

down near Rolling Fork?

JOHNSON: Well, this is just what I heard years ago, it was at Rolling Fork or Delta City? Down in there somewhere.

MILLER: Down in that area.

JOHNSON: They didn't allow any Italians in there for a long time -- because they misused this Italian or this Italian family or something and the Italian killed one or two of them so they killed that whole Italian family down there. They didn't allow any more of them in there, for a long time they wouldn't allow Itailians down there.

MILLER: And they killed the whole family?

JOHNSON: They killed the whole family.

MILLER: Did the law do it or just --- ?

JOHNSON: I don't know whether it was the law or, you know, everybody is law when they get ready, when they get mad.

MILLER: Yes.

JOHNSON: It was a long time before, right in this settlement, Italians, Jews, Assyrians, and Chinamen, none of them wasn't recognized as no white people, because they'd go so far with them and then after that you had to remember who you were. Sometime they'd go along with an Italian a certain distance or go along with an Assyrian. All of them a way back was right in the colored communities. They ran their business there and raised their families and when they got rich then spread it out and tried to get with white people. The Chinese is the only ones that really done something about trying to

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live in white settlements, and they are the onliest ones - in fact, they are the last ones that got into the white communities, because years ago I know they wouldn't allow a Chinese in a white barbershop.

MILLER: Oh, really?

JOHNSON: No, indeed, no more than they would a black person.

MILLER: Yes.

JOHNSON: The Chinese had to go to a colored barber-shop and, you know, they've got a Chinese cemetery, they don't bury no whites up there. They had a Chinese school up on Nelson.

MILLER: Yes, I know about that.

JOHNSON: You know from that they didn't allow them in no other place where white people went.

MILLER: Yes.

JOHNSON: I never forget the tale they told ---  
A Chinaman had plenty of money and a white fellow would hang around that place with him and he wanted the white guy to go to Memphis with him and he was going to buy something and you know how Chinese don't understand, and they have confidence in some people and they ain't got too much confidence in nobody much, so this white fellow went with him and so he was going to pay the hotel bill, and so they went to the Peabody Hotel so the white man said they wanted to register for a room. The man said, "You can register but you've got to take that out of here", talking about the Chinaman. He said, "Take that out of here."

NOTICE

The Chinaman had to go somewhere else so this fellow went with him to find somewhere to stay, but it wasn't against him, but the Chinese had to act just like he was a colored person. Well, he's not a white person, he was a yellow race, and of course, this Civil Rights is the best thing that ever happened. It give everybody their rights and --- That's one thing about Carter, you know, the human rights. I think everybody are supposed to be treated alike.

MILLER: Yes, we're human.

JOHNSON: Like humans. That's right, but I don't think it will ever get to the place where everybody is going to be treated exactly alike, because I'm not speaking about America, I'm speaking about all races.

MILLER: In the world.

JOHNSON: In the world, because they all is got a different system and they all wants to be over the weaker person and want to have the upper hand on him, so you can just look for that to be going on from now on until Christ comes back here and takes this world over. Now, you take the Bible speaks about this last war is going to be and no man can stop it. I believe this nuclear problem is the one that is going to get rid of us.

MILLER: Get us in trouble. Well, it could.

JOHNSON: I was looking at TV, all these different countries is getting that kind of power. I guess that there's no place that doesn't have it, and some of them are going to

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use it, and you start one to using it the whole gang is going to spread out and we're going to start that big war that we're expecting.

MILLER: Well, that'll be the end.

JOHNSON: That'll be the end of everybody. That's the reason I say I don't believe it's ever going to be right or everybody is going to be treated alike and the Bible speaks about this peace. There ain't going to be no peace. We're going to have to live just the best we can until we leave here.

MILLER: That's what we have to do.

JOHNSON: That's what we have to do. People are worried about the communist people and mighty near every country here has got some communists in it so you can just see ---

MILLER: Of course, the communist aren't the end of the world.

JOHNSON: No, but if they start this nuclear war it's going to be the end of the world because it's going to be a war that's going to kill everybody that's big enough to die.

