

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Football In New Orleans New Year's Day, 1890

In October, 1886, Josephine Louise Newcomb founded the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College with a generous gift to the Tulane Board of Administrators as a memorial to her daughter who died sixteen years before. Until the year of her death, Mrs. Newcomb donated over three and one-half million dollars (over \$75 million today) to maintain Newcomb College for the higher education of young women.

1886 also saw the opening of Sportsman's Park. It was located at the intersection of what is now the Pontchartrain Expressway and City Park Avenue across from Greenwood Cemetery. The New Orleans Pelicans played their first game there April 17 the following year after New Orleans businessman Toby Hart secured a franchise for the city in the Southern League.

By 1890, the population of New Orleans was 248,712. Way out west in Pasadena, California (eight miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles), the Tournament of Roses Parade was established and first held on January 1, 1890. But there was no thought of football or a bowl game. That wouldn't come until 1902. But back in New Orleans on that very same New Year's Day in 1890, some seven hundred people witnessed the city's first football game at Sportsman's Park played right there in the rear of the Halfway House on the New Basin Canal.

Pasadena's Valley Hunt Club, focused on the fact that in mid-winter "our flowers are blooming and our oranges are about to bear", organized those first festivities with horse-drawn carriages festooned with flowers. Things began simply enough with foot races, polo matches and even a tug-of-war. Then came ostrich races, bronco busting and a race between a camel and an elephant (the elephant was triumphant). Before long there were motorized floats with marching bands. But until 1902, there was still no football.

Ronald Austin Smith in his book "Play-by-Play: Radio, Television and Big-time College Sport" contends that the "origin of the bowl game is

not entirely clear, although most claim that the first was the Rose Bowl game of 1902". He further states that this "can easily be challenged, however, for there was a New Year's Day football clash in New Orleans on January 1, 1890". It was there that "Yale" beat "Princeton" 6-0 before a cheering grandstand filled (according to the New Orleans Daily Picayune) "with the choicest flowers of New Orleans society". So how did this historic intercollegiate game come to be the vanguard of the growth of football in the Deep South?

It was the brainchild of Thomas L. Bayne, who played football for Yale in 1884, and wanted to bring the game down to the South. And the two teams were not really those two institutions, although some of the players were from Ivy League schools. Many of the team members came from Tulane, as well as M. I. T. and Virginia. Bayne called his two squads "Yale" and "Princeton" after the two traditionally strongest teams in America. Dr. Charles E. Coates, who coached the first L.S.U. football team, said his "friend T. L. Bayne", who "was known as Nervy Bayne, undertook to get up a team of New Orleans players, composed mostly of ex-college men from Tulane and the southern Athletic Club."

Bayne was the son of Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Levingston Bayne, CSA, also a Yale man (Class of '47) who had been appointed valedictory class orator at Yale by the college faculty. Upon leaving college the elder Bayne returned to New Orleans, then his home, and engaged in the practice of law and subsequently the real estate business. He joined the firm of Slidell & Clark (previously Slidell & Slidell) and became a partner in 1851. Two years later, he was married to Maria Gayle, daughter of the Governor of Alabama. During the Civil War, this distinguished member of the New Orleans bar, served as Chief of the "Bureau of Foreign Supplies" on staff of the Secretary of War.

"Nervy" joined his father's firm (by then Bayne, Denègre & Bayne) in 1888, but he and his brother, Hugh Aiken Bayne (another Yale man and attorney), were particularly pumped toward promoting the pigskin pastime. On Dec 31, 1892, some 2,000 locals came out on a rainy day to see the Birmingham Athletic Club get defeated 6-0 by T. L. Bayne's Southern Club at Sportsman's Park. The "Daily Picayune" saluted these men "masked with mud and trembled with cold", who had "all proven their pluck and endurance." This and the 1890 New Year's Day game created a great deal of enthusiasm for the gridiron sport, and soon Bayne organized and coached the first match-up between Tulane and L.S.U. in 1893. It is said that he did just about everything for that contest: field layout, building goal posts, ticket sales and refereeing duty. Tulane won that first game, trouncing the "Old War Skule" 34-0. Its team colors of olive and blue were selected that same year, but Tulane's team was not known as the Green Wave until 1920 when Clark D. Shaughnessy was coach.

Back in 1890, there were no bands or cheerleaders. Players wore nondescript uniforms, and the game utilized battering-ram tactics. Since 1881 the field had been reduced to its modern dimensions, but other rules were different from today. Walter Camp, another Yale man and the "Father of American Football", formulated most of these. Touchdowns were four points, kicks after touchdowns another two, two for safeties and five for field goals. By 1887, games were generally two halves of forty-five minutes each with no substitutes. If a man was knocked out, the game went on without him. Refs were mandated the same year, and in 1888 there was tackling below the waist. By 1889, the officials were finally given whistles and stopwatches. The center rolled the ball back, and it had to be touched by two of the players before it was in play. One game came to an abrupt stop when the ball collapsed. It was the only football in town.

New Orleans' 1890 game paved the way for numerous other postseason charity games played in numerous cities (both North and South), usually in December. Between 1930 and 1934, there were possibly 100 of these. The Dixie Classic was a bowl game held in Dallas in 1934, a renewal of a couple of starts in the 1920s ... but it lasted only a year. As it mushroomed beyond its regional affiliations, 1930s college football gained national attention. The New Orleans Mid-Winter Sports Association announced in 1934 the debut of the Sugar Bowl Classic, which was held at Tulane Stadium on January 1, 1935, with the Green Wave defeating the Temple Owls 20-14. The Orange Bowl and the Sun Bowl were the same year, with the Cotton Bowl following in 1937.

The Rose Bowl, although first held in 1902, has only been played continuously since 1916. But be it remembered that the battle out by the New Basin bested the Californians by a dozen years, while they were just sitting around smelling the roses.

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