

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Civil Suits: A Sucker Born Every Minute**

"There's a sucker born every minute." This quote is attributed to P. T. Barnum but was actually made by David Hannum. He and four other investors had purchased a giant fossil man from George Hull, who had engaged in a \$30,000 hoax after having had this figure carved from gypsum and buried on a cousin's property near Cardiff, New York, in 1869. The Cardiff Giant was so popular that Barnum offered \$50,000 but Hannum wouldn't sell. So Barnum had his own fossil man carved by his own artists and called Hannum's giant a fake. It was then that Hannum made the famous quote referring to Barnum's giant (not realizing that his was also a fake). A civil suit brought out the truth in court and Hannum lost. Somehow the quote fitted Barnum and stuck.

The quote is also apt for the summer season as seersucker suits are seen all around the Crescent City. They are the very essence of civility and gentility. Brooks Brothers (founded 1818) claims that they first introduced this fabric of puckered cotton in America in 1830 in the form of a frock coat. But the company that made the seersucker suit famous was founded in New Orleans in 1909. Joseph Haspel and his brothers created this ubiquitous raiment loved by southern gentlemen (and ladies alike) from an ideal fabric with a most interesting history.

In fact, the words sugar and seersucker both come from the same root word. The etymology comes by way of the East India Company and the British Raj. From India came the word *shroshakar*, meaning literally "milk and sugar" but figuratively a garment with stripes (presumably representing the smooth surface of milk and the lumpy texture of sugar). The Persian word *shakar*, "sugar," in turn came from the Sanskrit *śarkarā*, "grit or ground sugar." Tamerlane showed true grit by invading India in the late fourteenth century and incorporated many things Persian and Indian. The English took striped Indian fabric and called it *Sea Sucker* as early as 1722.

Fast forward to 20th Century New Orleans and Haspel suits are gaining widespread popularity. It wasn't until the 20s that seersucker suits were made there, the material first being used for overalls for the workingman. The two layers of thread (one taut and the other slack) created the high-low crinkled texture with its cooling effect. The Southern businessman then embraced these suits, even with their rumpled façade, because they kept one cool. It wasn't long before well-to-do Ivy Leaguers followed suit (pardon the pun), figuring that if one were rich he could afford to be rumpled (imagine an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel).

In 1925 when Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan were engaged in their courtroom monkey business, H. L. Mencken wrote about "the mountebank Bryan, parading the streets in his seersucker coat." That was a curious comment since Mencken wore seersucker suits, as well.

Washington and Hollywood loved them, too. Presidents FDR and Harry Truman sported Haspel suits, and nobody looked better than Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch in a three-piece Haspel seersucker in "To Kill a Mockingbird." Bogie wore Haspel seersuckers and so did Cary Grant in "Charade," where he wore one in the shower. In the 50s Joe Haspel, Sr., had performed a similar demonstration with a wash-and-wear version of the traditional seersucker. He walked into the ocean, took it off and let it dry and wore it to a party the same evening. Sales took off even more. Perhaps Clarence Ray Nagin, Sr., cut the fabric for one of those suits. The father of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin worked for Haspel as a young man.

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