MILLER: O.K., that's too big a subject for us.

Now, I want to go back to the days of the traveling shows and to the days of the operas at the Opera House.

JOHNSON: That's some good days.

MILLER: Now, you were born in 1902 but you did go to the theatre a lot when you were a child.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. And when I was a grown man. You know, the last opera here was back here in the twenties.

MILLER: Where did you all sit in the Opera House?

JOHNSON: In the top area or balcony. We called it the "Buzzard Roost."

MILLER: That's where the colored people had to sit.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Now, on the second floor, half of that section was for whites and if a colored fellow could pay the price he could sit up there too, but there was a dividing line between that and if you sat up there you could see opera better than from up high where you'd have to look down. You'd have to have binoculars or something to look down. Now on this stage - now you take A. L. G. Fields shows - Minstrels used to come there too and they had the Operas - We had A. L. G. Fields to come here and some other white minstrel and his name was White. Who was that fellow?

MILLER: Lasses White. Yes, he used to come.

JOHNSON: They had a show to come there too. We used to go watch all that. But the main part of it was down on the first floor, down there the people could really enjoy the minstrel and the operas - And, of course, back there when they had the hacks, there was a little stand - you had to go to order your hack. I don't know what that man's name is that had that stand --

MILLER: It wasn't Mr. Lep Lewy, was it?

JOHNSON: No.

MILLER: It wasn't one of the Colliers?

JOHNSON: I'm going to ask Mr. Leroy Wall. He knows

NOTICE

that guy. A little old stand, it wasn't no size --

MILLER: I've seen a picture of it. Did it have a telephone in it?

JOHNSON: I don't know about a telephone in it. I know you had to come there to get a hack.

MILLER: And the hack would take you to the -- ?

JOHNSON: It'd take you to where you wanted to go. If you wanted to go to the train, or if you'd have to come from your house to go telephone, it would come to your house just like taxies.

MILLER: Yes.

JOHNSON: A guy would drive them horses --

( End of Tape 3 )

MILLER: So the hacks were just like taxies?

JOHNSON: That's right.

MILLER: They were driven by horses.

JOHNSON: They were just horse driven.

MILLER: And they were both black drivers and white drivers?

JOHNSON: They were driven by both black and white and they'd go around from place to place just like any other taxi and things like that.

MILLER: They'd meet the trains?

JOHNSON: They'd meet all the trains, steamboats and anywhere you wanted to get transportation. They'd come and they'd take you. I know a lot of them'd go over to the landing there

and meet the steamboats and carry people to them. They'd travel by boat then just like they would by train. People would go to Vicksburg or New Orleans or to Tallulah, Louisiana, or just wherever you wanted to go on the boat.

MILLER: And there were a lot of traveling salesmen.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, a good many.

MILLER: And they brought big cases of samples around with them.

JOHNSON: Big sample cases and large trunks, these big wardrobe trunks. They were regular salesmen's trunks or something. They had to have special transfer wagons to haul those things around, and a colored fellow hauling the biggest load of the trunks and they didn't know his name, but they called him "High-Pockets". He stuttered a lot. It was just comical to see him at the train, and they'd call the hotels the Cowan Hotel, Rest Haven, Muffuletto, or somewhere else, then they had a place for them at Greenville Inn. You know, at the Paxton building, that was some kind of a cheap rate hotel too. All those places you'd have to go there, and then they had a lot of boarding houses too. People would mostly eat there - Mrs. Crouch and Mrs. Hackett and all those different places. They were boarding houses. Those hotels and things, that was where most of the salesmen stayed.

MILLER: Now, I know they had lots of operas and plays and all kinds of shows at the Opera House but up on Nelson Street Mr. Archie McBride ---

MILLER: Mr. Archie McKay. What was the name of the place he had?

JOHNSON: The Royal Palm Hall. He ran that thing. I don't know who owned it. Archie McKay used to run the picture show machine there and he also looked after the Merry-go-round. He and this Shirley Lee, Shirley Lee worked around the picture show too, him and McKay, so they put this Merry-go-round down there and Archie McKay sold the tickets for that and Shirley would take them up on it.

