

## Interview with Mr. George Johnson, Mound Bayou, Mississippi, September 1941

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Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You started to tell me about this band that ah, Jefferson Davis organized for his slaves.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, he organized that band for his Negroes, in Davis Bend, on Brierfield Plantation. And ah, he hired a man in Vicksburg named Charles Morgan, teach them boys music. And he taught those boys music. They got so they could play and he escorted them from landing up home in a wagon and master Jeff be in his hack, and the band would play for them going and coming. And ah, after they got so they could play he bought them a uniform, and named that band the Davis Bend Band. Escorted everywhere he went.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: How many pieces were, how many pieces were in the band?

Mr. George Johnson: They had fourteen. Fourteen men in the band. Fourteen men.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: What kind of music did they play? Do you remember any of pieces they played?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, lord, yes indeed know them, I played them myself. Played *Grand National*. *Fort Watch*. ??? [Regiments (?)]. *Mount Rose*. *Dream On*. *Please the Birches Mountain*. *Not Guilty*. *Band ???*. *I'm A Soldier*. *Farm Quickstep*. All that kind of stuff. We played, I played it myself.

[Mrs. Elizabeth Lomax, encourages Dr. Johnson to ask Mr. Johnson if he can recall more songs]

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Name some more, if-f-f you remember any of them.

Mr. George Johnson: Uhhh. I see. *Dream On*. That's a piece. *Dream On*. And—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Di-did you ever play this piece, *Dixie*, that was so popular?

Mr. George Johnson: *Dixie*. Oh, yeah. I played *Dixie*. Yeah, I played *Dixie*. I could play it now. And ah, *Flower Flop*. And I don't know that other piece I used to play, *I'm A Soldier*, I think it was. [mumbles something] And da—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, did you, ah, you all didn't play any ah, plantation songs?

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir. Played strict music itself. I got music right, we got it from Sergeant Pepper, and Lyon Healey, and Joyce [Sullivan (?)]; that's where we got our music. We got a band from Lyon Healey in Chicago.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, did the other ah, slaves on the plantation sing any of the plantation songs? They, sing in the fields and sing around the place? Did you ever sing in the yard for him when he had visitors, anything like that?

Mr. George Johnson: Well, they, kids would sing some them little funny things, you know, around there. And dance, you know and all like that, you know. They, they, they had little plays. Used to plays down there. Play ah, *Scoops of [Sam (?)]*, you understand. Dance, stick a bottle and ??? all day, you know, and then you dance, you know, call it, *Scoops of [Sam (?)]*. Everybody dance *Scoops of [Sam (?)]*. They ring play, you know.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: And, ah every fellow dance his time to dance hold that bottle. He dance with a bottle, didn't have a bottle get a brick, [tipped up (?)], you understand; and he just play that song [around (?)] that place and they sing, *Scoops of [Sam (?)]* and dance with a bottle, or that brick.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well do you remember any of the words of *Scoops of [Sam (?)]*?

Mr. George Johnson: No. I don't relect [recollect] those words now. Wish I could relect them. It's been so long. And I had, we had a little song we used to sing, too. You going to a lady say, "Yes I am" and she was talking to a man. [laughter]

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Do you know that?

Mr. George Johnson: No, I don't know that's the first word I think about the thing.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Do you remember any, any of the other lines of it?

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir. [pause] No, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, ah di-d-did you all have any dances at that time or had you, had you joined a church—

Mr. George Johnson: Yeah, we had dances.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You did?

Mr. George Johnson: We had dances. We had dances, you know, this, this, this quad, quadrille. And danced ah, thirty-two on a set. And twenty-four on a set. Had this thing called [*Palm Major* (?)] *Partner*, and *Dance to Your Partner*, like that; then, *Palm Major Swing*, all that kind of stuff, you understand, see? And ah you pointing at your partner pointing her to bar. Had a bar, you know. Where they bought candy and so on like that, you know. And apples and oranges, understand. Carry your partner and spend a dime or a quarter on them, buy them candy, or cookies, or something else like that, you know.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Never had no soda water, you understand. They had ah, lemonade made in a barrel.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: See, had no nothing like soda water then. No soda water.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Did you all sing any songs at those dances while you were doing the quadrille and the promenade?

