

continued from page 3

Hill and Bill Bailey in place of Cab Calloway and Bill Robinson. The show left New York on the *Lafayette* on May 25, 1937; because of her age, Naomi was given a guardian -- Teddy Hill himself. As luck would have it, Gillespie was in the band, and the two cemented a lifelong friendship.

First stop was Paris, where the show ran seven days a week, at the Théâtre des Ambassadeurs in the early evening and after midnight at the Bal du Moulin-Rouge. Paris was impressed, and reviewers of the show spoke with awe of the "endiablés" and "effrénés" Lindy Hoppers. "I don't think I was old enough to appreciate it," says Naomi. "I'd sit in Boudin's, a cafe for artists overlooking the Moulin-Rouge, and think about how much I wanted to go home." From Paris they went to the Palladium in London, then to a theatre in Manchester, and finally to Dublin's Paris Theatre.

When the show returned to the States in September, Naomi decided to become a chorus girl. In a typical show, the chorus worked three numbers; the opening, the production number, and the finale. In between were acts with comedians, tap dancers, singers, exotic dancers, etc. The show would run four times a day -- six to seven at the Apollo. Naomi preferred burlesque shows, which paid more money and which ran only twice a day. The chief differences between a burlesque and a regular show were that a white show with strippers would precede the black show, and that the jokes were dirtier.

In 1939, Naomi was in *Swingin' the Dream*, a swing send-up of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which included a crew of Whitey's dancers and many jazz notables of the era. With the participation of Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong (who played Bottom), Maxine Sullivan, Teddy Wilson, Agnes deMille and others, it was the most expensive Broadway musical of the day -- and a dud, closing soon after opening night. Those who haunt SoHo card shops occasionally can find a postcard (mistakenly dated 1933) of Armstrong in costume blowing his trumpet while three chorus girls look on; the middle figure is Naomi.

During the first part of the War, Naomi worked at Moran's, but left in 1944 with a USO show. In 1945, she met and married her husband, an enlisted man named John R. Gay. After the War, she auditioned for *Showboat*, but wary of lavish Broadway productions after *Swingin' the Dream*,



From left: Frankie Manning and Naomi Waller; Jerome Williams and Lucille Middleton; Billy Williams and Mildred Cruz in 1936.

took an apparently safer job on another burlesque show before hearing she had been chosen.

Naomi soon quit dancing altogether, and moved with her husband to Philadelphia, where he ran unsuccessfully for state senate. Later, she came back to New York to work in her mother's hardware store. Today she lives in the same Bronx house bought by her mother in 1944. Still following a southern tradition passed on by her mother, Naomi keeps her dining room perpetually set, with a white lace tablecloth, crystal glasses, a candelabra centerpiece given by Gillespie, and a champagne bottle wrapped in cloth in a cooler. A portrait of her daughter June stands on an easel, and a picture of her mother sits in a frame over the fireplace. Naomi, who occasionally attends our Savoy Sundays, is wistful about the old days. "I loved to dance," she says, "and it still makes me a little sad to think about those times."

All photos courtesy Naomi Waller Gay

continued from page 2

Late that day, I spotted Norma Miller resting her legs at a corner table during a break, when both she and I had disobeyed orders to leave while the crew installed a new camera track. I reminded her that, when this movie comes out next year, 55 years will have passed between her first film (*Day at the Races*, 1937) and her latest -- an unprecedented record for longevity in show business. "Yeah," she said, shrugging her shoulders and looking unusually tired, "and I'm still trying to figure out how to rub two nickels together." Sardonicly she added, "Fifty-five years and it's still a bitch to be a black dancer!"

Eventually we were all "wrapped" for the day. As always, we non-SAG extras waited until last while every-

one else used the small changing room. We hung out in the ballroom for a good hour, and then waited single file for another half an hour in the dank and pock-marked stairwell. Later, as my companions exchanged zoot suits for jeans and leather jackets, they were silent for the first time since I had met them three days before. It had been only one small scene in a much larger movie about much weightier matters; still, everyone had been dazed by the power of the experience. Behind me, I heard Chantee grumble in an uncharacteristically subdued voice, "Maybe I won't be a shoe salesman after all."

Photos: Frankie Manning, Dawn Hampton, and 40 Acres and a Mule



Director Spike Lee and dance partner Cynthia take five.