

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A Family Theater Party

A newspaper article set the scene:

"Not every family can attend a current motion picture and see on the screen a portion of its own history re-enacted by popular stars of the moment. This is unique enough, and when that family decides to have a theater party in honor of the occasion preceded by a cocktail party which two members of the family have planned, the affair becomes a social event of outstanding interest."

Sounds as if the article was printed yesterday, perhaps connected with the airing of one of the recent productions filmed in New Orleans. The film may have just hit the big (or little) screen, and there may have been some historical connection to some local family.



"The Astronaut Wives" celebrate at my childhood home

Our own family home was recently used in the just aired ten-part ABC miniseries "the Astronauts Wives Club," but the article didn't refer to us. Unlike the family in the article, we were content to watch the

episodes at home and no special series viewing party was held. My parents' mid-century home on the New Orleans Lakefront served as the Houston home of astronaut Wally Schirra, his wife, Jo, and their two children. Schirra, one of the original seven astronauts for Project Mercury, was the fifth American, and the ninth person, to rocket into space.

But, no, the above captioned article actually appeared in the Baton Rouge *State-Times* on December 3, 1938, over seventy-five years ago. And the relatives that came together for the festive cocktail party and theater screening were of the historic deLesseps family.

The article continued:

"In the building of the Suez canal, Count Ferdinand deLesseps, French diplomat, played the leading real-life role, giving years to the task. Next week when the new motion picture 'Suez' comes to town, the American relatives of Count deLesseps will give minute attention to the enactment by Tyrone Power of the deLesseps part in the vast project. At 9 o'clock the deLesseps family members in this section will arrive at the Paramount theater and two hours earlier the oldest American kinsman of Count Ferdinand, Hamilton deLesseps, and his wife, will be giving a cocktail party at their home on Jackson avenue."



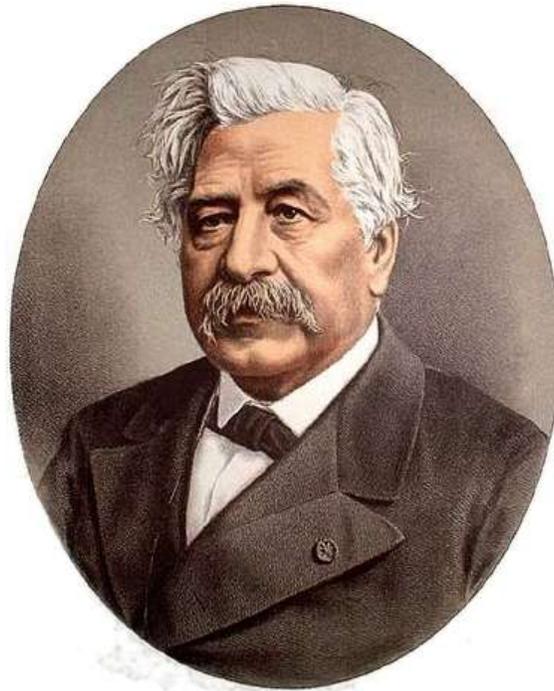
The "Paramount Theater" and "Jackson avenue" mentioned above, it should be noted, were in Baton Rouge, not New Orleans.

Among the treasured souvenirs of Hamilton deLesseps is "a family picture made in 1887, when Charles deLesseps, the son of the builder of the Suez canal, visited his American cousins in New Orleans." At that time, the family hosted a "Louisiana breakfast" for Cousin Charles "and were photographed later on the steps of the family plantation

home.” In that photograph, pictured with Charles were Hamilton deLesseps’ parents, Auguste (born 1854) and Augusta Story (born 1856) deLesseps. Augusta’s sister, Ann Eliza Story, the husband of Benjamin Olivier, was also in the photograph. Benjamin and Ann Eliza Story Olivier were the parents of Mrs. Anita Olivier Morrison. Sisters Augusta and Ann Eliza had a brother, Sidney A. Story, the New Orleans alderman whose name was attached to the historic “redlight” district known as Storyville.



Loretta Young as Eugénie and Tyrone Power as Count Ferdinand deLesseps



Count Ferdinand deLesseps, Developer of the Suez Canal

“The building of the Suez canal,” according to the *State-Times* article, was dreamed of ... as far back as the 8th century.” In the latter part of the eighteenth century, Napoleon Bonaparte delegated a survey team with the mission of discovering the remnants of an ancient waterway that once joined the Mediterranean and Red Seas. The team’s findings appeared in the series of reports known as *Description de l’Égypte*, published 1809-1826. Although the engineers deemed the ancient route unsuitable for a modern canal, it became evident that such a waterway could be of enormous benefit to France and the world. These observations inspired the French diplomat Ferdinand deLesseps to secure a concession from Said Pasha, the viceroy of Egypt, to form a company to construct a ship canal.

The digging of the first spadeful of dirt marked the formal beginning of the canal on April 25, 1859. With the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, Ferdinand Marie, Vicomte deLesseps (November 19, 1805 –

December 7, 1894) succeeded in joining the Mediterranean and Red Seas, substantially reducing the sailing distances and times between Europe and East Asia.



DeLesseps and Eugénie in "Suez" Ferdinand deLesseps

DeLesseps attempted to repeat his earlier success with an effort to build a sea-level Panama Canal during the 1880s, but his efforts were thwarted by epidemics of yellow fever and malaria. The immense task was also beset by serious financial problems. DeLesseps' planned Panama Canal was never completed, but Americans took up the torch. The United States eventually bought out the project, changing the design to a non-sea-level canal featuring locks. The U.S. completed the Panama Canal in 1914.

