

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Just When Is Twelfth Night?**

“On the twelfth day of Christmas” (after tryin’ to “cross the street with Eleven Schwegmann Bags”), “my true love gave to me a Dozen Manuel’s Tamales”.

Even though the Schwegmann’s stores “ain’t dere no more” and Manuel Hernandez’s daughter Frances Schneider has not reopened Manuel’s Tamales at 4709 S. Carrollton, Crescent City carolers continue to sing their praises. As one can tell by the lyrics, New Orleans natives don’t dance to the original “Twelve Drummers Drumming”. Thanks to Benny Grunch & Da Bunch, they dance to a different drummer. And so they do to other traditions, as well.

In Great Britain, things are just a bit different than in New Orleans. |But even there (as the headline in the *Telegraph* reveals), “Christmas ends in confusion over when Twelfth Night falls”.

Martin Beckford, Religious Affairs Correspondent, investigated why there is controversy over “the date by which festive decorations must be taken down in order to avoid bad luck”.

It seems that the Church of England and the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* insist that Twelfth Night refers to the eve (or night before) the Epiphany, the day when the three kings (or *magi*) visited the infant Jesus. The eve of the Epiphany was to be the conclusion of the *Twelve Days of Christmas* and the last day of holiday festivities and merrymaking.

Yet many in Britain “believe Twelfth Night falls on January 6”, at the end of the twelfth day after Christmas, and so risk misfortune by keeping their decorations hanging up an extra day. Most of England's churches also remain decorated beyond January 5 so that they can use crib scenes in Epiphany services. And Christmas trees are still standing on January 6 at the ancient cathedrals of Canterbury, York, Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's in London.

The confusion comes from the fact that in medieval times, Christmas was considered to begin at sunset on December 24 and so the twelfth night following it was January 5. But today most people count from Christmas Day itself (December 25) and so assume Twelfth Night falls on the 6th.

Winchester Cathedral observes an older Christmas tradition, keeping the main tree on display in the centuries old Norman church until the service of Candelmas usually held in early February.

In New Orleans, carnival season all begins with Twelfth Night (celebrated on January 6, not the 5th) with the *bal masque* of the Twelfth Night Revelers (held on January 6 since 1870), and the Uptown streetcar ride of the Phunny Phorty Phellows. King cakes traditionally arrive on that date, too, but (due to their popularity) local bakeries start much earlier now. Thus it is that in New Orleans Twelfth Night, the Epiphany, King's Day and Little Christmas are all the same and celebrated on January 6.

And phinally a phew phacts about those phorty phine phellows:

Phirst appeared Phat Tuesday, 1878, when they phollowed Rex. Pholded in 1885 until 1896. Phriday before Mardi Gras 1898 phinished out the century.

Phired up again in 1981.

Phostered "phun and phrivity" as the heralds of carnival phestivities. Phunny that the phellows also phrolic with and accept lady members. Phancy that!

The krewe's two mottos are:

"*Honi soit qui mal y pense*", (or "Shame upon the person that thinks evil of it" and the motto of The Most Noble Order of the Garter).

"A little nonsense now and then is relished by the best of men!" (quote by Edward Lear and printed on a krewe bulletin in 1896).

Author of nonsense poems and an artist (he gave drawing lessons to young Queen Victoria), Lear published *A Book of Nonsense* in 1846, a volume of limericks that went through three editions and helped popularize that form of rhyme. Edward Lear's patron was Edward Smith-Stanley, 13th Earl of Derby and a member of the Knights of the Garter.

The Phunny Phorty Phellows' symbol is an owl, and the krewe selects a "Boss" instead of a king. Edward Lear's artwork included owls (he painted his eagle owl in 1837), and he wrote of a "blue Boss-Woss". And Lear's best-known work is *The Owl and the Pussycat*.

The word "Boss" comes from the Dutch *baas*, meaning "master". And the corrupt William M. "Boss" Tweed died the same year that the Phunny Phorty Phellows was founded.

Lear began his career as a serious illustrator at age 19, with the illustrations of parrots. His ornithological paintings were well received and he was favorably compared with artist and naturalist John James Audubon. New Orleans' uptown park, zoo and Institute is named in Audubon's honor.

Queen Victoria also wore the sash and star of the Order of the Garter, and (according to various legends) the tradition all began in the 1300s at a fancy dress ball. The Countess of Salisbury was dancing with or near King Edward III at Eltham Palace when her garter slipped down from her leg. With sniggering courtiers all around, the king picked it up and tied it to his leg, announcing, "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*", (or "Shame upon the person that thinks evil of it". The Order was born.

And in New Orleans on Twelfth Night, who could think evil of that phantastic, phabulous phellowship? Or that January 6 is when New Orleanians celebrate Twelfth Night?

## **NED HÉMARD**

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