

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

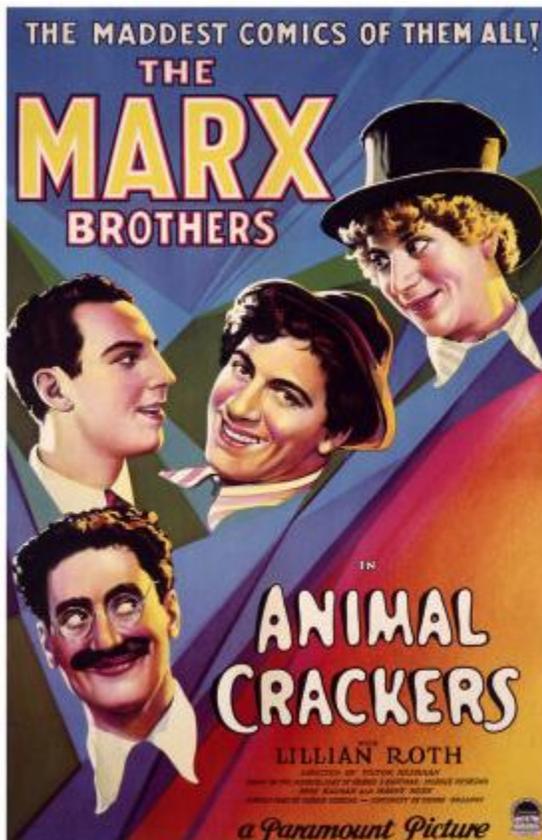
By Ned Hémard

A Pithy Pythian Piece

Marx Brothers aficionados may recall Groucho Marx in the role of African explorer and celebrated big-game hunter Captain Jeffrey T. Spaulding in *Animal Crackers*. In it he delivers some memorable lines, such as:

“One morning, I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I don't know.”

“We took some pictures of the native girls, but they weren't developed. But we're going back in a couple of weeks!”



Groucho as Captain Spaulding

"The principal animals inhabiting the African jungle are Moose, Elks and Knights of Pythias. Of course you all know what a moose is. That's big game. The first day I shot two bucks. That was the biggest game we had. As I say, you all know what a moose is. A moose runs around on the floor, eats cheese and is chased by the cat. The Elks, on the other hand, live up in the hills. And in the spring they come down for their annual convention. It is very interesting to watch them come to the water hole, and you should see them run when they find it is only a water hole. What they're looking for is an Elka-hole."

The Knights of Pythias, mentioned by Groucho, is a fraternal organization established February 19, 1864, at Washington, D. C. Founded by Justus H. Rathbone and the first fraternal organization to receive its charter by an act of the U. S. Congress, it also holds an annual convention. Rathbone came up with the name for his order after having been inspired by a play (written by the Irish poet John Banim) about the Greek legend of Damon and Pythias.

As told by Aristoxenus, Cicero and others, Pythias was accused of plotting against the tyrant Dionysius I and was sentenced to death. Pythias requested to be allowed to return home to settle his affairs and bid his family farewell. So he wouldn't run off, his friend Damon offered to take his spot as hostage. Dionysius agreed, on the condition that, if Pythias did not return, Damon would be put to death in his place. Dionysius believed that Pythias would never return and Damon would be executed. But he was wrong. Pythias did return. And Dionysius was so impressed that he set them both free.



BFFs, Damon and Pythias

Rathbone felt the story illustrated the ideals of loyalty, honor and friendship that were to be the core ideals of the order.

Notable Pythian Knights have included U.S. Presidents Warren G. Harding, William McKinley and Franklin D. Roosevelt; author of *Ben Hur* Major General Lew Wallace; and New Orleans Jazz legend Louis

Armstrong. New York State Senator Benjamin Antin (1884 –1956) was also a Pythian Knight and shares the same name as New Orleans' own Benny Grunch (real name: Benjamin Antin), who along with his "Bunch," created such humorous local songs as the "12 Yats of Christmas" and "Ain't Dere No More."



Louis Armstrong, a Pythian Knight, reigns as King of Zulu 1949

In April 1884, the Knights of Pythias held their annual convention in New Orleans, or as the *New York Herald* described, "the thirteenth session of the Supreme Lodge of the World." Founder Justus Rathbone was there for "addresses of welcome delivered by Governor McEnery," who was also a member of the order, and Mayor Behan, on behalf of the city. Present were "over ninety Supreme Representatives" and "delegates from every Grand Jurisdiction in the world, except the Sandwich Islands."

In 1909, Pythian history was made in New Orleans when self-made millionaire and son of a former slave Samuel L. Green spearheaded the construction of the Pythian Temple Building at 234 Loyola Avenue, near the corner of Loyola Avenue (formerly Saratoga) and Gravier Street. Green was then reputedly the richest African-American in New Orleans, if not the nation. He was also Supreme Chancellor of the African-American branch of Knights of Pythias of Louisiana.



