

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Meet Me in St. Louis, Louisiana

Many readers are probably familiar with the chorus of the song, “Meet Me in St. Louis, Louis”:

Meet me in St. Louis, Louis,
Meet me at the Fair
Don't tell me the lights are shining
Anyplace but there
We will dance the “Hoochie-Koochie”
I will be your “Tootsie-Wootsie”
If you will meet me in St. Louis, Louis,
Meet me at the Fair.

But they probably don't recall New Orleans being cited in Verse 3:

Lew Woods was the name of a horse,
that ran at the New Orleans course,
I played him one day
for a dollar each way,
and I charged it to profit and loss.

The St. Louis World's Fair inspired the above song (words by Andrew B. Sterling with music by Kerry Mills), which was recorded by many artists, including Billy Murray and William F. Denny. Both the Fair and the song are the focal points of the 1944 feature film *Meet Me in St. Louis, Louis*, which spotlighted Judy Garland.

The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition was only informally known as the Saint Louis World's Fair, a major international exposition celebrating the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase (1803), one year late. The Fair opened April 30, 1904, and closed December 1, 1904. Hosted by the city of St. Louis, Missouri, it was delayed from a planned opening in 1903 to 1904 in order to allow for full-scale participation by 62 foreign nations and additional states (43 of the then 45 states did participate). One of those states was, of course, Louisiana.

Jean Baptiste Levert represented New Orleans as a Louisiana delegate to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. The Louisiana exhibit was housed in a reproduction of the original state capitol building, the Cabildo, in which the actual transfer of Louisiana from France to the United States on December 20, 1803, took place. It contained on display the desk at which the actual Louisiana Purchase was signed, as well as a model of the workings of a prototype sugarhouse and a reproduction of the famous statue of Andrew Jackson found in Jackson Square in the French Quarter.

Also on display, in the Forestry Building, were all of the trees of the Louisiana forests (and their products). In the same building, but in a different area, were to be found all of the birds, fishes and wild animals of the State.

In the Palace of Mines and Minerals Building, Louisiana presented the "Devil in Sulphur," a "Pyramid in Sulphur," a biblical interpretation of Lot's Wife sculptured in salt, crude and refined petroleum and other minerals fresh from the mines of Louisiana, were exhibited there. Birmingham, Alabama's giant iconic cast iron statue of Vulcan was first exhibited at the Fair in the Palace of Mines and Minerals.

In the Agricultural Palace (covering some 20 acres), besides the complete sugarhouse, Louisiana showcased a rice mill, an irrigation plant, cotton gins and presses, a cottonseed oil mill, Louisiana's famous Perique tobacco, other plants and products, grains, grasses, clovers, and alfalfa, all in profusion.

Fruits and plants (including the best collection of the finest pecans) in the Horticultural Building were exhibited on the floor of the main building and in the conservatory. And in the Education Building were found Louisiana's school exhibits, from the kindergarten to the universities.

In the Transportation Building were examples of transportation on the Mississippi River, from Native American canoe to modern ocean liner. In the Anthropological Building were Native American relics, including a number of baskets of rare and beautiful types.

Finally, the Liberal Arts Building featured two hundred maps of the Gulf Coast from 1500 to 1904, some rare old books and a working model of the great United States Dock in New Orleans. Also there were large topographic maps of the levees of Louisiana (35 ft. by 4 ft.), New Orleans in 1803 (2 ft. by 2 ft.) and New Orleans in 1903 (13 ft. by 15 ft.).

The levees were of particular interest to Colonel Arsène Perrilliat of the Louisiana State Board of Engineers, who prepared a pamphlet for the World's Fair entitled "The Levees in Louisiana, Louisiana's Invitation".

In it he conveyed to the reader what was described as “a very accurate idea of the immensity of the Levee System and the immunity of the riparian dwellers from floods when protected by adequate Levees.” There’s still much to be learned on this subject over a hundred years later.

Civil engineer Arsène Perrilliat, son of Victor and Marie Lise (Blanc) Perrilliat, was born in Paris, France, July 10, 1865. The Perrilliats were descendants of the Perrilliat Bottonet family, from the Duchy of Savoy. Besides Colonel Perrilliat’s numerous accomplishments, he also worked in Thomas Edison’s laboratory in Schenectady, New York, specializing in electrical work. While working there, he performed tests on the first dynamos built for electric railways. In 1888 he accepted the position of general superintendent of the Edison Electric Light Co., of New Orleans, and in the fall of the same year was appointed a member of the Louisiana State Board of Engineers of by Governor Nicholls.

Interestingly, Thomas Edison was one of the famous visitors to the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition. So was bandleader John Philip Sousa, whose orchestra performed on opening day and numerous times during the Fair. President Teddy Roosevelt opened the Fair over the telegraph, but did not attend personally until after his re-election that year, as he did not wish to use the Fair for political purposes. A young twenty-four-year-old Helen Keller gave an inspiring lecture in the Fair’s main auditorium. Apache war chief Geronimo was present, and so was J. T. Stinson whose lecture at the auditorium coined the phrase “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.”

Ragtime music was hot and prominently featured at the Fair. It had also been especially popular at the earlier Chicago’s World Fair, where Scott Joplin went to play in 1893. This served a major role in making ragtime a national craze by 1897. Joplin wrote “The Cascades” specifically for the St. Louis Fair, inspired by the waterfalls at the Grand Basin. The Fair’s Festival Hall contained the largest organ in the world at the time, built by the Los Angeles Art Organ Company.

There were over 1,500 buildings at the Fair, connected by some 75 miles of walkways and roads. It was simply impossible to view (even with a hurried glance) everything in less than a week’s time.

All sorts of popular American food items are said to have been created at the Fair. The most prevalent claim is that the waffle-style ice cream cone was invented and first sold during the fair. Supposedly a Syrian vendor, who was selling a waffle-like pastry called *zalabia*, came to the aid of an ice cream man in the adjacent booth who had run out of dishes. The *zalabia* rolled into a cone would hold ice cream perfectly (and into the history books). Trouble is, more than one Syrian pastry vendor at the Fair claimed to have come up with the idea, and edible cones have been mentioned in French cooking books as early as 1825.

Although probably *not* invented at the Fair, the ice cream cone was popularized at the Fair. Other boasts are more doubtful, including the hot dog and hamburger (both traditional American foods), peanut butter, cotton candy and iced tea (the oldest printed recipes for iced tea are in Virginia cookbooks dating back to the 1870s). It is more plausible, however, that these concoctions were first introduced to mass audiences and popularized by the Fair. The soft drink Dr. Pepper and Puffed Wheat cereal were first introduced to a national audience at the Fair. One might remember that a New Orleans dentist was one of three men claiming to have invented the cotton candy machine.

In the United States, iced tea makes up about 85% of all tea consumed and is especially popular in the hotter states where kudzu reigns. Restaurants in most of the South typically give the customer the choice of "Sweet Tea" (saturated with sugar) or unsweetened tea. This choice is not offered much in New Orleans, except perhaps with barbecue at the "The Joint". On Poland Avenue in the Bywater, "The Joint" offers tea to its patrons either way.

But if it's the "Hoochie-Koochie" you want to watch danced, the next "Bustout Burlesque" at New Orleans' "House of Blues" offers that "sexy, glamorous, and risqué" type of entertainment that long ago one had to "meet at the Fair".

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