

LAURENA DIGGS
I [of 3]--Digest--Retyped
May 25, 1959

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Also present: Mrs. Carrie Boote, Richard B. Allen,
Paul R. Crawford

Laurena Diggs was born in October, 1873, in Mobile, Alabama, where she was reared until age fourteen, when she moved to New Orleans. Bands she remembers hearing in her teens were the Excelsior Brass Band, led by [Alec?] Rivers, and the Eureka Brass Band; both in Mobile. Isidore Pope was leader of a marching band which sometimes visited New Orleans; he also led a string band, which played for dances. [Cf. Wm. Ballariel (sp?) reel] Pope was one of several in his family. Pope led the band known as Pope's Band. There was no second-lining in Mobile when LD was growing up; there is now. The bands played ragtime as the occasion demanded. For funerals, they played [solemn?] such as "What A Friend [We Have] In Jesus." A fast tune played then was "Over the Golden Wall;" LD says when she was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in [19]44, she and others played the song for soldiers; she walked four blocks while it was being played, and because of the big rocks there, "my feet ain't been mates since." The tune was considered ragtime then. LD recalls that when she was a child the brass band musicians in Mobile, even the drummers, had written music to play.

LD didn't know about blues until after the Spanish-American War, although she may have heard blues without knowing it. Fast music was usually to be heard only in the District; LD didn't go there; she heard fast music only when bands played for funerals, parades and the tenth of May [i.e., at Odd Fellows parades?RBA].

LD explains what she means by "down the bay" in Mobile; anything south of Government Street was "down the bay." LD was born on the north side of town, at 1156 Adams Street, between Clay and [Gasquet?]. Her daughter and her son were born there, too. After the Spanish-American War, LD moved to New Orleans, where

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she worked at St. Charles and Melpomene, on the uptown front of town [i.e., river side] corner; the area was still like a swamp. There were gas and oil [street] lamps. LD says she was fifteen years old; she came back to New Orleans after the Spanish-American War. She has in recent years attended the burials of several of the men she saw off to that war. LD became president of the Spanish-American War Auxilliary Number 9 in 1944, when she was in Milwaukee. LD is the only survivor of the auxiliary. LD talks about the ceremonies held annually at the National Cemetary at Chalmette; she says her group was notified that there could be no more burials there because the ground was to be used as a racetrack. RBA says John Casimir and the Young Tuxedo Brass Band usually play for the ceremonies held there on May 30. LD says Louis Armstrong started the playing of "When The Saints Go Marching In" for the Auxiliary, the Red Cross and others for marching purposes. [Cf. L.A. Satchmo... and other interviews].

LD talks about her education, which included attendance at Straight University [now Dillard?]. She talks about the time the statue of [Robert E.] Lee was raised at Lee Circle; those participating actively sang "Praise Him, All Ye Nations."

LD was born Presbyterian, as here parents were; they were owned by a man in Demopolis, Alabama. LD is still of that denomination. LD sang in church. Some of the songs she sang when she was young were "At the Cross" and "Nearer My God To Thee:" The church was racially mixed.

Dave Perkins leader of the [Reliance? Alliance?] Band, a New Orleans band which made some appearances in Mobile, lived a short distance from where LD now

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lives. Perkin's band, plus the Eureka and the Pickwick bands, were playing [here in New Orleans?] when LD was young; they were brass bands. LD mentions a "string" [i.e., dance] band led by [oscar "Papa"] Celestin, which played [at Tom Anderson's? RBA] on [North] Rampart Street.

LD married and left New Orleans, returning to Mobile, where she reared her children. She didn't come back to New Orleans until they were all in school; she came back about 1914 or 1915; she says she came back at the end of the big storm [1915].

End of Reel I

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[RBA met Mrs. Boote through Punch Miller]
Also present: Mrs. Carrie Boote, Richard B. Allen,
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LD talks about the New Orleans yellow fever epidemic of 1878; she lived on Good Children Street [now St. Claude Avenue], between Elysian Fields [Avenue] and Frenchman [Street].

Carrie Boote was born Carrie Diggs, in Mobile, Alabama on December 31, 1900; she is now Mrs. Fred Boote. Her family moved to Moss Point, Mississippi, when she was six or eight years old; the family moved to New Orleans about 1914 [no doubt late 1915. See reel I above]. CB says that when she lived in Moss Point, she wanted to be in show business; there was a brass band, the Pickwick Band under the direction of Joe Cruzet [sp?] in Moss Point; some of the members had been with minstrel shows, and some later went with minstrel shows; Eugene Thomas [also know as Skinner?], who played cornet, later went to Chicago; Alfred Brazley, cornet, is now in New Orleans (his brother played cornet for a while); Alonzo Williams, cornet; [Romie?] Nelson now has a band in Cuba. CB's mother bought her a piano after they moved to New Orleans. CB gained experience by [lessons with, or just watching?] Buddy Christian, who played banjo and piano and who left town with Clarence Williams, and Steve Lewis, who played "by ear" only. Richard [M.] Jones was another fine pianist; either he or Christian wrote "I Ain't Gonna Tell Nobody 'Bout The Dream I Had Last Night" (which CB demonstrates). [By R.M.J. See King Oliver recording.] CB knew all the musicians, such as: Buddy Petit, Joe Robichaux, pianist, and Joe [actually, John] Robichaux, an older man, who led the orchestra at the Lyric Theater. Others were Kid Ory and Kid Punch [Miller]. When CB worked at the Royal Gardens, Chicago, in the 1920's, King Oliver's band was playing there; CB says Oliver sent for Louis [Armstrong] while

