

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A Puff Piece

The Thanksgiving Holiday is a time for families, flights, food and football ... as well as an excellent opportunity for alliteration. In fact, the reader will find no greater piece of writing than this anywhere in the English language.

Sadly, the author is compelled to mention that the previous statement is nothing more than puffery: a boastful claim that presumably anyone out of diapers won't take seriously. In its journalistic form (like one of those articles that downplays opposing critical comments about a politician), it's called a puff piece (which takes us back to the dinner table at Thanksgiving).

Perhaps the reader has oft noticed those marshmallows baked atop the candied yams, or enjoyed them around the campfire as a key ingredient of S'mores. Or maybe there was curiosity surrounding the Sta Puft Marshmallow Man's rampage in the movie "Ghostbusters". So just what in the hell is a mallow? Will its marshy environment be threatened if the wetlands aren't restored? Why does everyone pronounce it "mellow" à la Donovan (quite rightly), or as in "Mellow Jax Beer"?

The puffy, spongy confection known as marshmallow consists of sugar or corn syrup, beaten egg whites, gum arabic, flavorings and pre-softened gelatin. Marshmallows are extruded commercially as soft cylinders, cut into puffs and rolled around in confectioner's sugar and powered cornstarch. But there are much earlier recipes, each with a fascinating history.

The very old formula did not use gelatin but an extract from the mucilaginous root of the marshmallow plant, *Althaea officinalis*. This plant species is native to Africa and is used as both a medicinal and ornamental plant. It is found on the banks of rivers and in salt marshes, preferring moist, sandy soils (hence the name marshmallow).

Mallow plants are cited in the Book of Job in the Bible as used by the Egyptians "who cut up mallows by the bushes" in time of famine. Persians used the marshmallow's root's emulsifying property to clean their carpets, preserving the vibrant vegetable dyes used in coloring the wool. The Egyptians of antiquity used the root in a honey-sweetened concoction useful as a cough suppressant and in the treatment of sore throat. Using egg white meringue and rose water flavoring, the French improved on the recipe and called it *pâte de guimauve*. This came pretty close to modern day marshmallows, which are no longer made from the mallow's root.

So what do mallow plants have to do with New Orleans or Louisiana? It turns out that two very important members of the mallow family (or the *Malvaceae* family of flowering plants) are cotton and okra (and how could there be a gumbo party on "K-Ville" without okra?).

Cotton was "King" in New Orleans with millions of bales shipped through its port annually during those glory years. This soft fiber that grows around the seeds of the cotton plant (*Gossypium*), a genus of several species of shrubs in the *Malvaceae* family, is native to the tropical and subtropical regions of the world. Cultivation began in India 6,000 years ago and made its way to Egypt. Today, virtually all commercial cotton is grown from varieties of the native American species *Gossypium hirsutum* and *Gossypium barbadense*.

Aaron Neville sang cotton's praises in a 1992 advertising campaign, but he wasn't the first. Greek historian Herodotus wrote that India's "tree wool" was "exceeding in beauty and goodness that of sheep."

As for okra, it is said to have originated in the Ethiopian Highlands and its name is of West African origin (probably Nigeria). In numerous Bantu languages, okra is called *kigombo* and is the origin of its name in Spanish, Portuguese and French. Via Caribbean Spanish *guingambó* or *quimbombó*, *gumbo* has become New Orleans' and South Louisiana's signature Creole Dish. Not just an imitation of French

bouillabaisse, *gumbo* utilized the abundance of local seafood while Native Americans contributed a special seasoning known as filé (ground sassafras leaves) to thicken and flavor the soup. West African slaves introduced the okra (whose mucilage was an excellent thickening agent) and the name *gumbo*. Bell peppers, tomatoes and onions came via the Spanish. Today the "Holy Trinity" is the local name for key ingredients, onions, celery and bell peppers.

Traditionally served over rice, *gumbo* has been called Louisiana's greatest contribution to American cuisine. A dark roux is another means of thickening some gumbos. Tasso, chicken and andouille sausage are popular ingredients in non-seafood gumbos, and the traditional Lenten variety with greens is called *gumbo z'herbes*.

Other plants in the mallow family are the hibiscus (also called the rose mallow) and the hollyhock. Cocoa (and its chocolate) is also in the family. Due to the mucilaginous nature of the mallow family of plants, *Malvaceae* comes from the Greek word *malake* or "soft": like a "cotton puff" or the soft spot in the city's heart for a hearty bowl of gumbo.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"A Puff Piece"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2007