

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémar

Dingbats of New Orleans

If one were to embark on a dingbat safari in the Crescent City, where would one begin to look?

Recalling the Edith Bunker character on "All in the Family" (with her shrill, chalk-scraping response to her husband, "Aaaaaahhh-chee!"), one would attempt to search for a seemingly empty-headed person of a flighty demeanor. Archie Bunker regularly referred to Edith as a dingbat, although he wasn't the first to call someone that. The usage of the word in this manner dates back at least as early as 1905. Perhaps this definition would lead one to the halls of public officialdom. That's often an ideal location for mindless blather.

Or one could visit the offices of the "Times-Picayune" or historic "Newspaper Row" along Camp Street between Gravier and Poydras. In bygone days, there stood the offices of the "Daily Picayune", the "Times", the "Republican", "Our Home Journal" and the "German Gazette". The reason for such an investigation there is that a dingbat is a printer's typographic ornament or graphic. Dingbats can be either decorative or functional, such as bullets to signify a list or special icons used as end signs to announce the completion of an article. They are utilized as separators and as accents, and are today in digital form on every computer. One popular dingbat in the last century was the pointed finger, appearing both in newspapers and old fliers. Some etymologists believe dingbat originated as onomatopoeia in some old style print shop as the empty space around text was being filled by "dinging" the graphic design plate into place and then "batting" it tight for inking.

Dingbats are not letters, but small pictures inserted into a document. Many dingbat sets are available today as special fonts. One popular set is the "Zapf dingbats", named after its creator, Hermann Zapf. He should not be confused with Ron Zappe, the creator of Zapp's Potato Chips of Gramercy, Louisiana.

Another good place to look for dingbats would be on Bourbon Street or at the bars any of New Orleans' many fine cocktail purveyors. This is because, in 1838, dingbat was an American word for "some kind of alcoholic drink" of some "unknown origin". In fact dingbat is most probably in that class of words that are conjured up (very often while under the influence of that unknown alcoholic drink) to denote names for things that are not easily recollected. You know that thing I'm talking about: that whatchamacallit, that thingamabob, that thingamajig, that doohickey, gadget, gizmo, doodad or dingus.

Dingbat has also meant at various times "money", "a professional tramp", "a muffin", a person who is either "Chinese" or "Italian", "a woman who is neither your sister nor you're your mother" (and presumably not "a professional tramp") and "a foolish person in authority". If all of this has the reader frustrated and ready to throw something through the window, à la Al "Carnival Time" Johnson, then that would be another definition of the word dingbat. It is "an object, such as a brick or stone, used as a missile".

But perhaps the most interesting collection of dingbats was created by one of New Orleans' own sons. George Joseph Herriman was a New Orleans-born American cartoonist, best known for his comic strip "Krazy Kat". In 1910 Herriman began a comedy strip known as "The Dingbat Family" with characters that recall the era of Mutt and Jeff. The precursors of

Krazy Kat and Ignatz Mouse first appeared in a little unrelated comic strip (begun on July 26, 1910) that ran beneath "The Dingbat Family". Herriman's compositions didn't exactly fit the Hearst newspaper panel layout, so he very creatively added Krazy and Ignatz in what he called "waste space" at the bottom. It didn't matter. Publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst loved "Krazy Kat", and so did the whole country.

George was born on August 22, 1880, into a light-skinned, African-American family that operated a custom tailoring shop right off Esplanade on North Villere Street. His parents were George and Clara Morel Herriman, who moved the family to Los Angeles when George was young. But he apparently was old enough to practice drawing from live, nude models at Lulu White's Mahogany Hall, the famous Storyville bordello, paying the prostitutes for their services with charcoal sketches of themselves. He related this unusual experience in 1942 (two years before his death on April 25, 1944) at a well-attended meeting of the Pen and Pencil Club in New York.

Herriman's parents were listed as "Mulatto" in the 1880 census, but he was listed on his death certificate as "Caucasian". His nickname was "The Greek", and many probably thought he was. Many well-educated Creoles of color moved out west to escape the restrictions of the Jim Crow laws of the time, and so it was Herriman's family. Somewhat apprehensive about his identity, he seldom appeared with his hat off.

In 1897, Herriman got his first job in publishing by assisting in the engraving department of the "Los Angeles Herald". He would most certainly have learned about dingbats while working there, which was probably the inspiration for the name of his strip. Doing illustrations and ads in L. A. gave him much experience, and three years later he caught a freight train for New York. "Judge" Magazine published one of his cartoons in 1901, and that September his work appeared in the Pulitzer papers. He had several strips before working regularly for Hearst in 1910.

In 1999, "Krazy Kat" was rated by the "Comics Journal" as the #1 comic strip (or comic book) of the 20th century. Four years before that honor, the strip appeared on a commemorative U.S. postage stamp. Set in the surrealistic background of Coconino County, Arizona, it features Herriman's masterful poetry and innocent playfulness. It is a tale of a carefree cat (of indeterminate gender) in a strange love triangle with Ignatz, an antagonistic mouse, and protective police dog, Offisa Bull Pupp (who tries to moderate). Krazy's unrequited love for Ignatz only results in all manner of bricks being hurled at the feline suitor by Ignatz. Krazy takes each brick missile (or dingbat) being heaved at his head as a sign of true affection.

Herriman even inserted a bit of his down home New Orleans dialect into the strip, such as using "Offisa" for "Officer". The simple premise of his work, his detailed characterizations and visual and verbal creativity made this strip a favorite of comic aficionados, intellectuals and art critics alike. It was treated as serious art and, in 1924, was called by a noted art critic "the most amusing and satisfactory work of art produced in America today". This cerebral cartoonist influenced many others, including Charles Schulz.

Famed poet e. e. cummings, who always used lower case, was so impressed he wrote the introduction to the first collection of the strip in book form. Herriman's illustrations for Don Marquis' "archy and mehitabel" thrilled the American intellectual elite. The names "archy and mehitabel" were also in lower case because Archy the cockroach couldn't handle the shift key while jumping up and down on the author's typewriter, hence the offbeat orthography.

Would have loved to have ended this with a cockroach dingbat, but just couldn't find the right whatchamadoodle.

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