Mr. George Johnson: No they didn't sing. We had, we would dance, you know, hoot and holler.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Did you have anybody to call tiggers?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, yes indeed. We had a fellow, I had a fellow here, he played in my band, called tiggers. Fellow named, Hex Singletary. He dead now. He was naturally a smart fellow. He about my age or younger. He a jolly fellow. He know all that kind of stuff. That dance stuff, you know. I never was dancing. I would play myself in the mu-music. I like music.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, did-did you play for these dances?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, yes. Yeah. Yes, sir. [*he taps his cane*]

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, what year did you leave the ah, leave Davis Bend?

Mr. George Johnson: Davis Bend? I left Davis Bend the year of 1884.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Left Davis Bend cousin Isaiah come Vicksburg. We come near Vicksburg and stay there till 1887. Cousin Isaiah get in touch with, with Major McGinnis [Major George W. McGinnis], his father in law, who was one of the supervisors railroad company, he's a white man you understand, you see. And give him his part of his land where he could dig out up here and make it set up his Negroes. And they got him to come up here and got this land. I came with them, me and another boy named Shelton Allen, his father, stepfather rather, and my father, Peter Montgomery. They had twelve of us come up here, you understand. And ah, they offered us this land, you understand. See in up till December. January they moved two families here, Shelton Allens' mother was the first one to cook bread here. Cook bread here in 1887 on a stump. Over there [Delia (?) Allen']. Cooked bread on a stump. I never forget that bread. Never forget bread. In July twelfth that evening we come up from Vicksburg up here. Got off the train at Marigold. Walked up here, you understand. And for the men had made some staves, cross ties. We took the slabs picked them up and made a shack. And that evening she cooked that bread on a stump right close to the shack, right out there out of stump. She made a big fire, we made a big fire for her and ah, took those coals and put it on the stump and put the skillet on there, you understand. Put the lid on the skillet and put coal on top the lid, and bake that bread. And we got the first bread. That in 1887. How many year that been? [short pause] Fifty-four years.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Fifty-four years?

Mr. George Johnson: Fifty-four years last July. Yeah, sir. And I pulled a chain through this country for five years. That line that's out there. Run that line there? Run the other side Six Mile Lake. I pulled that chain in 1888. And that, on that side on the railroad there, I pulled that line in 1887. Went to Sunflower River, across the river. Out there other side Six Mile Lake. Now that line, Major Fountaine, the chief engineer, told Montgomery, say, "This line was run by the [Gimservilles (?)] a hundred year ago." Said, ah, "You'll find different designs and different trees you go along this line," cause they cut and find those lines. Find those stumps. We go in a tree and I found a, a gun by a tree ??? with some axes. And found a bottle in a tree. And all the people wanted to [empty (?)] that bottle. And cousin Isaiah got the design off of that paper and put it on his book, you understand. Where it were, where it been, cause I cut the tree, you understand. You see. And put another tree back in that tree. That tree just cut down a year before last. Yes, sir. Now, that line runs from [Atlantic (?)] to Pacific Ocean. Doesn't stop. Every-every county, has state has ??? . ??? . That line down there it run, all this land from here to Shelby, see, all that land. From here to Marigold. See, all that land. Cutting the cane and

surveying I ??? just ??? . Pull a chain with cousin Isaiah and Major Fontaine. Major Fontaine was chief engineer.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, how many ah, families were here the next year?

Mr. George Johnson: Next year? Oh, we got, we had about fifteen families the next year. Just about fifteen families. Next year we had about fifteen families come here about, that Ben [Landing (?)] the next year. They come, we advertised, you understand, getting people come here. Come from the old country in the South, you understand. You see. Cousin Isaiah had them come by, by letter and by advertise in paper. Newspaper, you understand. Had a paper out there [advertise (?)] trip, like that, you know. They sent it to them went right on through the country. They all come here on the account of cousin Isaiah. He know what he was trying to do. Sell all the folks land. Come from Davis Bend, where we left Davis Bend. They all come from the Bend. And come across road a new town, and out [edge (?)] the hills, from Vicksburg. Come right to cousin Isaiah cause they know what he was trying do. Give them all a home. And they bought that land and it's gone though now. Land here the folks all gone. Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, when, when would you say that you had your greatest prosperity here?