MILLER: Now it used to be down on Deaton Street.

JOHNSON: Deaton and Hinds.

MILLER: And why did they move it up to Nelson?

JOHNSON: Well, I guess Mr. Wineman decided to put it down in the colored section of town.

MILLER: Yes. So the colored children could enjoy it.

JOHNSON: And they would ride it and they kept it down there several years, before they taken it back to Hinds and Deaton. In later years Harry Crockett bought it, and he kept it for several years. He ran it on Walthall and Delesseps, and after he died his widow sold it. I don't know, I guess she sold or gave it away. The Community Center's got it now, but that's the starting of the Merry-go-round and it still looks like it is in good shape.

MILLER: Yes, it is. What kind of shows did Mr. McKay have up there other than picture shows?

JOHNSON: He would have picture shows, minstrel shows

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and then they had dances there too.

MILLER: Did they get any good bands in?

JOHNSON: Yes. Sometimes they'd get in good bands but back in those years we had mostly home bands - a fellow called "Rabbit", George McMillan. He had a string band.

MILLER: Is that the one they called Rabbit's Band?

JOHNSON: It might have been Rabbitt's Band. We called him "Rabbit" but he was a little low fellow, his name was George McMillan, and he had a little string band and he'd play at a lot of dances. At all those lodges and things, he'd play for them, because he had me playing drums for him.

Then we had a fellow named Prince McCoy. He had a band and so we had a lot of local bands.

MILLER: What kind of a band was his?

JOHNSON: He had a regular orchestra, but of course, "Rabbit" could play anything. He could play a violin and mandolin, banjo, guitar, trombone, he was a whole band.

MILLER: Were there any other local bands?

JOHNSON: Well, let's see ---

MILLER: Winchester Davis wasn't playing, he was too young.

JOHNSON: No, he wasn't grown. Well, I'll tell you this McBride, her daddy, he had a band too.

MILLER: It was Mr. Gray, wasn't it?

JOHNSON: Yes, Mr. Ed Gray, he had a band. You see, those were local bands. Well, we had a fellow named Holiday

NOTICE

came in here, back in the twenties. He had a good band but he didn't stay here long. He called them the "California Serenaders" and he left and went to California too. He had a real good band ---

MILLER: What was the names of the other bands? Do you remember any of the other names?

JOHNSON: This one by the name of the man who owned it, Prince McCoy, he had a band, and ---

MILLER: Ed Gray.

JOHNSON: And Ed Gray and they'd get a bunch of fellows together ---

MILLER: And all the dances were at Royal Palm Hall?

JOHNSON: No, the Royal Palm Hall was there but in my boyhood days we had dances at the Pythian Hall and Casa Calvo. There was a family here by the name of Casa Calvo and they built a Hall on the corner of Redbud and Nelson, a big two-story place there. We'd have dances there - upstairs.

MILLER: I think I know the place.

JOHNSON: It's not there now, it's torn down.

MILLER: Yes.

MILLER: And what was the other place - the Pythian Hall?

JOHNSON: The Pythian Hall. The Knights of Pythian.

MILLER: Oh, the Knights of Pythian. That's up on ---

JOHNSON: Nelson and Cately.

MILLER: That's where you had your dances.

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JOHNSON: And besides that, the Catholic Auditorium. The school kids would go there and then we had dances at the high school, Coleman High.

MILLER: At Coleman High.

JOHNSON: I used to slick that floor a many a night when we had dances there. So that's where we had all of our dances and everything, but of course, and I don't say that we were segregated, but the nicer class of people didn't go to the Pythian Hall but would go to the High School and Catholic Auditorium for dances, but that was the nice class but now if you had a "come one, come all", and you'd sell a ticket to anybody to go to dances. A lot of times you're going to have a fight there or something, but at these nice dances we didn't have all that.

MILLER: Yes. Now, some traveling shows came in and were on those lots by the Royal Palms ---

JOHNSON: No they were'nt on the lot, they showed in the Hall.

