

The Gold Star Mothers at Gare des Invalides

*In **Traveling Blues** by Bo Lindström and Dan Vernhettes, one paragraph deals with the events at Gare des Invalides, Paris, in 1930. Recent research has established the date given in the book to be false. Moreover, a revised version was earlier published at the Tommy Ladnier site, again with false dates and false identification of some musicians. In this new study, I have included valuable information and views provided by Konrad Nowakowski as well as his careful proofreading. I am also in debt to Dan Vernhettes, Mark Berresford, Kim Altsund, and Anthony Barnett for information.*

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The advent of the Gold Star Mothers pilgrimages

After WWI, mothers and widows of fallen soldiers came to be known as “Gold Star Mothers.”¹ The phrase is generic and, through customary usage, it has come to designate any mother whose child has been lost in war. Grace Darling Seibold did the initial work. Her son, a volunteer pilot fighting in France did not get any initial official recognition from U.S. authorities, causing Mrs. Seibold extra grief. His body was never found. Then in June 1928, Mrs. Seibold, along with twenty-five other mothers, formed the national organization of American Gold Star Mothers, Inc., incorporated on January 5, 1929 under the laws of the District of Columbia.

From the start, the national Gold Star Mothers' Association lobbied for a federally sponsored pilgrimage to the cemeteries of Europe. On March 2, 1929, the U.S. Congress passed legislation authorizing funding for Gold Star Mothers and widows *"to make a special pilgrimage to France . . . to visit the graves of husbands and sons killed in the World War. . . The trip will be free, the party being guests of the government."*

Planning for these visits to France started immediately. A *Dayton Journal* news story dated January 12, 1930, further described the arrangements:

The pilgrimage will be made shortly after May 1. . . the total number of widows and gold star mothers going this year from all over the nation will be 5,323. The total number entitled to make the trip during the time allotted, May 1, 1930 to October 31, 1933, is 11,440. . . All expenses will be paid by the government. Each one going will be provided with every possible comfort from their homes to France and return. It is estimated that the cost will average \$840 per person. . . All mothers of American service men now buried in European cemeteries and widows of service men who have not remarried are entitled to make the trip. This is being done by the government as a token of recognition to those who gave their all and have not yet visited the graves of their loved ones...²

After a New York welcome, the first contingent of 350 Gold Star Mothers boarded the United States Line's *S.S. America* and arrived at Cherbourg on May 16, 1930. They were accommodated at the finest Paris hotels near the different railway stations that could take them to the graves. In charge of the Gold Star Mothers in Paris was Colonel Richard T. Ellis.

However, the Gold Star Mothers organization was all white and African American mothers were even officially badly treated by government. They were transported, not as the white mothers on luxury liners, but in commercial steamers, *S.S. American Merchant* in 1930 and *S.S. American Skipper* in 1931. This segregation was heavily discussed on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The first group of African American women, Party L, arrived on 21 July and the second contingent, Party Q, arrived in Paris 25 August.³ All colored parties were led by African American Colonel Benjamin O. Davis and for the first party, a Mrs. N. Brown, hostess and Nurses B. J. Runner and N. Bost assisted. For the first party, Col. Davis also, paid by

¹ The phrase is usually capitalized but this is somewhat incorrect because it is not the name of a proper organization. A detailed history of the Gold Star Mother movement and pilgrimages can be found in *Graham, John W.; The Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages of the 1930s, McFarland & Co, 2005*

² Compagno, Kathy; <http://www.worldwar1.com/tgws/smtw0605.html>

³ This is in contrast to what is stated in *Traveling Blues* and based on newly found descriptions. The dates given here are obtained from newspaper reports.

himself, brought his wife Sadie, and son Ben Jr.⁴ In the group, one “honor pilgrim” was appointed, Mrs. Laura Newton.

Benjamin Oliver Davis, Sr. (born in Washington 1880 – November 26, 1970) was the first African-American general officer in the United States Army.⁵ He served in the Spanish-American War as a first lieutenant in an all-black unit. In 1915, Davis was assigned to Wilberforce University as Professor of Military Science and Tactics and served in the Philippine Islands 1917 to 1920. Davis then returned to Wilberforce University as Professor. He was assigned to the Tuskegee Institute in 1931, and remained there for six years as Professor of Military Science and Tactics. During the summer months of 1930 to 1933, Davis escorted Gold Star Mothers.

