Amos Earl Mordecai White was born November 6, 1889 in Kingstree, county seat of Williamsburg County, South Carolina. His mother, Elizabeth Burgess, married Lewis White; they had five children— the oldest, Amos and then [to the youngest] Geneva, Peter (died in 1944), Christina and Mary, all dead except Amos. The mother was a school teacher in rural South Carolina. AW was first placed in the Jenkins Orphanage, in Charleston, South Carolina, before he was nine years old (his mother died when he was still not quite nine, and he had returned from Jenkins then). Jenkins was established by the Reverend Jenkins (AW later became his son-in-law) about 1890; Reverend Jenkins, besides being the pastor of a large church in Charleston, had several small churches to serve, including one in Kingstree. AW was baptised a Baptist when he was fourteen years old, and in Jenkins Orphanage. None of the other members of AW's family played music. AW, studying printing and working in the printing department at Jenkins, was not allowed to play an instrument until he was about fourteen; he was a sickly child, afflicted with what a doctor diagnosed as hay fever. He wanted to learn music because he was such a good singer. AW, playing alto horn with the band, went on a summer tour of the eastern United States [seaboard] states, playing all kinds of jobs, from Massachusetts to the Mason-Dixon Line; the band, at that time under the direction of Eugene Michael, had a one-month engagement on the boardwalk at Atlantic City, New Jersey, playing alongside of Arthur Pryor's band. The
The Jenkins band was famous; they played as a featured act at the London Hippodrome with Cummings's Wild West Circus, in 1904, having just finished an engagement at the St. Louis Exposition; previous to that, they had played at the Buffalo Exposition, in 1902, under the direction of P. M. "Hotsy" Logan--AW was not a member of the band then. The band always had at least thirty members, except when it took the winter tour, to Florida, when it was cut to about twenty, because the older boys, twelve to sixteen years old, were kept in school at their studies. P. G. Daniels, present director of the orphanage and a nephew of Reverend Jenkins, always went with the band on the tours; he is also presently pastor of the Fourth Baptist Church in Charleston. The Jenkins band played in the inaugural parades of Theodore Roosevelt, 1904; William Howard Taft, 1908; and Woodrow Wilson, 1912, the only band of its kind (small, juvenile, Negro) to have such honors. AW was a member of the band on those occasions, although attending Benedict College at the time (1910-11) was director of it at the [1912 parade?], being succeeded by the son of Reverend Jenkins, Edmund Jenkins, a skillful performer on clarinet, piano, organ and violin; Edmund Jenkins, who studied in Europe, was known as "The Black Prodigy of Europe." AW says that he disagrees with some people [who have said there were no good Negro bands in the United States early in the Twentieth century], because he heard many good bands--in Florida, at Tampa, at Key West (the Shackleford family), in Jacksonville (the Welcome Cornet Band, led by Willie Lewis, father of a well-known musician now in New York; and another band), in Georgia, and two in South Carolina (the Jenkins Band and Tom Pinckney's Band, of Columbia--AW played in that band.
while attending Benedict College, being placed in the band by Hardy, the director, who was one of AW's teachers in his early days at the orphanage. Then there was Bill Berry's Band, of St. Louis, Missouri; there was even a good band in Pensacola, Florida--the Wyer Band, led by the old man Wyer, which produced a fine violinist, Paul Wyer. AW says the bands in Pensacola and the lower South were usually only ten to fifteen pieces.