at the Royal Gardens, and Louis joined the band there. When Louis quit Oliver, he went with [Erskine] Tate, playing at the Vendome [Theater]. After working with Tate, Louis organized his own orchestra. Punch Miller had a small band; he had offers from many larger bands, but he wasn't reading very well then. CB and he [Armstrong] were sweethearts before Armstrong got married. Armstrong also played for a while with Ollue Powell, who had an orchestra at the Dreamland; Glover Compton, pianist, played with Powell; Compton later went to France, and did well until "late years." CB says Compton has opened a cabaret in Chicago, but doesn't play now except on special occasions; CB qualifies the statement about his not playing by saying "I don't think." CB says Red Allen came to Chicago to play with Armstrong; Allen later had his own band. Luis Russell, who played piano for Armstrong, had a band of his own. CB says most of those people were from Louisiana. CB went to a benefit for cornetist Bunk Jones [i.e., Johnson] held in Chicago; she didn't hear him in New Orleans. Ernest Whitman, who played "Bill," was from New Orleans; he married one of the Leggett [sp?] sisters, who were showgirls from New Orleans. The Whitman sisters, from New Orleans, had a band with their minstrel show.. RBA asks about [Romie?] Nelson, cornet player from Moss Point; CB says she heard he was in Cuba. CB says Nelson speaks "broken Creole," so he can go almost anywhere and be understood; she doesn't know what Nelson is passing for, but he has a nice band in Cuba. Nelson is about 60-65, about the same age as Punch. He is apparently not pianist Romeo Nelson. Alfred Brazley lives at 1235 LaSalle in New Orleans.

CB and LD mention a song from CB's young which bemoans the fact that "the mailman passed and he didn't leave no news." [Cf. Bessie Smith "Gulf Coast Blues"]

Co A-3844]. CB says the songs then were so silly; she mentions "Dying Rag," which she sings, in part. CB sings part of "Dollar Bill." CB sings part of "Toot Your Horn," which was popular in about 1912. CB 'never liked blues. CB married in 1923. She mentions François Moseley [known as Frankie Franko], with whom Punch played at one time; Martha Raye [comediienne] was accompanied by Moseley's band when she worked around Chicago; she wanted to get them out to Hollywood, but the band had broken up by then. Moseley was from New Orleans ; he played drums. CB left New Orleans in the twenties. CB didn't know much about Punch until he came to Chicago, where she was living; he roomed with CB about six years, and was her tenant at the time he went on tour woth Walter Barnes; Punch was away from Barnes' band at the time of the fire [in Natchez, Mississippi]. CB mentions Buddy, banjo player with Barnes; there were two Buddy's, father and son, who played banjo and were from New Orleans. One went to California, where he was popular. RBA says there were several banjo-playing Buddies, among them Buddy Christian (also piano), Buddy Scott and Johnny "Buddy" St. Cyr. Christian or Richard Jones put CB's name (then Carrie Diggs) on a song he wrote; he was one of CB's admirers. Richard [M.] Jones, much older than CB, tried to teach her piano. CB thinks Jones was from Donaldsonville [Louisiana]. A lot of New Orleans musicians came from towns outside New Orleans; for example, Punch was from Raceland [Louisiana]; Christian, Red Allen and Armstrong are from New Orleans. CB says Bunk [Johnson] is from some small town where rice is grown [she is probably talking about New Iberia, but Johnson says he was born in New Orleans, near Laurel Street and Peters Street (now called Jefferson Avenue)? Cf. AM 10" LP with B.J. talking.]

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When CB was the leading chorus girl; she didn't like cabaret work. [Cf. Ethel Waters with Chas. Samuels, His Eye Is On The Sparrow.] Butterbeans and Susie were also playing the Royal Gardens. [King] Jones, well-known in Chicago, was master-of-ceremonies at the Royal Gardens.

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The m[aster-of-]c[eremonies] at the Royal Gardens was called Professor Jones [also know as King Jones. Cf. Paul Barbarin interview, RBA Lecture IX, Jazz Cooperative course, November 14, 1966]; he was there for years. Lil [Hardin] Armstrong was playing piano in King Oliver's band at the Royal Gardens; she became Armstrong when she and Louis Armstrong, who played second cornet in Oliver's band there; got married. Lil was from St. Louis [actually, Memphis? Cf. Lil Armstrong reel]. Freddie "Tubby" Hall, of New Orleans, played drums in the band. [Cf. Walter C. Allen and Brian Rust, King Joe Oliver. No reference to Hall.]

