

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **A Tale of Two Turpins**

One prayed for us, and the other played for us. One followed the cross, and the other was cross-eyed. Both are a part of the rich tapestry that is New Orleans.

On January 31, 1752, a profession ceremony was held at the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans. On that occasion, and with her ardent desire, the first American-born woman (i.e., born within the later limits of the United States) was permitted to take her holy vows as a nun in the Roman Catholic Church. Her name was Marie Turpin.



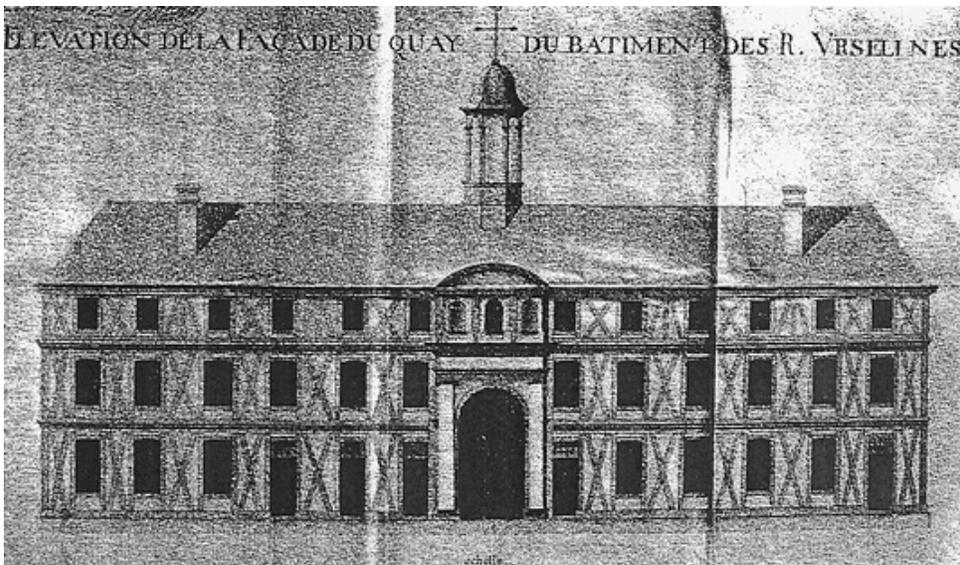
*The Arrival of the Ursulines in New Orleans in July, 1727*

“The first Creole from this colony that we have received,” Marie Turpin was born in the Illinois Country (*Pais des Illinois*, also referred to as

*Haute-Louisiane*, or Upper Louisiana). She was the offspring of an Indian and French intermarriage, the daughter of Louis Turpin, French militia lieutenant and royal storekeeper who had established himself as a wealthy merchant in the Illinois Country. Her mother was Louis Turpin's second wife, Dorothee, an Illinois Indian woman. Dorothee married Turpin September 11, 1724, after having been widowed by another Frenchman, Charles Danis.



*Pais des Illinois (Illinois Country), 1717, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes, Paris, France*



*1733 elevation of the Ursuline Convent by Ignace François Broutin*

Marie was born circa 1731 at Kaskaskia and raised by her mother and father, an upbringing of the greatest piety. On December 7, 1749,

after Marie's six-month trial period upon entering the novitiate, the Mother Superior recorded, "my sister Marie Turpin daughter of Mr. Louis Turpin and Mrs. Dorotée Turpin *sauvagesse* ... was received with all the voices," meaning by all of those within the order, "to receive the habit, in her quality as a converse sister." After being allowed to wear the habit, she took her vows just over two years later. Entering the Order of Ste. Ursula at the convent in New Orleans as a converse, or domestic, nun, Marie took the name *soeur Marie de Ste. Marthe*, or Sister Ste. Marthe.



*Member of the Kaskaskian Indian Nation*

Sister Ste. Marthe lived a short but spiritual life, dying of consumption on November 20, 1761 (at that time about thirty years of age).

