

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Well-heeled City

The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* of October 25, 1855, relates the arrival of high-heel shoes to the Crescent City in an article entitled "A Pretty Clatter":

"Of late Fashion has raised the ladies in their own and public estimation by the addition of heels to their shoes and petite bootees. And oh! such a pretty and rhythmical little clatter they keep up as they trip along the sidewalks! There is a melody in their movements," the article goes on, "but now they mark by music the poetry of their motions, and keep time to their own angelic tunes. Silks and fine linens by these elevated understandings are kept slightly out of the mud, and the general effect is supposed to be advantageous."

One can envision those muddy thoroughfares of ante-bellum New Orleans, with their wooden *banquettes* on each side. But the problem for *les belle dames* back then was the sloppy mire in between, soiling the hems of their beautiful dresses.

A month later on November 10, 1855, the *Picayune* is hammering home that very point:

"For several days past moisture has prevailed in the skies above, and mud on the streets below, and, of course, 'sloshing about' has been the rule among all male perambulators. As a general thing the fairer portion of creation has kept within doors, but yesterday a few, a very few, ventured out. It was towards evening, on Chartres Street, that we saw two of them moving like perpetual joys, as things of beauty are said to be. They were decked out with costliest apparel, and, till we approached very near them, we almost supposed that they were supernal visitants. That near approach, however, undeceived us, for although beauty of feature and adornment triumphed from the crowns of their bonnets to their dainty gaiters, there was dirt enough on their bedraggled trails of silk to dim the charms of two divinities.

Byron once gave it as his opinion that man is a strange compound of 'deity and dirt,' but we never supposed that fine ladies could be embraced in the definition till fashionable trails in muddy weather left their disgusting mark of the affinity.

Surely it is not incumbent on our republican beauties to follow fashions which must of necessity end in filth, and which were only intended by their inventors to hide the deformed feet of some court dames. For our part we shall in future persist in thinking that all those ladies who wear their dresses so long as to have two or three inches of the trail bedraggled, are cursed with feet ill-fashioned. Either the new hoops with the patent elevators, must become the rage, or ladies' dresses must be shortened to the standard of decency. We never wish to behold the like of those two trails again."

Similarly, Egyptian butchers also wore heels, to help them walk above the blood of dead beasts (instead of above the mud). Ancient Egyptian murals show depictions of both upper-class males and females wearing heels, probably for ceremonial purposes.

In ancient Greece and Rome, platform sandals called *kothorni*, later known as *buskins* in the Renaissance, were popular particularly among actors. These shoes (of varying heights to indicate different social status or character importance) had soles of wood or cork. In Rome, female prostitutes were easily recognized by their use of high heels. And in Mongolia, men wore heeled boots for a proper grip on their stirrups.

During the Middle Ages, both men and women wore *pattens*, wooden-soled outer footwear that were clearly a precursor to the high heel. They were designed to attach to fragile or expensive shoes to protect them from mud and other street debris. In the 1400s, *chopines* (or Turkish platform shoes), were popular throughout Europe until the mid-1600s. They were high and required women to use canes or servants to help them walk. Chinese concubines and Turkish odalisques wore high shoes, with some scholars speculating that it was in order to prevent women from escaping the harem.

High-heeled shoes soon caught on with the fashion-following men and women of the French court, and spread to the nobility of neighboring European countries. The Venetians made the *chopine* into a status symbol revealing wealth and social standing for women. The term "well-heeled" became synonymous with opulent wealth.

But the credit for modern high heels for women goes to the diminutive young wife of the Duke of Orléans. It was prompted by the 1533 betrothal of the then fourteen-year old Catherine de' Medici to the Duke of Orléans (who would become the next King of France, Henry

II). The petite Catherine began to feel insecure in the face of being presented before the French Court. In desperation, she sought the help of a clever Florentine artisan who promised she would be dazzling at her first French Ball. Her fairy godfather turned out to be none other than her cobbler, whose creation cast a spell over all of France when he removed the cumbersome wooden soles from Catherine's shoes and replaced them with a slender four-inch heel. The shoemaker concocted a most powerful aphrodisiac: a device that not only endowed the wearer with an attractive allure to her walk, but also the physical stature she may not have otherwise possessed. High heels made her frame appear more curvaceous with bosoms and buttocks protruding (up to twenty-five percent more), along with less accentuation on the waist. The heel also caused the arch of the foot to rise, creating the illusion of smaller feet. And throughout history, smaller feet were the symbol of ultimate beauty.

Marilyn Monroe said, "I don't know who invented high heels, but all women owe him a lot."

As necessity is the mother of invention, Catherine de' Medici (1519-1589) had the necessity and so became the mother of the modern high-heeled shoe.

A local New Orleans attorney investigating an arson case was amazed at the number of women's shoes claimed in the fire ... until he checked his wife's closet back home. Most knowledgeable men should understand women and their high heels, perhaps from observing the shoe addiction of Carrie Bradshaw in the hit HBO series, "Sex and the City."

They should also know about the stiletto heel first pioneered in 1953 by Roger Vivier, who worked with Christian Dior. Meaning a "small dagger", the stiletto makes reference to the ultra-thin pencil-width heel upon which the shoe rests. And the Southern man should be aware of spectator pumps, two-toned high fashion dress heels. After their loss of national popularity in the early 1950s (when sling-backed and sandaled, thinner pumps became stylish), they returned to fashion in the early 1980s. They still remained perennial favorites in England, and Joan Collins often sported them on *Dynasty*. That's pronounced *Di-nə-stē* in the UK.

In North America, pumps are heeled shoes with low-cut fronts and usually no fastening, but can also be formal shoes for men or women. A woman's pump is similar in overall shape to the handles of old-fashioned manual well pumps, accounting for the name.

In New Orleans, "shoes" rhymes with "Muse". In fact, the high heel serves as a signature for the Krewe of Muses. The all-female krewe throws all manner of spangled and wildly decorated trinkets, featuring

high heels, boots, stilettos, sandals and other more comfortable footwear. After all, beauty does hurt after a while and the feet need a rest. For Mardi Gras 2010, Muses displayed huge "fiber optic high heel sculptures", and their website features a "Muses Picture Gallery" with sixty photographs of wildly differing spectacular and colorful shoes.

The city has fallen "head over heels" for this lively krewe, one that loves the high heels first fashioned for a former Duchess of Orléans who became the Queen of France. As for King Henry, Catherine's high heels had lost their allure. At age fifteen (the year after his marriage), he took as his mistress thirty-five-year-old widow and courtly cougar, Diane de Poitiers. She became Henry's most trusted confidante and, for the next twenty-five years, wielded considerable influence behind the scenes, even signing royal documents. Extremely mature and intelligent, she left Catherine powerless to intervene. She did, however, insist that Henry visit Catherine's bed in order to produce heirs to the throne.

I guess you could say that Henry was a big heel.

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