

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Taft Visits New Orleans

1909 was an interesting year for New Orleans. One of the city's benevolent aid societies known as "The Tramps" attended a performance at the Pythian Temple, a theater erected the previous year by a group of African American businessmen on the corner of Gravier and Saratoga streets. This musical comedy (performed by the Smart Set) included a skit entitled, "There Never Was and Never Will Be a King Like Me," about a Zulu king and his tribe. From this the group was inspired to organize the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, now such a vibrant part of the Crescent City's Mardi Gras history. And many significant jazz musicians played at the Pythian Temple's rooftop garden, such as Armand J. Piron, Sidney Bechet and Papa Celestin's Original Tuxedo Jazz Orchestra.

Also in 1909, General Beauregard's home on Chartres Street was the scene of a Mafia shoot-out. Owned then by the Giacona family (who were posing as wine importers when in fact they were running a profitable tax-free liquor business), the house was the site of an extortion plot gone wrong. When the family wouldn't pay off, the family opened fire on the would-be Mafia assassins. Three men were dead and a fourth man was wounded. In the years that followed, the Giacona clan guarded the house like a fortress.

The New Orleans Mint was decommissioned as a functioning mint in 1909, having produced over 427 million gold and silver coins there from 1838 to 1861 and from 1879 to 1909. It would not take part in the production of an entirely new coin: the Lincoln penny.

August 1909 saw a radical departure from the accepted styling of United States coins, introducing for the first time a portrait coin in an annual series. Honoring the nation's first bearded president, this was the same year as the inauguration of William Howard Taft who, to date, is the last U.S. president to have facial hair while in office. His fashionable handlebar moustache sat atop an affable grin and (according to biographer Henry F. Pringle) "the most infectious chuckle

in the history of politics." The 27th president also visited New Orleans in 1909.

President William Howard Taft arrived in New Orleans on October 30, 1909, aboard the flagship *Oleander*. America's heaviest president at over 300 pounds (who had to super-size the White House bathtub) taunted the congressmen and governors of the states along his Mississippi River journey for (according to the New York Times) "having resorted to the humiliating device of land transportation at one stage of the journey." Taft laughed that "the fleet had come through without the loss of a single man," but declared "the waterways of this country must be used eventually to carry the bulk of heavy merchandise."

Taft (accompanied by 24 governors, 117 congressmen and senators, including Uncle Joe Cannon, Speaker of the House, and 3 diplomats) was in town to speak before the "Lakes-to-the-Gulf Waterways Convention" in favor of river improvements. President Taft and his flotilla were welcomed by "the shrieks of sirens, the clanging of bells, and the cheers of 100,000 citizens" (according to the New York Times). He and his party were whisked away by carriages to the St. Charles Hotel (his home for the two day visit), where the President reviewed a parade held in his honor.

After lunch with Archbishop James H. Blenk, the President was driven to the College of the Immaculate Conception on Baronne Street (then the name of Jesuit High School) where he addressed the young men, their teachers, alumni, and guests who had gathered in the courtyard below. From the balcony draped in stars and stripes, he spoke directly to the students and said, "My boys, I am glad to be with you. I congratulate you on being where you are."

Then it was off to the *Athenaeum* to address the "Waterways Convention", with later glimpses of the LSU-Sewanee (University of the South) and Tulane-University of Mississippi football games. An evening dinner was held in the Chief Executive's honor at the Pickwick Club, followed by a gala grand opera presentation. A late supper at one of the city's French restaurants finished off the evening. Dinner and supper?

The next day's activities (Sunday morning) included a service at the Unitarian Church, a long automobile tour (Taft was the first president to own a car at the White House) punctuated by a luncheon at the Jackson Barracks. Professor Alcée Fortiér was in charge of the committee for the "Ride Through Historic New Orleans" and tendered the address that Halloween day a century ago. President Taft also played some golf with Philip Werlein. After a sacred concert at Tulane University, the President retired to his train before its departure on Monday morning.

On that very same Halloween day, 1909, the Woman Suffrage Party was founded. Taft commented like an oracle on November 2, 1909, "I am not in favor of suffrage for women until I can be convinced that all the women desire it; and when they desire it I am in favor of giving it."

President-elect Taft had made an earlier visit to New Orleans in 1909 aboard the man-of-war *Birmingham*, less than a month before his March inauguration. Having just come from the Isthmus of Panama, Taft informed the cheering thousands that the Panama Canal would definitely be opened to commerce by 1915. (The canal was actually formally opened on August 15, 1914, two years ahead of schedule.) The newly elected Executive-in Chief spoke at Gallier Hall (where he viewed a parade), attended the Elves of Oberon Ball, and was guest of honor at a 400-person banquet. He stayed at the Hotel Grunewald, which New Orleanians know as the Roosevelt.

On the second day of that first visit, Taft spoke before a crowd at Pelican Park on Carrollton Avenue (an event totally organized and hosted by African Americans). Reverend Melvin Collins III, presiding minister of the First Free Mission Baptist Church, while recently searching the church's library, was thrilled to discover a program bill entitled "Reception to President-elect William H. Taft Under the auspices of the Colored Young Men's Christian Association and Allied Organizations." The program date was February 12, 1909.

More important than serving as President of the United States was Taft's dream of becoming Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. He got that wish in 1921, becoming the 10th U.S. Chief Justice immediately following Louisiana's own Edward Douglass White (whose Jesuit *alma mater* President Taft visited that October day back in 1909).

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