

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Bonanza in the Big Easy

Born in Ottawa, Canada, to Russian Jewish immigrants, this actor appeared as Monsieur Mercier in the 1958 Paramount Pictures film, *The Buccaneer* (which embellishes the role of Jean Lafitte (Yul Brynner) in helping Andrew Jackson (Charlton Heston) win the Battle of New Orleans. After a long and successful run in a weekly television series, this actor also reigned as Bacchus during the 1985 New Orleans Mardi Gras season.

If the reader has not guessed by now, the actor mentioned above is Lorne Greene (the patriarch Ben Cartwright, star of *Bonanza*). The fictional setting for the show (according to the premiere episode's storyline) is a 600,000-acre ranch on the shores of Lake Tahoe known as the *Ponderosa*. Nestled high in the Sierra Nevada, with a large ranch house in its center, the *Ponderosa* spread is bigger than Don Corleone's compound (also on Lake Tahoe), where the elaborate First Communion party scenes were filmed for *The Godfather Part II*.

Ben Cartwright is said to have built the original, smaller homestead after moving from New Orleans with his pregnant third wife Marie de Marigny (that's right, just like the Faubourg) and his two sons, Adam and Hoss (played by Pernell Roberts and Dan Blocker). The grown Adam designed the later sprawling ranch house as depicted on TV. The *Ponderosa* was roughly a two-hour ride on horseback from Virginia City, Nevada. Most people believe that the inspiration for the name *Ponderosa* was the great number of *Ponderosa* pines in the area, but it could've been taken from the Latin for large and ponderous in size.

As told in flashback episodes, living with Ben Cartwright must have been extremely difficult because none of his wives survived. Adam was born in New England to first wife Elizabeth, who died in childbirth. Hoss' mother, Inger Borgstrom, was killed by Indians. Hoss, it was explained, is derived from a Swedish word for "big in stature and big in

spirit". Joseph Francis Cartwright, "Little Joe" (played by Michael Landon) was born in 1842 on the *Ponderosa* Ranch to Ben and his Crescent City wife, Marie de Marigny. Joe's maternal roots are from New Orleans, unlike his eastern half-brother Adam or Scandinavian half-brother, Hoss. In Marie's episode one learns that Joe's mother had studied fencing under Marius the Fencing Master, and Joe was likewise taught to be proficient with the *épée*. This skill did not help her when she fell from a horse and died. Joe's mother's story appeared in the episode entitled "Marie, My Love", which aired on February 10, 1963 (Season 4, Episode 20), with Felicia Farr as Marie de Marigny.

According to the story, Little Joe's pinto *Cochise* stumbles and falls on him, a riding injury that brings Ben to remember Joe's long deceased mother. His memories carry him back to the time he first set eyes upon her, on *Rue Royale*. A close friend, who had saved Ben's life, made a dying request that Ben go to New Orleans, meet with his estranged wife, and give her a message. Ben fulfills his promise to his friend and discovers the scandal underlying the estrangement. He confronts those in New Orleans responsible for the deception, including bad guy Edouard Darcy, played by George Dolenz (father of Micky Dolenz, one of *The Monkees*). A duel (originally set for dawn at the Plantation Allard with rapiers) ends with pistols, fists and the truth. In his quest, Ben finds he has fallen in love with his friend's widow and takes her back to the *Ponderosa*.

The actress Inger Stevens (who also starred in *The Buccaneer* with Lorne Greene) was Yul Brynner's love interest, Annette Claiborne, the fictional daughter of Louisiana's first governor (played by E. G. Marshall). Inger Stevens guest starred as a love interest for Hoss in the third episode of *Bonanza* ("The Newcomers"), which originally aired on September 26, 1959. Although Hoss' character on *Bonanza* was portrayed as lovable but slow-witted, Blocker was the only cast member with an advanced degree, a master's in dramatic arts.

This is exemplified in another episode with a New Orleans twist. In Season 5, Episode 18, "The Gentleman from New Orleans", gullible Hoss meets a flamboyant, cutlass-wielding tippler with a French accent in the Golden Lily Saloon claiming to be none other than the pirate Jean Lafitte (perhaps lost from the set of *The Buccaneer*). Believing him to be the real Lafitte, a true patriot of the War of 1812, Hoss invites him to the *Ponderosa*. There Lafitte complains that Hop Sing's coffee needs chicory. While skeptical Ben makes inquiries back in New Orleans to try to verify his identity, Lafitte is accused of murder and it's up to Hoss to discover not only the real killer but the truth of Jean Lafitte's identity. Only on *Bonanza* could the heroic pirate of the Battle of New Orleans end up on Lake Tahoe. Lafitte (played by John Dehner) departs the *Ponderosa* for a place "where the music is gay, where the wine is good and where the women are beautiful".

All of these unusual Nevada-New Orleans connections link up with a talented harmonica player from Torras, Louisiana, named Lazy Lester, nee Leslie Johnson. Through the years, Lester has crafted a style as unique as his nickname (dubbed "Lazy" by producer Jay Miller because of Lester's laconic, laid-back style). He calls his music "swamp blues," a mixture of blues, swamp pop and classic country (Lester got hooked early on Jimmie Rogers). Lester says it's a "down home" music minus the additions and subtractions that other more urban-styled blues include.

Lester's career has spanned from the 1950s to the present with his first legitimate hits in 1958 (the release of "I'm A Lover Not A Fighter" backed by "Sugar Coated Love".) Those two songs made Lester a star. There's a rhythmic blues edginess to the sound – something that is today known as the "Excello Sound" for the Nashville, Tennessee, based Excello label. His label mates included Slim Harpo and Lightnin' Slim, and Lester's songs have been covered by the Kinks, Dave Edmunds, Freddy Fender, Dwight Yoakam and the Fabulous Thunderbirds, to name a few.

Lester remained a regular Excello artist for almost a decade, recording great songs like "I Hear You Knockin'"/"Through The Goodness of My Heart," "You Got Me Where You Want Me," "Patrol Blues," "Whoa Now," "If You Think I've Lost You," "The Same Thing Could Happen To You" and "Pondarosa Stomp." "Pondarosa Stomp" (one cannot help notice the misspelling) was released on Excello number 2277 and is an instrumental number.

Lazy Lester's classic recording of the "Pondarosa Stomp" is also the namesake for one of today's most important roots-based music events. New Orleans' annual Ponderosa Stomp festival begun in 2002, is a two-night celebration usually held each year in New Orleans between weekends one and two of the Jazz & Heritage Festival. Its very purpose is to bring classic signature performances back to the people (featuring the most legendary blues and early rock and roll artists still available). This showcase for the demi-legends of blues, R&B, rock and rockabilly is the brainchild of Ira Padnos (Doctor Ike), a record collecting anesthesiologist who loves to sport fezzes and other outlandish headgear atop his curly locks. Ponderosa Stomp has provided a plethora of performers at Rock and Bowl, House of Blues and on the road.

Lester's instrumental number, the "Pondarosa Stomp," was named after a slang term (Pondarosa) for Louisiana's Angola State Prison, rather than as a tribute to the TV show *Bonanza*. Perhaps the prisoners think of it as a big ranch. Surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River (instead of Lake Tahoe), it would take more than thirty Angolas (18,000 acres) to equal a *Ponderosa*.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Bonanza in the Big Easy"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2010