

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Burnt Offerings

In 1903, Governor W. W. Heard, Mayor Paul Capdevielle and other dignitaries gathered to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase. American, French and Spanish flags and bunting decorated the front of that historic building, as well as the Pontalba Apartments on either side of Jackson Square. French Ambassador J. J. Jusserand spoke in French from the platform at the Cabildo to the assembled crowd before him.

"Of all the seeds, of all the pearls ever sown by France beyond her frontiers and the vast seas, none is more beautiful than your city, the pearl of the great river. She owes her existence to those valiant "*coureurs de bois*," who in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries descended the unknown and mysterious Valley of the Mississippi, dotting its course with French towns; among these men your Bienville, the most worthy of admiration, whom reverses could never discourage, and who kept unshaken in the midst of the greatest disasters his faith in the future."

These were admirable words about this important city and of its founder, although Bienville was not a *coureur de bois*.

These French "woods runners" were a lawless and somewhat untamed lot that were actually engaged in illicit fur trading. They traveled far and wide (from Canada to Louisiana by the great river), lived outside of French settlements and among the native tribes. Their adventurous spirit was significant, and so was that of a strong group of Canadian explorers who came to build a fine city on the Mississippi.

Bienville's city was founded in 1718, and these intrepid French Canadians marked the name *Cannes Brûlées* (Burnt Canes) on their maps for that area upriver from New Orleans known today as the city of Kenner. These explorers noticed that natives in the area were burning sugar cane to drive out the wild game.

One has probably noticed the similarity in name to a favorite New Orleans dessert, *Crème Brûlée* (French for "burnt cream"). This rich custard is topped with a layer of caramel created by burning sugar under an intense heat source. Nowadays this is accomplished with a culinary blowtorch. First mentioned in Massialot's French cookbook *Le Cuisinier Royal et Bourgeois* in 1691 (just a few years before Iberville and Bienville's journey to Louisiana), this sweet dish can be savored at any number of New Orleans' fine restaurants.

And what can make any Creole feast even more spectacular? The drama and panache of the *Café Brûlot* will handle this task splendidly. *Café* is of course French for coffee, and *Brûlot* once again involves burnt sugar. One of the definitions in French is "*eau-de-vie brûlée avec du sucre*" or "brandy burned with sugar". A 1913 letter to the New York Times explained that *brûlot* was French for "firebrand", and in its liquid context "Cognac burned in this orange peel cup".

There is a specially designed silver *Brûlot* bowl (with ladle and cups), but an equally stunning presentation can be made with a chafing dish or Revere bowl, a bent-handled ladle and demitasse cups. The spiraling orange peels are decorated with grommets of cloves, and the flaming liquor gives off a beautiful blue flame. Louisiana chef extraordinaire John Folse has said that the recipe for this famous blending of dark roasted Creole coffee with Cognac, spiced with cinnamon and orange peel is attributed to Dominique You, Jean Lafitte's artilleryman and top lieutenant. He was certainly experienced with firepower.

All of this brings us full circle to one of those daring *voyageurs*, the *coureurs de bois*. The distinction of being the very first one goes to a young man born in Champigny-sur-Marne, France, in 1592. He came to New France in 1608 where he was sent by Samuel de Champlain to live among the Huron in 1610 to learn their language and customs. This first *coureur* was named Étienne Brûlé.

He became an excellent scout and pathfinder. And it is believed that he was the first European to see

the great Lakes Huron, Ontario, Erie and Superior. He was also one of the first Europeans to set foot in the future states of Pennsylvania and Michigan.

Brûlé lived with the Huron people for over twenty years, but ended up angering Champlain. Champlain believed Brûlé aided the British, and can you guess why he was "burned up"? "*Tu brûles*", ("You're getting hot"). When the English captured Québec in 1629, Champlain believed Brûlé guided them up the St. Lawrence River. He was branded a traitor. He also had a falling out with the Huron, who ended up putting him to death in 1633.

In 1678, Father Louis Hennepin came across the continent's most famous falls and recorded this fact in a book that would make him famous across Europe. Many historians argue that it was in fact Étienne Brûlé who was the first European to look upon the falls in 1615. Another priest, the Jesuit Gabriel Lalemant, gave the falls an Iroquois name *Onguiaahra* meaning "the strait" or more dramatically "thunder of waters." It became the destination year after year for countless newly married couples "burning with love for their sugar", and *Onguiaahra* devolved into the more easily pronounceable "Niagara".

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Burnt Offerings"
Ned Hémar
Copyright 2007