No band in the United States or in the world topped the Jenkins Band. The youngest member of that band was [Sammy Cope?], four years old, who, for comedy, directed the band, being in the band under AW, Hardy, John Brown and Brooks Brockman (the last died in Los Angeles about three years ago). AW was dismissed from Benedict College after one and a half terms; he played with Pinckney's band and with Bill Johnson while matriculating, and would take a drink with the, for which (among other things) he was expelled. When AW left the orphanage [presumably he returned there after Benedict College], he eloped with the president's [Jenkins's] daughter, Roxabelle, and got married in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1913. He went to work for a printing company, which occupied the former office of T. Thomas Fortune, a famous Negro editorial writer. After about ten months there, he was asked to be leader of the second largest band in Jacksonville, (about fifteen pieces) the Jacksonville Concert Band. A Jacksonville real estate company developed a new residential section for Negroes, around Davis Street, and built a fine bandstand in it;
the Jacksonville Concert Band gave concerts there every Sunday. Then Reverend Jenkins called AW to take the orphanage band to New York, to meet Edmund Jenkins, then in his second year as the band director; Edmund had AW take a portion of the band (there being forty-four members that year) and play a production of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," at the old Columbia Theater, on Broadway near 47th Street. After that, AW began touring with circuses and minstrel shows; his first minstrel show, in 1914, was Frank's New York Minstrels, of Birmingham, Alabama, which broke up in Pulaski, Tennessee. AW taught one winter, having bands in Pulaski, Dickson and Columbia, Tennessee, all about nine miles from each other [map shows 31 miles between Pulaski and Columbia, and over fifty between Columbia and Dickson, but perhaps there were smaller towns of the same names during that time]. AW then joined the Alabama Minstrels, working in the twenty-four piece band led by Jeff Smith, a fine cornetist who was also a wonderful interpreter of the concert scores, that is, "heavy" overtures, which AW had not played in the orphanage; out of the band, a ten piece orchestra would be taken to play in the pit. AW was asked to direct the band the next season, when Smith quit; AW didn't complete the season, joining another show, Harvey's Minstrels, for more money. The Harvey show, of St. Paul, Minnesota, was called the New Orleans Minstrels, but the closest the show ever got to New Orleans was when a winter season closed in Houma, Louisiana in 1917. In Houma, AW met Arthur (clarinet and saxophone) and Albert (violin and conductor) Verrett, and played
in their seven-piece orchestra that winter. (Bunk Johnson was around then.) AW played trumpet, Billy Young played trombone, the Verrettts's sister played piano, Harrison played bass, "Nee-Shee" [Spelling?] played drums and a barber (probably named Isaac Barnes) played banjo. AW heard Louis Armstrong when he was brought from New Orleans for one job by another man named Barnes. The Verrett brothers band played all up and down the Bayou [Lafourche]; they were very popular. AW began picking up some of the New Orleans style, helped along by a one-armed fellow named Joe Porter. AW says the New Orleans style was different from any in the United States; there were fine musicians in other southern towns, but they stuck close to the written music. AW names several--James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, Tony Jackson, Connie Michael, Willie Lewis, all of Jacksonville; Eugene Michael, mentioned before; etc. In 1918, AW began the show season with Cole Brothers Circus, the minstrel show and band directed by J. C. Miles, husband of Lizzie Miles; the J. C. Miles Minstrel show was a unit similar to the Georgia Smart Set, the Alabama Minstrels and the Virginia Minstrels, all owned by the same man, who owned Cole Brothers, Sparks Circus and Jones Brothers and Wilson Circus--Elmer and Augusta Jones owned all those shows, three circuses and three [count 'em] minstrels. The Virginia Minstrels band was conducted by Frank Moreland, father of [actor] Mantan Moreland; the Alabama Minstrels band was conducted, at various times, by Jeff Smith, AW, Charlie Lewis and Edward Howard. AW says Bunk Johnson played a season with the Georgia Smart Set, under Moreland; Bunk was a
feature in the band, as he was a fine jazz man (AW later [1924] played with the Alabama Minstrels and was featured in jazz numbers, such as "St. Louis Blues" and "High Society," but he also played triple-tongue numbers as features).

While with the Cole Brothers Circus, in Sedalia, Missouri, members of the troupe were investigated by government agents. AW tells that Lizzie Miles was with the show, and had pigeons which would light on her shoulders as part of the pageant; she also rode a horse; she was a beautiful woman in those days. The Cole Brothers Circus was playing the State Fair as a special attraction; Buhimir Kryl's band was also playing the Fair. Miles had fifteen pieces in his band, but AW conducted because Miles liked to play the bass drum so that he could keep the tempos up. Joe Porter was in the band, and Jap [Lovelace, Loveless (Spelling?)], too. There was no white band on the show. The band would also split off a six-piece group to play a side show, called the "jig" show, but AW was always remaining with the nine pieces, playing the main show. The government men came through, looking at draft cards; AW's was in the "privileged" car, and he wasn't allowed to get it....