Mr. George Johnson: Greatest prosperity? In life we had here when cousin Isaiah lived, and Charles Banks and John Francis. They was the life of Mound Bayou. Since they gone, why Mound Bayou gone. There is no backbone. There is no back bone in, in this ??? at all. Need somebody out get in front. They, every, every gang has a need to have a leadership. Gang of chickens got to have a leader. Well they got no leader now, you understand. See they need leadership. What they ain't got.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, did you form a band when you came here to Mound Bayou?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Broughttwo bands here. Two brass bands. Yes, sir. And the first teacher that band we had a fellow come from my home, played in the same little band down home there, he young fellow, named Wilson. He played in a band down there when I couldn't be able play in a band. I would go with the band, you understand. And ah, he, when he came up here, you understand, he said, "Well, let's get us a band." Said, "All right." And he saved a little money. And he sent to Lyon Healey in Chicago. And bought a band on partly on credit. He sent him fifty doller's. And give us a chance to pay for it, you understand. You see. And he ordered that band and we started playing. Started to learn how to play good music. I kind of knows a little and he know already. And right on we just learned to have a good band. We had a band of fourteen boys. The other boys working in [steel and tires (?)] like that. I was pulling a chain through the swamps surveying with cousin Isaiah, [but I never forget (?)] that music. And after that band wore out, played so long, I come to run a

saloon over there with that old man, Ben Green. The next band I had was running in that saloon, I had that band practicing there, in the saloon. [That's why he (?)] run in the saloon, "Where's whisky?" I was going to take the young band in there, you understand. Carried that band to here a few year ago. That band's all gone now.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, what sort of pieces were you playing about 1890, do you remember?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, played the same pieces we played down yonder. Them fellows played down yonder. I learned, played the same music. Played that same music. [Ten, twelve gauge (?)] music. I learned it. I had a piece that a white band give me from Cleveland [Mississippi]. They couldn't play it. And they give it to me, and I come up here and took it to my band and played it. And carried right on in place of them.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. In place of them. I never forget the man's name. The man give it to me, his name, [Scrad (?)] Johnson. ??? but he is, he is the manager of the band. He came up to me, "George, I give you a piece music because we can't play it. I'm give it you all." And he give it to me. Brought it up here we played it that week and next we had to go to Cleveland, or something and other, and played for them down there.

Mrs. Elizabeth Lomax: What was the name of [that piece (??)]?

Mr. George Johnson: Ma'am?

Mrs. Elizabeth Lomax: What was the name of that piece?

Mr. George Johnson: Only music *Quickmarch*. Only music. Only a *Quickmarch*. Never forget it. It was a hard piece of music. Only a *Quickmarch*. And um, *East Cakewalk* was the hardest thing I ever played in my life.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: What is that?

Mr. George Johnson: *East Cakewalk*.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: *East Cakewalk*?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Hardest thing I ever played in my life. Couldn't help being stuck. Yes, sir. [Can't (?)] do anything but tongue and finger. Yes, sir. It's all practiced solo. Every bit a solo. I never played a [side horn (?)] in my life. I played a tuba and a coronet.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: I could play them now on the account of my teeth. One bad. Two is bad. Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Do you have ah, did, did you all have a dance hall here in Mound Bayou?

Mr. George Johnson: Used to. Yes, sir. We had a dance hall. We had a nice dance hall. We had a dance hall in the little stairs our Masonic Lodge down the street down there a piece.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Our Masonic Lodge got burnt down by a train one day, couldn't believe it. Wind blow sparks on, on, shingles on top roof dry, and set it a fire couldn't put out. Guess they managed to get some our tools out that lodge, that's all they got. That's the only thing they got that was burnt up in there. Had nice hall. Nice Masonic Hall. Downstairs had dance and all that kind of stuff. But the upstairs, that belong to the Masons. [Dance hall for us (?)].

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, what do you think of a town like this? Do, do you think that the colored people can, can run a town like this?

Mr. George Johnson: They can, but they ain't here now.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: They ain't here. You can't get a [core started (?)] if you ain't got timber. You got to have timber to get your [core started (?)]. You can't get a board or a shingle unless you got timber to make it out of. You see, if the timber rotten, or [dotty (?)] or worm bitten, worm holes in it, it won't do. Take a board and put a worm hole in it, it ??? . Same way [they do (?)] right in this country. I mean worm holes. His knee. ??? . Yes, sir. Got to have solid timber. You can't think you go out door with a shoe on your foot and a hole in the bottom. You get your foot, get your foot wet.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: How long have you been a member of the church?



Mr. George Johnson: Me, oh since I was a boy. Since I was a boy. Going down to AME Church [African Methodist Episcopal] since I was a boy. Since I was down in Davis Bend. I was little boy. Down at Bethel AME Church.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: What's your ah, [*disc scratch*] what's your ah—

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