

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Lost and Found**

Quite a number of New Orleanians enjoy the beautiful beaches and blue water along Perdido Key for summer vacation or long weekend getaways. Easter and the Fourth of July are always popular, too. They have no trouble finding this 16-mile-long barrier island that lies in northwest Florida and southeast Alabama. It stretches from Perdido Pass Bridge near Orange Beach, Alabama, to just across from Santa Rosa Island near Pensacola. Lying to the west is Perdido Bay, and Ono Island and the bay's mouth are within Alabama territory.

A "key" is another spelling of the word "cay", as is "quay", and all are pronounced "key". The definition is a small, low-elevation, sandy island formed on the surface of coral reefs. It was not until 1933 that Perdido Key actually changed from being a small peninsula to an island. It was before then crossed by a large ditch that was narrow enough to leap over, but was sometimes filled with alligators. The ditch became the part of the Intercoastal Waterway in 1933.

But back in the 1690s, there was considerable trouble finding Perdido Bay and the river it drains, the Perdido River. "Perdido" means "lost" in Spanish, and the noted Spanish cartographer, Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (1645-1700), was definitely lost.

He wasn't usually lost, except in his studies, which included astronomy, archaeology, mathematics and cosmography. Born in Mexico City, he was a Jesuit priest, author, poet, historian, mathematician and geographer. He got into trouble with the Catholic Church over scientific matters and left the Jesuit Order. As royal geographer, he was an official member of the 1692 expedition under Captain Pes to explore the shores of Pensacola Bay for defensible frontiers. There he located the mouth of Perdido Bay but couldn't find a passage deep enough to sail through. Worse yet, he was being blown off course. But an Indian chief camped with his tribe at Bear Point spotted him and offered to guide him along a deepwater channel

to this elusive bay. This is why it was named "Perdido", meaning "hidden" or "lost".

Don Carlos wrote about his experiences in his "*Descripción del seno de Santa María de Galve, alias Panzacola, de la Mobila y del Río Misisipi*". The early maps show that the deepwater pass was located near where the FloraBama Lounge and Package Store stand today. One can get lost there, too.

John Chase writes that back in New Orleans, "another great problem of the Spaniards was to keep from getting lost in the back-of town sections. It was swampy there." And "Perdido became a popular name for streets which were apt to get lost under water". Bayou Road (which connected the early city with Bayou St. John) was known as the "Portage of the Lost" in Spanish, and the neighborhood of North Galvez had a Perdido Road listed on some maps running from Bayou Road to the Carondelet (Old Basin) Canal.

So it seems that Perdido Street predates the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and was originally cut from the swamp in as far as Carondelet. But along the way it appears to have gotten "lost" again. It was William and James Fréret who extended present-day Perdido Street and anchored it to St. Charles, where it can be found today (running parallel to Union Street).

Before natives of the Crescent City hop on the St. Charles streetcar for work in the morning, they may have a craving for a "lost" recipe that has never been lost. "*Pain Perdu*" means "lost bread" in French, and how it gets "lost" is all part of its charm. French and Creole citizens of early New Orleans baked their renowned loaves natives call "French bread". Even as wonderful as these treasured loaves were, some would always be about to go stale and be "lost".

From the Creole cupboard, local cooks would combine milk, eggs, sugar and vanilla in a bowl to soak the stale French bread in this custard-like batter before being lightly sautéed (and perhaps finished in the oven). Sprinkled with powdered sugar and cinnamon, this breakfast dish is a Louisiana delight. Some Louisiana cane syrup is another splendid topping.

This version is the sweet down-home historic recipe instead of what has come to be known as "French Toast", which employs regular white bread dipped in egg and fried.

An April 2009 Forbes Magazine article on "The Lost Characters of New Orleans" inquired, "Many of the city's strangest residents left after Hurricane Katrina. Will they ever return?" For some their time had come like Ruthie Moulon, the Duck Girl, who died in a Baton Rouge nursing home in 2008 after being evacuated for Hurricane Gustav.

Her ducks followed her through the French Quarter and were "lost" without her. Now New Orleans has "lost" Ruthie and other eccentric yet wonderful street people. Like missing bays, keys, streets and cherished childhood breakfasts, these beloved characters may be "lost" but never forgotten.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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