End of Reel I
AW, arrested in Sedalia, Missouri, because he didn't have his draft card [WW I] on his person, was taken to Nevada, Missouri, and placed in jail; he was in jail only one night, because [J. C.] Miles, of the circus he was working with [Cole Brothers], brought him his registration card, and he was released. He told the authorities he wanted to join the Army anyway (he had already written to Eugene Michael, a teacher of his at Jenkins' Orphanage and a band director in the Army, and to James Reese Europe--there were many other Jenkins boys in Europe's band; in fact, Herbert Wright, who later killed Europe, had been one of AW's students--to try to get in an Army band), so he was sent, unaccompanied, to Camp Funston, Kansas [c. 115 miles west of Kansas City, Missouri], arriving there, he was chastised by the sergeant of the guard at the gate, so he reported the incident to Major Blaine [Spelling?], later an officer over AW in AW's own [band] outfit, who stripped the sergeant of his rating and had him put in the guardhouse. AW was soon (during his second day in camp) assigned to the newly-formed band, which consisted of approximately twenty-four men claiming musical experience; the lieutenant in charge, just out of the Canadian Kilties Band (on the Chatauqua circuit), had a rehearsal immediately; later that evening the band had another rehearsal; the lieutenant had just been assigned to take charge 816th Pioneer Infantry Band, but he was re-assigned as a line officer, so he held an elimination among the twenty-four musicians to find out who would be capable of taking temporary charge of the 816th band; AW survived the elimination, (the band played "Espana" waltz, and AW was the only one to go as far as the conductor) and declared
temporary bandmaster. The band was immediately sent on a Liberty Loan drive, going to many cities for that purpose. They eventually arrived at Camp Upton, Long Island [New York]; more men were assigned to the band, bringing the number in it to forty-seven; one was William Triggs, later first sergeant of the band; another was Maurice Durand [of New Orleans], who was featured playing "Hooking Cow Blues" and "Livery Stable Blues." Durand didn't have the "proper" tone that some of the other trumpet players in that band had, (Triggs was with the Georgia Minstrels, Robert E. Walker with [W. C.] Handy's Band, and Carl Travis with Bill Berry's band) but [he had a good approach to jazz]. AW says that his band was ordered to play for a passing in review of a big outfit in England, and that the band was qualified to play for such an occasion, because (besides being good musically) a man named George Wells, who had already been in the Army, was in the band, and he understood all the signals, etc., that a band in such a situation would need to observe. AW says the band played for Liberty Loan drives in England, also, and then he tells of going to France, and of the excellence of the band. The band was to serenade [then] Captain [later President] Harry Truman, but Truman, playing the piano, said he was doing the serenading for his outfit, and the band could get something to eat instead of playing. AW was an acting warrant officer; his title was assistant bandmaster, but he was the only bandmaster ever assigned to that particular band. The band serenaded General John J. Pershing four times. The band was
stationed from March 8 to June 8, 1919 where a cemetery was being built; from then they were ordered to LeHavre in August of that year. The band was declared to be the Army Camps Band, no longer associated with the 816th Pioneer Infantry; Maurice Durand left the band at this time, going to the hospital. The band played for various occasions, including the sailing of troopships for the United States. The band was sent back to the United States about a month after arriving in Le Havre. AW says some other bands beat up their bandmasters [because of wanting to go home], but he didn't have any trouble with his.

Discharged in Louisville, Kentucky, AW went to New Orleans; J. C. Miles had died, but Lizzie Miles was in New Orleans; AW went there because he had a friend [Lizzie] there; he says he never had any intention of getting married [to Lizzie] that they were just good friends. AW still has letters from Lizzie, some from as late as 1957, when she was at the Tin Angel [night club in San Francisco]; WR says she is coming to Monterey [California] about the first of October [for the Monterey Jazz Festival]. AW got married (in New Orleans) in 1920 to a beautician named Hazel Robinson. AW went to work (upon arriving in New Orleans) as a printer, in a printing house (run by a Mr. Garnier, a white Creole) on [South] Rampart Street; he tells about it. He [later] got jobs printing contracts for musicians; the first musician he met was Buddy Petit, who came in to get some cards printed. Zeb [Lenoir] was with Petit; while
talking to AW, it came out that AW was also a trumpet player; a liking developed; Petit told other musicians about AW, so that they began coming to AW for their printing. The next musician he met was Arnold Metoyer, who came into the shop with Lizzie Miles; AW was invited to the Pythian Temple Roof Garden to hear the band (with Metoyer and Lizzie); he didn't have an instrument, because the Army had (by mistake) taken his own personal instrument.