MILLER: How about that wild west show?

JOHNSON: The Wild West show was out on Redwood Street which is Orange Street now.

MILLER: Was that Buffalo Bill?

JOHNSON: Buffalo Bill and the Wils West Show.

JOHNSON: They called it the 101 Ranch, I believe. They had a lot of Indians and Cowboys shooting. They didn't show anything fancy like these circuses. They showed trick-roping

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and all that.

MILLER: Yes. Well did they have dog and pony shows too?

JOHNSON: Well, they had dog and pony shows but not in that particular show. They had several dog and pony shows. Not as many as they had circuses. They had more circus shows than they did anything.

MILLER: Where did they have Lasses White and Rabbit Foot?

JOHNSON: Lasses White was in the Opera House and this other guy ---

MILLER: Rabbit Foot.

JOHNSON: No, Rabbit Foot was in a tent show, was a tent minstrel.

MILLER: Didn't we have Silas Green?

JOHNSON: Silas Green tent minstrels. He was a real good --- We had, let's see, I'll name the tent minstrels: We had Silas Green and Sugar Foot Green, we had Rabbit Foot, the Huntington Minstrels and we had the Alabama Minstrels and A. G. Allen. That's all tent minstrels. Now, I thought of another Opera Minstrel. I can't think of the name of it, but we had three or four different, you know, at the Opera House. Now, you take, other shows when they'd go further up north they had shows inside the auditorium but they didn't show in tents, but when they were down here they just showed in tents.

MILLER: Because the weather was good.

JOHNSON: Put them up in tents and stay one night and go on the next night. They didn't do like carnivals, carnivals stayed a week. I remember up in North Carolina we saw a carnival that'd been stranded there for about three weeks. It had rained 'm out - they were waiting for a good night. I think they gotten bit there too.

MILLER: Yes, I'd imagine they can't operate every night there.

JOHNSON: Now, we come in there --- We was in there one night and gone the next night.

MILLER: Now when you were young you used to meet the trains when the big bands would come in here for dances?

JOHNSON: Yes, we had to help them to get the instruments down to the Club house, the Elysian Club, because that's the only Club I ever kept up with, you know. Orchestras and things.

MILLER: Do you remember any of those orchestras?

JOHNSON: I can't think of the name. They had some real good orchestras down here - They had several good ones, because I met one or two of the guys --

MILLER: Were they black orchestras?

JOHNSON: No, they were white orchestras, they wasn't no black orchestras. Only black orchestras come in here was "Duke Ellington", Fletcher Henderson. They all played at the Hall.

MILLER: At Coleman - At the Pythian Hall?

JOHNSON: Yes. I think Cab Calloway came.

MILLER: I think he did. I think I was there. I think it was at Coleman.

JOHNSON: I've seen Duke Ellington and I've seen Fletcher Henderson and I don't think Armstrong ever played here.

MILLER: I don't think so either.

Now, they came and played for the colored community but they let white people come?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. They'd let anybody come. See, but now you take there's a difference in our affairs, we'd be glad to have white guests but we never could go to the white affairs but we could just stand up and look. If we went at all we'd have to get some place to peep in but the colored people always had a certain amount of white guests and we were always glad to have them there because it would increase the, you know, the money that was coming in. But, I know, a lot of white people used to go around, you know, prominent people, they would go to something, a band that was a high class band.

MILLER: Yes.

JOHNSON: White people were very interested in ---

MILLER: Yes, and liked jazz music. We always grew up liking jazz music.

JOHNSON: Well, the first place I ever saw Louis Armstrong down in New Orleans. I think that was in 1919. I saw him down there and he had a jazz band and he played jazz music all his days.

MILLER: Yes.

JOHNSON: He was the world's best. He got to be a millionaire, I think.

MILLER: And probably one of the most well known artists in the world, he'd been everywhere.

JOHNSON: Now, let's see, what's the name of that guy that plays the piano so good? Was it Duke Ellington?

MILLER: He's good.

