

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Is New Orleans Feminine?

This author has always thought of a great city such as New Orleans being feminine, a beautiful *grande dame*, with her intricate moods (yet always calling you back with her many charms). *Por moi*, it was "*le coup de foudre*," or "love at first sight" (even though I've known this elegant queen since my birth). But other writers through the years have put a different spin on what it means for a city to be feminine.

Mark Twain wrote, "(This Mardi-Gras pageant) is a thing which could hardly exist in the practical North; would certainly last but a very brief time; as brief a time as it would last in London. For the soul of it is the romantic, not the funny and the grotesque. Take away the romantic mysteries, the kings and knights and big-sounding titles, and Mardi-Gras would die, down there in the South. The very feature that keeps it alive in the South — girly-girly romance — would kill it in the North or in London. *Puck* and *Punch*, and the press universal, would fall upon it and make merciless fun of it, and its first exhibition would be also its last."

"Girly-girly" romantic? Is that what New Orleanians are?

It all stems from Twain's disdain for Sir Walter Scott, believing the romantic author's writing having contributed to the American Civil War. He blamed "Scott with his enchantments" for causing the War Between the States by setting the South "in love with dreams and phantoms, romanticizing "decayed and swinish forms of religion" and "decayed and degraded systems of government; turning back the "wave of progress "with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society".

"Romantic," yes. But "girly-girly"?

Maybe New Englanders don't get us. Samuel Langhorne Clemens may have been born in Missouri, but he died a "Connecticut Yankee". The late Phil Johnson, WWL's beloved editorial voice, wrote, "Look what

happened to New England. Narrow people, God-driven and frightened, sensing life as a trial; living, one long avoidance of sin. Their legacy: boiled beef and potatoes. But the French – they knew how to live." What would New Orleans be today "had the Pilgrims gotten off at Pilottown instead of Plymouth?" According to Phil, "It's frightening ... we might have been burning witches instead of *cafe brulot*; or preaching to the quadron beauties, instead of dancing with them; or spending eons eating boiled beef and potatoes, instead of *ecrevisse Cardinal*, or *pompano en papillote*, or gumbo."

That's the choice, it seems: The majesty of the *Boeuf Gras* or boiled *boeuf* and potatoes. I'll take the "girly-girly" *Boeuf Gras*, with all its grandeurs, gauds and chivalries (sham, or otherwise), *s'il vous plaît*.

Now I'll grant you there is that aspect of the Crescent City where it is not at all unusual (especially during Carnival season) to observe an inordinate number of "Men in Tights":

Bryan Batt said after writing his loving tribute to his mom, Gayle, *She Ain't Heavy She's My Mother*: "Something that someone in every city, no matter what, has commented on" were the pictures of "the crazy outfits we would dress in for Mardi Gras."

"That was one of the big things. 'What is it with all the crazy costumes?' First, they thought we were touched, this crazy family. I said, 'No, no, no. This goes on in every home in New Orleans. At Mardi Gras, men wear tights and boots and tunics and sequins and wigs, and no one bats an eye. No one thinks it's strange.' That's definitely a comment. Everyone noticed."

It is more than appropriate that composer George Leybourne not only wrote the New Orleans Mardi Gras anthem, *If Ever I Cease To Love*, but also a tribute to the man who made wearing tights all the rage, Jules Léotard, *The (Daring Young) Man On The Flying Trapeze*.

The city itself has always been feminine from a grammatical point of view, even though others have tried to change that fact. In his monograph entitled *L'Abbé Prévost and the Gender of New Orleans*, William S. Woods (of Newcomb College and Tulane University) wrote that French author Antoine François Prévost (the *Abbé Prévost*) in his famous short novel (*L'Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*) referred to New Orleans as *Nouvel-Orléans* (in the male gender). Woods offered commentary that etymologically *Orléans* should be male, however, for whatever reason "it has always been *la Nouvelle-Orléans*". Jesuit traveller and historian Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix (1682 – 1761) wrote as much in his 1744 journal: "*Orléans est du genre féminin: mais qu'importe ? l'usage est établi, et il est au-dessus des règles de la Grammaire.*" This means, more or

less, that: "Orléans is of the feminine gender. But what does it matter? The usage is established, and it is above the rules of grammar."

John Churchill Chase, in his *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children* opined that although New Orleans was named for Philippe II, Duc d'Orléans (1674 –1723), some may have overlooked his father, Philippe I, Duc d'Orléans (1640 – 1701), the Sun King's brother. His mother, Anne of Austria, encouraged him to dress in feminine clothing as a young man. He would attend balls and parties in female attire or dressed as a shepherdess. This may have accounted for the feminine adjective, *Nouvelle*, in naming the city.

Philippe II (for whom the city was actually named), on the other hand, had numerous mistresses. And while he and his wife never grew to like each other very much (young Philippe gave her the nickname of *Madame Lucifer*), they did manage to produce eight children. Nevertheless, the city has been of the female gender since its (or her) founding.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2009, David McCollam commented, "By contrast, New Orleans is a warm and dreamy place, birthplace of jazz, lover of good food, and afternoon naps, America's most feminine city."

Feminine city, eh? I don't know about the women in David McCollam's life, but taking an afternoon nap seems to me more of a guy thing. This author, gentle reader, has snored away on many an afternoon right in the middle of one of his many literary meanderings. He's fading now.

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