

VERNE STRECKFUS  
I [of 2]--Digest--Retyped  
September 22, 1960

Also present: Richard B. Allen  
Paul R. Crawford

(Recorded aboard the steamer President, at the foot of Canal Street,  
New Orleans, Louisiana)

The Streckfus brothers who are in the steamboat excursion business are Joe (the oldest), Roy (next), John (third) and Verne (the youngest). Their father started the business in 1895; he ordered built the first excursion boat used exclusively for one-day excursions; it was the steamer J.S., built in 1903. The company had been operating only in the Upper Mississippi River until 1903, when they came to New Orleans and began running harbor trips. VS has been on the boats ever since he got out of school; he worked on them during the summers before he got out of school. He was born July 27, 1895.

There has always been live music on the Streckfus boats; the first group, a trio, consisted of Charlie Mills, piano (a colored man considered by the Streckfuses the finest piano player in the business then; Mills later toured foreign countries, playing a command performance for the King of England; he returned to Chicago, where he died, when he died, four or five years ago, he was returned to his home town, Quincy, Illinois, for burial with honors as an outstanding citizen); Charlie Herzog (of Peoria, Illinois), violin; [           ?] Little, drums. (The Streckfus family were musical; Roy and Verne played violin; John and Joe the piano.)

Mills played on the boat four or five years; he then broke in Fate Marable, a piano player from Paducah, Kentucky, on calliope. Mills, the original calliope player on the boats, was the best they ever had. The calliope lessons were given Marable on trips down the river; the boat would stop between towns for two or three hours for the practice, so that the sould wouldn't disturb the public.

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Marable became a very good piano player; he also led the band on the [New Orleans] boat for many years; the band was called the "Cotton Pickers", and was in its hey-day around 1920. Marable was the first to employ Louis Armstrong [on a regular basis? for a white audience? Compare below, p.3].

The Streckfus Company was operating four boats at the time of Fate Marable and Louis Armstrong; the smaller boats had smaller bands; the excursion boats [perhaps different because they were one-day excursions?] had eight-nine piece bands, such as are used by the President now. The larger [New Orleans] boats were the J.S. (1903-1910), the Sidney (1910-1920), the Capitol (1920-1933) and the President (1933-present). Smaller boats: Quincy, St.Paul, Sidney, and Dubuque (all wooden). The bands on those boats were employed only for four or five months at a time, during the summer months when those boats were operating. (RBA mentions Ed Allen [of St. Louis]'s Golden Leaf Stompers [worked on one of the smaller boats?], but VS doesn't recognize the name.) VS says [Henry] "Red" Allen [Jr.], cornet of Algiers [Louisiana], worked with Marable on the Capitol, in New Orleans. [Warren "Baby"]Dodds also worked with Marable on the Capitol, and was a very good drummer. [George "Pops" Foster] played with Marable [Compare below, p. 6]; he couldn't read then, but he was a very good bass player anyway. Davy Jones played melophone with Marable at the same time Armstrong was in the band; Jones was very good; there hasn't been a melophone player on the boats since.

The dancers on the Sidney liked "straight" music--fox trots, waltzes and one-steps. The bands played stock arrangements, "music as it was published, not distorted by arrangements." The dancers on the Capitol liked the same kind of music; the bands would play some rumbas and other special rhythms, but the floor wouldn't fill until the "pretty" music was played again. As for the present: "The patrons that we have still like good, danceable music--pretty music, but good rhythm, it must have good rhythm."

Most of the musicians on the boats played [or could play?] by ear; Louis Armstrong couldn't read at all when he first joined the band; however, he could learn a piece by hearing it played through once. Armstrong was very bashful at first; he had never played for whites before he played on the Capitol. The Streckfuses went to Economy Hall, where Armstrong was working with [Kid] Ory and [Joe][sic] Oliver, to hear him; Armstrong was playing a cornet loaned to him by Ory. [Compare biographies]. Armstrong joined boat band; played cornet belonging to boat for over a year. He hadn't ever stood up and taken a solo until one night at Caruthersville, Missouri, when the lights were turned down low, he was told to step forward and play the solo; he was elated afterwards, so that he wanted to do it more.

Marable was featured on calliope and on organophone (which was like a calliope, except that it used air instead of steam and was not so loud; the instrument is still manufactured by a company in Muscatine, Iowa).

