

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Chinaballs



Local bloggers reminisce about the flora and fauna of bygone New Orleans neighborhoods, especially the flora:

“When I was a kid, we all had china ball trees in our yard. We had some great china ball fights. I can't tell you the last time I saw a china ball tree.”

I know my Dad used to tell me tales of all the china ball battles he had as a kid. The ammunition for these childhood skirmishes came from Chinaberry trees, also called Chinaballs (and Chineyballs, particularly among New Orleans natives). The trees can still be found in some older neighborhoods, but they're not as prolific as they were years ago. They're considered somewhat of a nuisance. But, in their day, they made history.

Ernest Hansen's Sno-Bliz was envisioned one very hot summer day in New Orleans during the Great Depression. Ernest and his son saw a sno-ball vendor pushing his cart past them, and they were feeling the heat and desirous of a cool treat. But Ernest disapproved of the old method of shaving the ice by hand from a large block of ice. “A real lack of cleanliness,” he thought. Being a master machinist, he conceived and built a device that would hold and shave ice safely and cleanly. His mechanized creation (earning U.S. Patent 2525923) made

Crescent City cool-inary history.

Ernest's wife Mary, a great Italian cook, created her own line of delicious syrups. In 1939 Hansen's Sno-Bliz made history by serving its very first sno-balls under a Chinaball tree on the sidewalk outside of Mary's mother's house on St. Ann Street. Back in those days, a sno-ball was only two cents and was served in a little cardboard tray. After a short time on Valmont Street, Hansen's moved to the current location on Tchoupitoulas Street in 1944. But it all got started under a Chinaball tree.

New Orleans lost its beloved baseball manager, Abner Powell, in the summer of 1953. He collapsed and died after chopping down and cutting up a Chinaberry tree in his New Orleans backyard. He was 92 years of age.

The Chinaberry tree (formal name *Melia azedarach*) is a species of deciduous tree in the mahogany family, *Meliaceae*, native originally to northern India, the Himalayas, China, Indochina, Southeast Asia and Australia. The Chinaberry tree is also known as the Persian Lilac, Texas Umbrella, Bead Tree, Umbrella Tree, Ceylon Cedar and Pride of India (to name just a few). First introduced around 1830 as an ornamental and shade tree in the United States, it was widely planted in the warm southern states. This fast-growing medium-sized tree can reach a height of 40-50 feet and is drought tolerant. This beautiful tree turns yellow in the fall and has yellow berries in the winter.

The Chinaberry tree's bark is dark chocolate and becomes increasingly cracked with age. Its wood is soft and white. The leaves are glossy dark green with a light green central vein above and the pale green central vein below. They turn golden yellow in fall. The flowers are fragrant and have five pinkish lavender to whitish petals. They bloom from March to May.

This short-lived tree, however, has a bad a reputation for messiness. Its usefulness as a shade tree in the United States is hampered by its ability to sprout where unwanted and to turn sidewalks into dangerously slippery surfaces when the fruits fall. The fruits (the Chinaballs) are toxic to human beings and small animals (but not to birds, who gorge themselves on the Chinaberries, eventually reaching a state of drunkenness). The abundant seeds are spread by birds, which ingest the berries and spread the seeds in their droppings.

The main use of the Chinaberry is its timber. This is of medium density, and ranges in color from light brown to dark red. In Europe, the wood is used for flooring. The Chinaberry tree's extracts are also useful for natural pesticides. And it used for medicinal purposes since it has anti-viral and possibly anti-cancer properties.

But in this country, the National Park Service lists the Chinaberry among invasive species. It has a tendency to grow rapidly and crowd out native species, and its leaves and roots produce chemicals, which impede the growth and germination of nearby vegetation. And no one would like to see the tree's poisonous projectiles ending up in a child's mouth.

Not growing quite so rapidly is the community known as China, in Jefferson County, Texas. Part of the Beaumont-Port Arthur Metro Area, the small town (population of only 1,160 at the 2010 census) is supported by agriculture (rice primarily) and by the nearby oil and natural gas fields. Back in 1901, the enormous Lucas gusher exploded forth from a drilling site at Spindletop Hill, in Jefferson County, near Beaumont. More powerful than any previous find, the booming Texas oil industry soon grew up around the oil field at Spindletop, and many of the major oil companies in America, including Gulf Oil, Texaco and Exxon, can trace their origins there.

China, Texas, began decades earlier, and at a much slower pace. The town was first known as "China Grove", for a water stop on the *Texas and New Orleans Railroad* route. In the 1860s a town grew up around the water stop, situated amidst a grove of Chinaberry trees (hence the name). Another small community named Nashland popped up a few miles away. A post office with the name "China" was established in 1893. After fire destroyed the "China Grove" depot in 1906, the railroad rebuilt a depot in the larger Nashland area, but retained the established name "China". The Nashland post office changed its name to "China" soon after that. It wasn't until 1971 that the (now-merged) community voted to incorporate as the city of China, Texas.

The Chinaberry trees that gave the town its name are actually rare in the area today. In fact, two Chinaberry trees that were transplanted to the front lawn of the city's civic complex in the mid 1990s are some of the only examples still remaining. And yet, several local residents have begun to cultivate new and transplanted Chinaberry trees. But this "China Grove" is not the name of the Texas town that lives on in song.

"China Grove" is a 1973 song by The Doobie Brothers, written by original lead singer Tom Johnston before being replaced by Michael McDonald. The song is based on another real Texas town (in Bexar County) with the same name. The connection is apparent given its real-life proximity to San Antonio, which is referenced in the lyrics:

"When the sun comes up
on a sleepy little town
down around San Antone"

However, the rest of the song is mostly fictitious, portraying “China Grove” as Texas’ version of Chinatown.

Then there’s the “China Grove” mentioned in Eudora Welty’s short story *Why I Live at the P.O.* That fictional town is said to be located in Mississippi.

Meanwhile, back in China, Texas, the China Elementary School has for years hosted an annual Chinaberry Festival, to celebrate the city’s people and history. It featured a parade, musicians, and *beaucoup* booths manned by local vendors and church groups. But Hurricane Rita (2005) put an end to that. Now the City of China has tried somewhat unsuccessfully to get the festival going again. But in 2011, the festival had only six booths and barely a hundred attendees.

They should keep trying. After all, Hansen’s started with only one booth (consisting of nothing more than a table and a stand) under a Chinaball tree on St. Ann Street. And it’s a good thing none of the toxic berries fell into the sno-balls.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“China Balls”
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2011