JOHNSON: No, there's one other guy, a piano player, I can't think of his name. They used to come to Greenville a whole lot and they were real good musicians.

( End of Interview )

(Transcribed by Vivian Broom)

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By V.B.

INDEX  
OF JOHN WESLEY JOHNSON  
BY SHERILYN D. ALLEN

Adams, John Dobree, 86  
Air Base, 20, 73  
Airdale (Road), 20  
Alabama Minstrels, the, 105  
Alexander Street, mentioned, 50  
Alfalfa Mill. 49, 50  
Allen, A. G., 105. See also Minstrels  
Allison, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mrs.), 8  
Armstrong, Louis, 107  
Ashley, W. B., 65  
Atlas, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mr.), 16  
B. F. Goodrich, 25  
Bailey, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mr.), 23  
Bailey, Florence, 23  
Bailey's Eat Shop, 23  
Bands, 102  
Bass (School), 10  
Bayou Addition, 42  
Beaver Lake, 24  
Beckwith, Delay, 81  
Bell, Bernice, 68  
Bell, Percy (Mrs. ), 52  
Bell, Sam, 68

Belle Aire, 52  
 Bigleben, the, train, 88  
 Black Bayou, 32, 33  
 Bolivar County, 93  
 Bootlegging, 54, 55, 59  
 Bourbon, road, paving of, 32  
 Brill, Bernie, owner, men's clothing store, 22  
 Britton, Abe (Mrs.), 11  
 Broadway (Street), 8, 20, 46, 52, 66  
 Broom, \_\_\_\_\_ (Miss), 25, 28  
 "Buzzard Roost", 98  
 C and G, 41, 74, 85  
 Cajuns, 12  
 "California Serenaders", 103. See also Bands  
 Calloway, Cab, 107  
 Campbell, Guy, 89  
 Campbell, Ky, 89  
 Cannon, Anne (Mrs.), 8  
 Cannon, Bob, Mayor, 7-9, 26, 46, 47, 53, 58  
 Cannon, Louise, 10  
 Carnivals, 106  
 Carter, Hodding (Mrs.), 13  
 Casa Calvp, 103  
 Catholic Auditorium, 104  
 Central Street, mentioned, 67

Chicago (Illinois), mentioned, 10

Chinese, discrimination, 94-96

Chinese groceries, 19

Chinese Laundry, 21, 22. See also Hop Lee's

Chung, Y. T., 22

Churchill, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mrs.), 60

Church's Chicken, mentioned, 60

Circuses, 105

City Hall, 52

Civil Rights, 69, 81. See also Equal Rights League

Coal-oil, 50

Cohn, \_\_\_\_\_, grocer, 50

Clarksdale (Miss.), mentioned, 29

Coke gas, 7

Coleman High School, 4, 35, 61, 104

Coleman, Lizzie, principal, Number Two School, 4

Collier, Holt, operator, Livery Stable, 65, 66

Collier, Hyde, operator, Livery Stable, 65

Colson, Harold, 72

Community Center, 101

Condon's Drug Store, mentioned, 15, 71

Cotton Classers, 31, 37. See also Walter McBride

Country Club, 24

Court House, 3, 41

Cowan Hotel, 100

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Craig, Della, black grocery store owner, 21  
 Crittenden, George, 29, 37  
 Crittenden, O. B., cotton buyer, 37  
 Crockett, Harry, owner, Merry-go-round, 101  
 Crouch, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mrs.), 100  
 Dabney, \_\_\_\_\_, 42  
 Davis, \_\_\_\_\_, shipping clerk, Goyer Wholesale Company, 38  
 Davis, Winchester, 102  
 Dead bodies, disposal during the flood, 44  
 Deaton (Street), mentioned, 101  
 Delesseps (Street), mentioned, 101  
 Delta and Pine Land, 74  
 Delta City (Miss.), 32, 94  
 Delta Transportation, 61  
 Depression, 7, 17, 58, 60, 61, 63  
 Dixie Drugstore, the, 71  
 Doolittle, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mr.), policeman, 92  
 Eagle Pass, Texas, mentioned, 41  
 Edison (Street), 17, 41, 91  
 Educational Building, 3  
 Eighty-two Highway, 32  
 Electricity, 7  
 Elkas, Will, 39  
 Ellington, Duke, black orchestra, 106-108  
 Elysian Club, 52, 106

