

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Alois and Aloysius**

Clovis was the King of the Franks who united all the Frankish tribes under one ruler. His name evolved into the French name *Louis* and the moniker of a multitude of monarchs. But Frankish people to the south had their own way of speaking.

Occitan is the traditional language of Occitania (also referred to as Oc Country), the cultural area that encompasses roughly the southern half of France. It is composed of Drôme-Viverais, Auvergne, Limousin, Guyenne, Gascony, southern Dauphiné, Languedoc and the ever-popular Provence. It even includes Monaco and parts of Italy (the Occitan Valleys) and Spain (the Aran Valley).

Occitan (or *langue d'oc*) is a Latin-based Romance language just as French, Spanish or Italian. Provençal is a dialect of the *langue d'oc* used by the troubadours of the High Middle Ages (1150-1350), corresponding to Old French or the *langue d'oïl* of Northern France. Troubadours were the medieval performers and composers of Occitan lyric poetry.

The name Alois is the Provençal form of the name *Louis*. By way of the Old French (Loois) and Provençal (Aloys), Alois is used chiefly in Czech and German. These names are older forms of Aloysius, the Latinized version of Aloys. Aloysius was commonly used in medieval Italy, and was the name of the Italian Jesuit and saint, Aloysius Gonzaga (1568-1591) from Lombardy, the patron saint of the young. Born in his family's castle in Castiglione della Stiviere, Saint Aloysius was a member of the illustrious House of Gonzaga.

With only six students, the Brothers of the Sacred Heart opened the second oldest all-male Roman Catholic school in New Orleans on September 26, 1869, and named it for Saint Aloysius. In 1892 the school moved to larger quarters on the corner of Esplanade and Rampart avenues, and in 1969 (after celebrating the school's 100th anniversary) it moved again to the larger Cor Jesu campus (1954-

1969) under the newly changed name of Brother Martin High School (renamed for Brother Martin Hernandez).

Notable alums from Brother Martin and its forerunner schools include Gregory Aymond, Archbishop of New Orleans; 1920s New Orleans mayor, Arthur O'Keefe; Allen Ellender, United States Senator and President Pro Tempore of the Senate; fitness guru Richard Simmons who had the country "Sweatin' to the Oldies"; Charles Emile "Peppi" Bruneau, Jr., member of the Louisiana House of Representatives from (1976-2007); Rod West, CEO of Entergy; journalist Ronnie Virgets; Chief Justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court, Pascal Calogero, Jr.; and Saints owner Tom Benson. There are many more.

Numerous men named Alois have achieved renown, like Joseph Alois Schumpeter (1883-1950), Czechoslovakian-born Austrian School economist known for his theories of the development of capitalism. He popularized the concept of "creative destruction" as the process of transformation that occurs with radical innovation. Austrian-American Arnold Alois Schwarzenegger has achieved worldwide fame as bodybuilder, Hollywood action movie icon and Governor of California. And Alois Alzheimer (1864-1915) was the German neuropathologist and psychiatrist credited with identifying the first published case of "presenile dementia" that would become known as Alzheimer's Disease.

But New Orleans has been home to at least two remarkable men named Alois: Baker Alois J. Binder and Alois Maxwell Hirt, famous New Orleans trumpeter.

The Alois Binder family has been associated with the French bread baking business in New Orleans since 1916. Alois J. Binder, Jr., affectionately known as "Butz", has worked in the family bakery since he was seven years old. Located at 940 Frenchmen Street in the Marigny, it has been supplying New Orleans restaurants, hotels and grocers with French bread since before the creation of New Orleans' signature sandwich, the po-boy. And Frenchmen desire French bread.

It is said that the po-boy was the brainchild of the Martin Brothers at their St. Claude Avenue Coffee Stand in 1929 during a local transit worker's strike. The streetcar motormen and conductors were the "poor boys" taken care of by Benny Martin and his brother Clovis (there's Clovis again). According to reports, a striker could buy cheaply (or was given free) French bread filled with gravy and roast beef end pieces or gravy atop sliced potatoes.

But, in fact, diners in the Crescent City had been eating sandwiches on French bread for quite some time before. These were simply known as "loaves", and oysters were a favorite component. The 1901 Picayune's Creole Cook Book contained a recipe for the popular "oyster loaf".

Binder's Bakery continues to display its slogan: "The Happy Baker with the Light Brings You Hot French Bread" – and does he ever. The "Happy Baker" processes thousands of quality loaves of bread daily. Milled from hard red spring wheat, the bread is crispy on the outside and chewy on the inside. Rarely limp or damaged, a Binder's loaf can hold together a "Jumbo" sandwich like the "Ferdi" from Mother's (dressed and loaded with debris).

Another "Jumbo" (and one of his nicknames), New Orleans native Al Hirt (1922-1999) earned international success as a trumpeter, bandleader and recording artist. His dad, also named Alois, was a policeman who bought his son his first trumpet at a local pawnshop when young Alois (shortened to Al) was only six. According to the story, this secondhand instrument had a faulty mouthpiece, requiring the young musician to develop his wind power, which later wowed his audiences and fellow trumpeters alike.

At sixteen, he was playing professionally (including a gig at the track). He studied at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music (beginning in 1940) under the tutelage of Dr. Frank Simon (a Sousa alum). After bugling for Uncle Sam during the war for the 82nd Army Air Force Band, it was stints with the great swing bands of the day (Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Ina Ray Hutton, Ray, McKinley, Benny Goodman and in 1950 as soloist and first trumpet for Horace Heidt). A major influence was Harry James.

"Al (He's the King!) Hirt", also known as "The Round Mound of Sound", brought all this experience back to his hometown and (despite saying he was not a jazz trumpeter) played with Pete Fountain (at Dan Levy's Pier 600 Club) and other Dixieland jazz groups and began leading his own bands. He made a few recordings on Joseph P. Mares' Southland Records label. His extraordinary playing landed him a national contract with RCA, charting #4 on Billboard with Allen Toussaint's "Java" (a Grammy winner). Albums "Honey in the Horn" and "Cotton Candy" were tremendous hits in 1964, along with "Sugar Lips" which became a game show theme (Eye Guess). With a remarkable twenty-two different albums on the charts in the 50s and 60s, Al recorded a hip version of "Flight of the Bumblebee" for "The Green Hornet" TV program. This frenetic number was later used in Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill" in 2003.

In the 60s, Hirt played Vegas and New York's Basin Street East and was a frequent guest on television variety programs hosted by stars like Andy Williams and Dinah Shore. In 1965, he hosted a summer replacement television series, "Fanfare," for Jackie Gleason.

Big Al's virtuosity would lead to his opening his own club on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter (1962-1983), as well as becoming a

minority owner in the New Orleans Saints NFL Football Team in 1967. That same year, Al Hirt headlined the half-time show at the very first Super Bowl in Los Angeles (where Green Bay beat the Chiefs), the first of an impressive five total Super Bowl appearances for the man with the horn.

Hirt received a Mardi Gras parade injury to his lip caused by a hurled brick, which was parodied in Saturday Night Live's ill-fated Mardi Gras Special in a skit entitled "Let's Hit Al Hirt in the Mouth with a Brick Contest".

He was especially proud of his eight children, ten grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. And his most memorable performance was a solo rendition of "Ave Maria" played for Pope John Paul II on his visit to the Crescent City.

Another young New Orleans virtuoso got his first trumpet at age six:

"I got my first trumpet when I was six years old, from Al Hirt. My father was playing in Al Hirt's band at that time, and he got me a trumpet because my older brother ... was playing the clarinet and the piano, so he didn't want me to feel left out."

His name is Wynton Marsalis.

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