Bernard "Ben" Turpin was born in New Orleans on September 19, 1869. His father Ernest had advertised his business that same year in Gardner's City Directory. The full-page ad announced that he was the "manufacturer and dealer of all kinds of chocolate, fancy candies, syrups, gum drops, jujube paste and sugar almonds" and located at 93 Old Levee Street (now Decatur) between Conti and St. Louis. He had run the same ad two years before in Graham's Crescent City Directory. The Turpin establishment also made New Orleans style pralines, a skill that was taught to young Ben. Ben worked in the candy kitchen for

some years, but the shelling of pecans and the making of pralines held no fascination for the youth who would later become one of the screen's most popular comedians.

XLIV GARDNER'S NEW ORLEANS DIRECTORY.

**ERNEST TURPIN,**  
MANUFACTURER  
—OF ALL KINDS OF—  
**FANCY**  
**CANDIES**  
**SYRUPS,**  
**GUM DROPS,**  
**JUJUBE PASTE**  
AND  
**SUGAR ALMONDS,**  
**BY STEAM.**

—  
No. 93 OLD LEVEE STREET,  
BETWEEN ST. LOUIS AND CONTI,  
**NEW ORLEANS.**

Ben Turpin worked in Vaudeville, Burlesque and circuses, and his stage persona was a brushy mustache, crossed eyes and being able to execute spectacular pratfalls and a backward tumble he called the "108". His trademark crossed eyes were later insured by Lloyd's of London. In the early days of his career he played the part of comic character "Happy Hooligan," and his skill as a comedian landed him a job in the movies. From Essanay Studios in Chicago to Mack Sennett's operations in California, Ben became a big star opposite Charlie Chaplin and other comedic greats. He retired from film in 1924 to care for his ailing wife and became very successful in real estate investing.

