

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

La Belle Creole

"La Belle Creole" would be an apt sobriquet for one of those "Creole babies with flashing eyes" (or perhaps some other "Pretty Baby" in the Big Easy), but it was instead the name of a popular item produced in the city over a century ago.

Simon Hershheim, born in New Orleans March 4, 1839, to Joseph Hershheim and Ricka Katzenstein, entered a lucrative business in 1857. He began supplying the tobacco leaf for the European market, but soon the Civil War began and he enlisted in the Confederate Army.

There were numerous cigar factories in the French Quarter, and after Reconstruction New Orleans was the nation's cigar capital. During this golden period (1880s to 1930s), 80% of the nation's male population smoked a cigar. But no competitor had the output of S. Hershheim Brothers & Co. In 1882, the cigar tycoon and his brothers erected the immense five-story La Belle Creole Cigar & Tobacco Factory on the corner of Magazine and Julia Streets in what is today the city's Arts District. The factory employed over a thousand workers, and women outnumbered the men by two to one. The Hershheim factory was the largest in the country at that time, and in 1892 they rolled 40 million cigars. Cuban tobacco came into the Port of New Orleans, and exports went out to Europe, Mexico and Central America. The most popular brands, "La Belle Creole", "Jackson Square" and "El Belmont" gained international renown for their quality. The Hershheims also produced perique cigarettes with tobacco grown in only one area of St. James Parish.

The year after constructing his huge factory, the cigar king needed a suitable dwelling place. He sought the architectural services of the young Thomas Sully, who grew up in New Orleans and trained in New York and Austin before returning to the city in 1880. His great-uncle and namesake was the famed American painter, best known for his portraits of Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe and Queen Victoria. In New Orleans the younger Sully is known as the king of Uptown architecture, having designed more homes on St. Charles Avenue than any other.

In 1883, Sully designed for Simon Hershheim an elegant Italianate chateau at 3811 St. Charles. This Beaux-Arts mansion had a tower (lost in the 1915 hurricane) and arcades. Renovations after the storm created a totally different look for this imposing building. Stately columns in the Colonial Revival Style were added to give the structure its present look and name, the Columns Hotel. It was purchased in 1917 and run as an exclusive boarding house by the Feld family until 1953, when it was sold and finally converted into a hotel. The present owners, Jacques and Claire Creppel, have owned The Columns since 1980.

1895 was not the best of times for Simon Hershheim. Both his wife, Ida, and his sister, Henrietta, died that year. In early January, 1898, a New York Times article reported that this "wealthy man", Simon Hershheim, committed suicide "by taking cyanide of potassium". "Grief resulting from the death of his wife and other family troubles" were listed as the cause.

The Columns Hotel is today a wonderful place to enjoy a cocktail with friends and enjoy the beauty of the avenue. In 1978, it was transformed into Madame Nell's 1917 Storyville bordello for the movie "Pretty Baby". French Director Louis Malle cast Brooke Shields as a

twelve-year-old New Orleans prostitute named Violet who becomes the romantic obsession of Keith Carradine. Susan Sarandon also stars in this drama based on the life of photographer Ernest J. Bellocq. His poignant photographs capture a unique vision of the women of New Orleans' legalized red-light district.

The song "Pretty Baby" was created by a talented sporting house piano professor named Tony Jackson in a Bienville Street Saloon. One of his contemporaries, Jelly Roll Morton, was not known for complimenting others. But he called Jackson "one of the greatest manipulators of the keys", who "wasn't a bit good looking", but "had a beautiful disposition". Morton said there was no tune "that Tony couldn't play by memory" and he had a "beautiful voice and such a marvelous range".

Born uptown on Amelia Street on June 5, 1876, Jackson was a sickly epileptic child. However, by age fifteen he was the king of the Storyville brothel piano players. In 1904 he played and sang for the Whitman Sisters' New Orleans Troubadours during their 1904 tour of black vaudeville. Back in town he accompanied Antonia Gonzales, who played the cornet for her customers in the nude.

Morton said Jackson wrote "Pretty Baby" around 1913-1914, but it was probably before that. It was published in 1916 with additional sheet music credits to Gus Kahn and Egbert Van Alstyne. The lyrics needed some refinement, and the song was performed by Dolly Hackett in "The Passing Show of 1916". Storyville was closed down the following year.

The tune was a terrific hit (Al Jolson did a great rendition), but it had a secret provenance. Jackson was gay and wrote the song for another young man with whom he was enamored.

Tony Jackson died April 21, 1921, from a most bizarre death. This creative musical genius had the hiccups for eight weeks, and all efforts by his doctors to relieve him were in vain.

Bellocq died in 1949 and was interred in the city's Saint Louis Cemetery. After his death, it was thought that the majority of his prints and negatives were destroyed. But his negatives of hauntingly beautiful natural nudes were found a number of years later hidden in a sofa. Thanks to photographer Lee Friedlander, the world has enjoyed these incredible images.

In 1896 (a short time before the death of Simon Hensheim), the New Orleans Public Library system began by public ordinance as the Fisk Free and Public Library on Lafayette Square. An October 1902 gift of \$50,000 from the Hensheim heirs designated toward the purchase of books enabled the Library to build a substantial collection. Andrew Carnegie followed up with an additional gift to build a main library and three branches.

The Hensheim cigar dynasty faded after Simon's passing, but other companies continued for a while. Labor costs, Castro and the Cuban Economic Embargo took their toll. Many will remember M. Trelles & Co. on South Peters, which produced "El Trelis" and "Keep Moving". Those cigar boxes certainly made great school pencil boxes.

Years have gone by since Blue Book belles danced nude to the ragtime rhythms of Tony Jackson. Had Kipling been there, perhaps he would not have written, "A woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke."

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