RBA mentions Steve Lewis and Jess Stacy. VS says Tony Catalano, of Davenport, Iowa, had the best band on the upper part of the river; Stacy and Bix Beiderbecke were in it; Catalano's band worked the boats in the summer months only. Paul Mares and Leon Roppolo, who had been working [with PM's New Orleans Rhythm Kings] at the Friars Inn [Chicago], and who had been together several years, joined a boat band in Evansville, Indiana for a summer season. RBA mentions Santo Pecora and Turk Murphy, who appeared on a special concert aboard the President [in 1955?], [Compare The Second Line Magazine], and also Georg Brunis. A good clarinetist who died a few years ago played on the boat with Piron [see Alfred Williams, reel ?]. Irving Fazola played on the boat with Earl Dantin (RBA says Blue Prestopnik [brother of Fazola] was also on the boat), who had the band for a couple of years. VS didn't think Fazola was very good at first, but changed his mind soon. (Dantin's brother, Lloyd Dantin, is mentioned.) Piron played several summers on the boat; he worked elsewhere during the winter months; Fats Pichon, with Piron a couple of years (summers) on the boat, got his start with Piron. VS doesn't remember Steve Lewis; RBA says he is supposed to have played the calliope while wearing a raincoat to protect himself from steam spray; VS says the players put cotton in their ears, as protection against volume; he says the volume could be controlled by adjusting a regulator valve. VS says good calliope players practice on the twenty-eight keys of a piano which correspond to the twenty-eight keys of a calliope; when they have worked out a good-sounding arrangement, they play it on the calliope. (The boat in St. Louis, the Admiral, has a calliope;

the afternoon player, a good pianist, gives calliope concerts which are well-attended.)

Marable had charge of getting men for the band; in the case of Louis Armstrong, however, the Streckfuses heard of him, so they got the required permit to attend a function Armstrong was playing at Economy Hall, with King Oliver, cornet, and Kid Ory, trombone; the Streckfuses knew at once that they wanted Armstrong. He was so shy then that they had to go up on [South] Rampart Street, where he lived then, to get him and escort him to the boat.

When the boat was running seven nights a week, it was very important to have a good band; the Streckfuses hired [           ? ], a Russian, who was director of music at the Saenger Theater for years, to rehearse the band; he taught them how to tune up, too; the Streckfuses didn't want the band to change its style, but they wanted the band to play waltzes and other pieces a bit more gracefully; the Russian taught them how.

Dewey Jackson played on the St. Paul for several years; after Marable had been gone for one or two seasons, Jackson brought a band down from St. Louis. Jackson is playing spot jobs around St. Louis now. He was a good cornet player, but not a very good [organizer?]. The best colored band from St. Louis was led by cornet player Charlie Creath; his band played on one of the two boats operating out of St. Louis in the summer; his band compared favorably with any band in St. Louis. Jules [Buffano] [spelling?] had the white band which

played on the deluxe boat, the J.S., in the summer; he is now with Jimmie Durante. Ralph Williams, of Chicago, also had a band which played some summers on the deluxe boat; a Chicago band was hired during the [several] summers to play the deluxe boat, while a colored band worked summers on the cheaper boat. The deluxe boat's prices were \$1.25 and up.

Burroughs Lovingood, piano player, now lives in Washington, D.C.; VS's brother (Roy) had a long-distance telephone call from him recently; he wanted to play the calliope. Lovingood lived in California before moving to Washington. Lovingood was the extra piano player with Fate Marable, with the two pianos on either end of the bandstand; Lovingood's style was more flowery than Marable's, who was more rhythmic. They were the first two-piano team with a dance band.

George "Pops" Foster worked on the boat for years; the Streckfuses bought him his first bass "of any consequence."

RBA mentions Walter "Foots" Thomas, who was with Ed Allen's band; George Foster and Johnny St. Cyr (guitar, remembered by VS) were also in that band, and Manuel Manetta (teacher of Red Allen and Emmet Hardy) played piano in it. VS remembers Pete Bocage, one of the best cornet players, who also played with the band at La Louisiane [restaurant].

End of Reel I

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Pete Bocage is mentioned.

Johnny Dodds, brother of "Baby" Dodds, was a good clarinet player; VS believes he could read; he says the Dodds brothers were later than the originals [i.e., earlier jazzmen], and their generation was beginning to read music. Fate Marable could read; his mother was a piano teacher in Paducah, Kentucky; Marable's band didn't have to read, as Marable would play it [the tune or their parts?] on the piano, and they would learn that way. The non-readers had music in front of them, and they would change it, but "it didn't mean anything."

Carlyle [check spelling] Evans, of Davenport, Iowa, succeeded [Jess] Stacy as the pianist with Tony Catalano's band on the boat. Evans later had his own band for a few years. RBA thinks Fred Flick was with [Catalano?] at one time, but VS doesn't remember the name.

