

Also present: William Russell, Ralph Collins.

Willie Madison Pierce, born Goodson, has three living sisters, out of a total of seven [all girls] children in the family. Sister Sadie, the oldest living sister, lives in Detroit; Edna, next in age to Sadie, lives in Florida, as does Ida, the baby sister. Billie Pierce was born in Marianna, Florida (not in Pensacola), June 8, 1907.

De De Pierce was born February 18, 1904, on St. Ann and [he thinks] Rocheblave [Streets[, [near?] what was called the Indian Market--near Iberville [Street?]. [Confusing here.] None of his family were musical. When De De was 17 years old, [Malisca?], a female cousin of his who played in an all-girl band, gave him an old trumpet; he began playing it by ear, but soon began to take a few lessons from Kid Rena. De De says his knowledge of reading music began when he started taking lessons from [Paul] Chaligny, an old-time musician, who was about 60 years old at that time. De De says Chaligny had been the leader of the old Onward Brass Band, which functioned in the [late] 1800's. Chaligny lived on St. Claude, between Dumaine and St. Philip [Streets]. De De never played an instrument other than trumpet. Answering William Russell, De De says he liked some trumpet players he heard; he always liked Louis [Armstrong]. Answering William Russell, he says he heard brass bands, with men such

as "Wooden Joe" Nicholas, [Papa] Celestin and Kid Rena; he heard the Eureka [Brass Band] (which is still playing), the old Tuxedos [Original Tuxedo Brass Band]. He knew Manuel Perez, having been in his home often with Perez's sons; he never worked with Perez. De De replies that he never heard Joe ["King"] Oliver. De De heard Freddy Keppard, and knows his brother, Louis Keppard, the guitarist [who now plays sousaphone]. De De answers that his first job was with Arnold DePass, an old-time drummer, who used to get a lot of fraternity and organizations work along St. Charles Avenue. Other members of the DePass band at the time De De worked with him were Bill Phillips, drummer [how many drummers working at the same time?], George Stewart, clarinet and sax, (BP prompting here) "one of the Daves, like Johnny Dave," banjo; Reese Cobette, sax (a fat man). De De answers William Russell, saying he didn't know or hear Bunk Johnson until later years, when he met him in Lake Charles [La.]. One other member of that band was a brother-in-law of Billie Pierce, Abby "Chinee" Foster, drummer. De De says Bunk was playing fine then, and De De answers William Russell's question, saying that Bunk had false teeth then. It is deduced that De De knew Bunk before the Pierces married; Billie Pierce says they have been married 24 years, having been married March 28 [1935].

Billie Pierce answers William Russell's question; she says all her family were musical, that her father and mother and all her sisters played piano, that nieces and nephews played piano, and that some of them also took up other instruments, too. She left her home town [or Pensacola?] when she was 15 years old; she and her sister, Edna, went on the road, playing music. Billie Pierce never had any lessons on the piano; she, as well as the others, picked up the knowledge of piano playing from their parents. Billie Pierce says the first tune she ever picked out was a blues; she was still too young to talk very plainly, but she would also sing the words, which told about the only man she had loved in her life, she loved him so much she stole him from his wife. Answering William Russell, Billie Pierce says Sadie and Edna are older than she is, and that Ida is younger, the baby girl. Billie Pierce tells William Russell that her parents never played with bands, that they mostly played around church, Baptist in this instance (De De is Catholic.). The name of the show Billie Pierce and her sister Edna joined was the Mighty Wiggle Carnival, owned by Jack Shaffer [sp?]; the show traveled Florida, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee, but Billie Pierce only worked the show in Florida (She names Florida towns she played with the show--Miami, Cedar Key, Micanopy, Kendall, Orlando, Ocala, Wildwood, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Daytona [Beach] and Lakeland--among others.).

Billie Pierce played organ in the colored minstrel show; Edna danced and also played with the band; sometimes Billie Pierce would also sing and dance. Answering William Russell, Billie Pierce says Edna has been to New Orleans several times; De De says Edna worked 4 or 5 months steady with his band, in the French Quarter at The Cat and The Fiddle, which was on Dauphine; it was a block further away from Canal than the Cocoanut Grove, which used to be called the Pig Pen. William Russell says [Alphonse] Picou worked there, and Billie Pierce says she and Picou worked together at the Pig Pen. William Russell asks Billie Pierce when she first came to New Orleans; she says she was working with the Nighthawks Orchestra, in Birmingham [Alabama], when her sister, Sadie, then working on the lake steamer Madison, became ill and asked her to play in her place. Sadie's husband was then married to "Bebe Chinee" [Abbey Foster], drummer, who was also in the band. Billie Pierce tells De De that Reuben Oliver was not in that band, that he took over the boat job after Sadie had left, later. Billie Pierce came to New Orleans and played with the band until Sadie was well; others in the band were "Derby," sax player, and Buddy Petit, cornet. Billie Pierce was ready to return to Birmingham and the Nighthawks when she met Lawrence Toca [Martin], who was getting together a band to play a few nights across the lake, probably in Mandeville; Billie Pierce worked those few nights, and then returned

