

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Basketsful of Easter Joy

In 2009 I wrote that Easter in New Orleans had gone highbrow with the most exquisite confections available up and down the Bunny Trail, aka Magazine Street. At 3025 Magazine, I pointed out, basket fillers could find an elegant array of caramel eggs, chocolate bunnies, macarons and Easter baskets fashioned with what the artisan chocolate establishment known as *Sucré* calls “a touch of *Sucré* sophistication”.

In the 5700 block, I continued, those on an Easter egg hunt could encounter all manner of marvels at *Blue Frog Chocolates*. There they could find truffle eggs, Easter pops, a variety of chocolate bunnies and those wonderful old-fashioned panorama sugar eggs (that feature tableaux of chicks and bunnies against a Springtime backdrop). Back then, one could purchase a 7.25 ounce solid milk chocolate FEMA approved blue roof house for his bunny hutch. Only \$12.00 each!



Sucré Easter macarons

Blue Frog Chocolates

New Orleans has always possessed a sweet tooth, and privately run

candy emporiums have been around for years. Creole pralines can be found at *Laura's Candies* (331 Chartres), which has been using copper kettles, wooden paddles and fresh pecans to make treats from old Creole recipes. *Aunt Sally's* (810 Decatur), also purveyor of pralines in the Quarter, was founded by Pierre and Diane Bagur in the 1930s. *Aunt Sally's* now has a second location at 750 St. Charles Avenue. And, of course, the Roman Candy wagon has been wending its way through the Crescent City since 1915. Today, *Merlin's* is a Harahan based company that makes chocolate rabbits.

One new development since 2009 was the announcement in 2015 that Café Du Monde would buy *Evans Creole Candy Factory* in the French Market (and its recipes) and expand its operations. André Dulac-Evans, who hand-made delicious pralines and other candy, founded the company more than a century ago. *Evans* was acquired by Jay Cuccia in 1968.

Mars, Incorporated, the worldwide multi-billion dollar confectionery is one of the largest privately owned U.S. corporations. Frank C. Mars started out in 1911 with his *Mars Candy Factory*, but it failed. A second try in 1920 was the genesis of the present-day Mars megalith. But the oldest family-owned chocolate candy company in the country, *Elmer's Candy* (in operation since 1855), began in New Orleans.



The familiar Elmer's logo has been with us for some time.

Christopher Henry Miller was a sixteen-year-old German immigrant who had arrived in New Orleans ten years before. Full of youthful confidence in his new city, he took a job as a baker's assistant in a Vieux Carré pastry shop. He worked hard, married Mary Wetzel and opened the *Miller Candy Company* on the corner of Jackson and Levee Streets in 1855.

One of the Millers' eleven daughters, Olivia, married Augustus Elmer, who eventually joined the company. The company's name was

changed to *Elmer-Miller* around the turn of the century. The final name change came in 1914 after Elmer's sons joined what is now known as *Elmer Candy Corporation*.

The company soon increased both its regional and national presence by adding some excellent products. In the early 1920s, Elmer's bought the recipe and trademark for a concoction consisting of chocolate, marshmallow and toasted almonds from a New Orleans department store. Heavenly Hash was originally marketed as a boxed chocolate, and Gold Brick chocolate bars came along during the Depression (1936) with packaging designed to resemble gold bars from the U.S. Mint. When almost all candy bars sold for a nickel, Gold Bricks were the first to sell for a dime (and people still couldn't get enough). These two delightful treats were later marketed in Easter egg shapes with flat bottoms, enclosed in attractive wrappers. Big hits at Easter, these (and the company's Pecan Eggs) outsell the national leaders many times over in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. The Gulf Coast buys more Easter candy than any other region in the United States. And in 2009 the 1923 and 1936 favorites were introduced in dark chocolate, as well. Another popular item since the 1940s has been the chocolate and pecan syrup for ice cream under the Gold Brick topping brand name.



In 1963, a Chicago native named Roy Nelson purchased the company from the Elmer family. His son Allan joined him two years later, and as the 70s approached the Nelson family relocated the company to Ponchatoula, Louisiana. Allan's son Rob came on board after working for the company as a teenager, followed by a business degree. It is, after all, one of the few places where it's O.K. to "goldbrick" on the job.

Holmes Quality Package Eggs

All Dainty and Ready for Easter Giving

IT'S A PLEASURE to select Easter Eggs and other things for Easter Nests at Holmes. For Mr. Bunny has assisted with the packing of the Easter Goods in glacine covered or fancy packages. Therefore, you find well balanced assortments of the better kind ready for you without handling of any kind. And the prices in box lots are a little less than if bought individually. Here are some of the specialties:

Maillard's Purple Box; 6 large size chocolate covered marshmallow eggs; price **45¢**

Bunte's Nut and Fruit Egg; packed in a pretty package; ½-pound size; price **40¢**; one-pound size, price **75¢**

White Rabbit Box filled with assorted rabbits and candy; price **50¢**

Adonis Nut and Fruit Eggs; attractive package; price **50¢**

Adonis Hollow Chocolate Eggs filled with candy; attractive package; price **1.00**