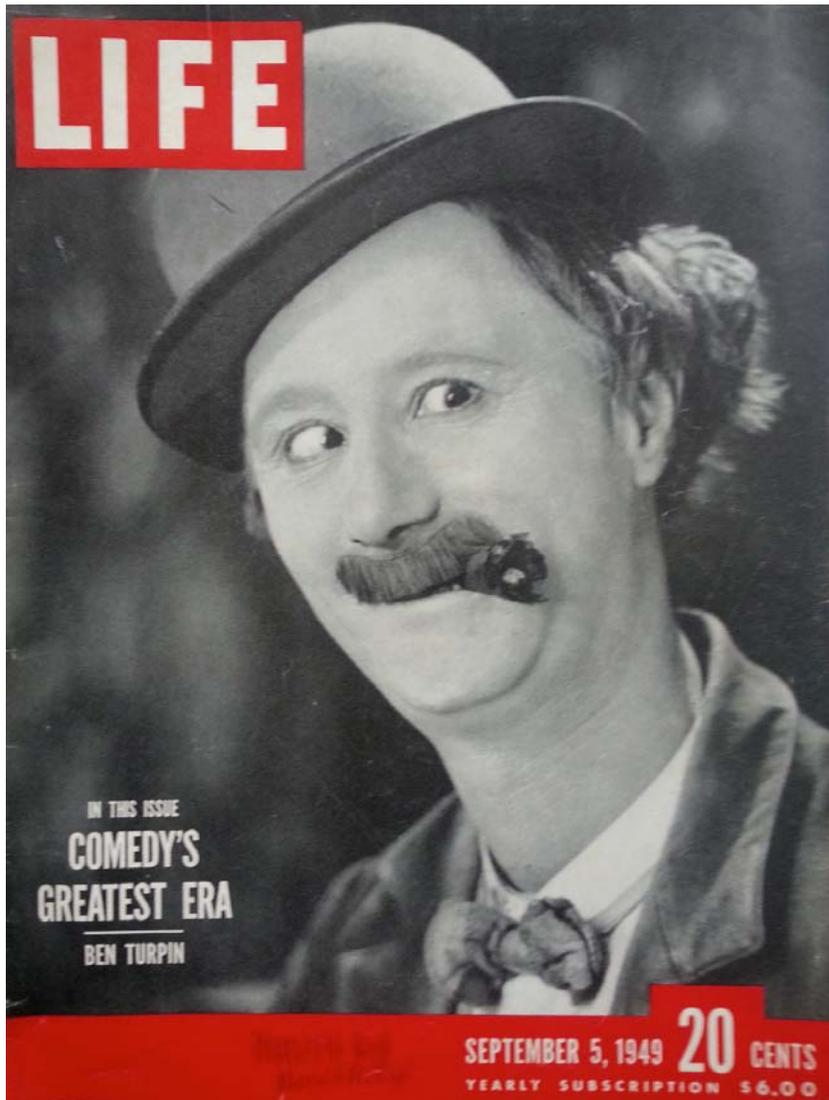


*Cross-eyed Ben Turpin*

An article in the *Dallas Morning News*, dated August 29, 1928, carried Turpin's recollections of his early days in New Orleans:

"If you ever hung around a candy kitchen, you know how I felt after I grew up, said Turpin. "At first it was a delight – all the sweets a fellow could stuff – but after a bit the taste for sweets departed and then this making of candy was really work. It wasn't so bad when tasting the product was still a pleasure, but with the departure of the sweet tooth it was an annoyance."

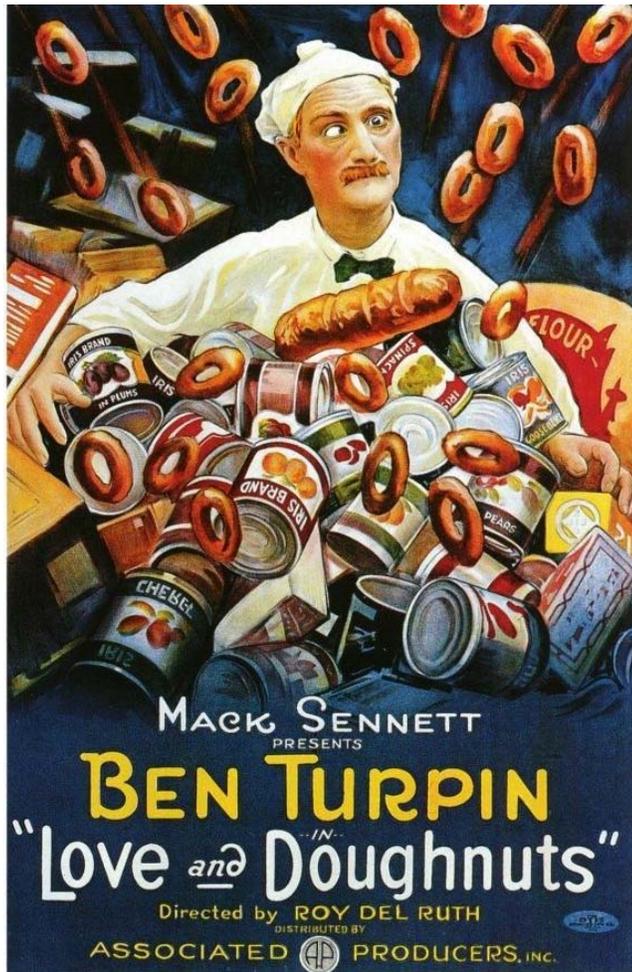
He continued, "During the lulls in the work periods I used to juggle odd objects around the place. Soon I got to be a fairly good juggler and manipulator. I did a few performances in New Orleans and then branched out and soon was making my money entertaining folks."



*On the cover of Life*

"I performed on the stage until my eyes crossed and refused to come out of the huddle, and then I went into pictures, where I have been ever since."

The article added, "Turpin still avoids candy today – especially pralines."



*Doughnuts, Yes – Pralines, No!*

Ben Turpin, a cockeyed (yet cross-eyed) optimist with a face that is recognized around the globe, died July 1, 1940.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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"A Tale of Two Turpins"  
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