to Birmingham. Billie Pierce doesn't remember the name of the leader of the Nighthawks. From Birmingham, Billie Pierce went back home to Florida, where she eventually joined the Mack's Merry Makers band; which traveled around, playing; all of the personnel were from Florida, with the exceptions of Mack and the trombonist, George Morris, who was from Mobile [Alabama]. When Billie Pierce left Mack, she joined Joe People's band, out of Orlando, Florida.

William Russell asks Billie Pierce about good pianists she heard in Florida; Billie Pierce says there were two women, Willie Woods and Florida Beck, who could really play. (They played the style Billie Pierce plays.) There is a woman named <sup>Josie</sup>~~Sofie~~ living over the river [in New Orleans] who played fine piano, but she had recently told Billie Pierce that she doesn't play any more. All the pianists played with bands, usually at private parties and occasions of that nature, rather than in clubs. Joe Jesse was a good trumpet player; "Teddy Bear" was a good drummer. "Buttsy" Douglas had a good band. Answering William Russell, Billie Pierce says that the bands today are the same as the old ones, playing the same kind of music. [She misunderstood his question; he had asked her to compare New Orleans bands with Florida bands.] Billie Pierce answers William Russell, saying that the Florida bands and the Birmingham band didn't sound like the New Orleans bands, that the New Orleans bands always had

something that the others didn't; she replies that the people [in Florida] liked New Orleans bands and that they still do. She says there were many New Orleans bands coming to Florida, that there would be about two each week; Buddy Petit worked there [in Pensacola] sometimes. Billie Pierce says Charlie Segar was another good pianist, as well as trumpet player; he was the husband of Nellie Lutchter, and was killed in an automobile accident; [they?] were from Lake Charles, where De De once had a band. Billie Pierce says Segar worked with her some, and that he would play trumpet while she played piano; then he would play piano.

After De De's tenure with Arnold DePass, he played with Kid Rena, who taught him a lot; De De played on advertising wagons with and/or for Rena; when Rena had two engagements for the same time, he would split his band, giving De De some men and taking some with him. In his studies with Paul Chaligny, De De used the Otto Langey method book; Chaligny taught strictly from [written] music. Rena did not teach from books. De De also played with Buddy [Petit], and would be given the extra jobs Buddy had, the same as with Rena. De De played with traveling bands, in Mississippi, Alabama and Florida.

Billie Pierce shows some photographs, one taken in front of her home in Florida; one of the men in the picture is Charlie Pearson [sp?], sax player, from Milton, Florida; the drummer, R. D., is now a big-time

undertaker in Billie Pierce's hometown [Pensacola]; De De is the cornetist. De De and Billie Pierce met when De De was working with sister Sadie. Billie Pierce says she had probably seen De De around, perhaps had even had drinks with him, but she did not pay any attention to him, until one day when she went home [to Sadie's] and met De De [either he was going or coming]; she asked Sadie who he was, and was informed that he was Sadie's trumpet player. When Sadie assured Billie Pierce the De De was not her boy friend, Billie Pierce asked Sadie to tell him that she "liked the hell out of him." Sadie told Billie Pierce that Billie Pierce did not mean any one man any good, and Billie Pierce said she meant De De some good. Billie Pierce and De De worked in adjacent blocks on Decatur Street. Billie Pierce said she would tell De De she liked him, if Sadie wouldn't do it. One night, when Sadie was not feeling well and gone home, De De came to take Billie Pierce home (usually Sadie would come by for Billie Pierce). Billie Pierce says she wouldn't take a cab home that morning, inferring that she didn't want to get home too fast, because of the company. Billie Pierce told De De she liked him, so they started going together. Three weeks afterwards, they decided to get married; Sadie told Billie Pierce she shouldn't get married to De De if she wasn't going to settle down, because De De was a fine fellow; Billie Pierce told Sadie she had decided to settle down, because she had met the man she

loved. De De, at the present, agrees that Billie Pierce's story is true, and says that they have had a lot of fun in the years they have been together, and that they have always been together, even before he lost his eyesight.