Freddy Keppler [i.e., ~~K~~^eppard] was a good cornet player; CB saus he played around Chicago; she doesn't know if he had his own band there.

CB didn't go to many dances when she first lived in New Orleans; she did go a few times to a place on Danneel [Street] called the Palm Garden, where Buddy Petit played. She thinks [John] Robichaux's band played at St. Katherine's Hall. The band at the [Pythian Temple?] Roof Garden was led by a man who later became a booking agent; a girl he sent to Chicago was Vivian Segue [sp?]. Kid Ory sometimes played (across the street from scene of interview) at the Bulls Club, which is now called the Elks Club. (Interview recorded at 1926 Harmony [Street, New Orleans]) The activities at the Bulls Club were not regular, like that at a night club, but occasional. The dances were held downstairs, and also in a paved yard.

CB knew only Ollie Powell and Glover [Compton] in Powell's band. LD does not remember Tony Jackson in Chicago. [Perhaps he was dead by then. RBA].

Peck Gorman, a Negro pianist who passed for white, worked in the District in New Orleans; when he went to Chicago, he worked for years at the Chicago Theater. The reason CB knows Gorman was colored is that he was at one time a boy friend of a cousin of CB. CB says colored musicians who work on the North Side of Chicago aren't well-known among the Negroes on the South Side; she says Fred Reed, pianist originally from Jackson, Mississippi, played with Punch [Miller] at one time; Reed now works in a white cabaret on the North Side, making a lot of money, but is not well-known on the South Side. CB says Reed worked with Punch and Francois [Moseley]. Punch was very popular on the radio at one time; his singing such songs as "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Ses" and "Marie" made him popular. Many women, white and colored, called Punch at CB's home, as Punch roomed with her. CB says Punch could have gone to the top, especially with a good manager; she says Joe Glaser wanted to manage Punch, but Punch decided against it.

CB had a phonograph in Chicago; she still has records at her home in Chicago, which she still owns; she had records by Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, Mamie Smith, and perhaps, Punch. [Cf. her statement above that she never liked blues!!] CB has had a phonograph since the Twenties. Blues were popular then. Blues singers such as Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Trixie Smith, Chippie Hill, and Sara Martin were very popular in that time. CB thinks not many men recorded during that time; Bert Williams was an exception, with his talking records [i.e., humorous records]. The first band [i.e., instrumental] recording CB remembers hearing was by King Oliver; Oliver's band had recorded "Dippermouth" and "High Society" [among others]; she heard them around 1922 or 1923; [later] she heard Armstrong's "Savory [Blues]".

When GB was small, not many people had formal instruction in music, dancing, etc.; she says one of the finest dancers, one who never got credit for his ability but who did a lot fo the things Bill Robinson did, but before Robinson, was Jack Wiggins, from Algiers; Wiggins never had formal lessons. Steve Lewis, pianist, couldn't read music, but he could play anything requested. CB says children saved their nickels to have the organ grinder play so they couls dance in the streets. Clarence Williams and his wife, Edith [i.e., Eva] Taylor, operated an amateur night on the present site of Flint-Goodridge Hospital [Louisiana Avenue between La Salle and Freret Streets]; the contestants might win a week's engagement at the Regal Theater; some would continue as entertainers. CB says tap dancing was then called buck dancing. Ghorus lines were expected to learn routines with a minimum of group and no individual instruction. CB says Ethel Waters had no formal lessons; she worked in a street fair, with a team called Jeanette and Seymour. CB mentions Neomi^{A?} [sp?] McGraw, of New Orleans, and Herbert Brown were the featured dancers with Paul Ash's orchestra; McGraw and Brown [once] hired McKinney's Cotton Pickers for their accompanying band; McGraw and Brown never had any formal training. CB thinks New Orleans is a great town for entertainment; she says a lot of people got a lot of experience just dancing in the New Orleans streets, watching others dance, etc. Herbert Brown worked for years on the Orpheum Circuit, in vaudeville.

CB worked in "ragtime concerts," which were minstrel shows, but not by that name, before she went to Chicago.

All the organ grinders were white men; CB didn't know any colored organ

grinders. RBA mentions a colored organ grinder. [Nicodemus].

Tryouts for amateur nights were accompanied by bands; Robichaux had the band at the Lyric Theater; Clarence Williams had a band, too. [Apparently she confuses the Lyric and the Regal (of Chicago)].

CB attended public school in Moss Point, Mississippi; she then attended Miller's Ferry [Alabama] Normal Industrial School; years later she took a course in public speaking at Roosevelt College, Chicago; in 1946 she took a labor course at the University of Wisconsin; she also attended the University of Chicago.

LD sings ("Don't You Leave Me Here," or "Alabama Bound," or "Alabama Gone.").

CB says Trummy Young, not an old-time [trombonist], now playing with Louis Armstrong, is from New Orleans [born in Savannah, Georgia? Cf. reference books].

The Cruzats [sp?] mentioned previously were from Pascagoula, Mississippi; they had the Pickwick Brass Band, which sometimes played in New Orleans.

End of Reel III