

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

B. A. C. (Before Air Conditioning)

It would be difficult to imagine New Orleans in the summer without air conditioning, but the “old time” electric fan has only been around since the 1880s. Between 1882 and 1886, Dr. Schuyler Skaats Wheeler developed the two-bladed desk fan and Philip Diehl introduced the electric ceiling fan. Even then, electric fans were most often used in commercial establishments or in wealthy households. How did the residents of the Crescent City cool themselves in the “good old days”, notwithstanding the high ceilings, transoms and “fan” windows? (In England, the transom above a door is usually called a “fanlight”, since Georgian style transoms were often fan-like in shape.)

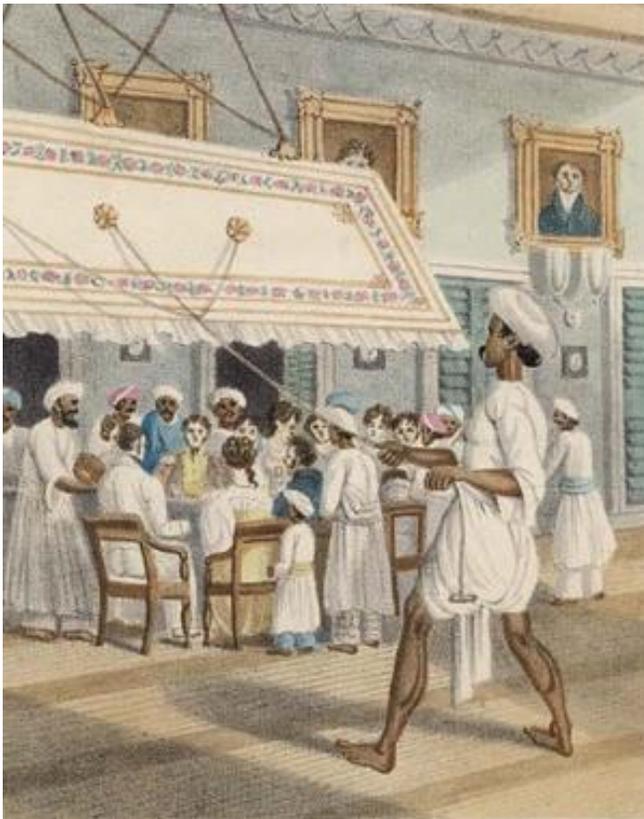


Khu-fan with single ostrich feather

Egyptian sunshade

Before these improvements in technology there were handheld fans and mechanical fans. From Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, we learn that sunshades were on hand to protect one's eyes from the sun's glare, or perhaps symbolically to protect onlookers from the brilliance of the king himself. They were probably used as fans, as well. The most common types of fan were lotiform (representing the leaf of the blue lotus) and palmiform (the frond of the date palm). Others were patterned after bird wings. The short-handled *khu*-fan surmounted by a single ostrich feather, with a papyrus-umbel handle, also appears frequently in Egyptian art and signifies "protection" and "breath of life". The *khu*-fan (always shown held by a fan-bearer) first appeared during the reign of Amenhotep II.

In South Asia, early handheld fans (in use since 500 BC) were constructed either from a single frond of palmyra palm or from other woven materials, such as rattan, bamboo strips or other plant fiber. In Hindustani, the *lingua franca* of North India and Pakistan, a fan of such design was called a *punkah* (Hindi *pakhá* or *pangkhā*; from Sanskrit *pakaka*, fan; from *paka*, meaning wing, or, more specifically, the flapping wing of a bird producing a draft. In more recent centuries, however, we think of the *punkah* in a different way.



Indian punkah operated by a punka wallah

Around the middle 18th century, inventors started designing wind-up mechanical fans (with mechanisms similar to wind-up clocks). A mechanical fan (although operated by a human attendant), used in

colonial India in the early 19th century, was called the *punka* (or *punkah*) fan. It had a canvas-covered frame (or solid wood, palm frond or cloth strip) that was suspended from the ceiling. Servants, known as *punka wallahs*, pulled one or two ropes connected to the frame to move the fan back and forth to provide cooling to the diners and hopefully help to keep flies and other insects off the food below. On March 3, 1856, a civil engineer, George Alfred DePenning of 7 Grant's Lane, Calcutta, petitioned the Indian Government for grant of exclusive privileges for his invention, entitled "An Efficient Punkah Pulling Machine".



