A forum for the discussion of blues lyrics. Questions, answers and ideas should be sent to B&R's editorial address by post or, preferably, directly to Chris Smith via email to chris@skerries.demon.co.uk

1. NUGRAPE

The soft drink NuGrape [orthography sic] is still manufactured, but it will be best-known to B&R readers because of the NuGrape Twins, who had two records issued in Columbia's 14000-D race series. They also made Columbia 102-P, issued in the Personal Record series, but probably financed by NuGrape as a promotional item. Four of the six issued sides, and a further two unissued titles, are gospel songs, but the twins advertised the product explicitly on 'I Got Your Ice Cold NuGrape' (Columbia 14187-D, 2nd November 1926) and 'NuGrape – A Flavor You Can't Forget' (Columbia 102-P, 8th April 1927).

The NuGrape Twins were Matthew and Mark Little, born in Tennille, Washington County, Georgia on 16th September 1888. Mark was drafted in July 1918, but never went overseas, and was discharged in December of that year. Matthew, apparently didn't serve; his funeral notice in the 'Atlanta Constitution' said that interment would be at the National Cemetery in Marietta, Georgia, but the VA has no record of a Matthew Little buried there.

It seems that the brothers were touring as the NuGrape Twins by mid-1924: on 8th June, the 'Shreveport Times' carried a report about 'Harry Gardiner, the human fly' scaling the city's Washington-Youree Hotel to promote NuGrape. The story concludes:

**It's NuGrape**

*A Flavor You Can't Forget*

| Before Mr. Gardiner appeared on the scene Saturday evening, the famous Nugrape Twins [sic], just arrived from Florida, stepped out on the metal awning over the front door of the hotel and sang several songs. The twins were boys as much alike as two bottles of Nugrape, and the harmony they produced was a treat in itself. Mr. Gardiner and the twins will be in Shreveport for two or three days, and the twins will sing their melodies from a truck in various parts of the city. (I take 'boys' to be a racist way of conveying that the twins – 35 years old in June 1924 – were African American.)

The Atlanta City Directory for 1928 lists both brothers, with the occupation of both as 'singer', but it seems that the act had broken up by 1929, when Mark is not in the directory, and Matthew (married to Sylvia, as he had been in 1928) is shown as a 'peddler.' Matthew was apparently missed by the census in 1930, but Mark was enumerated as 'advertiser, Nu-Grape Plant.' Thereafter the trail goes cold on both brothers until their deaths. (Matthew Little, 54, 'fruit handler, state market', living in Atlanta in 1940, is probably another man of the same name, born in Eatonton, Georgia in November 1885.) Matthew died in DeKalb County on 20th August 1962, but his home was at 806 Hunter Street in Atlanta. Mark died in Atlanta on 17th July 1965 and, as a veteran, is interred at the National Cemetery in Marietta.

As for the product which the twins advertised, the company seems to have wanted authenticity and uniqueness stressed in the song lyrics:

*What is sung

**In Gert Town where the blues were born,**

**There's none

**got plenty

**it is made prominently to appear that the product is an imitation,*


**2. 'GIRT TOWN'**

Tony Burke was listening to Dave Bartholomew's 'Girt Town Blues' (DeLuxe 3217, 1949, misspelled 'Girl Town Blues' in 'The Blues Discography 1943-1970'), and was unable to locate the place on a map. That's because it's also misspelled on the record label, Gert Town is a district of New Orleans, and according to the Hawketts ('Mardi Gras Mambo' Chess 1591, January 1955),

**In Gert Town where the blues were born,**

**it takes a cool cat to blow a horn.**
More certainly born in Gert Town were Allen Toussaint and Ellis Marsalis. The Joy Tavern, mentioned in Bartholomew’s song as Joy’s Tavern, was celebrated for its yakamein (see BA R331/2, and for the A.F.O. Combo, who had a residency there in the early sixties (see Hammond Scott, ‘Tami Lynn: Wild Honey’ in ‘Wavelength’ 12, October 1981.)

In 1893, Alfred Gehrke bought a general store at the corner of South Carrollton Avenue and Colapissa Street, which became a popular local hangout (and initially had the area’s only telephone.) Gehrke also owned a good deal of adjacent property by the time of his death in 1900, and ‘Gert Town’ is thought to be a modification of ‘Gehrke’s Town’. Historically impoverished, despite the presence of Xavier University, Gert Town was also severely affected by Hurricane Katrina. Recovery subsequently has been slow and limited, with little return of manufacturing activity, and a population decline from 4,748 in 2000 to 3,614 in 2010.

