

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Provincialism

Charles Dudley Warner (1829 – 1900), American essayist and novelist, was quite the wordsmith. Friend of Mark Twain, the two co-authored *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. In it they coined the term “Gilded Age” for that era of rapid economic and population growth in the United States during the post-Civil War and post-Reconstruction periods of the late 1800s. Something “gilded” has a superficial layer of gold, and they meant to poke fun at ostentatious display (all the while playing on the term “golden age”).

Warner is known for making the famous comment, “Everybody complains about the weather, but nobody does anything about it”. This was repeated by Mark Twain in a lecture, and is still commonly misattributed to him.

Back in 1850 Warner also wrote, “Politics makes strange bedfellows”.

In addition, he wrote a few interesting things about New Orleans. Writing in *Harper's Magazine* in the late 1880s, he observed:

“In no other city of the United States or of Mexico is the old and romantic preserved in such integrity and brought into such sharp contrast to the modern.”

“The Creole civilization differed totally from that in any Northern city; it looked at life, literature, wit, manners, from altogether another plane; in order to understand the society of New Orleans one needs to imagine what French society would be in a genial climate and in the freedom of a new country.”

“New Orleans is the most cosmopolitan of all provincial cities. Its comparative isolation has secured the development of provincial traits and manners, has preserved the individuality of the many races that give it color, morals, and character, while its close relations with France – an affiliation and sympathy which the late war has not

altogether broken – and the constant influx of Northern men of business and affairs have given it the air of a metropolis.”

“New Orleans is the most cosmopolitan of all provincial cities.” Is that a pejorative or a positive, a put-down or a compliment? S. Frederick Starr thought the observation “demeaning” and that it missed the point. “Far more accurate,” he believed, “would be to say that New Orleans is the most provincial of cosmopolitan cities. And that’s not all bad, either.”

Although, certainly not the first to express this view, *Mad Men* actor (and booster for his beloved Crescent City) Bryan Batt has said, “New Orleans is the smallest big town in the country.”

So, just what does it mean to be provincial? The English word *province* surfaced around 1330, from the Latin *provincia* (a territory controlled by a Roman magistrate). This was possibly from “*pro*” (“on behalf of”) and “*vincere*” (“to triumph over” or “to take control of”). *Provence* in France was just such a Roman *province*. And, of course, there are Canada’s provinces.

As a noun, provincial has a number of meanings, such as a religious officer acting under the superior general of a religious order. But as an adjective, the first definition of provincial is “of or relating to a province”. In truth, New Orleans was for many years part of more than one overseas empire. That context lingers on. There is a Hotel Provincial in the French Quarter on *Rue Chartres*, and Chef John Besh has *La Provence* Restaurant on the North Shore. Some readers may even have what was known as “French Provincial” furniture.

The second definition of provincial is “of or characteristic of people from the provinces; not fashionable or sophisticated”. That’s usually some other provincial city looking down on New Orleans and saying, “Oh, they’re so provincial.” The nerve!

There is also a fallacy of logic known as the fallacy of provincialism, which is the failure to perceive that other people are likely to see the world differently than you. Provincialism is displayed when the arguer appears culturally or socially, politically or religiously myopic. It is the error of assuming that what is familiar and comfortable is actually “right”.

But the key meaning of being provincial is having a “narrowness of mind, ignorance, or the like, considered as resulting from lack of exposure to cultural or intellectual activity (or to the way things are done outside one’s own *province*).” It may also entail a devotion (oblivious or otherwise) to one’s own community before the nation (or outside world) as a whole. It just may be a form of comfortable native narcissism.

This clear case of local myopia was exhibited on Royal Street at the 2011 "Roadfood Festival" in New Orleans this March when an out-of-town visitor noticed people in front of her in line ordering "nectar cream sno-balls". In spite of the fact that she'd only heard of "snow cones" in her neck of the woods, she inquired, "What is nectar?" The man behind the local sno-ball booth replied, "You know, ma'am, it tastes a lot like a Barq's red drink." Rightly so, there was a double blank stare.

The inquisitive lady asked about a flavor most New Orleanians have known for over a century to be bright pink and taste like almonds and vanilla (but he didn't even give her that explanation). He could've related that pharmacist I. L. Lyons created the marvelous essence in the late 1800s or that kids once loved ordering nectar sodas at the counters of the old KB Drug Stores; but the soda fountains are gone and the KBs are all Rite Aids now. Or that Charles Dennergy once provided the city with nectar syrup. No, he sure didn't.

The sno-ball purveyor from Plum Street defined what "nectar" was by translating it in the very same local vernacular. He compared it to a Barq's "Famous Red Creme Soda" (or "red drink" to many locals), which is actually very dark pink and vanilla flavored. The perplexed visiting roadfood gourmand was nowhere nearer an answer than before, but (after this author offered a more flavor descriptive explanation) she tried a "nectar cream sno-ball" and seemed to thoroughly enjoy it. Those sno-balls were, in fact, damned good!

Sir Halford John Mackinder (1861 – 1947) was a British geographer considered to be one of the founding fathers of both geopolitics and geostrategy. In 1902, he published the comprehensive *Britain and The British Seas*, which became a classic in regional geography. This "father of modern geography" stated that provincialism is very useful, since it "prevents the tyranny of the wider, geographical majority".

In his writings, Mackinder wrote how England was living outside of the European sphere when the Spanish and Portuguese discoveries were winning over more territories. After the Columbian discoveries, Britain showed up on the globe through her great naval power. In *Britain and The British Seas*, Mackinder asserted how island living people tend to liberty more than any other ones:

"But as liberty is the natural privilege of an island people, so wealth of initiative is characteristic of a divided people. Provinces which are insular or peninsular breed on an obstinate provincialism unknown in the merely historical or administrative divisions of a great plain; and this rooted provincialism, rather than finished cosmopolitanism, is a source of the varied initiative without which liberty would lose its significance."

And New Orleans is essentially "insular". Squeezed between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain and surrounded on all sides by swamp, it is easy to see why early French settlers called it "*le flotant*", "the floating land", and Napoleon Bonaparte spoke of it as the *Île d'Orléans*. This unique "island" was in many ways isolated and insulated from the mainland for over two centuries. The causeway across the lake wasn't built until 1957, nor was there a metro bridge until 1958. Its culture grew lushly in its insular greenhouse, giving birth to and nurturing jazz, Mardi Gras, Creole cuisine, second lines and burials above ground. Even sno-balls drenched in nectar cream.

Great Britain followed its own drumbeat rather than that of Continental Europe and created one of the greatest empires the world has seen. New Orleans may be thought of as provincial, but like the island nation of Great Britain, this great city may achieve innovations yet unseen. This island city in the river's crescent just might have "liberty more than any other ones" and "an obstinate provincialism" more than a "finished cosmopolitanism", which (after numerous setbacks) may lead it to greater days of glory ahead.

NED HÉMARD

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