End of Reel II
AW continues telling about going to the Pythian Temple Roof Garden with Arnold Metoyer and Lizzie Miles, both of whom he had known previously. The band was led by George Thomas, pianist and writer of "New Orleans Hop Scop [Blues]" and other numbers; Metoyer, playing trumpet with the band, invited AW to sit in a few numbers; AW did so, but had to play all the remainder of the job, as Metoyer did not return. Willie Washington, the proprietor (and also a barber who cut AW's hair), insisted on paying AW for the job, instead of Metoyer, and wanted him to take Metoyer's job; AW wouldn't take the job, though, as he didn't want to cut anyone else out. He then met Papa Celestin, who placed him in the band at the Surburban Gardens; AW says all he himself could do was read the music, although he could play the parts with a little variation. He got into the [New Orleans style] swing of things when he was playing with Willie Humphrey [the younger] at "Beansy"[Fauria's] Elite Cafe; AW had been listening to Buddy Petit, Sam Morgan, Chris Kelly and Metoyer [among others], and he began to get the feel for the style. AW says he played only about four jobs with "Horse" Manetta (who worked with George Moret, playing clarinet and trumpet [AW worked with Manetta in that band?]), but Manetta reminds him that they worked one season in Bucktown, at Martin's Pavillion. [Henry] "Red" Allen [Jr.] would sometimes play with the [Moret?] band on parade, being the "twelth man" [in this case, extra], not even caring about being paid; Allen called Manetta who had him as a student,
his second father, and AW his third father. AW played with [Richard] "Myknee" Jones; he didn't play with Sidney Desvigne until they played together on the steamer Capitol. He played with Louis Armstrong only when Armstrong was a twelth man and learning to read in Celestin's Tuxedo Band. Armstrong is now an excellent reader, but had further tutoring in Chicago. AW says they played many funerals in those days; he was playing with the Tuxedo and with the Excelsior [Brass] Band the, and they had their share of funerals; they might have three funerals in one day. The funeral bands all read their music in those days. AW mentions Sunny Henry, "Shorty" [?] Johnson and Harrison Barnes, all trombonists, as being good readers. Usually Lorenzo Tio [Jr.] or Willie Humphrey played clarinet, but sometimes Sidney Carrere, not so competent as the other two, played with the band [which?]. AW says they had another good clarinetist, who worked with [John] Robichaux, Charlie McCurdy, but they couldn't get him often. Also "Big Eye" Louis [Nelson], who played a C clarinet, but wouldn't play many funerals because he didn't like to march. AW talks about the personal neatness and the mustaches of Manetta and Moret. Moret had a beautiful strong tone, but couldn't improvise or fake.

A Negro symphony orchestra conducted by Albert Piron, fine violinist and brother of Armand J. Piron, was organized at [probably] the St. Bernard Club on St. Bernard Avenue; it was the best in New Orleans at the time, in fact, the only one. At that time the white New Orleans Symphony was being organized. Metoyer, AW and George Moret [the principal] were the trumpet players.
[Perhaps off the subject], AW says Lorenzo Tio, Jr., was the sweetest and smoothest clarinet player he ever heard, perhaps because of his Creole mixed heritage (his grandfather was from Mexico); AW doesn't know that he could choose between Tio and Benny Goodman [AW thinks Goodman must have gotten his inspiration from Tio].

