

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Zorro Rides Again

In 1937, New Orleans became the first city in the United States to be provided funding under the Wagner Act. Contracts for the St. Thomas and Magnolia housing projects were the first signed by FDR under Senator Robert Wagner's legislation, and with it the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) was created. A young LBJ was one of the principal authors of the Housing Act of 1937, and he saw to it that the first three grants were announced in alphabetical order (with Austin being mentioned before New Orleans and New York).

Also that year, New Orleans saw the founding of a new carnival organization, the Knights of Hermes (which continues to charm the city with its annual parade). Hermes, HANO and housing were the talk of the town, and Hitler was the talk of the nation.

For those who wanted some form of escapism, there was always the local movie house. Among numerous neighborhood theatres, there was the Bell, the Cortez, the Casino and the Carrollton (which had been rebuilt the year before). Or perhaps one visited the Imperial on Hagan Avenue (Jefferson Davis Parkway today) followed by a stop at the Parkway Bakery (also on Hagan ... then as today).

1937 produced great films like Frank Capra's "Lost Horizon", the Marx Brothers in "A Day at the Races", "Stella Dallas", "Topper" and "The Awful Truth". In addition to these classics were the serial Westerns from Republic, and 1937's "Zorro Rides Again" was one of these twelve-chapter runs. A modernized version of the beloved Zorro saga, this series has as its hero the great grandson of Don Diego de la Vega (the original masked swordsman).

The dashing Zorro heir (aka James Vega), played by New Orleans-born actor John Carroll, must also fake it as a fop. The handsome, mustachioed Carroll outwits his villainous adversary, J. A. Marsden, portrayed by Noah Beery. Beery had previously delivered one of his most memorable characterizations in the 1920 role of Sergeant Gonzales in "The Mark of Zorro" opposite Douglas Fairbanks.

The original Zorro story was Johnston McCulley's 1919 novella "The Curse of Capistrano", but in 2005 Chilean author Isabel Allende penned an origin story for the caped hero. In this prequel she added a bit of New Orleans flavor by having young Diego and his companions captured by Jean Lafitte and his notorious crew. And as guests of the Baratarian buccaneers, Don Diego and company would also encounter voodoo queen Marie Laveau. What more could one ask for?

John Carroll was the stage name of Julian Lafaye (July 17, 1906 - April 24, 1979), and he spent some intriguing years leading up to his becoming an actor. Leaving home to seek his fortune at a young age, he made his way to the capitals of Europe. There he combined such unusual talents as becoming a successful racecar driver and studying operatic voice in Milan, Italy. Initially working as a stunt man in the early 1930s, Carroll climbed his way toward leading man status. He made his screen debut in "Hi, Gaucho!" in 1935 where he appeared with his first wife (the exotic Hungarian-born actress, Steffi Duna). When she first came to this country, she spoke very little English.

The late Prieur Leary related in his autobiography that Julian Lafaye was his wife's first cousin. Two Fauconne de Calongne sisters were the link; one married a Lafaye and the other a Hartson. He described Steffi Duna as a "talented actress" who was "awaiting her forthcoming pregnancy" in Mandeville, Louisiana, as a guest of the Hartsons. Prieur and John Carroll went out on Lake Pontchartrain to catch some imposing lake crabs, but these "terrible looking crustaceans" with "large defensive claws" caused Steffi to jump back "horrified". She said, "Where did you get them spiders?" This did not prevent an enjoyable crab boil.

Carroll is probably best known for his role as Woody Jason in "Flying Tigers" with John Wayne (1942).

He worked steadily in films through the mid-1950s (even singing occasionally) and continued to make wise investments throughout his life. He and Steffi Duna divorced in 1938, and his second wife was Lucille Ryman.

Another Lafaye family member, Edward Emory Lafaye, was a city commissioner of public property. In 1909, he along with Michael Baccich and Colonel Roch Eugene Edgar De Montluzin were instrumental in the development of Gentilly Terrace. What evolved was a neighborhood of impressive homes on the lake side of Gentilly Boulevard bounded by St. Roch and Franklin Avenues. The homes were quite striking and were built up high upon the terraced lots. There is even a Lafaye Street in the area.

Mostly constructed in the years 1910-1940, these homes were designed to resemble English Tudor cottages or were built in the Mediterranean-revival style. Many display a Spanish accent, and there are quite a number of California bungalow style houses. Any of these superb haciendas would have made Zorro feel quite at home.

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