

A City Where Millionaires Once Drove Streetcars

The recent second debut of the Canal Street streetcar line (followed by an interruption of service due to Katrina) brings to mind one of the New Orleans' most celebrated streetcar drivers. Sir Thomas Lipton, famous multimillionaire tea merchant and yachting enthusiast, was employed as a mule-driver on the New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad (now the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line). It is because mules and horses were used in New Orleans that locals still say "streetcar" instead of "trolley." Trolleys are the electrified version, which were introduced in New Orleans on February 1, 1893. A special song, the "Trolley Polka," was written to celebrate the event, but New Orleanians stuck to calling them streetcars.

Thomas J. Lipton was born in Glasgow, Scotland, May 10, 1850, of Irish parents. At fifteen he traveled to the United States with less than eight dollars in his pocket. Lipton not only worked on a New Orleans streetcar but for a New York grocery. It was there that he began to learn and master the lessons of American merchandizing. Saving enough money to return to Scotland, Lipton continued his rags-to-riches story by expanding a small provision shop into a huge tea marketing firm. Through clever advertising and shrewd acquisitions, he became a millionaire by age 30. By 1898, when Queen Victoria knighted him Sir Thomas, Lipton owned shops all over Britain, tea plantations in Ceylon and various businesses in America. By the late 1800s Thomas Lipton controlled 10% of the world tea trade.

At the same time he undertook his personal and romantic quest of promoting yachting on both sides of the Atlantic. He failed in five attempts to return America's Cup to his homeland, but his good humor won him widespread affection and admiration throughout the United States where he was presented a special sportsmanship award. His several yachts were all named "Shamrock" in honor of his Irish roots.

The smartly goateed gentleman in his yachting cap and blue polka-dot bow tie wrote to the Southern Yacht Club about its approaching seventieth anniversary in 1919:

"That I cannot visit New Orleans, the city of my happy boyhood days, is another cause of regret, and upon my return to America it is my sincere hope to have the pleasure of once more meeting all my good New Orleans friends." He kept that promise and did return in

November of 1919 as a guest when he presented the club a handsome silver challenge trophy. Sir Thomas Lipton died in 1931.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Where Millionaires Once Drove Streetcars"
Copyright 2006