Davis also led two more African-American parties in 1931, arriving in Paris late in the evening of 7 June and 18 June respectively. He was later promoted to Brigadier general in 1940 and served in the Second World War.



Figure 1 Benjamin O. Davis c. 1901 and in the 1940s

At Gare des Invalides

Members mainly from the Noble Sissle and Benny Peyton orchestras met up and played at *Gare des Invalides* on both occasions in 1930 and in the first of the two 1931 parties. Naturally, press attendance was greatest at the arrival of the first party in July, 1931. Noble Sissle and Ada “Bricktop” Smith, who both were present, organized this event. *The Chicago Defender* noted:

*Ada Smith, better known as ‘Bricktop’, well known in the Windy City some few years back as a member of the Panama Four [sic], which included the late Florence Mills, and again at the old Pekin Theater, is shown here in Paris, France, with Noble Sissle, internationally known stage artist, as the two entertain the first group of our Gold Star mothers. They were assisted by Peyton’s New York Orchestra.*⁶

Proved by the history of the Gold Star Mothers shown here and the publication in several French and US newspapers, this happened on 21 July⁷. Tommy Ladnier was at this time playing with Noble Sissle at Les Ambassadeurs, one of the most prestigious restaurants at Champs-Élysées.

⁴ Just as his father, Davis Jr. made a military career and served as a US Air Force General and Commander in WWII.

⁵ Davis officially gave his birth date as 1877 in order to pass recruitment but was probably born in 1880.

⁶ *Chicago Defender*, 25 August, 1930. The picture is shown below as Figure 8.

⁷ Among news items dealing with the Invalides reception were L’Echo de Paris (22 July, Le Matin (22 July), and the Chicago Defender (26 July). Special thanks to Konrad Nowakowski for submitting copies of these and other items.



Figure 2 The Noble Sissle orchestra at Les Ambassadeurs in June 1930. Billy Burns (tb), James Revey (tb), Tommy Ladnier (tp), Arthur Briggs (tp), Edward Coles (tu), Lloyd Pinckney (p), Jack Carter (dr), possibly Antonio Spaulding, Frank Goudie (as), Ralph Duchesne (as), Ramon Usera (ts), Rudy Jackson (as). In Front: Frank Ethridge (vln), Noble Sissle (dir.), Leon Abbey (vln).

A reception at Gare des Invalides has been documented in a recently identified Pathé newsreel as well as in several newspaper items with pictures of poor quality.⁸ Furthermore, two still photographs showing the musicians exist.

The still photos

Two almost identical photos showing a group of musicians at Gare des Invalides have circulated for a long time. In the first photo owned by Briggs, the musicians were identified by him and the result was published by Panassié in 1964.⁹ Unfortunately, this identification was incomplete and even erroneous as Briggs stated that this event took place in 1929.



Figure 3 Gare des Invalides, Paris, 1930. Photo and identification published in BHCF. This was the photo Briggs kept and used for identification: Left to right: Rudy Jackson, Albert Tynes, George Warren, Horace Eubanks (cl), Roy [sic] Pinckney (p), Big Boy Goudie over Jack Carter, Bennie Peyton, Warren Harrison, Tiny Oliver, Edward Cole (tuba), Billy Burns, Gene Bullard, Tommy Ladnier, Snow Fisher and Arthur Briggs. Noble Sissle and Glover Compton in the front.

⁸ The Pathé archive was made available at YouTube in the spring of 2014 but has actually been available at the Pathé site for many years.

⁹ *Bulletin du Hot Club de France* (BHCF), No 138, May-June, 1964.

