

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Trouble, Right Here in the River City

In Meredith Wilson's "The Music Man", con man Harold Hill tells the townspeople of River City that they've got "Trouble" after a new pool table is delivered to the town's billiard parlor. He then convinces the town's parents "that game with the fifteen numbered balls is the devil's tool". The river city of New Orleans had "trouble", too, and the solution had a lot to do with both carnival balls and billiard balls.

Carnival in the Crescent City during the 1850s could be rowdy and dangerous. New Orleans newspapers made some observations. The *Delta* termed Mardi Gras activities "vulgar, tasteless and spiritless", and the *Daily Crescent* hoped they had "seen the last of Mardi Gras".

In December 1856, six New Orleans residents (three of whom had previously lived in Mobile, Alabama) decided to do something about it. On January 4, 1857, invitations went out and some nineteen gentlemen met at a clubroom above the now-defunct Gem Restaurant in the French Quarter to set up an organization to observe carnival in a less crude manner. Inspired by John Milton's "Lord of Misrule" in his *masque* entitled "Comus", the group fashioned the "Mistick Krewe of Comus" (which would have an annual parade like the "Cowbellion de Rakin Society" back in Mobile). The name of the Mistick Krewe's social counterpart, the Pickwick Club, was adopted in 1857 from Charles Dickens' beloved novel. Dual membership in the Krewe and Club continued until May 2, 1888, when the two organizations separated (so that in modern times the membership is not identical).

So popular was the first "Comus" parade (with its thematic rolling floats and *flambeaux*) that the prospect of its second one drew thousands of tourists to New Orleans for Carnival.

In January, 1872, another krewe was organized by local business leaders in part to honor Russia's Grand Duke Alexis on his visit to the city and also as a form of boosterism to lure new visitors and business entrepreneurs to New Orleans in the years after the Civil War. "Rex"

was created by a group of gentlemen led by Colonel Albert Walter Merriam, "a man of culture, taste, liberality and public spirit," who was also the proprietor of the Crescent Billiard Hall, and Philadelphian Edward C. Hancock, the managing editor of the *New Orleans Times* (who Lewis J. Salomon, the first "Rex", called "the big chief"). Since those times, "Rex" has reigned over the Mardi Gras metropolis as the "King of Carnival".

Colonel Merriam, born June 18, 1828, traveled from New England to make his fortune in New Orleans, becoming the proprietor of a fine billiard parlor and colonel of militia. After the outbreak of the War Between the States, he joined the Confederate Army. He came back to New Orleans after the war to rebuild his business. The Crescent Billiard Hall (described in a newspaper article as "the largest billiard saloon in the world") stood at the corner of Canal Street and St. Charles. Henry Clay's statue then towered in front of the structure before the orator's removal to Lafayette Square. Built in 1826, the building was the Merchant's Hotel in the 1850s before being converted to the billiard hall in 1865. In the 1870s, noted architect Henry Howard oversaw extensive renovations, both on the interior and exterior.

In 1873, "Comus" presented its satirical *papier-mâché* mocking of radical Republicans as "Missing Links to Darwin's Origin of the Species". Grant was a tobacco grub, and "Beast" Butler was a hyena. Everyone at the ball received a beautiful book to commemorate the parade and ball. It is believed that Colonel Merriam (in a humorous mood) sent a copy of this book (along with the *New Orleans Times* accounts of the festivities) to Charles Darwin himself. And Darwin replied, questioning whether or not "the newspapers were sent in good faith" or whether his theory was totally misunderstood:

"The abusive article in the newspaper amused me more than Comus; I can't tell from the wonderful mistakes in the article whether the writer is witty, ignorant, or blunders for the sake of fun."

On February 17, 1874, Colonel Merriam participated in the third anniversary parade of the krewe he helped found. The "Rex" procession celebrated "The Glories of Persia", while "Comus" later heralded "The Nations of the Earth". It was also the first year that "Rex" established the tradition of its monarch's arrival by paddle wheeler at the Canal Street docks on *Lundi Gras* amidst great pomp and circumstance. Banker William S. Pike, one of the original founders of the School of Design, reigned as "Rex" that year with Margaret Maginnis as his queen. But (according to the *Ouachita Telegraph*) a remarkable "tragical incident" occurred after "the gay exercises at carnival at New Orleans". The paper reported the tragic event oddly, as if Colonel Merriam were "Rex" himself:

"The veritable 'Rex' himself, in all the trappings of mock royalty, and the paraphernalia of mimic state, left the Mardi Gras ball-room on the morning of the 18th and returned to his residence. About 8 o'clock the same morning a member of his family entered the sleeping apartment of the masquerader, and found that a greater king than the discrowned 'Rex' had invaded the chamber before, and asserted his sway over its tenant. Apoplexy had done its work in the night. The king was dead."

The forty-five-year-old billiard hall proprietor died on February 18, 1874, in the city he so loved. The article went on to say that Colonel Merriam seemed "to have been held in much esteem, as his funeral was a magnificent pageant. His end was sudden and sad, especially when contrasted with the splendid ephemeral glories of the day just preceding in which so much of authority had been yielded to him. So end all the pageants, so passes all the power".

Besides his membership in the "Rex" organization, Colonel Albert Walter Merriam was Captain of "Comus" and belonged to the Pickwick Club. On June 1, 1950, the Pickwick Club made its ninth move into new quarters since the club's founding at the Gem Restaurant on Royal Street so many years before. Its 1950 move (and current digs) was none other than Colonel Merriam's Crescent City Billiard Hall.

That's a capital "C"
that rhymes with "P"
and that stands for pool!

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