

words words words

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:



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:

*I got a NuGrape, nice
and fine,
Three rings around
the bottle is a-gen-
u-ine.**

*I got a NuGrape,
nice and fine,
Got plenty
imitations, but
there's none
like mine.*

* What is sung sounds like 'is a ginger wine', which is either a mondegreen by the Twins, or results from their inserting an intervocalic 'g' for ease of singing.

The 'three rings around the bottle' can be seen in the advertising reproduced here, as can the catchphrase which gave the Twins' second promotional song its title. (Human fly Harry Gardiner milked the slogan as he scaled the Shreveport hotel in 1924, shouting 'Don't forget!' to the watching crowd, who had been primed to shout back 'Nugrape!')

As for those 'plenty imitations,' NuGrape was itself an imitation, and its makers were forced to say so by the Federal Trade Commission in 1925, hence the unexpected confession, 'Imitation grape not grape juice,' on the bottle and in advertisements. The company had been claiming that their product was 'made from the purest of pure Concord grapes,' and had 'just that sort of flavor, a mysterious something, born of plump Concord grapes and sunshine.' In fact, NuGrape's fizzy water and syrup mixture contained less than two per cent grape juice; it was undisclosed artificial additives which gave the stuff its presumably grape-like taste.

By 1929, NuGrape had changed their formula, and were flavouring the beverage with something called 'Merchandise No. 25', supplied by Fritzche Brothers of Brooklyn, who said that it was made entirely from grapes. Accordingly, NuGrape decided they could drop the 'not grape juice' warning.

The FTC were not happy with this, but Fritzche Brothers declined to reveal full details of their process, on the grounds that it was a trade secret. FTC analysts set to work, and determined that Nugrape 'does not contain the natural fruit or juice of the grape in quantity sufficient to give it its color or flavor,' which were mainly derived respectively from artificial colours and the tartaric acid in 'Merchandise No. 25.' Tartaric acid, the FTC noted, was

not found as such in grapes or grape juices, [but was] obtained from crude argols, commonly called wine lees, by-products, or precipitates, obtained in the treatment of grape juice or the manufacture of wine.

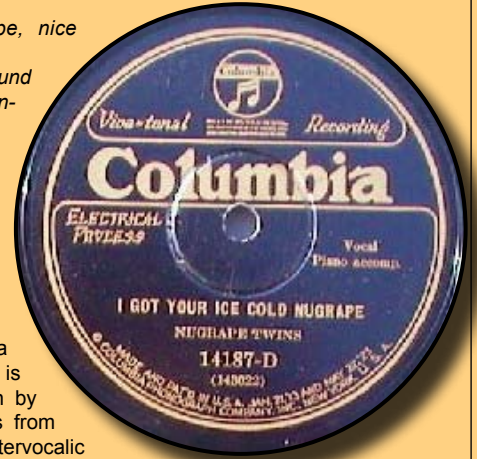
This was too many steps away from actual grapes for the FTC, and they once again banned NuGrape from

using or authorizing the use by others, in interstate commerce of 'NuGrape' or the word 'grape' either alone or in conjunction [unless] it is made prominently to appear that the product is an imitation, artificially colored and flavored.

2. 'GIRT TOWN'

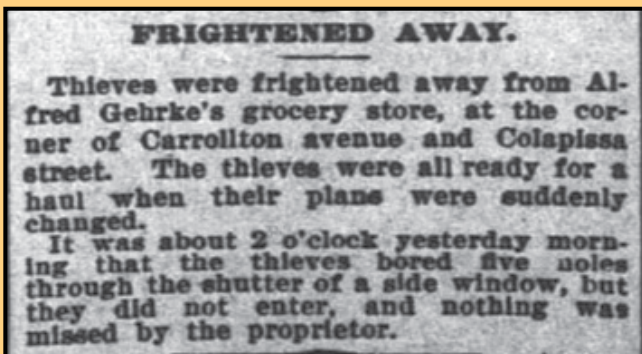
Tony Burke was listening to Dave Bartholomew's 'Girt Town Blues' (DeLuxe 3217, 1949, misspelled 'Girl Town Blues' in 'The Blues Discography 1943-1970'), and was unable to locate the place on a map. That's because it's also misspelled on the record label. Gert Town is a district of New Orleans, and according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



Times-Picayune, 8th July 1896.

3. WATERBURY

During the field trip that resulted in 'Conversation With The Blues', Blind Arvella 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 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.

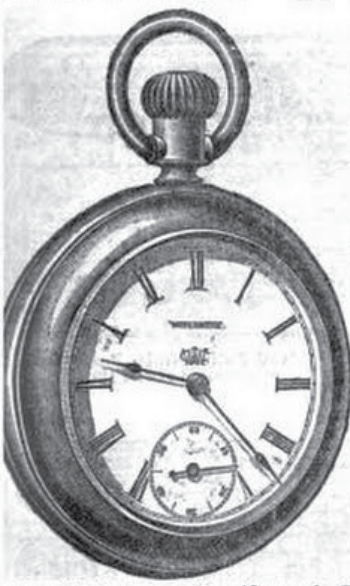
An impressed patent attorney named Edward Locke offered Buck \$100 to design a cheap watch, and he produced what became the Waterbury long-wind, so called because winding its nine-foot (!) mainspring took 158 turns of the spindle. Two entrepreneurs capitalised the Waterbury Watch Company to produce what 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.)

Arvella 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, and the railroad companies required all employees to carry accurate watches. Gray's comment that neither his Waterbury nor the captain's will keep time seems to be gallows humour, and perhaps implies that the captain, who can presumably afford a better watch than Arvella, is a cheapskate.

17/6 The New Short-Wind **17/6**

WATERBURY WATCH.

Winds as rapidly as any
for First-class Keyless



Why expose a valuable Watch or Chronometer to rough usage and risk of loss? Remember that as a timekeeper **THE WATERBURY** is perfect, and holds its own against the most costly watches. You can rely implicitly upon its correctness: it will rarely fail you; and its durability is proverbial. "Correct as a 'Waterbury'!" is a household simile.

Series "J." The "Gentlemen's Waterbury." Nickel-Silver Cases. Keyless. Stem set. Seconds hand. Jewelled. Dust-proof. Non-magnetic. PLAIN OR FANCY BACKS. ROMAN OR ARABIC DIALS.

Series "J." and "L." can also be had in Handsome Silver Cases, English all-marked, price from 30s. to 36s. according to design. Illustrated Catalogue application.

OVER 1,000,000 SOLD IN THREE YEARS.

Series "L." The "Ladies' Waterbury," small size, 17s. 6d.
Series "E." The "Old Favourite," long wind, 10s. 6d.
Sold by all Retail Watchmakers, and at all the Waterbury Watch
Depots. London Depots: 2, Holborn Viaduct; 131, Regent Street;
435, Strand. Head Office, 7, Snow Hill, London, E.C.

The Truth, December 1890.

The Waterbury was a new and revolutionary product, and at first it enjoyed booming sales and became a household word, but problems soon arose: rival manufacturers entered the market, and the Waterbury began to be seen as cheap and shoddy, rather than simply cheap. The perception of inferiority was compounded because Waterbury sold their watches by the dozen to all comers, rather than through a network of dealers. Merchants often gave a Waterbury away with other goods as a promotional item, meaning that there was less incentive to buy one. It cannot have helped that the first models only had an hour hand, but above all, people became irritated with the seemingly endless process of winding: 'I come from Waterbury, land of the eternal spring' was a contemporary joke.

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, Arvella 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 **B&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.

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