AW organized a band, the Imperial Orchestra, at the request of Armand Piron for the city of New Orleans. In it were such men as Barney Bigard, Jose Ysegurre, Albert Nicholas, Sunny Henry, Willie [Le Boeuf], Ethel Finney on piano; George Moret played second cornet for a while. The band played for the circus acts in the park [Which? Spanish Fort?], and at the pavilion for dancing; across the way was Piron's orchestra at Tranchina's Restaurant. AW used eight pieces, except on Sunday nights, when he added tuba (besides the regular string bass) and banjo (played by Charlie Bocage); Sometimes he would bring in a sax player, a man from Texas, who was a mail carrier. The pay was good. There was no band or activity in the park the next year, but AW says he has been told that activity and music were resumed in 1930 [the year after the barren year? PRC].

The symphony was called the St. Bernard Orchestra, because it was at the St. Bernard Club, on St. Bernard Avenue; they didn't give public concerts during the time AW played with them, but people would come to hear the rehearsals. AW says that Arnold Metoyer, who rehearsed with the St. Bernard Symphony, was
"discredited" [that is, not given credit for being good] by a lot of people, but he was a fine trumpet player; he had played with W. P. English's band, in the Barnum and Bailey Circus.

AW worked with Fate Marable on the [Streckfus] steamer Capitol, after Louis Armstrong had gone to Chicago; Sidney Desvigne played solo cornet, AW played second trumpet and took the breaks, as Desvigne was a "legitimate" trumpet player; Desvigne developed into a good "get-off" man after he left Marable and organized his own band. AW played six months in New Orleans, and took a six-month tour up the river; he was fired by Marable when they returned to New Orleans. AW made [the] two records [that is, two sides of one record. RBA] with Marable's band; they were "Pianoflage" and "Frankie and Johnnie;" AW says they were a mess, because everyone was trying to outblow the rest. He says he had already made radio broadcasts and records, having recorded for fairs; he mentions one session with the Cole Brothers Circus, band directed by J. C. Miles, and another [in recent years?] in Sonora, California, for the Soap Box Derby. He recorded with Mamie Smith when he toured with her in 1926. In 1927, AW took the Georgia Minstrels band out [no doubt as director?], and was with that until the winter of 1928, when the show closed, in Peru, Indiana. After that he did no trouping since then, but played a lot in Arizona in 1929-31; he has not been East since. He jumped from town to town, having a good band in Phoenix and one in Tucson. He has been in California since 1933. He says
he was in New Orleans from 1919 to 1927, returning there when
his show would go into winter quarters; his last trip there,
for a few days only, was in 1928.

AW was impressed by Hypolite Charles, "a fine, business-like
trumpet player." Kid Rena also impressed him. AW doesn't classify
Rena as in a class with Armstrong and Papa Celestin, who were
world-renowned, but as a top man of "local fellows." AW can't
praise the locals enough, he says. Buddy Petit was the sweetest
player, a variation player, but without a great range (but who
needed it?, says AW). Sam Morgan was kind of ["grope-y"?],
but very good, and with his own style. Joe Howard was an
excellent cornetist. "In the top echelon" were Manuel Manetta,
Celestin, Manuel Perez. Joe Oliver was supreme in his way of
playing; AW heard him at his best, in Chicago; AW was working
with Mamie Smith during the 1926-27 season, and he would hear
Oliver at the Plantation Club; he heard the first Oliver big
band when Armstrong sat in with it. AW would put Oliver and
Bunk Johnson in the same classification, but he doesn't know
which one it would be. When Bunk Johnson met AW in San Francisco
(in 1943), he remembered AW from a meeting in Lake Charles about
1916, when AW was with the Alabama Minstrels, and before AW
had been to New Orleans. The Caddo Parish [probably Calcasieu
Parish--Caddo is parish where Shreveport is located]. Band played
to greet the Minstrels; the Caddos were the pride of the white
and colored populace, who were convinced that no other band
could play so well; the Caddos were on a truck, with Evan Thomas
and Bunk in that band; Thomas played a solo on "The World is Waiting for the Sunrise as a waltz," repeating it in the upper register. AW and his band played "My Old Kentucky Home" and three variations as their last number; AW's triple-tongue finale was received with wild acclaim. AW tells of meeting Bunk in 1943 in San Francisco, the first meeting since 1916. AW hadn't gone to hear Bunk play in San Francisco, although he knew Bunk and Mutt Carey were there (Mutt had taken lessons from AW). AW and Bunk met at an all-nations ball where AW was playing, [and where Bunk played or was to play as a guest?].

