

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémond

A Lorelei Named Alice

1953's "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" was a smash hit movie starring Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe. When told she was not the star of the film, Marilyn replied:

"Well whatever I am, I'm still the blonde."

Blonde and enticing, she played the role of Lorelei Lee, which brings to mind those lovely Rhine maidens known as *Lorelei* who lured the river's distracted navigators to their dooms. *Lorelei* is also the name of a soaring rock (some 120 meters above the water) on the eastern bank of the Rhine near St. Goarshausen, Germany. This narrow part of the river has a very strong current, and rocks below the waterline have caused many boat accidents. A famous poem by German poet Heinrich Heine is entitled "*Die Lorelei*", a portion of which follows:

Die schönste jungfrau sitzt
Dort oben wunderbar,
Ihr goldenes geschmeide blitzet,
Sie kämmt ihr goldenes haar.

The English translation is:

The loveliest maiden is sitting
Up there, wondrous to tell.
Her golden jewelry sparkles
as she combs her golden hair.

Herr Heine wrote beautiful verses, and was also the cousin of a lovely Siren with golden hair (he was, in fact, her father's first cousin). And, wondrous to tell, her dazzling jewelry really sparkled. Born in New Orleans to a socially prominent family, she would marry Monaco's Royal Prince (after first marrying a French Duke) and become America's first Princess of Monaco sixty-seven years before Grace Kelly (and a Jewish-American Princess at that).

Her name was Marie Alice Heine. The Crescent City's very own princess was born to Michel and Amélie Miltenberger Heine on February 10, 1858, in the 900 block of Royal Street at the home of

Alice's father was a German Jew who (according to his 1904 obit in the "Daily Picayune") had come to New Orleans "back in 1837, accompanied by his elder brother, Armand." Their uncle, "the wealthy banker of Berlin" had financed their "banking and commission house in a building which stood on the site" which was then occupied "by the Commercial Bank, Common and Carondelet Streets."

Michel and Armand had left Berlin, arriving in the United States after three years in Paris. With their own banking house known as A & M Heine, they created the most profitable financial operation in the city of New Orleans which after just twelve years was valued at about \$600,000. With their social position enhanced (Armand was a member of the Pickwick Club and had erected through agents the building at the corner of Canal and Carondelet Streets for the club – it later burned), Michel was able to wed in 1853 the daughter of a very wealthy first-generation German-American (Joseph Alphonse Miltenberger) and his Creole wife (Marie Céleste Dorfeuille).

Soon after their wedding, the newlyweds traveled to Paris where a European branch of A & M Heine was opened. They alternated part of each year in Paris and part in New Orleans. The Heine brothers soon commanded one of France's most important banking concerns. Michel and Amélie became regulars in the court of Napoléon III, who (with the Empress Eugénie) became godparents to the New Orleans-born Alice. The House of Heine loaned the Emperor substantial sums of money to finance his war against the Prussians.

Although an American citizen of strong German ancestry, Alice's unusual upbringing found her more inclined in style to European influences. In fact, she was more Spanish (like the Empress) than German in her way of looking at things. Anne Edwards in her book, "The Grimaldis of Monaco", describes Alice as a "combination of her exotic mother and her pragmatic father, even in appearance, Alice spoke many languages – all fluently and all with a melodic American Southern Accent".

So how did it come to pass that this French Quarter belle would become a princess? At only age sixteen, the charming beauty accompanied her father to the City of Lights where she became the toast of Parisian society. On February 25, 1875, she wed Armand Chapelle, 7th Duc de Richelieu and Marquis de Jumilhac – a distant relative of Louis XIII's infamous Cardinal Richelieu - in Paris. Raised in the Jewish faith, she converted to Catholicism. The couple settled in at the Duke's ancestral home, the *Château de Haut-Buisson*, had a son (the 8th and final Duke) and a daughter. Five years after the marriage, the Duke died leaving Alice seventeen million francs: beautiful *and* extremely rich!

The wealthy widow spent most of her time at her home and intellectual salon in Paris in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, where she attracted authors, poets and even princes. Marcel Proust came and used Alice as the model for the Princesse de Luxembourg in his monumental work "*À la recherche du temps perdu*" (In English, "Remembrance of Things Past"; later translated as "In Search of Lost Time"). His Serene Highness Prince Albert I of Monaco, heir to the *Monégasque* throne (and great grandfather of Prince Rainier III), also came.

Alice married the divorced Prince Albert (whose first wife, Lady Mary Douglas-Hamilton, was the daughter of a Scottish duke) on October 30, 1889. Albert took a great interest in oceanography and spent considerable time on expeditions at sea. While he was doing that, Alice set about bringing class and distinction to a country financed by the casino at Monte Carlo. She fashioned the principality into an elegant cultural destination and took a great interest in its Grand opera. The Diaghilev Ballet was also a mainstay. With Albert away so often, Alice became lovesick after meeting the singer-composer Isidore de Lara (born in London in 1858 as Isidore Cohen). His artistic and intellectual accomplishments were great, and (although he was under five feet tall with hunched back and arms) he had a strikingly handsome face with huge dark burning eyes. Smitten, she became de Lara's lover, which occasioned Albert striking her in the full view of an audience at Monte Carlo's beautiful opera house, the *Salle Garnier*.

Albert and Alice separated judicially in 1902, but still remained married. Upon Albert's death twenty years later, she became Her Serene Highness the Dowager Princess of Monaco. She never did remarry, but she surely had some interesting stories to tell. The New Orleans girl with an "Alice in Wonderland" life died in Paris on Dec 23, 1925.

Today the Princess of Monaco Courtyard & Carriage House at 912 Royal Street in New Orleans is used for wedding ceremonies and other receptions. There is another Royal Street connection, for Rue Royale is home to the HNOG. General Lewis Kemper Williams and his wife Lelie Hardie Moore collected maps, documents, books and old prints through the years. After his wife died in 1966, the general founded the Kemper and Lelia Williams Foundation to manage and archive these treasures of Louisiana history and culture. The Historic New Orleans Collection opened in 1970, a year before the general's death. The general had served as the honorary Consul General of Monaco in New Orleans, becoming a Chevalier of the Order of Grimaldi.

The House of Grimaldi descends from Grimaldo, a Genoese statesman at the time of the first Crusade and bears a coat of arms described as fusilly argent and gules (red diamonds on a white background). Whether the strikingly attractive Irish-American great granddaughter of a Philadelphia bricklayer or an elegant Royal Street beauty, it seems these blondes found that diamonds were indeed "a girl's best friend".

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"New Orleans Lorelei"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2008