When De De left New Orleans [before he met Billie Pierce], he was with Paul Barnes (brother of Emile "Mehly" Barnes); the band traveled Louisiana and part of Texas. At Lake Charles, Nellie Lutchter joined the band. De De doesn't recall that he ever met or heard of Lawrence Duhe, clarinetist. He says he didn't do what could be called "playing" with Bunk Johnson, but he has sat in with him. Answering William Russell, De De says his favorite trumpet player was Kid Rena, that his style was like De De's (De De says he has taken Rena's style almost exactly); Rena was a fast-fingering player, and played very high pitches. Asked to compare Rena with Buddy Petit, De De says Rena played a better-class of music, that Petit played mostly blues and the like. De De knew and played with Chris Kelly; his style was strictly blues, and he played more blues than any man in New Orleans.

End of Reel I



Also present: William Russell, Ralph Collins.

De De says it was known that Chris Kelly could play the blues with such feeling that he could actually start a general fight among the people at the dance where he was playing. De De says he played with Kelly, now and then, when Kelly needed extra men. Answering William Russell, De De says Kelly used mutes, mostly "rubber wa-wa mutes" [plumbers' plungers]; Kelly seldom used another mute in conjunction with the plunger [such as a straight mute, with plunger outside]. De De says Kelly would sometimes use a tin can for a mute. Answering William Russell, De De says Buddy Petit was another one who used mutes, such as tin cans, etc., for mutes, but that Kid Rena hardly ever used any kind of mute; Rena was noted for his fast fingering. William Russell asks about personnel of Chris Kelly's band around the time De De played with him; De De says Albert Glenn [bass] played with Kelly a lot, and also played with Rena; it depended on who had the most work. William Russell asks about the highest-note man around; De De says Louis Dumaine was pretty fair. De De tells William Russell that Buddy Petit did not play as high as Kid Rena, that De De would not consider him a high-note man. When asked the first time he heard Louis Armstrong, De De says it was not in the early years, but it was after Louis had become famous, and had returned to New Orleans on a tour [probably in the early 1930's]. De De didn't ever hear Louis in

brass bands; he says he remembers hearing [Papa] Celestin, Manuel Perez and others of that era. Answering William Russell, De De says he played with street bands, that he was the leader for 15 years or more, of the number one band which played for the Jefferson City Buzzards. William Russell comments that the Young Tuxedo Brass Band played for the Carnival parade of the Buzzards this year, with one other band also playing. De De says he heard the Buzzards had used a white band once, but William Russell says the colored bands played this year. De De was not usually a leader; he usually played with various street bands [as a sideman].

Billie Pierce shows pictures of places she has played, several of them in Pensacola. Billie Pierce shows a photograph by [Ralston] Crawford, taken at a rehearsal at the Apex Apartments on Laharpe Street; some of the members of band were Billie Pierce, De De, Emile Barnes and Emile Riley [No. Guitarist is Albert Fortier, ~~the~~ cf. photograph.]. Billie Pierce shows a picture of Stell's Club Playtime, Bunkie, Louisiana, where Billie Pierce and De De worked in the early 1950's [check]. Billie Pierce shows a picture of Ida, her youngest sister; she shows another of her oldest sister, Sadie, and her husband, who live in Detroit. De De says even the oldest sister, Della, who died, played piano (Edna is the oldest living sister [confusing]). Billie Pierce and De De have been to New York City, not to play, but

on vacation. Billie Pierce shows a picture of De De at about 2 years old. Speaking of musical heritages, De De says he believes he does remember his mother's saying that her father played flute.

William Russell asks when the Pierces started playing at Luthjen's; De De says a long time, but not long enough to own it. Billie Pierce says they played there about 10 years [off and on], beginning with 4 nights a week, cutting to 3 per week, and then down to the present 2 nights per week [with another band]. De De answers William Russell, saying the job was always non-union; he answers William Russell, saying that he belonged to the union in years past, for the period of one month (he belongs to the union now), but he dropped out because it seemed that the elected officials were getting all of the work.

Billie Pierce shows more pictures, including one of King's Motor Court in Panama City, Florida, dated 1944, where both Pierces have played. There is also a card from Mexico, from John Bernard Churches. Naked baby. De De's family (in part--De De says there were 9[including parents?] in all).