AW says that Mr. Joseph Jones, of the New Orleans Waifs' Home, with whom he was in the printing business, wanted him to come back to New Orleans to teach at the Home, but AW didn't. Willie Humphrey, when in San Francisco, told AW he should go back.

End of Reel III
AW invites the interviewers to inspect his collection of sheet music, which he says is quite large.

Contrary to other stories, AW has never been a night watchman; he also has never been in jail for any length of time [was in over-night], and has never committed any crime or been convicted of anything; the only offense he committed was not having his draft card on his person one time [see Reels I and II].

AW says James Reese Europe's service band had a lot of entertainers, such as Bill Robinson, the dancer, in it, and the band was noted for its entertaining qualities, but for military music, the only Negro band in service in France that was better than AW's band was that of Will Vodery [Spelling?], the 807th Pioneer Infantry Band, which was attached to AEF headquarters in France. AW says he doesn't doubt that Europe's band introduced jazz to France; Noble Sissle had a lot to do with the early introduction of jazz to France. Sidney Bechet was in France with Will Marion Cook's band, but later than World War I; AW says Cook's band may have presented a sort of ragtime [but infers that they didn't really play jazz.]

AW says Bechet couldn't have played in the Cook band [at the time it first went to France?], because of his technical limitations at the time. AW says the best orchestras in New York at that time [WW I] were conducted by women; Marie Wayne, Marie Anderson
and Marie Lucas, to name some. The finest orchestra he ever heard in New York was conducted by Marie Wayne; AW heard it when he sneaked away from the Jenkins' Band to attend a performance. The finest bandmaster AW ever heard was Eugene Michael, who conducted the tougher performances of the J. R. Europe band; Michael had taught AW in Jenkins, and had also been head of the department of music at Tuskegee [Alabama, Institute]; he also founded a music school on Long Island, New York. AW refutes a statement he attributes to Duke Ellington, which said that there were no Negro reading pianists in the United States prior to 1915; AW says Michael was reading everything, even earlier than 1900; AW names Tony Jackson [of Jacksonville, Florida] and others as being reading pianists; Manetta mentions Alfred Wilson [of New Orleans]. AW says Dr. Locke [Spelling?] of Howard University, also of the same opinion as Ellington, didn't know what he was talking about. AW says Ellington came on the scene in 1927, with Smalls [at Smalls' Paradise], who was the son of a fine organ teacher of Charleston, South Carolina. AW names other teachers in Charleston. AW also names James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson (of Jacksonville) as being pianists and composers. Wendall McNeal and John McNeal, of New Orleans, were fine reading musicians; AW worked with Wendall, who conducted John Robichaux's second orchestra; Robichaux's first orchestra was in residence at the Lyric Theater at the time. Robichaux got the best jobs, playing at the best places; he
was well-known and well-liked by the society people. In the McNeal-led orchestra, Marie Robinson played piano perfectly, and McNeal, who also played French horn, led on violin. AW repeats his refutation of Ellington's and Locke's statements, naming other musicians and centers of reading bands, including Scott Joplin, and Blind Boone; Boone, from Missouri, had a teacher before he went blind. Boone played perfectly. AW tells about the music which was presented in the churches in Charleston, South Carolina, saying that big choirs with organ accompaniment would present many compositions, including secular music; the churches, eleven of them, were grand, and the Negro churches were grand, too. Asked about Joplin, AW says he knew him personally, that Joplin presented some of his rags to Alonzo Hardy, then leader of the Jenkins Band, which was playing at Young's Million Dollar Pier, Atlantic City, New Jersey; Joplin told Hardy he could have them if he [the band] could play them; they were "Maple Leaf Rag," "Bolo Rag," [by Albert Gumble] "Sweet Meats Rag" [by Percy Wimrich] and "Temptation Rag" [by Henry Lodge]. The band played them.

AW says if he hadn't been an orphan and gone to Jenkins, he never would have been a musician, and never would have gone where he has gone or had his personal experiences.

End of Reel IV