Nat Story, a good trombone player, worked on the boat with Marable for three or four years; he now teaches trombone in public schools in Paducah, Kentucky.

Norman Mason played saxophone on the boat, [perhaps?] with several bands. He now lives in St. Louis; PRC says he is now playing clarinet [with Singleton Palmer's band--PRC].

VS says none of the bands recorded when they were [working?] on the boat; for one thing, the amplification systems in those days weren't very good; the first system the Streckfuses used was a battery-powered outfit, made by Western Electric; the next one, same maker, was part battery and part [external] power; the Capitol was equipped with an amplification system in 1920, the first such system in the city[of New Orleans].

VS says the drums should always be heard, to a certain extent; if the dancer can't hear the drums, they can't dance; the bass should be heard, too, and a piano player with a good left hand is an asset. The Streckfuses don't interfere with the playing of its bands now, although they used to suggest changes [personnel, arrangements, etc.] within the band; if the band doesn't play well, they are not hired again. VS likes the band currently on the boat, Phil Zito's [personnel included PRC, trombone]; ("White", or "Little") Mike Lala (son of Mike Lala [Sr.], trumpet player who worked the boat for several years), trumpet; [Hank Kmen, clarinet and] saxophone (history teacher at Tulane); [(probably) Roy Posey, clarinet and saxophone; Leland Bennett, clarinet and] saxophone (music teacher); [Henry Gustine], piano (music teacher); Pat Easterling, bass; Zito, [drums and leader]. VS, who likes Jan Garber and Guy Lombardo, says Zito's band sounds better to him than the music on Garber's latest recording.

The boat bands of recent years have played some rock-and-roll numbers, and rock-and-roll bands have been used infrequently by the boat, but that type music doesn't please the bulk of the boat's customers. The boat has built up its business with "straight" music, catering to people in their twenties and older; the boat people don't want kids [, i.e., teen agers] as regular customers, as they and the music they prefer drive away the older customers.

RBA tells VS about Fate Marable's recording on Okeh; RBA names the tunes and some of the personnel. RBA also mentions Dewey Jackson's

"Capitol Blues" recording, which RBA presumes to be named for the S.S. Capitol. VS says Jackson played on the Capitol, which was laid up shortly afterward.

Eugene Sedric (with Fats Waller for several years) was a very good saxophone and clarinet player who worked with Fate Marable's band on the boat.

Charlie Creath, who played on the St. Paul in St. Louis, specialized in [i.e., emphasized] rhythm. The boat did a good business because Creath's band played the best music in town. In later years, Creath's lip went bad, but he kept a good second cornet player with him, which enabled Creath to play only on the numbers which featured himself; the people still came to hear Charlie Creath. He moved to Chicago [Steiner interview?] later and got out of music entirely. Creath played blues on the boat; he could really rock the crowd. Neither Creath or Dewey Jackson used mutes much; Jackson, a loud player, featured himself quite a bit. His loudness was one of the drawbacks of his band. RBA mentions Floyd Campbell, drummer and singer, perhaps with Jackson and perhaps also with Creath; VS thinks he remembers the name.

[A.J.] Piron was the only violinist on the boat, except Charlie Herzog, who played on the J.S. in the early days [see Reel I]. Before electrical amplification, the violin couldn't be heard above the band; if it could be heard, the band had to be so soft that people weren't able to dance to it.

Creath's musicians were not outstanding; he had trained them to play for him, and they wouldn't have been good for anyone else.

VS doubts that Irving "Mousie" Randolph (drums or trumpet?) ever played on the boat.

The [Streckfus] summer excursion boats operated in the upper Mississippi River as far as St. Paul [Minnesota], and on the upper Ohio River as far as Pittsburgh [,Pennsylvania]; they would move from town to town, remaining a day or two at each stop; when they reached the terminus (e.g., St. Paul), they would remain about ten days. They would move up and down the river all summer long, covering the same territory. The towns where they stopped were about thirty miles apart; they would run a day excursion and a night excursion, then move to the next town. The excursions were advertised in newspapers, on posters and through organizations, mostly women's clubs, and mostly in schools; the day trips with such groups aboard would go from one town to another; the night trips didn't stop anywhere.

The winters were spent in New Orleans; there has been a boat in New Orleans during the winter for the past fifty-seven years. Years ago, the boat would leave New Orleans during the summer, as there was no business then; tourists didn't come to New Orleans during the summer until Huey Long had good roads built in the state. The summer business [on the boat] is now equal to the winter business. The