sounding priest has possibly arrived, and is telling an anecdote about confusing Excelsior Band - in pronunciation - with 'Seltzer' Band.]

Well, I tell you, we was a drawing card back in those days, you know. Every time you mention the Excelsior Band, the public was coming out. As I say, the Excelsior Band, now, is at least 76 years old.

We had a large following. Yes, yes, yes. Sometimes, we had to have an officer to keep the crowd away. We had Mardi Gras - we had probably five, or six, bands - and the Excelsior Band had the crowd.

The maskers on the float, they'd be hollering for the

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Excelsior Band. Calling for Pope. They wanted the Excelsior Band with them.

Now, they play once a year [on Carnival Day]. Edward Langston is the leader. I wish't I got a hold of him. By that time, I'd have him here with me.

He's a saxophone player. Clarinet and saxophone. I'd try to get him something...[They play the same style as we did], because we played all the popular...

Of course, as a whole, music has changed a bit. I think back to my days. Music was more simplified than what it is right now.

The men playing today are in their twenties; youngsters, thirty years old. All the old-timers, practically, died out in the last few years. They did play along with those youngsters.

Langston's about the oldest one now that's living. He's around 60 - 58 or 60 - years old.

Cootie [Williams'] teacher was Charlie Lipscomb. He did teach Cootie. He died...Cootie played with me quite a bit.

[The current Excelsior Band] all have other jobs, but they're members of the union. I organized the American Federation of Musicians right here in Mobile. Some of them play in local dance bands.

Back in my days, we all did have four, or five, orchestras in Mobile. Now, I think they have one. I haven't heard them myself.

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In fact, I've given up the music, nearly 25 years now. I haven't played at all.

[WR mentions that Bill Matthews, a trombone player, has his own band, and told them a few names to look up. One man - he didn't remember his last name - said Charlie had a pressing shop on Davis Avenue, down near town...where you press clothes.]

That's Charlie []. He's dead. [Another man he mentioned was Frank Jackson whom] I played with. He's living, but in South Carolina, not in Mobile. He was very good. I don't really know anyone else who's alive, and can give you information.

We have [played on wagons], advertised on big trucks. From one corner to another, advertising the dance tonight.

We mostly done that...in orchestra work. We had around seven, or eight, members. [Sometimes, back then in my father's day], we had the whole Excelsior Band on the truck.

We played polkas, schottisches, waltzes. We played lancers, same as a quadrille. We played all those dances back in those days. [We didn't use banjo or guitar in the earliest dance music.] Just 14 brass pieces.

In my [small] band, we had a guitar player. Right now, he come in, and bury his mother at a funeral. Right now, from Philadelphia.

They used the banjo first. I'm a Mobilean. We played some ragtime music, but New Orleans was famous for that. We learned it

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from people from New Orleans about 1908, 1909, something like that.

They used to pick [the bass]. Very seldom they used the bow. I think the best bowed bass player was Sam Morgan's brother [Al Morgan].

I guess you remember those Morgans. He used to use the bow. In fact, I think he's the only one who played by music. I think he picked it up from here.

We used mutes quite often. We used a violin in the dance orchestra. We played the violins.

Holman, I think he played the violin. Someone else I can't remember right now...He was leader of his own orchestra. That's Holman I have referenced to.

When I left him, I organized my own orchestra. I was leader back then, for a long time. He played violin with his own band. When I played with him, I played trumpet in his own band.

I don't remember Buddy Bolden, but I do remember Manuel Perez. [Do you remember him? WR met him.] He died, too.

They always compared me with Perez. He used to come over here.

I used to show off a little bit when he came to town. I'd mix some passages...and he'd say, 'You know those other fellows. They can't do like you and I can.'

I remember Joe ["King"] Oliver in the early days. I think he

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used to play here in Mobile. He'd come over here, and play for dances. Of course, that's been quite a while now. I'm going way back.

I remember quite a few out of New Orleans. I just can't recall them now because I'm not prepared. I don't remember Freddie Keppard.

[WR says, they're just about out of tape.] The next time you come through, I hope I have something a little bit better. [WR thanks me, and my daughter.]

I wish I could live those days over again, but you take the Excelsior Band as a lost art. Yeah. It's a lost art, and I don't think it will happen again.

When I first started playing [for parades], we used to get around \$1.50 for the parade, and the dance. We worked that up to about \$5 a man. (They laugh.)

I remember when we used to play dances in some hall. We'd get all worked out...

END OF REEL