De De answers various William Russell questions. He says he has always liked jazz. He says he knew Manuel Perez through Perez's sons; he says Perez was a "straight" man, and powerful, like Joe Nicholas, in his playing. De De says Perez taught him a little, when De De would be at Perez's house, and De De and Perez's sons would be going

over a piece. De De tells William Russell he liked (Alphonse) Picou as a clarinetist, in the old-time jazz. De De says he played with "Big Eye Louis" Nelson, and that Big Eye had what was called beautiful "tonation", which means beautiful tone. De De says Big Eye played with them at Luthjen's for a while, when they were just beginning the job, and that Big Eye had been there before them; De De says "Mehly" [Barnes] played there long before they did, too, and names a clarinetist, Melvin Frank (De De and Billie Pierce say he is dead) as his source for that information. Billie Pierce explains how she and De De got the Luthjen's job; she says Barnes and Lawrence [Toca], who had the job, couldn't get along [with each other or with Luthjen's?]; Billie Pierce thinks that her sister [Sadie] left that job to go to work on a boat, and the sister sent Edna Francis to play piano in her place. [Apparently, Billie Pierce took her sister's place on the boat job], and when she would get off work on Sunday evening, she would go to Luthjen's to sit in and have her fun; Melvin Frank, in charge of hiring, was having trouble . . . so the old man [Mr.Luthjen's?] turned the work over to De De, who hired Billie Pierce to work with him.

William Russell asks who Billie Pierce's favorite singer was; Billie Pierce says Bessie Smith. Billie Pierce says she also worked with Ida Cox, but she didn't think so much of her singing; Billie Pierce also didn't like Sara Martin's singing. She says

Bessie Smith was the only one she liked, but she amends that statement to include Ma Rainey; she says Bessie and Ma Rainey were the two best blues singers. Comparing the two, Billie Pierce says Ma Rainey's voice was deeper and courser, that she was powerful, but she didn't sing with the feeling that Bessie Smith did. Billie Pierce says the first song Bessie sang when Billie Pierce worked with her was "Whoa, Tillie, Won't You Take Your Time;" this first was at the Belmont Theater in Pensacola. Billie Pierce says that she was in the chorus of the Bessie Smith company; Clarence Williams, her regular accompaniest, became ill, so Billie Pierce took his place at the piano. Billie Pierce tells William Russell that Ma Rainey's show was more like a minstrel show than anything else. Billie Pierce heard Ma Rainey in Florida. She says she traveled with Bessie Smith only in Florida; she didn't leave Florida with any of the shows she worked; when she finished the tour of her section of the country she would go home. She says whenever a show at the Belmont Theater would get in a pinch for a piano player, Mr. Cummings, the manager, would send for a Goodson girl, not caring which one he got, just so long as a Goodson played the show, Billie Pierce mentions that a man who reminds her of Joe Rena was a drummer on the show [Bessie Smith?]; he was named Gus. De De and Billie Pierce exclaim about the odd position of Joe Rena's drums; apparently the snare drum was mounted rather higher

than is usual. Billie Pierce and De De agree that Joe Rena died of food poisoning; William Russell didn't think he was dead [Joe Rena is still alive, and is the high potentate or minister or something of the Jehovah's Witnesses; he is at least head of that church located on Jackson Avenue at about Liberty Street--church is being re-built at this time, June, 1964].

De De answers William Russell's questions about favorites. De De says Arnold DePass was a good drummer; he used an overhead foot pedal, too. De De likes Sunny Henry and Ike Robinson on trombone. Billie Pierce assured De De that Robinson is not dead, telling him she saw his wife recently, and the wife told her Ike was still alive, although so fat he doesn't get around, and, she thinks, his eyes are bad. De De asks who the sax player is who worked with him in the [Young?] Tuxedo and on St. Claude and St. Bernard; the sax player's father also played [trombone?]; one of them had bad feet; the younger sax player lived near [Louis] Keppard.

De De and Billie Pierce answer William Russell, saying Sadie [Billie Pierce's sister] played with Celestin's Tuxedo [Orchestra], Buddy Petit, [Isaiah] "Ike" Morgan, among others. The sister Edna, who worked in show business mostly, did not work with any New Orleans bands except De De's; Edna would be here sometimes between shows; she worked a long time with De De at The Cat and The

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Fiddle, then went back with a show. The younger sister [Ida] did not play in New Orleans; she only visited. Sadie was in New Orleans a long time.

End of Reel II