The Cotton Club

A chorus line dancer remembers

By Racine S. Winborne

She was a dancing bombshell. A pint-sized ball of rhythmic talent all encased in a five-foot four-inch frame. Juanita Boisseau Ramseur was an original Cotton Club chorus girl during the golden days of the Thirties.

She arrived in New York City from Baltimore, Md. when she was three in 1915 on the arm of an aunt, Florence Cunningham.

It wasn't a permanent move and for the next several years young Juanita, whose parents James and Elmira Edward Boisseau had split shortly after her birth in July, 1912, would be shuffled back and forth between relatives, finally landing up north for the last time when she reached her early teens.

She displayed dancing abilities almost at birth, frequently entertaining family friends who visited her relatives. Today, she recalls that she never had a single formal lesson and at age nine won a Charleston dance contest sponsored by the once legendary and now defunct Royal Theater in her native Baltimore. The prize was \$10.

"I could do any dance you mention except for ballet and that was because my ankles were too weak. I could do tap, flash dancing, the Charleston, Tango, adagio... everything."

The exploits of another relative, an aunt, Ray Jefferson, who was billed as 'The Songbird of Atlantic City" inspired her as a child.

"I admired her as a child when I was growing up and I left New York and went to Atlantic City to see her and be with her. She was
more of a sweet song or sentimental singer.
I took her to the hospital, she must have had
pneumonia, and she died there in New York
in the Forties. She was my mother's sister."

Her first true dance job came at 14 when she and a girlfriend joined a summer road show "Four-Eleven Forty-Nine." "They were looking for talent and so my girlfriend and I decided we should go and see them but we were too young and had to have our mothers' consent in order to go on the road."

The two girls managed to pull it all off and took off on their first real adventure as semi-professional dancers. By now Juanita's parents had reconciled and moved to New York.

Her father was soon summoned to court to explain why his daughter, away on the road performing, had not resumed her schooling in the fall.

"We overstayed our time and I had to go back to school." She did briefly. By then the show biz fever had struck and she was soon



Juanita Boisseau Ramseur, one of the original Cotton Club dancers, as she looks today.

drawn to it for good. There was no place in a working girl's life for books and school and so she quit.

She met Maxwell Bough and married him 1927. She was fifteen at the time and he was a much older and successful "colored" businessman with his own small trucking firm. The marriage lasted two years and produced a son, Sterling.

Now an experienced woman, she resumed her professional dance career, which hadn't really stopped during her marriage, landing a chorus spot in a traveling act, "The Cotton Club Revue" which was sponsored by the famous New York nightclub.

Next she joined the all-Negro "Hot Chocolates" followed by her debut in the famed "Blackbirds" show in the late Twenties. Sandwiched in between was an appearance with a rising young musician trumpeter Louis Armstrong, who would later achieve notoriety as one of the greatest black entertainers in America.

Juanita's spiraling career reached an early plateau when she was spotted by tap dancing whiz Bill "Bojangles" Robinson who signed her on as a part of his act. That debut was short-circuited when a fire utterly destroyed the theater were Robinson and his troupe were scheduled to perform outside of New York. That seeming tragedy opened yet another door for her.

At the time, she was dancing with a young man who worked uptown at the Cotton Club on 143rd St. and Lenox Ave. It was a "colored" performers dream to have a chance at the big time and a place in the Cotton Club floor show.

A glittery, flashy night haunt, that catered to an exclusive and all-white clientele, her male companion filled her head with tales of the going on inside its infamous walls.

One day following a rehearsal with Robinson, he took her over to the Cotton Club and introduced her to its manager, Herman Starks.

"He told him 'you ain't seen nothing till you see this young girl dance.' I could watch Bill Robinson do a move like a time-step and emulate it right on the spot so I got on the stage and I danced with him and Herman Starks said 'I want her.'

"Well, Bill Robinson says to him 'you can't have her, she's with me'. But if Herman Starks wanted somebody he got them."

She signed on as a chorus dancer at the Cotton Club for \$27 a week in 1932.

She recalls that life inside the club was fascinating with the Negro acts performing two shows nightly seven days a week.

"We had show girls and dancing girls...
everything was feathers and very extravagant
costumes." It was also a popular haunt for
some of New York City's most notoriuos
gansters and she admits to having seen
several who were regular paying customers.

She also says that she never experienced any unfair sexual advances at the hand of the guests of the club managment. "Never, never, never... as far as I'm concerned I never saw anything like that."

During her stay at the Cotton Club she was introduced to a number of leading black entertainers of the day: Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters, the Nicholas Brothers and Lena Horne, among many others.

"Lena was dancing in the chorus line right next to me when I first went there in 1932. She could dance. She liked to sing and they thought she had a pretty good voice so she stepped out of the chorus and went to sing with Noble Sissle. She didn't get her break at the Cotton Club."

Around 1935, she left and returned to the road briefly pausing in between to appear on stage in the Apollo Theatre chorus line. She teamed up with singer George Dewey Washington and for a time, tried her hand at choreography.

(Continued on page 6)

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