There is actually another almost identical photo as the one shown above, taken just seconds apart. This photo was in the possession of Glover Compton, who also made an identification of the musicians seen. Compton made several mistakes in this identification. However, he or somebody else has written the date *July 20th, 1930* on the photo. This photo was later kept in the Frank Driggs Collection along with Compton's handwritten identification. Frank Driggs thought this identification erroneous and made a third, and almost correct, identification



Figure 4 Gare des Invalides, Paris. Photo from the Frank Driggs collection. My latest identification, from left to right: Rudy Jackson, Wilson Townes, George Warren, Horace Eubanks, Big Boy Goodie, Jack Carter, Lloyd Pinkney (concealed), Bennie Peyton, possibly Warren Harrison, Oliver Tines, Edward Cole, Billy Burns, Gene Bullard, Tommy Ladnier, Snow Fisher, Arthur Briggs, Unknown (behind), Cricket Smith, George Brashear. Front row: Noble Sissle and Glover Compton (beneath the tuba).

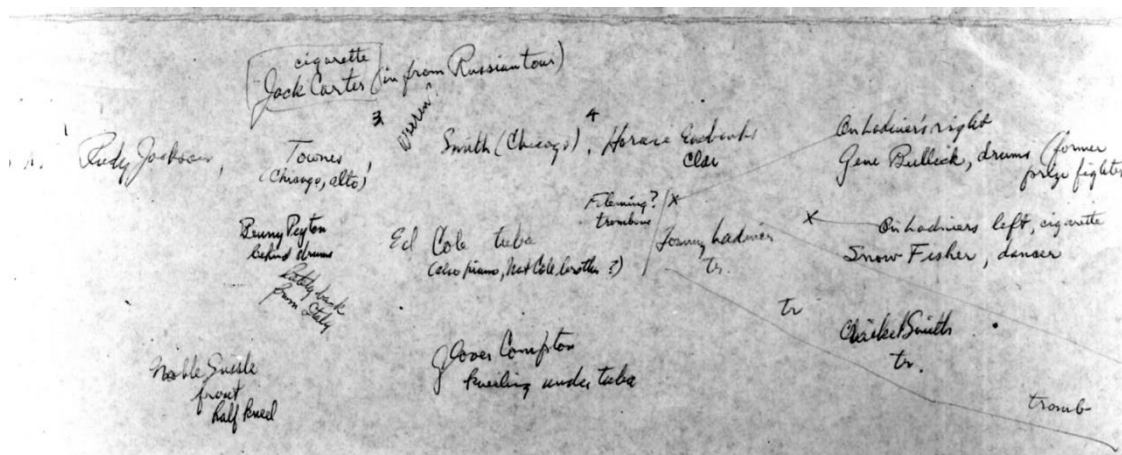


Figure 5 Notes from the Compton identification¹⁰

The identity of the rightmost trombonist only barely seen in the second (“Compton”) photo has been uncertain from the identification made by Compton and Driggs. The “Briggs photo” did not show the second trombonist at all, so he is naturally left out in the Briggs identification. Identification performed later by Driggs from the “Compton picture” and stored in the Frank Driggs Archive, stated **Billy Burns** as the trombonist to the left and also stated the rightmost trombonist as either **Jake Green** or **George Brashear**, see Figure 6.

¹⁰ The fact that Compton made this identification can be proved by comparing the handwriting of this sheet with Compton's signature on his WWI and WWII draft registration cards.



Figure 8 Gare des Invalides, Paris, photo published in the Chicago Defender, 25 August, 1930.
Ada « Bricktop » Smith and Noble Sissle in front of the band.

Identification of film clip musicians

The trombonists

When Compton identified the musicians in the Gare des Invalides photo from 1930, he stated the left trombonist as **probably (Herb) Flemming** and did not name the rightmost trombonist, barely seen. In contrast, when published by Panassié in 1964, based on the “Brigg’s photo”, the accompanying text listed not Flemming but **Billy Burns** as the leftmost trombonist.¹¹ Of course, Briggs knew his old bandmate Burns very well.

At this time, summer 1930, at least five black U.S. trombonists were present in Paris: **Billy Burns** and **James Revey** with Noble Sissle, **Herb Flemming** and **Albert Wynn** with Sam Wooding, and **George Brashear**, probably free-lancing and working in his profession as physiotherapist.

As for the trombonists caught in the photo and in the Pathé film clip, the leftmost trombonist is without doubt **Billy Burns** as seen in following comparison. Characteristic features are the marked cheek-bones, a straight and shining hair and somewhat protruding ears. In the *Ciro’s London* video filmed in December 1930, we can also see that he very easily maneuvers the slide with his index and long fingers. All these characteristics are applicable for the left trombonist.