The punkah above the dining table at Rosedown, St. Francisville

The *punka* did not take long to make its journey from the India of the British Raj to New Orleans and the Old South. One can view *punkas* at Rosedown Plantation in West Feliciana Parish; Oak Alley in Vacherie, Louisiana; or at Linden in Natchez. At Melrose in Natchez, there is a *punka* of solid mahogany. The *punka wallahs* that once operated the cooling systems at these stately homes, sad to say, were slaves.

There is a *punka* in operation in the 1938 movie, "Jezebel", where Bette Davis plays the strong-willed New Orleans belle, Julie Marsden. And in 1939's "Gone With the Wind", long-handled peacock fans cool the young ladies at "Twelve Oaks" during naptime.

And Booker T. Washington recalled in his autobiography, "Up from Slavery":

"When I had grown to sufficient size, I was required to go to the "big house" at meal-times to fan the flies from the table by means of a large set of paper fans operated by a pulley."

Booker T. Washington went on to become an orator, author, educator and dominant African-American leader, head of the great Tuskegee Institute.

In New Orleans, *punkas* quietly cooled guests at the quadron balls.

John H. B. Latrobe was a writer, inventor and lawyer (specializing in patents). Son of the architect of the nation's capitol, he caught the spirit of New Orleans and the South in his lively 1834 journal. He commented on the customs of the city he called "a place after its own fashion" - from quadron balls to oysters dripping in hot sauce.

"The quadroons," Latrobe wrote, "conducted themselves with equal propriety and modesty. Moreover, they were beautiful to look upon. They were gracefully gowned, their smiles came and went with their talk, and they captivated all who were present." These aristocratic *gens de couleur libre* put on society balls known as the *Bal de Cordon Bleu*, sponsored by the *Société Cordon Bleu*, a group of well-to-do quadron mothers who used the balls as a means of securing for their daughters arrangements with well-born, unwed white Creole men. Only wealthy men were invited to attend, for they would be good protectors in this system known as *plaçage*.

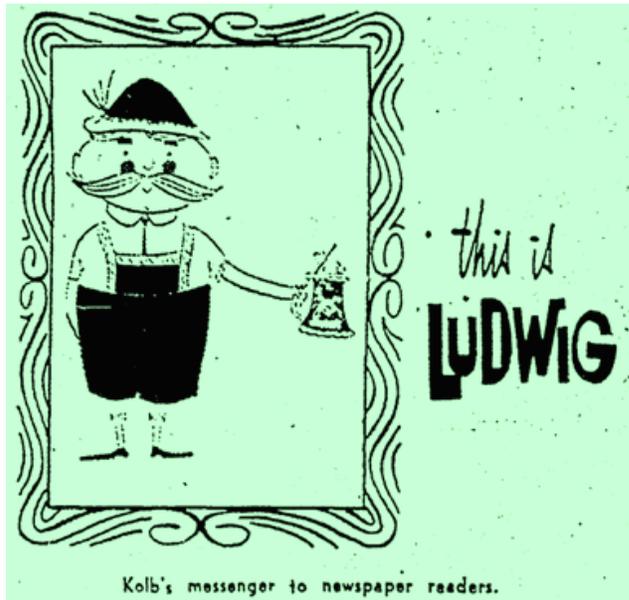
Author Eleanor Early described the scene:

"The patrons for each ball sat on a dais carpeted in crimson beneath a winged fan called a punka, that was suspended from the ceiling, and kept in motion by a slave child who pulled at the string that descended from the wings. Around the room sat the rest of the chaperones, all in evening gowns, and fanning themselves with palmetto fans."

Men chose dancing partners during the ball. The young belles could tactfully decline any further dances if she was not attracted to a particular gentleman, and relied on her chaperone to assist. Once an agreement was reached, the girl was spoken of as *placée*.

An "automaton punka" was installed in 1865 at Washington's Lincoln General Hospital. It was not much more than a long suspended rod supporting a series of palmetto fans moving slowly over each bed in the ward. A single attendant was able to fan two whole rows of beds.