FRIGHTENED AWAY.

Thieves were frightened away from Alfred Gehrke’s grocery store, at the corner of Carrolton avenue and Colapissa street. The thieves were all ready for a haul when their plans were suddenly changed. It was about 2 o’clock yesterday morning when the thieves bored five holes through the shutter of a side window, but they failed to enter, and nothing was missed by the proprietor.

Oh, captain got a Waterbury, and it’s just like mine,
Said, they both still a-runnin’, lord, they won’t keep time;
Captain got a Waterbury, and it’s just like mine,
They both still a-runnin’, lord, and they won’t keep time.

In its heyday the Waterbury Watch Company, founded in 1880, and located in the Connecticut town of the same name, revolutionised the market for watches. Its inception was an unlikely spin-off from the 1876 Centennial Exposition, where Daniel Buck, a Massachusetts watchmaker, flaunted his design and construction skills by exhibiting the world’s largest and smallest steam engines side by side. The latter, could fit under a thimble and contained 148 parts and 52 screws; its boiler held three drops of water.

An impressed patent attorney named Edward Locke offered Buck $100 to design a cheap watch, and he produced what became the Waterbury long-wind, so called because winding its nine-foot (!) mainspring took 158 turns of the spindle. Two entrepreneurs capitalised the Waterbury Watch Company to produce what became the world’s first relatively inexpensive pocket watch, selling for a mere $3.50, brought down to $2.50 for later versions. ($2.50 is equivalent to about $60 in 2018, so the Waterbury wasn’t exactly dirt cheap, even then.)

Arvelia Gray’s explanation that the Waterbury was ‘one of them dollar watches’ is thus a general, rather than a precise indicator of cheapness, but his comment reminds us that the pocket watch industry took off with the expansion of railroads. As Gray implies, knowledge of the correct time was important to preventing accidents, while the exact chronology of his early life is irrecoverable, he probably worked in an extra gang (see BA R 216/2) sometime around the mid-twenties. His Waterbury and the captain’s, both still ticking, albeit with less than perfect accuracy, would then have been 25 or more years old. Waterbury watches were evidently built to last, and Gray’s explanation of it as a ‘dollar watch’ some 30 years later is an indicator of its emblematic status as a mass-market timepiece.

(The essay draws extensively on the website archived at <http://www.oocities.org/waterburywatch/history.html>.)

3. WATERBURY

During the field trip that resulted in ‘Conversation With The Blues’, Blind Arvelia Gray talked to Paul Oliver about his time as a gandy dancer, and sang ‘Railroad Worksongs & John Henry’ (Heritage HLP-1004, 11th July 1960). He recalled that

the boss would get kinda nervous when we don’t have the tracks lined up and right for the train when the fast train comin’ long, and he used to pull out his watch – in them days he used a watch they call a Waterbury, them dollar watches, and he’d say – we’d sung a little verse to it, say,

Oh, captain got a Waterbury, and it’s just like mine,
Said, they both still a-runnin’, lord, they won’t keep time;
Captain got a Waterbury, and it’s just like mine,
They both still a-runnin’, lord, and they won’t keep time.

In 1888, therefore, the company began manufacturing ‘short-wind’ models at a variety of prices, from $2.50 for the Trump (presumably fitted with wandering hands) to $25. Waterbury had one of the largest pavilions at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, but from then on it was downhill all the way, thanks to poor marketing and a worldwide economic downturn. In 1896 there were layoffs and a temporary closure, and in 1898 Waterbury reorganised as the New England Watch Company, which limped along until it too failed, in 1912. (It was in 1898 that Waterbury watches were name-checked in ‘The Grand Duke’, the last opera by Gilbert & Sullivan, by that time another failing operation.)

Born in 1906, Arvelia Gray said that he lost his sight in 1930, and while the exact chronology of his early life is irrecoverable, he probably worked in an extra gang (see BA R 216/2) sometime around the mid-twenties. His Waterbury and the captain’s, both still ticking, albeit with less than perfect accuracy, would then have been 25 or more years old. Waterbury watches were evidently built to last, and Gray’s explanation of it as a ‘dollar watch’ some 30 years later is an indicator of its emblematic status as a mass-market timepiece.