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Emily (Daisy Greene's oldest sister), 36  
 England, mentioned, 37  
 England, Perry, 41  
 Episcopal Church, 24, 46  
 Epperson, Blanche, 38  
 Equal Rights League, 69. See also Civil Rights  
 Evers, Medger, 81  
 Express Office, 62, 74, 85, 86  
 F B I, 78  
 Fargason Company, 38  
 Fargason, J. T., 38  
 Federal Reserve Bank, 86  
 Ferry, 52  
 Fields, Al G., 98. See also Minstrels  
 First Aid Station, during the flood, 43  
 First National Bank, 2, 86  
 Fischel's Poolroom, 48  
 Flood of 1912, 43  
 Flood of 1927, 26, 35, 43-53, 69, 72, 73  
 Foules, the, operators, black grocery store, 21  
 Francis, Will, 38  
 Frank's Cafe, 14, 84  
 Franklin, Hamlin, 91  
 Gardner, \_\_\_\_\_, operator, laundry, 22  
 Garrett, Claud, black grocer, 19, 35

Garrett Hall, 4  
 Garretts, the, 4  
 Geise-Mann, 23  
 Gibson, Emmett, 92, 92  
 Gildart, \_\_\_\_\_ (Captain), 31  
 Gildart, Ben, 31  
 Glen Allen (Miss.), 40  
 Gloster Street, mentioned, 34  
 Goldwater \_\_\_\_\_ (President), 85  
 Golstein, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mr.), 39  
 Goyer Company, 12, 23, 30, 31, 37, 38, 41, 47, 53, 65  
 Goyer Oil Company, 38, 41, 53, 65. See also Goyer Company  
 Goyer Service Station, 38, 42, 48  
 Goyer Wholesale Company, 38, 47, 49  
 Grasty, Anne, 9, 10  
 Gray, Ed, 102, 103. See also Bands  
 Green, Silas, 105  
 Greene, Daisy Miller, 36, 69  
 Greenville High School, 10  
 Greenville Inn, 100  
 Griffin, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mr.), 39  
 Hackett, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mrs.), 100  
 Hacks, 99  
 Hafter, Jerome, 17  
 Hall, Frank, 19

## NOTICE

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Ham's Furniture Store, 21  
 Hanway, Dreda, 11  
 Hanways, the, 9, 10  
 Harty, \_\_\_\_\_ (Judge), 57, 58  
 Haxton, Kenneth, 13  
 Hen, Arlee, employee, Joe Gow Nue, 35  
 Hen, Jess, owner, grocery store, 35  
 Henderson, Fletcher, black orchestra, 106, 107  
 Highland, 52  
 "High-Pockets", 100  
 Hinds (Street), mentioned, 101  
 Hirsch, \_\_\_\_\_ (Dr.), 30, 31, 33  
 Hirsch Meat Market, 16  
 Hollowell, \_\_\_\_\_, 13, 14, 54, 62  
 Holly Ridge, mentioned, 67  
 Hop Lee's, 22. See also Chinese Laundry  
 House, Gordon, 75  
 Howard, \_\_\_\_\_ (Dr.-Mound Bayou, Miss.), 19  
 Howard, Fred, 47  
 Hunter, \_\_\_\_\_, 19  
 Huntington Minstrels, 105  
 I. C. (Illinois Central) Railroad Yard, 43  
 Indian Mound, 34, 35  
 Isenberg, I. B., 61  
 Itzig Company, the, 49

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Jackson, Jake, black farmer, drug store owner, 16, 17, 19

Jim's Cafe, 84

Joe Gow Nue, (grocery store), 11, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 24,  
35, 47, 48