Numerous deLesseps family members attended the 1938 cocktail party, which featured a holiday motif, and theater viewing. They are descendants of Alexandre B. deLesseps, a cousin of the canal-building Count Ferdinand deLesseps (played by the handsome Tyrone Power in "Suez"). Alexandre (born 1796) was the first deLesseps family member to come to the United States, and here he married Manette Tremé (born 1801), the daughter of Claude Tremé. Her father, of course, was the namesake of the historic Faubourg Tremé.



First vessels through the Suez Canal

Loretta Young plays Eugénie de Montijo, who would become the last Empress of the French as the wife of Napoléon III. The French actress Annabella plays a character named "Toni," who falls in love with deLesseps – but he still pines for Eugénie. In real life, Annabella became the real Mrs. Tyrone Power in 1939. The film's screenplay was so highly fictionalized that, upon the release of the motion picture in France, deLesseps' descendants sued (unsuccessfully) for libel. The Louisiana relatives, on the other hand, enjoyed a theater screening preceded by a cocktail party.

Alexandre and Manette deLesseps had four daughters, Emma, Angela, Hersilie and Amelie. Amelie married Henry Clement Story, son of Benjamin Story, one of New Orleans' early bankers. Amelie is the grandmother of Anita Olivier Morrison.



Modern container ship on the Suez Canal



DeLesseps Family Party Planned to Precede Movie All Will Attend Tuesday

By Mary Champagne

1938 Headline in the Baton Rouge State-Times

Perhaps the most important member of the deLesseps family, at least in the history of New Orleans, had not yet emerged on the local stage in 1938 when the movie "Suez" appeared in theaters. His name was deLesseps Story "Chep" Morrison (January 18, 1912 — May 22, 1964), a young thirty-three-year-old attorney Morrison who was approached by a group of Uptown New Orleans reformers in December 1945 to run for mayor in the election of 1946. "Chep" was born in New Roads, Louisiana, in Pointe Coupee Parish, to Jacob H. Morrison, III and Anita Olivier (mentioned earlier as the granddaughter of Amelie deLesseps). "Chep" was actually named after deLesseps Story, a respected New Orleans judge to whom he was related on his mother's side. He is also related to canal builder Ferdinand deLesseps, being descended from Ferdinand's cousin Alexandre.



A dynamic and youthful mayor, deLesseps S. "Chep" Morrison

Before defeating Mayor Maestri and becoming mayor of New Orleans, "Chep" was earlier a member of the state legislature. During World War II, he left the legislature to join the United States Army where he was promoted to the rank of colonel. He became chief of staff of the occupation forces stationed in Bremen, Germany.

During Mayor Morrison's administration, a deal was struck to return home rule to the Crescent City. "Chep" was adept at effectively marketing the city as a "Gateway to the Americas," as well as a growing and progressive Southern metropolis. He made several promotional trips to South and Central America, and his wife Corinne was very helpful in that she spoke Spanish. "Chep" had the vision to see the value inherent in reinforcing strong cultural and business ties with Latin America. He had great charisma and was successful in attracting significant private investment in the city. Numerous oil industry and white-collar corporate offices were established in downtown New Orleans, in addition to industrial plants in other parts of the Greater New Orleans area. One of Mayor Morrison's most notable acts was to create the New Orleans Recreation Department (NORD), which provided needed recreational facilities and programs for whites and African-Americans alike. He was also instrumental in projects such as the current city hall and civic center, as well as the city's first permanent VA hospital.

Morrison made several failed attempts to be elected governor of Louisiana. Toward that goal he faced two overwhelming handicaps: he was Roman Catholic and he was from New Orleans.

After serving four terms spanning sixteen years as mayor of New Orleans, and seeking a potential launch pad from which to stage another run for governor, "Chep" was appointed ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) by President John F. Kennedy. Tragically, Morrison and his son, Randy, died on May 22, 1964, perishing in a plane crash near Ciudad Victoria, Mexico.

"Chep" Morrison's daughter, Corinne Ann Morrison, is a New Orleans attorney. His son, the late deLesseps Story "Toni" Morrison, Jr. (March 11, 1944 – August 21, 1996), also ran for mayor of New Orleans at the age of thirty-three. In that election of 1977, in which Ernest N. Dutch Morial was elected the first African-American mayor of New Orleans, "Toni" finished fourth in the jungle primary (a primary election in which all candidates run in the same primary regardless of political party).

Many people are unaware that Morrison Road in New Orleans East was not named for the city's popular mayor. It was named for M. L. (Musgrove Ledyard) Morrison, one of the developers of the Lakeshore Land Company, along with Frank B. Hayne and Robert H. Downman. Hayne and Downman, who both reigned as Rex, also have streets named for them in the East: Hayne Boulevard and Downman Road.

Also little known is that a street in New Orleans was actually named for Mayor Morrison. In 1983, "an ordinance to authorize the dedication and acceptance of Morrison Court," (bounded by Morrison Road, Benson Street, Aberdeen Road and Crowder Road) was entered into with Hemard-Wogan, Inc., builders and developers. I participated in that naming decision, familiar with the situation by having read John Chase's *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children*.

We decided that an important four-term mayor of New Orleans – especially one with an excellent deLesseps pedigree – deserved a street.

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