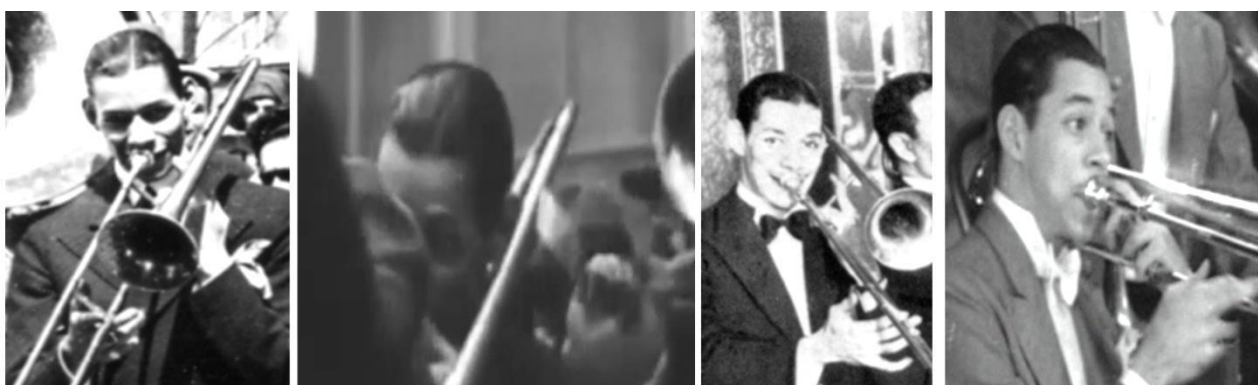


Figure 9 Billy Burns in the Invalides still, the Pathé film clip, at Ambassadeurs 1930 and in a Pathé film clip with Sissle from *Ciro's London* 1930

¹¹ BHCF, No. 138, May/June 1964.

Therefore, only the rightmost trombonist remains to identify. He is tall or at least over medium height, his complexion is rather dark and his mouthpiece is placed slightly off-center to his right side. His grip on the slide and his hand movements are somewhat strange as can be best seen in the video. His palm is angled almost 90 degrees to his arm – most trombonists have the palm more or less as a prolongation of the arm.



Figure 10 The second trombonist from the Invalides “Compton” still (right) and from the Pathé film clip

On the remaining possible four trombonists the following can be stated:

Albert Wynn was left-handed as shown in the photo from 1921 with Ma Rainey, so he can not be in question.¹²



Figure 11 Albert Wynn with the Ma Rainey tour band

Herb Flemming (a.k.a. Nicolaiih El Michelle) was a fairly light complexioned trombonist bearing no facial likeness to the second trombonist and he can thus be ruled out.

¹² Preston Jackson has told Chris Hillman that “*he taught Albert Wynn to play right-handed because it looked better in the trombone section of an orchestra.*” It is not known if this tuition was made before or after 1930. Anyway, the Invalides trombonist bears no resemblance to Wynn.



Figure 12 Herb Flemming in Berlin 1925 and in the 40's-50's

James Revey was a tall trombonist and one of his characteristic face features were his big and protruding ears. His complexion was rather light. Moreover, he left France on 10 July, 1930, arriving in New York on 17 July. So he could not be present at the Invalides welcoming party and can be ruled out.



Figure 13 James Revey in three photos with the Sissle orchestra in Paris 1929 and 1930

Jake Green was in summer 1930 a member of the Leon Abbey orchestra. Since the Invalides musicians were from the Sissle, Peyton and Abbey orchestras, the presence of Green would be natural. What we have on Green is one shot with the Leon Abbey orchestra from 1928 and a short movie with Johnny Dunn filmed in 1933 in Holland.¹³



Figure 14 The Leon Abbey Orchestra 1928. Jake Green, with beret, is standing third from right with Leon Abbey fourth from right

¹³ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MUHDrUhuVc>)

From his 1917 draft registration card, we know that Leon Abbey was described as of medium stature. However, the registrar has at first described Abbey as short but crossed it out for medium height, so he was probably just under medium height. From the Abbey picture, we can see that Jake Green seems to be a little shorter than Abbey, but he is not standing completely upright. Unfortunately, Green's passport application is not available, but the comparison with Abbey shows Green's stature anyway. The conclusion is therefore that Green is of medium or just under medium height. In the 1933 film, we can see that Green wears a big signet ring on his right pinkie. Even more important is to study how Green handles the trombone slide with his wrist and palm almost aligned with his arm, easily manoeuvring the slide with thumb and index finger. The conclusion is therefore that the trombonist hardly can be Jake Green.