Joe Gow Nue Number Two, 20

Johnson, Ann Chase, mother, 1

Johnson, Charles, father, carpenter, 1, 2

Johnson, John W.: born in Greenville, Miss., 1, 2; schooling,  
Mrs. E. D. McKay's house, 3; Number Two School, 4;  
Seventh Day Adventist School, 4; New Orleans School, 4, 11;  
childhood life on Muscadine Street, 4-6; employee, Joe  
Gow Nue, 11, 12, 15, 16, 35; porter, Sharkey Hardware,  
12, 22, 23, 37; employee, Goyer Company, 12, 23, 30,  
31, 37, 39, 47-49, 53; invention, tubless tire, 26-28;  
driver for Bill Taylor, 40; life during the 1927 flood,  
42-53, 58, 72, 73; life during the Depression, 58-61;  
employee, Delta Transportation, 61; bank employee, 13,  
62; retirement, 62; acts of violence, 66-71; mail carrier,  
83-86

Johnson, Maguerite, Postmistress, 84

"Juke" Houses, 26

Kate Adams, steamboat, 63

Kerg, Alma, 39

Kerg, Charles, 39

Kimbles, the, 8

King, Martin Luther (Dr.), 81  
Kitchens, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mr.), grocer, policeman, 21  
Knights of Pythians, 103  
La Grange, 52  
Lamps, 7  
Lampton, \_\_\_\_\_ (Bishop), 70, 71  
Lavoris, mentioned, 31  
Lee, Shirley, 101  
Leland Road, paving of, 32  
Lewy, Lapp, 65, 98  
Lewy Transfer Company, 65  
Leyser Company, 3, 88  
Little Jim's, Greek restaurant, 14  
Loeb's, 16  
Lowraine, Jack, 9  
Lucky Number One, 20  
Lucky Number Two, 20  
Lynchings, 89-93  
Mahoney, E. J., 50, 51  
Main (Street), mentioned, 21, 46  
Maple Street, mentioned, 1, 66  
McBride, Walter, 36, 37, 49, 87  
McCoy, Prince, 102  
McCutchen, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mrs.), 9  
McGehee, W. T., 30

McKay, Archie, traveling salesman, Leyser Company, 3, 87-89,

101

McKay, E. D. (Mrs.), teacher, 3, 86

McKee, Bert, 10

McMillan, George (Rabbit), 93, 102

Memphis (Tenn.), mentioned, 10, 29, 40, 52, 53

Meridian (Miss.), mentioned, 18

Merry-go-round, 101

Metcalf (Miss.), 26

Midwives, 2, 3

Miller, \_\_\_\_\_ (Dr.), 36

Ming Sang, Chinese grocery store, 21

Minstrels, 98, 101, 105

Mother Lawrence, midwife, 3

Mound Bayou, 19

Muffuletto Hotel, 100

Muscadine (Street), mentioned, 1, 2, 4-6

"My" Cafe, 79, 84, 85

National Gaurd, the, 72

Nelson (Street), 17, 19, 20, 91, 100, 101

New Leland Road, 32

New Orleans (La.), mentioned, 4, 11, 12, 15, 55, 100, 107

Noel, \_\_\_\_\_, shipping clerk, Goyer Wholesale Company, 38

North Street, mentioned, 90

Number Nine (9) Canal, ditch, 32

Number One School, 4  
Number Two School, 4  
O'Hea Street, mentioned, 34  
Old Leland Road, 43  
Opera House, 47, 97, 98, 100, 105  
Oyster Loaves, 13, 14, 62  
Pace, \_\_\_\_\_, 59, 60  
Paxton Cotton Office, 49  
Paxton, Galla, 37  
Payne, \_\_\_\_\_ (Dr.), 30, 31  
Payne, Chuty, 26, 53, 56, 57  
Pearce, \_\_\_\_\_, 9  
Peavine #21, train, 75  
Percy, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mrs.), 9  
Percy, Will, 9  
Pigg, Johnny, 13  
Police Station, 21, 57  
Poplar Street, mentioned, 50, 67  
Port Gibson, Mississippi, mentioned, 1  
Powers, \_\_\_\_\_ (Dr.), 24  
Priscilla (Miss.), 40  
Pump (water), 5  
Pythian Hall, 103, 104, 106  
Quianthy, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mrs.), cafe owner, 47  
Rabbit Foot, 105

