

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Lapsing Lexicon

What follows is an interesting mix of bygone New Orleans words and phrases, many in the *Créole patois*. Omitted are the words and expressions still in widespread use (or at least on some New Orleans slang list), such as *banquette*, *faubourg*, *jambalaya*, *lagniappe*, *picayune*, *pirogue* and *praline* still quoted by one's *nainaine* and *parrain* (godmother and godfather).

Omitted also are those classic local maxims everyone's mother or father used to offer up so that good manners were always exhibited.

Mine would often say, "Don't eat so fast. You're eating like the Russians are marching down Canal Street."

And if one were not eating enough, it was, "Think of the poor starving Armenians." I don't think they're still hungry. But, in any event, whatever I ate (or didn't eat) back then didn't help them much one way or the other.

If one were eating too much, "Always leave something on the plate."

Or if one shouldn't eat anything at all, "Don't eat that. It's *faisandé!*"

Faisandé is one of those words slowly creeping out of the New Orleans vernacular. It means gamy, putrid or left out too long. Whatever it was, it had gone bad.

Moms were also great whenever you had a bo-bo (or was it *beau-beaux?*).

Beaux-beaux was a minor scrape, cut or bruise. It's the type of wound the rest of the country mysteriously called a *boo-boo*. In New Orleans, *boo-boo* was also an expression. But it meant a mistake, or *faux-pas*.

Here are some others in the lexicon:

Algerine or *Algereen*: a person from Algiers, Orleans Parish, Louisiana (still commonly used in Algiers, but now less common in other sections of the city, except with older speakers). One might run into an *Algerine* on the way to Oak Alley, which features a famous

Allée: A passageway lined by a double row of trees leading from the road or river to a plantation house (Fr. *allée*, meaning an alley).

Baire: A mosquito net or bar (Fr., *barre*, cross-bar, used to hold up the net).

Billet-doux: a love letter (Fr. *billet-doux*, literally sweet letter), something to send to *Boo*. See below.

Blanchisseuse: A washerwoman (Fr. *blanchir*: to whiten, to clean). Her name could even be *Blanche LeBlanc*. On Mondays she cooked red beans and rice. But if she was a little too gossipy with the lady on the other side of the fence, she was a *ginny woman* (a local term for a gossip or someone who gets way too involved in other people's business). *Entre nous* (between us), that girl was such a *ginny woman*!

Blouse-volante: A mother-hubbard; a loose wrapper (Fr. *voler*, to fly).

Boeuf Gras: The fatted bull, often displayed in *papier mâché* on a Rex float, was a Lenten symbol of the last meat eaten before a season of fasting. It's now available as a *plushie*. "Throw me somethin'. Mister!"

Boo: A term of endearment (evolved from Fr. *beaux* for male love interest). However, if one picked the wrong *garçon*, it could be an enormous *boo-boo*. *Boo hoo!* This *garçon* might have been staying in a *garçonnière*, or bachelor quarters, usually separate from the principal part of the house (Fr. *garçon*, a boy, a bachelor).

Briqueté entre poteaux: Eighteenth century construction method in which bricks were filled in between the framework of cypress timbers (Fr. bricked between posts).

Cagou: Disgusted, disillusioned (Fr. *cagot*, leprous, indigent and beggarly).

Chacalata: This was a local term for Creoles who remained among themselves, refusing to accept new customs or ideas.

Chambre à brin: Screened portion on the corner of a *gallery* (Fr. *brin*, meaning linen cloth). In Louisiana, *brin* is screen wire. And *gallery* was often used when describing a porch or balcony (Fr. *galerie*, Lat. *galeria*, gallery).

Charivari: A group serenade of dissonant music utilizing pots, tin pans, cow bells, kettles, trays and the like, offered in derision of incongruous or sometime unpopular marriages. *Charivaris* were given widows and widowers who remarried and to married couples with a large age difference. The most notable ever given was to the widow of Don Andres Almonester y Roxas, New Orleans' great benefactor. In 1798, this Crescent City cougar wed a young Monsieur Castillon, French Consul to New Orleans. Some of the crowd produced a coffin on a cart containing Don Andres' effigy with a living person posing as his widow sitting beside it. Totally exasperated after all the racket and ribbing, the newlyweds had to give three thousand dollars in coin to the poor to call them off. Immediately after, they fled to France.

Compère: A term of affection or friendship. Senegalese animal fables told in *Créole patois* used it as a title of address for characters (Fr. prefix *com*, with, and *père*, father).

Courtbouillon: Seafood (usually redfish) cooked with highly seasoned gravy (Fr. *court-bouillon*, a sort of thick gravy of white wine, salt, pepper, parsley, carrots and onions in which fish or game may be cooked slowly). Louis Armstrong pronounced it "*cubie yon*" in his autobiography. That's how most New Orleanians say it, too.

Cyprière: French for cypress forest or swamp.

Devil beating his wife: A New Orleans expression for a situation when the sun is shining very brightly, but it's still raining.

Do-do (pronounced *deaux-deaux*): In New Orleans, it's a sweet expression mothers use to put their children to sleep, as in "time to go do-do" (Fr. *dormir*, to sleep). Then there's *fais-do-do* (pronounced fay-doe-doe), a Cajun term for a dance party or *soirée*. It literally means "to make sleep". These shindigs were family affairs held for family and friends in people's homes. As the music and dancing carried on late into the evening, the children would eventually tire themselves out and go off to sleep (*do-do*). Then the fun could really get going with the parents dancing "up front" while the little ones were put to bed in "the back" of wherever the party was.

