

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A Lustrous Leap Year

It is believed the tradition of women being allowed to propose to men on February 29 was started in 5th century Ireland when St. Bridget complained to St. Patrick about women having to wait too long for a man to pop the question. According to legend, St. Patrick said the yearning females could propose on that one day that only occurs during a leap year.

The year 1896 in New Orleans, being leap year, a number of prominent society women planned and gave a very elegant ball. These role reversal *rebelles* called this first all female krewe "*Les Mystérieuses*", and Mr. Willie Stauffer was chosen king. Mrs. A. A. Brittin served as president of the organization. In all respects the usual positions of men and women were turned around, the former being "called out" by the latter. *Les Mystérieuses* was the forerunner of all-women krewes such as Venus, Iris and Muses.

1896 also saw the Crescent City's Carnival growing ever larger and more diverse. The Twelfth Night Revelers' tableau of "Cloudland" was reigned over by Miss Bertie Hayward, who got the golden bean. On February 3, 1896, a totally new group, the Krewe of Nereus, made a very successful *début*. "Sea Views" were presented in tableaux at the ball, and the first Queen of Nereus was Miss May Van Benthuisen. The Atlanteans illustrated "Loves of the Angels", and the Elves of Oberon (formed just the year before) gave "Visions in Marble". Momus burlesqued Carnival with a miniature parade on stage, and Proteus chose the "Animal Kingdom" as its subject. The Phunny Phorty Phellows gave a ball described in Henry Rightor's *Standard History of New Orleans* as a "medley of grotesque and mirth-provoking maskers".

Mardi Gras Day was on February 18 and Rex (with monarchs Mr. Charles Janvier and Miss Arthemise Baldwin) presented "Planets." Comus finished the season with "The Seasons" alongside Miss Alma Kruttschnitt as his queen.

Miss Vira Boarman reigned as Queen of Proteus in 1896, and (quite in keeping with the leap year theme) was a leader in securing suffrage for New York women in November 1917. Educated at Newcomb College in New Orleans, she married Norman Whitehouse, a New York stockbroker, on April 13, 1898. In 1918, she became director of the Swiss office of the United States Committee on Public Information in order to "combat the German propaganda and make plain the aims of the American people". She wrote a book recounting that experience, *A Year as a Government Agent* (1920). She was later president of a leather company that she sold before the stock market crash in 1929.

Murphy J. Foster won re-election as Governor of Louisiana in 1896 with 116,216 votes to 87,698 for John N. Pharr, the Populist-Republican candidate. Foster needed the help of the Democratic Regulars of New Orleans to win. A century later on January 8, 1996, his grandson, Murphy J. "Mike" Foster, Jr., was inaugurated as Louisiana's 49th governor since the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

Deidesheim, a town in the Bad Dürkheim district of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany, has festivals known as *Geißbockversteigerung* ("Billygoat Auction") and the *Deidesheimer Weinkerwe* ("Deidesheim Wine Fair"). But for locals, Deidesheim brought New Orleans a master baker named George Leidenheimer who founded the bakery that bears his name in 1896.

Once located on Dryades Street, Leidenheimer's moved in 1904 to its present location on Simon Bolivar. Originally baking the dense and heavy brown German loaves, Leidenheimer found fame producing New Orleans style French bread with its crisp outer crust (and continues to do so today). The jingle for the company with such a very German name is, in part, "You'll love Leidenheimer's. That's French for bread."

There were some noted entrances and exits in 1896. Captain Thomas Paul Leathers of the steamboat Natchez (which lost to steamboat Robert E. Lee in a famous 1870 race from New Orleans to St. Louis) died on June 13, 1896, at the age of 80 after being run over by a bicyclist on St. Charles Avenue. His magnificent residence at 2027 Carondelet became the home of Dr. E. W. Jones in 1900. Other Jones family members occupied the mansion, followed by the Charles Francis Buck, Jr. (Consul of Turkey) family and the George J. Mayer family.

February saw the death of George Nicholson, whose widow and boss, Eliza Jane Poitevent Holbrook Nicholson, poet, newspaper owner and editor of New Orleans' *Daily Picayune* since 1876, caught pneumonia and followed him in death eleven days later. Writing under the name Pearl Rivers, she was the first woman owner of a major newspaper.

1896 was the founding year of the Era (Equal Rights Association) Club, New Orleans, formed by Kate Gordon. The organization successfully

pushed for the right of women to vote on matters of taxation. Like Vira Boarman, Kate and Jean Gordon were suffragists and social reformers (among the South's few), well known and respected for furthering women's rights in the areas of political and social reform.

1896 was a big year in the development of the motion picture industry. In Britain, Birt Acres and Robert W. Paul developed their own film projector, the Theatrograph (later known as the Animatograph) in January. The same month in the United States, a projector called the Vitascope was designed by Charles Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat. Armat began working with Thomas Edison to manufacture the Vitascope system of movie projection, which was first publicly exhibited on April 23, 1896, at Koster and Bial's Music Hall, New York City.

It wasn't long before the Vitascope came to New Orleans. The first film shown in the Crescent City was on a large outdoor canvas screen at the lakefront (unrolled in front of the bandstand) on June 28, 1896, by Allen B. Blakemore, an electrical engineer for the New Orleans City and Lake Railroad. He had the know-how to rig up Armat and Edison's projection system. Blakemore reduced the five-hundred-volt current from the trolley line for his "Wonderful Vitascope" machine by way of a water rheostat. He also set up a small, square booth six feet above the decking of the resort to house the projector, and an old-time circus man named Billy Reed cranked out the first flicks.

On July 26, 1896, the first permanent theater in the United States dedicated exclusively to showing motion pictures was William "Pop" Rock's Vitascope Hall. It was located on the corner of Canal Street and Exchange Alley in New Orleans, and admission was ten cents. The first movie house in the United States, it only slightly preceded the city's first silent film studios.

Siegmund Lubin was an early motion picture pioneer who purchased a Jenkins camera. He took his first moving pictures of his horse eating hay. He visited "Pop" Rock's Vitascope Theater in New Orleans and in 1896 began distributing films for Edison, including the first screen kiss between Canadian actress May Irwin and John Rice. Entitled "The Kiss", popular short films like this were extremely popular at Vitascope Hall.

Whether or not the lady in "The Kiss" took the osculation initiative that leap year long ago is for the viewer to ascertain.

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