Rabbit's Band, 102. See also George McMillan  
Ramada Inn, mentioned, 86  
Rankin, Bill, ex-fireman, 85  
Red Cross, during the flood, 43, 47  
Redwood Street (now Orange Street), 104  
Rest Haven, 100  
Roads, paving of, 32  
Robb, Ida, bookkeeper, Sharkey Hardware Store, 22  
Robertshaw, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mr.), 49  
Rolling Fork (Miss.), mentioned, 94  
Roosevelt, Teddy, 65  
"Roots", motion picture, 79  
Rosedale (Miss.), mentioned, 52  
Rosenfield, Abe, 47, 48  
Rowland, "Boots", 92  
Royal Palm Hall, 101, 103, 104  
Sacred Heart School, 33  
St. Louis, mentioned, 18, 19  
Saloons, 54  
Schwab, 20, 21  
Schweizer, George, 51  
Seventh Day Adventist, school, 4  
Shanahan, Dan, 6  
Sharkey, \_\_\_\_\_, 23, 24  
Sharkey Hardware, 9, 12, 22-24, 30, 37

Shelby (Street), mentioned, 91  
Shivers, \_\_\_\_\_ (Dr.), 31  
"Shoulder Box", 6  
Sit, Jerome, 60  
Small, Harry, blacksmith, 87-79  
Smith, Ray, 62  
Smythe, J. D. (Dr.), 31  
Social Security, 3  
Southern Railroad, 5  
Southern Railway Company, 5  
Standard Oil Company, 89  
Starling Street, 6  
Steamboats, 63-65, 99, 100  
Steele's Bayou, 32  
Steele's Lane, 13  
Strange Park, 91  
Straughter, John, black undertaker, 71  
Sugar Foot Green, 105  
T-Model Ford, truck, 50, 51  
Taggart, Red, Chief of Police, 44, 56, 84  
Taylor, Bill, 23, 29, 38, 40, 41, 48, 53  
Taylor, Edmund, operator, Goyer Wholesale Company, 38, 43, 48  
Taylor, Frankie, 51  
Taylor, Skinner, black lawyer, 69  
Theobald (Street), 4, 20, 46

Thrifty, Chinese grocery store, 20  
 Ting, 20  
 Tire, tubless, 26  
 Tolliver, boat, 63  
 Two-Forty-Six (246) Service Station, 53  
 Union, 20  
 Universal Life Insurance, mentioned, 19  
 Upshaw, Jerry, 37  
 Verne Swain, boat, 63  
 Vicksburg (Miss.), mentioned, 42, 59, 100  
 Victor, Jim, 14  
 Virden, Rose Mary, 11  
 Wall, LeRoy, 98  
 Walnut (Street), 19, 21, 52, 79  
 Walthall (Street), 101  
 Warren, \_\_\_\_\_ (Mrs.), 9  
 Washington (Street), 14-16, 19, 46  
 Washington, Booker T., mentioned, 66  
 Wayside, 17, 32, 50, 51  
 Weathers, \_\_\_\_\_, 72  
 Wetherbee, \_\_\_\_\_, 21, 22  
 Whiskey, sale of, 54-59  
 White, Lasses, 98. See also Minstrels  
 "White Stick" (Mr.), 72  
 Wilcox Road, 18

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Williams, Charlie P., 25

Wills, Joe, 25

Wilmot Road, 59

Wineman, \_\_\_\_\_, 101

Wineman's Saw Mill, 91

Wing, Bitá, 41

Wing, Bob, 40, 43, 47, 49, 73

Winterville (Road), paving of, 32

Winterville Mounds, 92, 23

Wong Brothers, grocery store, 19, 21

World War I, mentioned, 12

World War II, 17

Wright, \_\_\_\_\_, 13