

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Tontis, Cadillacs and Chevrolets

"In the name of the most high, mighty, invincible and victorious Prince, *Ludovicus Magnus Regnat*, ... Fourteenth of that name" Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle took possession of "this country of Louisiana" on April 9, 1682. This was the official birth of Louisiana, and by law recorded by notarial act. Jacques de la Métairie was the notary, and La Salle's chief lieutenant Henri di Tonti witnessed this momentous beginning.

Tonti was the explorer's "right-hand man" although this was not actually possible. This intrepid Italian soldier in the service of France had lost his right hand to a grenade, and an impressive iron one took its place. For this he was known as "*Bras de Fer*".

Tonti's father, Lorenzo di Tonti, was a Neopolitan financier who in 1653 invented a form of life insurance known as the tontine. It was a financial vehicle incorporating the features of an annuity, group life insurance and a lottery. At first tontines were used to fund wars or public works and were the first government bonds issued anywhere in the world. In a later variation, the capital reverted to the last survivor. Simply put, as investors died the surviving investors' dividends increased. Ultimately the last one would take all (providing a story line for numerous murder mysteries). This feature caused tontines to eventually be banned in Great Britain and the United States, because there was that incentive for investors to kill one another.

There is a Tonti Street in New Orleans named for the iron-handed explorer, and there is a Tonti Street in Detroit. But that thoroughfare was named for Henri's brother, Pierre Alphonse di Tonti, Baron de Paludy. Lorenzo's second son served as lieutenant to Antoine Laumet, dit de La Mothe, Sieur de Cadillac, and together they established Detroit in 1701. First called "*les Étroits*" (the narrows) and *Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit*, the settlement increased with the arrival of Cadillac's wife and that of Alphonse di Tonti the following spring. Motown was on the move.

Cadillac also became governor of Louisiana but was recalled to France in 1717 and imprisoned for a brief period for speaking out against John Law. Law, of course, represented French investors in another elaborate financial scheme to settle the Mississippi valley and build New Orleans the following year. There is a Cadillac Street in the Gentilly area of New Orleans between St. Bernard Avenue and Bayou St. John, but Cadillac's name really lives on as the prestigious luxury automotive line for General Motors.

John Law was a shrewd Scot and a masterful marketer, especially in the area of street names for his new city. Later subdivision developers were faced with similar challenges. What street names would best stimulate lot sales? Back in Gentilly shortly after World War I, promoter Joseph Alfred Blythe decided to name some streets in his new development after popular automobiles of the day. There was a Stutz (remember the "Bearcat"), Buick, Ford and Packard Street. There was also a Velie Street for the automobile brand produced by Velie Motors from 1908 to 1929. Willard Velie, the company's founder, was John Deere's maternal grandson. How Hiawatha, Pocahontas and Powhatan Streets ended up in the same neighborhood is anyone's guess.

But with all those many automobile names for streets, Chevrolet is noticeably absent. Seems that Mr. Blythe was having trouble during those times with his own vehicle, a Chevrolet. He decided there was no way that would be a name choice.

It was not until years later that another "troubled man" would emerge in the Crescent City. Manny "Chevrolet" Bruno would finish thirteenth out of a fifteen candidate field for mayor in 2002 with the outstanding slogan: "A Troubled Man for Troubled Times". Part of his platform was enunciated clearly. "I don't have a car. That is one of the reasons I am running so I can get a city car and a driver." Just what the city needed!

To contemplate what Henri di Tonti did without a car is quite remarkable. He spent years and covered countless miles through the wilderness searching for La Salle. Governor William Charles Cole Claiborne

said that he could think of no figure in the romantic era of the French exploration of North America "so uniformly perfect and admirable".

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Tontis, Cadillacs and Chevrolets"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2007