

EDITORIAL DIGEST & MANUSCRIPT FILE

PROJECT Negroes of N.Y.

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FILE TITLE & NO.: Biographies

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NEGRO IN NEW YORK

—Lawrence Gellert.

of the
Problems and ~~causes~~ of the Negro Song
Writer.

Verbatim statement of Ad Johnson, Songwriter

To tell you the truth singing came about as naturally to me as the glow to the lightning bug. Seemed like that with just about everybody in the town I come from down in Greenville County, S. C. I don't say they had all good voices - Hell no - screechy voices some of them had, and others croaked like a bull-frog. But any time four of them would get together for sorrow, or joy or just to pass time of day, there'd be a quartet, just about as musical as you please. But nobody thought anything of it. Of course some of the singers were better than others, but I never knew anybody down there in those days that ever came by any money just opening his mouth and "bawling" - except maybe the Preacher. And he had to about half scare them with eternal damnation and things like that before he could shake anything out of those folks. Earning money to live, for him as well as for everybody else meant to bend the back and strain the shoulders. Pick and shovel mostly - or out in the country in the season picking the cotton crops. But then all that's a long, long time ago.

I was born in Gaffney, S.C. about 1881. There was a large family of us, which made it possible for my father to better himself, that is take on additional acreage under cotton cultivation on shares. At no more than five, maybe six, I was going up and down the rows of plants with a burlap sack on my shoulder to put the bolls into. My brothers and sisters, some younger, most of them however older did the same. Four bales, sometimes five -- one year as many as ten, we made together. And we went on like

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that until I was about ten years old and had had very little schooling. Then my father died - some of my brothers had married and moved off and the family was fast breaking up. I was apprenticed to a tailor, of all things, in Spartanburg, S. C. I didn't like it very much. I'd been used to the out-of-doors in the cotton patch, and the smell of steam and old clothes got me down fast. I caughed day and night. So I ran away. I took one of the coats I remember in place of money due me, ~~KAK~~ which I didn't have the nerve to ask for. I sold that coat to a white man for seventy five cents and thought it was big money. Then I hit the freight cars heading South toward the Gulf of Mexico. Why that way? Because it was the first thing arunning I could grab. I tried several before going every which way, but I fell off one and almost lost a leg - got kicked off another, and a third was going too fast and I misjudged it so it got away without me. I fell in with another hobo, older than I was and we got to be buddies. Boy we saw hard times together, sure enough. Nobody'd give me no work to do. Too puny for hard work. And back in those days if a black man couldn't get to doing no hard work he was about as bad off as a mule with only three legs. My partner now and then got him a little job, like raking leaves or cutting wood - you see he was bigger and stronger than I was. I helped when I could. And somehow we found ourselves in New Orleans, about which everybody all along the line was telling us about. Nice big shiny clean streets and people both black and white thronging the walks in the most beautiful Sunday rags I ever could imagine. I guess it must have been a holiday - the Mardi Gras season maybe. Anyway while we were walking along with eyes popping bigger than horse chestnuts, a ^{white} man calls us over and asks

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if we want to do some work. We accepted right on the spot. Didn't know what kind of work or how much the pay was going to be. But we come near knocking the man down following him into a kind of saloon where he say the work was. Boy, I did some spittoon polishing and my buddy Harry, that was his name, I can't think of another name if he had another, he dig into soap suds about a mile high. He wash dishes all day, and I polish brass and mahogany and things like that. In the evening the place get filled with men and woman, all wearing good clothes. They drinking a lot, and do some dancing, an old man - a colored musician beating on an old piano like he was a whole band. That's the first time I ever see that kind of music. And the folks throwing pennies and nickles to him when they go out. Well, that's about the first time I ever see anyone paid for making music, and it gives me ideas.

Before we left that job I got me in some fingering myself on that piano - mostly in the mornings when I was supposed to be polishing while the place was closed in preparation for the evening trade. But I had still about ten years of polishing brass, digging ditches, breaking hard rock, long-shoring and things like that to do all over the South. During that time my buddy took a cold and died. So when the World War break out, I got me nobody in the World to think about so I join up in Mobile, Ala., and before I know it I'm in New York taking a boat for ~~XXX~~ Europe. Well I did an awful lot of digging and building but saw no fighting. There was a Negro band the fifteenth regiment had, and I kept hanging around and bothering them at rehearsals and things until I could sit right down and play along on several different instruments. And it wasn't long before they took me out of pick and shovel and I'm slinging a couple of boom boom sticks on the big drum. I played right through that War - we'd go from encampment to encampment, hospitals, Y. M. C. A., Salvation Army, etc., and every

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where we'd get the glad hand. And we were being paid for it too by Uncle Sam. When the War was over and we come back we played around some in New York and other large cities but then our leader was killed in a mix-up of some kind, and I'm out pounding the streets, looking for work.

Once about this time I got me hold of a ticket for a big concert at Metropolitan Opera House or Carnegie Hall maybe, I forget which. There's a violinist ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ and I read about him on the program before the concert start. It says ~~XXXXX~~ he studied in Rome and Paris - this conservatory and that Master teacher, a list of things and places covering more than two sides of the paper. And I say to myself, what chance have I got, with hardly any schooling at all. And me more than thirty eight years old. But I don't give up anyhow. I try to find out about where I could get some studying done, but it take an awful lot of money.

I decide to take a job on the trains - pullman car porter. I say to myself, I'm going to make me a sock of dough and then quit to do some studying. I work on the cars about six months and come a strike on the whole line and it ain't long for I'm on the street again hunting job. Running elevator, dish-washing, long-shoreman -- all the kinds of jobs I had before I went into the army only more so, cause times are bad and jobs hard to get and the pay very little. But I got married about this time. Little ones start coming. ~~XXXXXXXX~~ And we just about struggling along. Then one day I hear about army bonus going to be paid, and I say to myself, "Well Joe, that's your chance to do some real studying, but I know down deep it can't ever be done no more. The bonus money come and go. Jobs, just any kind of jobs, are more hard to get than ever. I land up on home relief and then on W. P. A. I'm laborer when it start but then I hear about music project and I get myself into

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a little practicing again on a couple of instruments I borrow. And first thing you know I'm on an orchestra working at the Labor Stage in 39th Street. Our first play is Jiggers of Jiggerstown an Irish play. And I'm on the payroll earning 23.86 regular every week. We work hard, got in a lot of extra rehearsing we never get paid for. But we like to do it. I learn an awful lot about reading and arranging notes I didn't know before. Several songs I got together goes around begging from office to office but nothing happens with them. I try others, one gets published by Harms & Co., in London but I keep getting the cold shoulder in all the offices in town. I think maybe they don't want it because I'm a colored man, so I fix it up to get one of the boys in the orchestra - a white man - to go take the song with him to one of the offices. He gets fifty dollars in cash for it and we divide up. I don't know what happened to the so I don't even know whether they publish it or not. But I got a lay-off slip on the job one day and I lost touch with the white man who did me the good turn. And I can't find a job in music anywhere. Don't forget I'm near 58 years old, and still need to do some studying. So what is there to do. I'm on home relief again. Just getting my paper to begin work on the boulevard in the Bronx with a pick and shovel. Got five kids to support, so I'm mighty glad to get it.

~~taken down verbatim as told by A. Johnson,~~

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