Figure 15 Jake Green in 1928 and 1932

George Brashear played with Fate Marable in 1921 and from that occasion – with Louis Armstrong – we have one photo. The photo quality is not good enough to view details, but it seems that Brashear has an angular grip in the middle or the leftmost part of the slide handle part. He also probably has his mouthpiece placed slightly to his right side. In the passport application from 1923, George Brashear is stated as 5 foot 11.5 inches, equal to 182 cm. In his draft registration card from 1917, he is described as tall. The passport photo unfortunately does not give a clear view of his hairdo. A Chicago Defender clip from 1928 is unfortunately in too low resolution.



Figure 16 George Brashear in 1921, passport photo from 1923 and a 1928 Chicago Defender picture

The second trombonist, standing to the right, can definitely be described as tall. It is also clearly seen that this trombonist handles the slide with fingers bent almost perpendicular to his arm. Moreover, his facial features clearly resemble the Brashear passport photo although he has gained some weight. All this is in accordance with George Brashear. We also know that Sissle lost his trombonist James Revey, returning back to U.S.A. on

10 July. Therefore, it is possible, but not proved, that Brashear could have subbed for Revey during the summer and also quite naturally had been recruited by Sissle for the Invalides party on 21 July.



Figure 17 George Brashear in the Pathé film clip, 21 July, 1930.

So the final conclusion is that the second trombonist is George Lorenzo Brashear as also suggested in the Driggs identification

Identification of film clip saxophonists

Noble Sissle's alto saxophonist Rudy Jackson is easily recognized in the film clips due to his short stature as is Frank "Big Boy" Goudie due to his tallness. Tenor saxophonist Ramon Usera, also with the Sissle Orchestra, can also be recognized by his high hairline and protruding ears. However, one unfamiliar clarinetist is seen, playing what seems to be a metal clarinet. He cannot be readily traced to any of the known orchestras. Instead, his name is Rudolph Dunbar.¹⁴

Rudolph Dunbar (26 November, 1907 – 10 June, 1988) was born in British Guiana. He began playing clarinet with the British Guiana military band at the age of 14, before moving to New York at the age of 20. He studied at the Institute of Musical Art (Juilliard), and while in New York also took part in the Harlem jazz scene. In 1925 he moved to Paris and during 1927-1929 studied classical music at the Sorbonne, also touring with Peyton's Jazz Kings. Dunbar played with Leon Abbey in London in the spring of 1930 but returned to Paris for the summer. Acquainted with Abbey, his presence at Invalides is quite natural but it is not known if he played with Abbey at this time. Anyway, he is not dressed as any other musician present at Invalides. In 1931, Dunbar relocated to London. He thereafter worked mainly as composer and director.

¹⁴ Dunbar has been mentioned by Mark Berresford on his Facebook site. The suggestion to investigate Dunbar came from Konrad Nowakowski.



Figure 18 Rudolph Dunbar in the early 1920s and the clarinetist at Invalides 1930

As for the remaining saxophonists, Wilson Townes and George Warren have been suggested.¹⁵



Figure 19 Rudy Jackson, as; Rudolph Dunbar, cl; Big Boy Goudie (rear); Ramon Usera ts; Jack Carter, snare drum; Oliver Tines, cymbals; Benny Peyton, bass drum; US Colonel Richard T. Ellis



Figure 20 Rudy Jackson, as; Wilson Townes, as; Rudolph Dunbar, cl; Ramon Usera ts; Big Boy Goudie, as; George Warren, ts (concealed); Horace Eubanks, cl; US Colonel Richard T. Ellis, Mrs Laura Newton, Honor pilgrim; Benny Peyton, bass drum at the right.

