

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Universal Acclaim

What could the following possibly have in common: A famous New Orleans courtyard, "The Titanic", a movie mogul and his mistress, "Citizen Kane", Universal Studios, mysterious deaths and Nazi prison camps? The story all begins in 1816.

One of the French Quarter's most identifiable landmarks is the Brulatour Courtyard, which was created in 1816 by the building efforts of wine and furniture retailer Francois Seignouret. With its mysterious bending stairway behind a huge arch, this historic patio's fan windows and doors have attracted artists and photographers for years. Early studies in oil or charcoal show a massive pottery olive jar. Later photographs reveal that an impressive fountain has replaced the jar. And it is photography and the Brulatour name that give this tale its life.

Jules Brulatour was born in New Orleans April 7, 1870, and was one of the foremost pioneering figures in the early film industry. Starting out with the Manhattan Optical Company in 1898 as a sales rep, he eventually became the distribution chief in the United States in 1907 for raw film stock from *Lumière Frères*. He then joined forces with Carl Laemmle in creating the Motion Picture Distributing and Sales Company in 1909. This consolidation weakened Edison's strong position and it also cut into Kodak mogul George Eastman's profits. Brulatour was then offered a contract with Eastman that put him in charge of Kodak distribution, as well. He made huge profits from the volume of film sold in the burgeoning movie industry.

Brulatour co-founded Peerless Pictures and was a producer for the French film company known as *Éclair*. Another pastry was *Éclair's* leading lady, Dorothy Gibson (already a famous artist's model), who became a popular star in a number of dramas and comedy hits. She was also a personal hit with Mr. Brulatour. In 1911 she began a six year love affair with the movie tycoon, although he was still married to first wife Clara Isabelle.

To make things even more interesting, Dorothy escaped with her bridge partners and survived the sinking of the "RMS Titanic" only to star in a tremendously popular film on the event. She also wrote the scenario for this one-reeler and wore the same white silk evening dress. Brulatour backed "Saved From the Titanic", released just a month after the disaster. No prints are known to exist and film historians consider this to be one of the great losses of the silent film era.

Meanwhile, Brulatour teamed up again with Laemmle to form Universal Film Manufacturing Company, later known as Universal Pictures. Begun in 1912, the corporation brought together competing studios into a spectacular reservoir of resources and talent. Brulatour served as Universal's first president, and Universal City Studios would soon follow.

In 1913 Dorothy killed a pedestrian while driving Brulatour's sports car in New York. The ensuing high-profile court case revealed the fact that Dorothy was Jules' mistress. Although he was already separated, this created a scandal followed by a divorce in 1915. Dorothy and Jules were wed in 1917 (but it only lasted two years). First wife Clara died in 1924 from injuries in a car accident in Egypt.

Much has been written to suggest that Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane" was all about William Randolph Hearst. But much of the story was drawn from the lives of Jules and Dorothy Brulatour. The film's character, Susan Alexander, is said to have been partly based on Dorothy Gibson (the highest paid movie actress in the world at the time of her premature retirement).

Brulatour married a third time to actress Hope Hampton, but Dorothy never remarried. She and her mother settled in France in 1928 where Dorothy appears to have gotten involved in Fascist politics and espionage. She apparently switched allegiances once the war was under way, was arrested by the Gestapo, imprisoned, escaped and incarcerated again until 1944.

The last twenty years of Jules Brulatour's life were less dynamic than his early ones. His wife Hope was quite the entertainer and was dubbed in the society columns as the "Duchess of Park Avenue". Jules was wounded in 1939 by a would-be assassin but would never reveal to the police who it was.

Dorothy died of a heart attack in her quarters at the *Hôtel Ritz* in Paris February 17, 1946. Jules died in New York October that same year. Jules' son from his first marriage, Claude Jules Brulatour was vacationing in Montego Bay, Jamaica, with his wife. They appear to have both died in bed of heart attacks on the same night.

The Brulatour Mansion at 520 Royal Street was home to WDSU Television from 1950 until the move in 1996 to its new corporate headquarters on Howard Avenue and Baronne. This NBC affiliate is today owned by Hearst-Argyle Television. To that one can only say: "Rosebud!"

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