One old fan system much-beloved by the people of New Orleans was the belt-operated collection of gears, pulleys and belts once on display at the 1884 Louisiana Cotton Exposition. It moved to Kolb's (German-Creole) Restaurant on St. Charles, where diners viewed a life-size lederhosen-clad mechanical Bavarian named "LUDWIG" crank away in the rafters on an intricate belt system connected to the ceiling fans. Though Kolb's is gone (although its façade has been newly renovated), a company named "Fanimation" (founded 100 years after the 1884 Cotton Exposition) has recreated a reproduction of the original Snediker & Carr long belt and pulley system installation at Kolb's. Today's model is called the "Bourbon Street". Good place for a "long belt"!



An advertisement in the *Times-Picayune*, dated January 9, 1961, featured the above image of Ludwig, along with the following copy:

"That's a stein of imported German beer in his hand ... but it could just as well any one of our fine American beers.

LUDWIG'S cheeks are puffy and his waist-line a bit out of control but that comes from sneaking around Kolb's kitchen sampling ALL of the good things that are steaming, boiling, broiling and baking in the big pots and pans."

LUDWIG goes on to say, "Ach, what good eaters those Kolb patrons are."

The beloved Bavarian's primary role, however, was cranking, cooling and entertaining Kolb's guests. He and Kolb's are indeed missed.



Original lyre-shaped punkah at Oak Alley Plantation

A hand fan known as a *rhipis* was used in ancient Greece at least since the 4th century BC. The Romans also used fans. The folding fan was invented in Japan in the eighth century and was adopted in China between 900 and 960. Christian Europe's earliest fan was the *flabellum* (or ceremonial fan), dating back to the 6th century and used during Communion services to drive insects away from the bread and wine (and priest). Made of feathers, leather, silk, metal or parchment, these fans really date back to ancient Egypt, where one was found in King Tut's tomb. Handheld fans made their way back to Europe via the Crusaders; and Portuguese traders, during the fifteenth century, brought fans to Europe from China and Japan. During the sixteenth century, fans appear to have been in general use in Portugal, Spain and Italy, from which they made their way to France with Italian perfumers who accompanied Catherine de' Medici on her way to marry Henry II. They became popular and were even considered elaborate high status gifts to royalty. Queen Elizabeth I of England, too, was a "fan" of fans.



In England the fashion spread more rapidly due to the large-scale immigration of skilled French fan-makers who took refuge there after the revocation of the edict of Nantes in 1685. The East India Company played its part, as well, in the importation of fans from China. From the sixteenth century up to the late 1800s throughout the entire continent of Europe, the wardrobe of no fashionable lady *en grande tenue* was considered complete without a proper fan. It is therefore no surprise that fans eventually found their way to New Orleans, fluttering past the faces of "Creole babies with flashing eyes".

"Fashionable Fans" were offered for sale in the August 13th, 1811, issue of the *Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser*: "Apply to R. HERIOT At Messrs. Fortier & Son's," it suggested.

GUION & CO., corner of St. Charles and Chartres streets, offered:

Rich Fans, of pearl, ivory, feathers, silk and paper;

The above ad appeared in the *Picayune*, dated June 15, 1845.

In lieu of "Rich Fans," one could purchase "cheap" ones "of all sizes" at King's White House on Gravier Street:

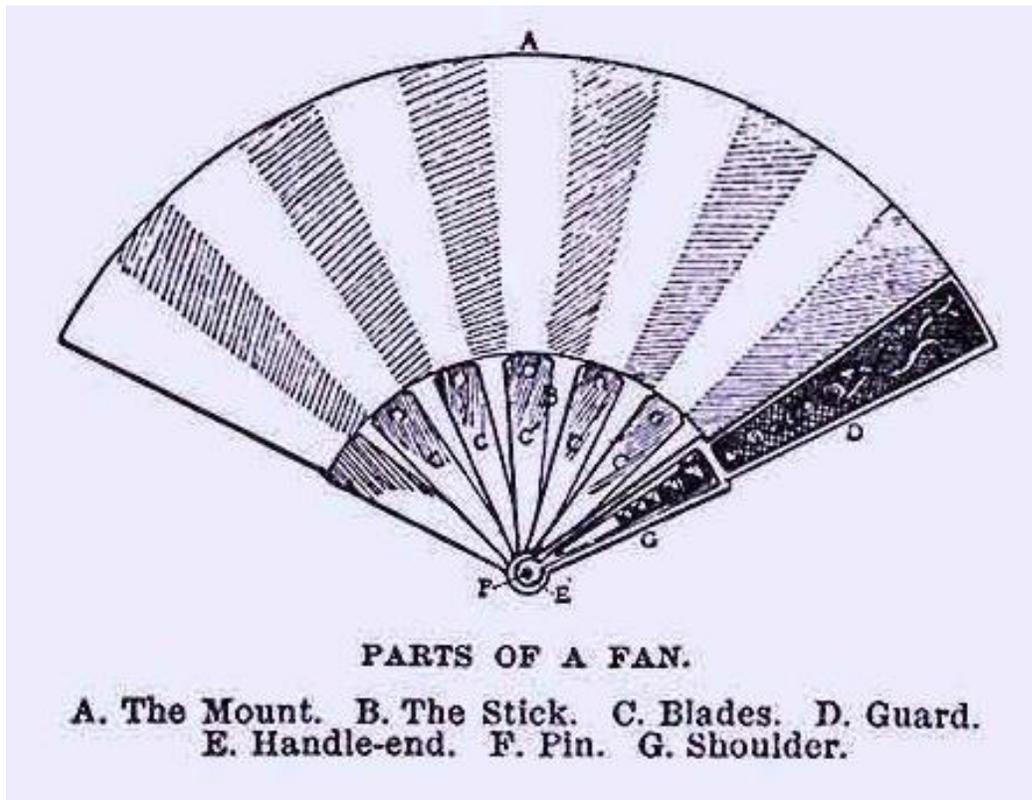
FANS! FANS! FANS!
At King's, 72 Gravier Street,
FEATHER FANS of all sizes—very low.
PAPER FANS,
From common to very fine—cheap.
SILK SCREEN FANS—very cheap.
PALM LEAF FANS—a few cases left.
At KING'S WHITE HOUSE,
Je20—3t2dp 72 Gravier street.

Ad in the Picayune, June 20, 1850

Today, folding fans of all kinds can be found in great profusion at the French Market.

The handheld fan, as we have seen, is a rigid or folding device used throughout the world since ancient times for cooling, air circulation or as a sartorial or ceremonial accessory. Pleated folding fans are those in which the paper or fabric (known as the leaf) is mounted to sticks (the outer two called guards) and held together at the handle end by a rivet or pin. The leaf is pleated in folds so that the fan may be opened and closed. *Brisé* ("broken") fans are those made entirely of wider decorated sticks, often held together by a woven ribbon. Rigid paddle fans have handles of wood or other material. Fans of this type, displaying an image of Napoleon's death mask, were given out at the 200th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase. For the past decade, the Historic New Orleans Collection has produced a number of these fans each year with a variety of historical and cultural images for its ever-popular "Antiques Forum".

It has been said that in the European courts (or at least during Victorian times) fans were used as a silent code to circumvent the constrictions of social etiquette. Many historians suggest that this was little more than a later advertising ploy to sell fans, a romantic notion without historical basis. But Duvelleroy, a high-end Parisian fan-maker in business since 1827, proudly claims having published a nineteenth century leaflet on fan gestures and their meaning. The meanings contained in this leaflet, and those explained on other lists, are quite numerous and can get a little confusing (*Così fan tutte*).



It is hard to imagine that this secret language of love (whether enduring or momentary) did not make its way to New Orleans, where a furtive glance and the placement of the fan, aptly called a “woman’s scepter,” could say it all. Flirting had to take place. Assignations must have been made. Picture, if you will, those nights when a nonchalant furl encouraged a lover, while a disdainful flip of the wrist plunged him into despair. Every fine young gallant surely found it necessary to learn the meaning of each movement and interpret every flutter.

An open fan covering the left ear means, “Do not betray our secret.” But a fan held over the left ear indicates, “I wish to get rid of you.” A half-opened fan pressed to the lips sends the message, “You may kiss me.” Placed near the heart, the fan signifies, “You have won my love. In other words, I’m a big fan. You fulfill my fantasies. You’re fantastic!”

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