

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Cool and Hot**

"Awesome" may come and go, but "cool" will always be fashionable. It is the word that never seems to go out of style. As Goldilocks discovered, it's the temperature that's "just right".

As the 2010 Whitney White Linen Night approaches, *The Dallas Morning News* has already spread the word:

"About 20,000 people are expected to don white clothing Aug. 7 to stay cool during the White Linen Night block party in the Warehouse Arts District of New Orleans."

The headline explains why (while most New Orleanians are secluded in cool air-conditioned comfort), thousands of intrepid creative souls don "cool" linen and venture out to support the city's arts scene. It states, "Too warm is cool in New Orleans."

"Cool", after all, relates to more than just the temperature. It's all locally logical. In the years before air conditioning, the natives did what they could to lessen the effects of the summer heat and humidity. There were hats, light fabrics, parasols, and (of course) the wearing of white linen clothing.

Just to confuse matters, "hot" can be "cool", too. *The Real World* is back on location in New Orleans in 2010 with a houseful of hedonism, hormones and hard partying, billed as "Hot Days, Sultry Nights". It premiered June 30.

But how did locals cope with the sweltering heat and humidity in the Crescent City over 150 years ago?

The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* on November 21, 1855, paints a picture of what it was like for a fictional Cockney gentleman from the British Isles visiting New Orleans in summer. Mr. Fitzflunkey is the name the paper gives for "the newly arrived John Bull," who "after

sweltering a few hours about the streets, puffing and blowing" exclaims, "'Ow 'Orrid 'Ot!"

He is "continually wiping from 'is big, round flushed face the streams of perspiration, and no doubt fully appreciating Hamlet's exclamation: 'Oh! that this too solid flesh would melt!' Iced water, iced porter, iced ale, iced 'aff-an-aff can't assuage Fitzflunkey's thirst. He burns; he swelters, he gasps. He prays in vain for relief; his sighs and pantings do not cool the burning air; his oft-recurring reminiscences of the moist, cool, clammy, foggy Lunnun atmosphere but serve to increase his torments."

As Mr. Fitzflunkey "waddles along, larding the lean earth," he envies "the Creole who saunters by, dressed all in loose, white garments, his neat patent leather pumps, his white socks, his light cravat, his little cane, his *cigarrito*, his Panama-looking hat with the white sack and pants, and irreproachable shirt-front, as cool as the wearer is calm - just as if both wearer and garments had stepped out of a refrigerator kind of a bandbox to take a whiff of air and a gleam of sunshine.

The sight is striking and amusing, and is almost of daily occurrence just now in our streets. The freshly imported Englishman wonders how any civilized being can live in such 'a dom-d bloody ot climate'; the Creole takes another whiff at his *cigarrito*, twirls his *moustache* and mutters:

*Quel beau temps!"*

On a summer day not too long ago, I asked an English friend of mine living in New Orleans (much more eloquent and well-spoken than the example above) this pertinent question:

"The seersucker suits we love to wear to keep cool in New Orleans had their origins with the British Raj. The English have used this wonderful Indian fabric since the early 1700s. Does anyone in London ever wear seersucker today?"

"Simply not done," he replied.

"It would be the same thing as wearing a pith helmet on Oxford Street."

Of course, as he told me all this, my British friend (on that hot New Orleans summer day) was wearing a seersucker suit.

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