

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémond

Basketsful of Easter Joy

Easter in New Orleans has gone highbrow of late with the most exquisite confections available up and down the Bunny Trail, aka Magazine Street. At 3025 Magazine Street, basket fillers will find an elegant array of caramel eggs, chocolate bunnies and Easter baskets fashioned with what the artisan chocolate establishment known as *Sucré* calls "a touch of *Sucré* sophistication".

In the 5700 block, those on an Easter egg hunt will encounter all manner of marvels at *Blue Frog Chocolates*. There they'll find truffle eggs, Easter pops, a variety of chocolate bunnies and those wonderful old-fashioned panorama sugar eggs (that feature tableaux of chicks and bunnies against a Springtime backdrop). Some may prefer a 7.25 ounce solid milk chocolate FEMA approved blue roof house for their bunny hutch. Only \$12.00 each!

New Orleans has always possessed a sweet tooth, and privately run candy emporiums have been around for years. Creole pralines can be found at *Laura's Candies* (331 Chartres), which has been using copper kettles, wooden paddles and fresh pecans to make treats from old Creole recipes. *Aunt Sally's* (810 Decatur), also purveyors of pralines in the Quarter, was founded by Pierre and Diane Bagur in the 1930s. And, of course, the Roman Candy wagon has been wending its way through the Crescent City since 1915. Today, *Merlin's* is a Harahan based company that makes chocolate rabbits

Mars, Incorporated, the worldwide multi-billion dollar confectionery is one of the largest privately owned U.S. corporations. Frank C. Mars started out in 1911 with his *Mars Candy Factory*, but it failed. A second try in 1920 was the genesis of the present-day Mars megalith. But the oldest family-owned chocolate candy company in the country, *Elmer's Candy* (in operation since 1855), began in New Orleans.

Christopher Henry Miller was a sixteen-year-old German immigrant

who had arrived in New Orleans ten years before. Full of youthful confidence in his new city, he took a job as a baker's assistant in a Vieux Carré pastry shop. He worked hard, married Mary Wetzel and opened the *Miller Candy Company* on the corner of Jackson and Levee Streets in 1855.

One of the Millers' eleven daughters, Olivia, married Augustus Elmer, who eventually joined the company. The company's name was changed to *Elmer-Miller* around the turn of the century. The final name change came in 1914 after Elmer's sons joined what is now known as *Elmer Candy Corporation*.

The company soon increased both its regional and national presence by adding some excellent products. In the early 1920s, Elmer's bought the recipe and trademark for a concoction consisting of chocolate, marshmallow and toasted almonds from a New Orleans department store. Heavenly Hash was originally marketed as a boxed chocolate, and Gold Brick chocolate bars came along during the Depression (1936) with packaging designed to resemble gold bars from the U.S. Mint. When almost all candy bars sold for a nickel, Gold Bricks were the first to sell for a dime (and people still couldn't get enough). These two delightful treats were later marketed in Easter egg shapes with flat bottoms, enclosed in attractive wrappers. Big hits at Easter, these (and the company's Pecan Eggs) outsell the national leaders many times over in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. The Gulf Coast buys more Easter candy than any other region in the United States. And in 2009 the 1923 and 1936 favorites are being introduced in dark chocolate, as well. Another popular item since the 1940s has been the chocolate and pecan syrup for ice cream under the Gold Brick topping brand name.

In 1963, a Chicago native named Roy Nelson purchased the company from the Elmer family. His son Allan joined him two years later, and as the 70s approached the Nelson family relocated the company to Ponchatoula, Louisiana. Allan's son Rob came on board after working for the company as a teenager, followed by a business degree. It is, after all, one of the few places where it's O.K. to "goldbrick" on the job.

Throughout Elmer's long history, numerous goodies have been produced. There were Coconut Haystacks and Chee-Wees (said to be the first crunchy cheese curls produced in America) and Fruit Bubles (in "4 Luscious Flavors"). These colorfully striped giant gumball-sized beach balls melted away in your mouth. A tin of these went fast. These three items were discontinued, but Chee-Wees are currently available from *Elmer's Fine Foods*. Run by the Elmer family, the company bought back the Chee-Wees name from the Nelsons in 1993.

Trouble was, to remain a viable company in the 80s and beyond,

Elmer's Candy Corporation needed to specialize in fewer niche items and do that best. That niche has been seasonal chocolates (including Christmas, Mother's Day and Valentines), and the company is now the second largest heart box manufacturer in the country behind Russell Stover. Of course, Easter is always hoppin'. And there's those conversation Valentine hearts with the short quirky messages. Elmer's custom prints theirs. Gucci ordered thousands of pounds of these custom-made conversation hearts from Elmer's for a fashion show in Milan, Italy. The models paraded above these Valentine messages, visible beneath a Plexiglass catwalk.

Over 150 years ago, New Orleans' Daily Picayune advertised the "extraordinary powers of Divination" offered by Madame Murat Massena at 224 Hercules Street, between Thalia and Melpomene (in its May 30, 1855 issue). The ad touted "her knowledge of the Wonders of the Past and Mysteries of the Future". Or one could have consulted "Madame Facker, This celebrated Philosopher, Astronomer and Physiognomist, and owner of the Egyptian Oracles of Fate" (July 10, 1855 issue). It is doubtful that either of these two ladies could have predicted the enormous joy Elmer's and other New Orleans candy makers would bring each Easter to young and old alike in the Crescent City.

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