

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Roosevelt Returns

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."

Sometimes big changes bring New Orleans back to where it was, and that's not always a bad thing. In the case of one of the city's most historic hotels, calling it by its bygone name will be easy "to do" after its "re-do". The hotel that began as "The Grunewald", afterwards became "The Roosevelt" and later "The Fairmont", will become "The Roosevelt" once again. Even during "The Fairmont" years, locals just couldn't get used to not calling it "The Roosevelt".

This landmark hotel, as well as New Orleans' premier university, each began in the same spot. Tulane University was founded as a public college of medicine in 1834, and in 1847 (with a law department) the Medical University of Louisiana was transformed into the University of Louisiana. This collegial connection is why the street upon which the original property is located is called University Place. The school expanded into a full university, was privatized and renamed Tulane University in 1884. Thanks to the endowments of Paul Tulane and Josephine Louise Newcomb, it thrived as the only university in the U.S. to convert from a public institution to a private one.

Growing pains precipitated Tulane's move to its present campus on St. Charles Avenue and provided a German-born entrepreneur named Louis Grunewald a site for his new hotel. It opened on Baronne Street as a six-story, 200-room hotel just before Christmas in 1893. By 1908, the 14-story annex added 400 rooms to the complex on the University Place side.

"The Grunewald" was famous for what many consider to be the first nightclub in the United States, a basement room called "The Cave". It was inspired by Mammoth Cave in Kentucky and featured indoor waterfalls and fake stalactites of cement and plaster hanging from the ceiling. (One must always remember that "when the 'mites' go up, the 'tites go down".) If that wasn't enough, they stuck in a few life-size stucco nymphs. While in the cavernous supper club, one could be entertained by showgirls dancing to jazz music. Johnny De Droit was a popular cornetist whose Dixieland band played at "The Cave" dressed as elves.

Mr. Grunewald died in 1915, and his son Theodore carried on until 1923 when a local consortium (the Moss Brothers and the Vaccaro Brothers) bought the hotel and renamed it "The Roosevelt" in honor of the nation's "Rough Rider President". Mike Moss promoted a former shoe clerk and distant relative name Seymour Weiss up the food chain. He started in 1923 as the hotel's barbershop manager, was assistant hotel manager the next year and manager by 1928. By the 1930s he was principal owner and managing director. This Bunkie, Louisiana, native was great at promotion, and "the Kingfish" (Governor Huey P. Long) was provided a free and luxurious suite in the hotel that he used as his New Orleans headquarters. Weiss became a close confidant of the governor and was made a colonel for his services. He was also responsible for much of the success of "The Roosevelt" through the years (even if it entailed Huey entertaining in green silk pajamas or, years later, his brother Earl entertaining stripper Blaze Starr).

For over thirty years, under Weiss' leadership, the hotel had great features and traditions. It hosted the WWL radio station through about twenty years of broadcasts. "Dawnbusters" (with Henry Dupré, Pinky Vidacovich and others) was a popular program. Many will remember the beautiful and popular "Blue Room", which opened in 1935 and was known as the "Hawaiian Blue Room" for a time. A giant white seashell was the backdrop for great entertainment. This author saw great acts there over the years: Lou Rawls twice, the Platters and Jerry "the Iceman" Butler (to name just a few). And he, along with many New Orleanians, had photos taken there with family, neighbors or perhaps a special date. All the big name stars and touring musical acts made a stop at the "Blue Room", often accompanied by Leon Kelner and his Orchestra.

Then there was the Fountain Lounge and the Sazerac Bar (for a time off limits to the ladies). At Christmas the entire lobby corridor was fashioned into a virtual winter wonderland cocoon of white spun glass angel hair (a much more ethereal use than for aquarium filters). Spectacularly adorned with huge yuletide ornaments, lights and decorated trees on either side along the way, throngs of visitors, families and school children visited every holiday season.

Inspired by "The Roosevelt", Arthur Hailey's best selling novel "Hotel" came out in 1965 (with a movie and TV series to follow). That same year, Weiss sold out to the Fairmont hotel group, which changed the name of their New Orleans property to "The Fairmont-Roosevelt". By 1970, it officially became "The New Orleans Fairmont Hotel", where guests have enjoyed everything from dances to carnival queen suppers. "Bailey's" offered a great place to eat, especially outside of the usual dining times. And besides the Sazerac Bar, there was a Sazerac Grill that provided the finest of dining experiences.

Hurricane Katrina came along in 2005 and caused considerable damage to "The Fairmont", causing its closure. On August 24, 2007, a Natchitoches investment group announced its 17 million dollar purchase with plans to convert the hotel to one of Hilton's Waldorf-Astoria Collection chain. They would invest 100 million dollars and have the hotel ready by late spring of 2009. On June 5, 2008, there was even better news: The "Blue Room" and its live entertainment would return, as would the restored ballrooms and Sazerac Bar. Better yet, it would reopen under its previous name, "The Roosevelt".

The epigram "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*", or loosely the "more things change, the more they stay the same", also has a barbershop connection. Its creator, Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr was the editor of the famous Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*. Founded as a satirical weekly in 1826, it was named for and took its motto from the Beaumarchais comedy *Le Mariage de Figaro*, or "The Barber of Seville". The motto, "*Sans la liberté de blâmer, il n'est point d'éloge flatteur*" is a good one: "Without the freedom to criticize, there is no true praise".

Ladies have freely criticized their one-time ostracism from the Sazerac Bar and have truly praised their freedom to now be "Sazeracked" along with the men. What better place than at the new "Roosevelt Hotel"?

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