¹⁵ The identifications made by Briggs, BHCF and Driggs give varying names for the saxophonists.



Figure 21 US US Colonel Richard T. Ellis; Noble Sissle; Mrs Laura Newton, Honor pilgrim; Unknown, possibly Mrs. Ellis; Tommy Ladnier; Unknown pilgrim; Eugene Bullard; Cricket Smith



Figure 22 Horace Eubanks, cl; George Warren, ts; Ramon Usera, ts



Figure 23 Ramon Usera, ts; Wilson Townes, as; Big Boy Goudie, as



Figure 24 Rudolph Dunbar, cl; Unknown, cl; Horace Eubanks, cl; George Warren, ts



Figure 25 Jack Carter, snare drum; Wilson Townes, as; Oliver Tines, cymbals

Identification of film clip brassmen



Figure 26 Benny Peyton, bass drum; Edward Cole , tu



Figure 27 Bricktop and Noble Sissle



Figure 28 Noble Sissle and Tommy Ladnier



Figure 29 Billy Burns and George Brashear



Figure 30 Gene Bullard; Cricket Smith; US Colonel Benjamin O. Davis; Unknown



Figure 31 George Brashear and Tommy Ladnier



Figure 32 Tommy Ladnier



Figure 33 Tommy Ladnier, Arthur Briggs, Gene Bullard

The location

Gare des Invalides is a big building near the Seine at the corner of Quai d'Orsay and Avenue de Maréchal Gallieni. However, the entrance was on the south side from Rue Robert Esnault Peltier. The first part of the film was shot on the south side of the building and near the entrance at the south-west corner. The farewell gathering with people waving at the end of the film clip was shot at the south-east corner, facing the buildings across Rue Robert Esnault Peltier.



Figure 34 Gare des Invalides today



Figure 35 Gare des Invalides c 1930, south-east corner (Courtesy Konrad Nowakowski)

The location shown in the last film scene is clearly shot overlooking Rue Robert Esnault Peltier as seen in the following comparison, where the characteristic portal on the building across the street can be recognized.



Figure 36 Farwell film clip scene compared to contemporary photo. (Courtesy Konrad Nowakowski)

The mystic photos

The photo identified by Compton has the scripted date “July 20th 1930”. Clearly, this date is not in accordance with what we know about the reception of the Gold Star Mothers of 21 July. Moreover, there is at least one discrepancy regarding the musicians present.

First of all, the photo gathering do not at all resemble the gathering in the final scene of the film, although definitely shot at the very same place. From the film clip we also know that 21 July was somewhat windy. The first still photo, though, seems to have been shot without any wind, as can be seen from the trees behind the musicians.

Secondly, some of the people present in the film clip are not to be seen in the photos and vice versa. This applies to Dunbar, Usera, Bricktop, and Compton. And there are no family members or chorus girls seen in the film shown in the stills.

Thirdly, and probably most remarkable, is that Sissle wears striped trousers in the photos and dark grey trousers in the film. Since it is very unlikely that he changed trousers during the reception, the date 21 July can be considered as most unlikely. Moreover, there are details that don’t match, i.e. Tommy Ladnier has different handkerchiefs in his breast pocket, George Warren has not the same tie etc.

From this we can discuss two options. The first would be that the still photos were shot at the next Black Gold Star Mothers reception held at Gare des Invalides on 25 August for Party Q.¹⁶ We know that this reception started at exactly the same time as the July reception, at 14.05, but the photos indicate sometime around noon. However, the near agreement of musicians perhaps makes this more unlikely.

The second and probably most likely option is that the photos are from a gathering the day before the reception of 21 July in order to coordinate positions and agree on tunes to play – these were the French and American anthems as well as other for the musicians more familiar tunes. In this case, the Compton notation of 20 July is completely correct. But would they gather like this with instruments and in Sunday best?

Therefore, the exact date for these photographs is still an unsolved mystery

Conclusions

The Pathé film clip was shot at Gare des Invalides on 21 July, 1930.

The still photos were shot at another gathering in July or August 1930.

¹⁶ Le Matin, 26 August, 1930.