The building was designed by local architects Diboll, Owen and Goldstein, and included many contemporary elements, such as a steel structure clad with brick, concrete and terracotta. On the first floor was a bank, a barbershop, along with offices and retail space. There was an auditorium on the second floor, and the additional floors within the six story building contained many meeting rooms and offices. On the roof was an open air garden that would later become enclosed.

The new structure had its formal dedication on August 18, 1909, a year after construction had begun. The Knights of Pythias celebrated with four days of events. According to the *Daily Picayune*, the "imposing structure" cost \$200,000 and was the "biggest business enterprise ever attempted by the colored race in the United States."

Also in 1909, John L. Metoyer and a neighborhood group of laborers known as "The Tramps" attended a Pythian Temple Theatre performance of a vaudevillian comedy show performed by the Smart Set. The comedy included a skit entitled, *There Never Was and Never Will Be a King Like Me*, about the Zulu Tribe and its king. The "Tramps" were so impressed by the portrayal of the Zulu king that they retired to their clubhouse on Perdido Street and, when they emerged, they were reorganized as the Zulus. Thus was born the famous Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the most widely-acclaimed African-American carnival krewe in the Crescent City.

The first Zulu king was William Story, who wore a lard-can crown and carried a banana stalk scepter. The Zulu members wore raggedy trousers and featured a Jubilee-singing quartet in front of and behind King Story. Six years later, the first decorated platform was

constructed with dry goods boxes on a spring wagon. The king's float was decked out with palmetto leaves and tree moss.

The earliest reference to Zulu's prized coconuts appears to be about 1910 when they were handed from the floats in their natural "hairy" state. Sign painter Lloyd Lucus was perhaps the first to scrape and paint the coconuts, the forerunner to the beautifully decorated ones we see made today by George Lafargue, Jr., his wife Chanel and their children.

Some years after the grand opening of the Pythian Temple, its owners added a rooftop garden (very popular during the years 1909 – 1927). That facility became a popular venue for such important jazz musicians as Sidney Bechet, who first played the saxophone with A. J. Piron's band at the Roof Garden. Papa Celestin's Original Tuxedo Jazz Orchestra also played there.

PIRON'S GARDEN OF JOY
PYTHIAN TEMPLE BUILDING

GRAND OPENING
MONDAY NIGHT
AUGUST 8th, 1927
AT 8 P. M.

Spend the Evening in This
Delightful Place With
Your Friends

SELECT MATINEE DANCE
SATURDAY NIGHTS
6 TO 12 P. M.
Dancing Every Monday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday
Nights
ADMISSION, 30 CENTS

PIRON'S FAMOUS VICTOR RECORDING ORCHESTRA, COMPOSED OF ELEVEN PIECES, WILL FURNISH THE LATEST DANCE-HITS AT ALL DANCES

DANCE ON THE COOLEST AND MOST UP-TO-DATE DANCING FLOOR SOUTH
COOLED BY NATURE'S BREEZES--200 FEET IN THE AIR

Advertisement for A. J. Piron's Band at the Pythian Temple

The Pythian Temple went out of black ownership in 1941 when the Knights were forced to sell the building to pay off outstanding debts. In 1943, boat builder Andrew Jackson Higgins leased the property as a hiring office. By manufacturing the famed landing craft used to land the Allied troops onto the beaches during World War II, Higgins was the one Eisenhower called the man who "won the war" for the U.S. Higgins opened the building's top-floor dance hall as a place for soldiers and sailors to socialize before being sent off to war.

The Pythian Temple Building has a long history and its structure still stands, though obscured behind a 1950s glass facade just across Loyola Avenue from the City's Main Library. The Temple Theatre and the Roof Garden, however, long ago disappeared.



The Pythian Temple Building, New Orleans, Then and Now

The building also has a future. In 2015, Green Coast Enterprises and Crescent City Community Land Trust announced plans to revitalize the 106-year-old historic building, utilizing the original architecture to restore the Pythian Temple Building to its former grandeur. Having secured an \$18.6 million construction permit for the project, the newly renovated building will offer retail and office space, a health clinic, physical therapy, and sixty-nine one- and two-bedroom apartments, including one floor of two-level, loft-style apartments formerly taken up by the dance hall space. Commercial spaces will be completed to tenants' specifications, and residential tenants will have the opportunity to choose a full array of amenities. It is noteworthy that this historic building will be given new life.

On August 18th and 19th, 1909, as part of the building's original grand opening, The Temple Theatre presented the play of "Damon and Pythias," a great lesson in friendship and brotherhood. The anagram "FCB," which stands for the Pythian motto ("Friendship, Charity, Benevolence"), can be seen displayed on the Pythian Knights' swords.



"FBC" on a Knights of Pythias sword crossguard

Wouldn't you love to travel back in time and listen to A. J. Piron's Band "live" and, as his ad said, "DANCE ON THE COOLEST AND MOST UP-TO-DATE DANCING FLOOR SOUTH?" His ad also encouraged you to "Spend the Evening in This Delightful Place With Your Friends," a truly Pythian sentiment.

I tried, but it seems:

There Never Was and Never Will Be a Pithy Piece From Me.

NED HÉMARD

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