

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Throw Me Somethin' Lighter, Mister

Whenever the weather in New Orleans is bleak and cold, there's always a special place that abounds in treasures from warmer climes. No, the French Market is just too open-air at this time of year. But there is a most congenial spot on the Westbank that will warm your thoughts and your heart.

George Lafargue and his wife Chanel run George's Produce at 129 Terry Parkway, and the inside of their store embodies the essence of French Market fruit and vegetable vendors of days gone by. Garlic hangs from the ceiling. On display are jars of just about anything, from mirlitons to pickled peppers. George and Chanel take great pride in their selection of the highest quality Louisiana produce. There are bags of freshly gathered pecans, plump and juicy plums and pears, sacks of sweet and succulent seedless oranges from Plaquemines Parish, perfect bananas and stacks of satsumas. Native to Japan, satsumas are a type of mandarin orange first introduced to New Spain by the Jesuits. Groves were planted in the 1700s in Plaquemines Parish by Jesuit priests and have continued to the present day. Meyer's lemons, also originally from the Orient, are available at George's. They've become popular since Martha Stewart included them in her recipes. Meyer lemon curd and limoncello are definitely worth making fresh at home.

Everything George selects for his customers is absolutely the freshest. Clarence A. Becknell, historian of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club since 1983, stopped by on February 4th for a box of the most exceptional Creole tomatoes seen in some time. And, of course, talk turned to Mardi Gras and Zulu's upcoming 2011 parade.

George rides in Zulu, too, and George's Produce is piled high with coconuts, all ready to be decorated. They are shaved with a wire brush to remove the outside hairy fibers, made smooth and then primed ready for their glitter and decoration. And some are completely emptied of their milk and meat. This is a result of the danger that could result from tossing or throwing the prized Zulu coconuts to the crowds. Even the Zulu King of 1949 could have caused some physical damage. Let Louis Armstrong tell you in his own words:

"Just think—twenty thousand coconuts, which each member on my float then threw to the crowd. . . . I happened to look up on a porch where a young man was just yelling to me, 'Come on Satchmo (meaning me), th(r)ow one of those fine coconuts up here'. . . . And I taken real good aim, and threw one at him, with all my might."

It has been said that from 1924 until 2002, the coconuts were the primary weight source on all Zulu floats (totaling more than the combined weight of the actual riders). And through the years, a proliferation of lawsuits alleging injury resulted in the organization being unable to obtain insurance coverage. In 1987, the time-honored tradition was put on hold until (after much lobbying) the Louisiana Legislature passed SB188 (aka the "Coconut Bill"), which excluded the Zulu organization from liability. Zulu riders in turn agreed to gently hand the coconuts from the floats to the parade goers. On July 8, 1988, then-governor Edwin Edwards signed the bill into law.

A decade later, Kenner electronic engineer Willie Clark, perfected a new process. He figured out how to clean out the entire contents of the coconut, milk and meat. No longer would the floats be weighted down, nor would injury result. Clark also shaved down below the cork layer to the complete shell and developed a method of carving into the shell and applying ready-made art images. Zulu coconuts have come a long way since they first appeared around 1910 in their original "hairy" state. Golden walnuts actually preceded these bigger, meatier throws. Today's coconuts are usually decorated in two ways. The first is painted gold with added glitter, and the second is painted like the famous black Zulu faces (with the eyes and mouth represented by those three coconut holes).

What's important is that everyone has fun, and nobody gets hurt.

That was a big concern for the Rex organization over fifty years ago when Darwin Schriever Fenner was Captain. Fenner's father had co-founded the New Orleans brokerage firm of Fenner & Beane, which merged in 1941 with what was then Merrill Lynch, E. A. Pierce and Cassatt to become Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Beane. By 1963 Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Smith was the nation's largest brokerage firm (Beane was dropped from the name to add long-time chief Winthrop H. Smith).

Darwin S. Fenner joined his father's brokerage firm in 1929 and served as a general partner of Merrill Lynch after the 1941 merger. He became vice-president in 1957, senior vice-president in 1964 and retired from the company in 1970. He served as Captain of the Rex organization, 1956-1970, revamping much of the krewe's parading style, bringing back the "*Boeuf Gras*" and the "Rex Bandwagon", but perhaps most remembered was introducing New Orleans to a totally new Carnival throw known as a doubloon.

The original doubloon (from the Spanish word *doblón*, meaning "double") was a gold coin valued at either two escudos or two ducats. Minted in Spain and other parts of the Spanish New World, the name came about either because it represented two coins or because of the double portrait of Ferdinand and Isabella. Another possible reason was that on the doubloon and other Spanish coins, there were engraved the two Pillars of Hercules overlaid with a scroll. This is also one of the explanations for the origin of the dollar sign (an S-shaped scroll with two lines, or columns). The Brasher Doubloon was an early United States coin, one of the rarest and most valuable, minted in and after 1787 by Ephraim Brasher. Only seven are known to exist.

But now it was 1959, and a 50-year-old Kentucky-born jack-of-all-trades named H. Alvin Sharpe (who had worked as a reporter, mariner and mural painter) was creating designs from an art form known as *intaglio* (from *tagliare*, "to cut", an engraving depressed into a flat surface of stone or other hard material in which the impression yields an image in relief). Sharpe believed that aluminum coins produced in this manner would be of high quality, yet inexpensive in large quantities. More importantly, they would be safe when thrown.

Sharpe had designed some attractive doubloons, and believed they would be ideal for Carnival throws. But how to convince Darwin Fenner? There had been some coins minted for Rex back in 1884, honoring the Cotton Centennial Expo, but how could this concept work for the 1960 Mardi Gras so that no one would be hurt?

Sharpe could not think of a better way to prove that his new, lightweight, aluminum prototypes were safe than by throwing them directly at Fenner's face. And that's exactly what he did upon entering the Rex Captain's office. Taken aback and astonished at this approach, Fenner nevertheless realized that the projectiles were harmless. He ordered 80,000 to be minted, with 3,000 being gold anodized. There were no dates applied that first year (1960), since Captain Fenner was still uncertain of whether the doubloon would be a success. Without the date, they could be thrown in subsequent years. The 1960 Mardi Gras did much more than disprove his doubts. Doubloons have had dates engraved since that very first year and have been popular ever since, not just with Rex but with countless other Mardi Gras krewes (including Zulu).

Today plush toys are greatly desired from the numerous Carnival krewes. The "*Boeuf Gras*" has now been made into a "plushie" and a very popular Rex throw. It seems the Carnival leaders of today have all gone "soft" on us.

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