Adonis Milk Chocolate Eggs in fancy crate box; price **15¢**

Adonis Hollow Chocolate Hen in fancy box; price **50¢**

Adonis Hollow Milk Chocolate Roosters; prices **50¢** and **1.60**



Elmer's Candy-Filled Hollow Chocolate Eggs; packed in wooden boxes; price **2.00**

Elmer's Candy-Filled Hollow Chocolate Eggs; large size; price **4.00**

Elmer's Fancy Package of Foil-Wrapped Eggs; box of 10; price **60¢**

Elmer's Fancy Package of Foil-Wrapped Eggs; 20 in a box; price **1.00**

Elmer's Large Bon-bon Filled Hollow Chocolate Eggs; packed in a purple basket; prices, according to size, **1.75**, **2.50** and **5.00**

Elmer's Gold Egg in gold box; a very attractive Easter package; prices, according to size, are **2.50**, **3.50** and **6.50**

Yorkman Nest Rabbit with foil-wrapped eggs; attractive package; price **1.00**

*D. H. Holmes was the place to buy Elmer's and other Easter treats.
From a Times-Picayune ad, April 7, 1925*

Throughout *Elmer's* long history, numerous goodies have been produced. There were Coconut Haystacks and Chee-Wees (said to be the first crunchy cheese curls produced in America) and Fruit Bublelets (in "4 Luscious Flavors"). These colorfully striped giant gumball-sized beach balls melted away in your mouth. A tin of these went fast. These three items were discontinued, but Chee-Wees are currently available from *Elmer's Fine Foods*. Run by the Elmer family, the company bought back the Chee-Wees name from the Nelsons in 1993.



Heavenly Hash Egg

Trouble was, to remain a viable company in the 80s and beyond, *Elmer's Candy Corporation* needed to specialize in fewer niche items and do that best. That niche has been seasonal chocolates (including Christmas, Mother's Day and Valentines), and the company is now the second largest heart box manufacturer in the country behind Russell Stover. Of course, Easter is always hoppin'. And there's those conversation Valentine hearts with the short quirky messages. Elmer's custom prints theirs. Gucci ordered thousands of pounds of these custom-made conversation hearts from Elmer's for a fashion show in Milan, Italy. The models paraded above these Valentine messages, visible beneath a Plexiglass catwalk.



Sugar eggs with tableaux inside

New Orleanians eat quite a bit of Easter candy. Consumption is affected more directly by the calendar than by the economy. Easter candy selling stretches from Feb. 15 to Easter Sunday, and sales levels increase when there are more weeks in that period. An article in the *Times-Picayune*, dated April 17, 1919, predicted the city would consume 80,000 pounds. "Life-size hens, baby chickens and rabbits made of sugar, chocolate and nougat" fetched \$3.50 to \$10 even then. "An Easter rabbit driving a Liberty motor airplane, all of nougat, brought \$25 after it had been in a show window but a few days." The National Confectioners Association reports that the U.S. candy business represents a \$35 billion industry, directly employing 55,000 Americans and supporting hundreds of thousands of other jobs. The

Crescent City has always eaten its share.



Easter in City Park, circa 1915

The *Daily Picayune* on April 16, 1854 offered this explanation of Easter: "The venerable Bede says that 'Easter month had its name from a goddess named *Eostre*, to whom the Saxons used to celebrate festivals.' She was the goddess of the East, whence came the storms, and whence rose the sun. Hence Easter was taken to mean 'to rise,' and so typified the rising of the Saviour from the grave on that day." In Greek and Latin, the Christian celebration was, and still is, called *Pascha*, a word derived from Aramaic originally denoting the Jewish festival known in English as Passover. The French call it *Pasque*, the Spanish *Pascua*.

"The Easter rabbit," reported a 1920 article in the *Picayune*, "is a revival of paganism, for among the Greeks the rabbit was a symbol of fertility, and thus became connected with spring and returning green."

"The Easter egg," explained a 1900 article in the *Picayune*, "is used so extensively at this season because it is symbolical of the springing forth to life of the springtime and the breaking out from the shell of winter of flowers and trees."

For Christians, it is the moveable feast celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the culmination of His Passion, preceded by Lent, a forty-day period of prayer, fasting and penance.



The Holy Women at the Tomb by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, 1893

In 1914, throngs of young children made their way to Charles A. Kaufman Company, Ltd, on Dryades Street (that's Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard today). On hand was "King Bunny" in his "royal throne room," which could be likened to nothing else but "a gigantic egg from which the front had been broken to show the pink-tinted interior where King Bunny sat and dispensed" some truly wonderful "Easter gifts to the boy and girl patrons of Kaufman's store." With Easter lilies on each side off the enormous egg's entrance, the regal rabbit gave away "the loveliest French and German imported toys, papier mache rabbits and chickens, and cunning little baskets with their tiny nests."

KING BUNNY

Sets Up His Throne in a Children's
Paradise,

And Distributes Easter Gifts to
Little Subjects for an Hour
Each Morning.

Times-Picayune, March 29, 1914

During my childhood in the 1950s, there was always a trip to D. H. Holmes or Maison Blanche Department Stores to visit the Easter Bunny. Easter in New Orleans has always been a time of joy, and what enormous joy *Elmer's* and other New Orleans candy makers have dispensed each Easter to young and old alike in the Crescent City.

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"Basketsful of Easter Joy"
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