Doodle bugs, roly poly bugs or *pill bugs*: I called them *roly poly bugs* as a child, but to most of my friends they were *doodle bugs*. These terrestrial crustaceans (i.e., related to crabs and crayfish) belong to a family of woodlice known as *Armadillidiidae*. They had armor like little armadillos and rolled themselves into a ball. For some strange reason,

the Black-French expression for this creature was *cochon-dilaite* (Fr. *cochon de lait*, meaning suckling pig).

Flying horses: That's what folks in the Crescent City call a merry-go-round or carousel. Locals love to ride the *flying horses* at City Park.

Gabrielle: A loose wrapper worn around the house.

Gard-soleil: A local term for a sunbonnet (Fr. *garder*, to guard, and *soleil*, the sun).

Garde-de-frise: These spikes can be observed projecting from rails separating two adjoining balconies. One sees this often in the *Vieux Carré* (Old Square), or French Quarter. Some older locals say "The Quarters". The *garde-de-frise* is often in a beautiful fan shape. The phrase is probably a hybrid formation of the (Fr. *garde*, guard, and *cheval-de-frise*, spiked guard rail).

Gaspergou: How natives say *casse-burgau*, the fresh-water drum. This fish thrives on large bivalves of the genus *turbo* (Fr. *burgau*), which it breaks (Fr. *casser*) with its powerful teeth.

Grasset: The kingbird, or bee-martin (Fr. *grasset*, fatty).

Gumbo ya-ya: Indicates everybody talking all at once; i.e., at a loud party. It is also the title of the excellent WPA collection of Louisiana folk tales compiled by Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer and Robert Tallant.

Huckabucks, huck-a-bucks, huckle-bucks or (in some parts of town, simply) *cold cups*: Frozen Kool-Aid in Dixie Cups popular in the black community. "The Hucklebuck" was a popular hit song by Paul Williams in 1949. Lucky Millinder first played it as "D'Natural Blues". Chubby Checker did his version of "The Hucklebuck" in 1961. Jackie Gleason tried to dance to it on "The Honeymooners". With all that popularity, virtually no one outside the jazz community knew the *hucklebuck* was a type of sexual position. Here's some of the lyrics:

"Push ya baby out, then you hunch your back,
Start a little movement in your sacroiliac.
Wiggle like an eel, waddle like a duck,
That's what you do when you do the Hucklebuck"

îlet: A city square or block (Fr. *îlet*, little island, so called because the ditches which drained the New Orleans streets were often full of water).

Jalousie: In Louisiana, this is the term for the common two-battened outdoor blind (Fr. *jalousie*, Venetian window). There are even some mid-century houses out by the lakefront that have glass *jalousie*

windows. Don't forget that Hampson Street in Carrollton is named for John Hampson, who was awarded a patent on positioning the slats of Venetian Blinds.

Latanier: The palmetto, or fan-palm.

Make *ménage*: Local translation of the French *faire le ménage*, meaning to clean house. It used to mean to clean house in New Orleans, as well.

Mamaloï: Voodoo priestess, like the city's Marie Laveau (probably from Fr. *maman*, mama, and *roi*, king).

Maringouin: A mosquito (from South American Tupi and Guarani). In New Orleans locals call the predator insects that devour mosquitoes *mosquito hawks*, while most of the rest of the country says *dragonflies*.

Minou: A cat (Fr. *minet*, kitten). Here, *minou*, *minou!* *Chat* is still used as in "le chat noir," New Orleans cabaret on St. Charles, but *minou* is more personal and affectionate. Cat Island, an island off Bay St. Louis in the Mississippi Sound, Iberville named *Isle de Chat* for the multitude of cats on the island. They were actually raccoons, critters new to Europeans. The Frenchmen first called the raccoon a *chat sauvage* (literally "wild cat").

Moqueur: The mocking-bird, Louisiana's popular songbird (Fr. *moquer*, to mock).

Perron: Porch (Fr. *perron* from *pierre*, stone), or a *façade's* construction, in front of a doorway, consisting of a landing reached by a few steps.

Pigeonnier: A pigeon-house, or dove-cote (Fr. *pigeon*, pigeon). Not quite the accommodations of a *garçonnière*.

Porte-cochère: Architectural term for the portico-like structure at the main or secondary entrance to a home or building, through which a carriage or motor vehicle can pass, in order for the occupants to alight under cover, protected from the elements (Fr. *porte*, gate, *coche*, coach, or literally "coach gate").

Quartée: Local term for one-half of a five-cent piece. John Chase provided a wonderful old poem:

"*Quartée* red beans, *quartée* rice,
Little piece of salt meat to make it taste nice,
Lend me the paper, and tell me the time;
When papa passes by, he'll pay you the dime."

New Orleanians would often say *silver dime* in the above situation, just as they would say things like *inkpen*. They'd *pass the vacuum*, *crack the glass* and spread some *mī-nez* on their sandwich. And often they'd mangle the pronunciation of the word sandwich.

Shoot d'shoot: A slide at a playground.

Tignasse: Tangled-up hair (Fr. *tignasse*). Perhaps it's something to hide under a *tignon*.

Tisane: Tea made from orange leaves or soothing herbs and used as a specific in certain illnesses (Lat. *ptisana*, an infusion of maple).

Veillée: An evening spent in pleasant conversation. It's also a wake, not all that pleasant for everyone (Fr. *veiller*, from Lat. *vigilare*, to watch).

Wanga: A spell, presumably a word of African origin. *Mamaloï* used some *gris-gris* to put a *wanga* on a *minou* that got into her *chambre à brin*. If that didn't work she'd try something else. *There's more than one way to skin a cat*.

Some of these words and phrases were explored in the "New Orleans City Guide, 1938" put together by the Federal Writers' Project of the WPA. Over seventy years have passed, and many of these are no longer murmured. *Quel dommage!*

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Lapsing Lexicon"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2010