

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Gallatin Street

New Orleans has always been a city of contradictions, “a heaven right here on earth” (according to the song lyrics) or a “perfect hell on earth” (according to the diary of a noted British war correspondent).

In 1861, soon after the start of the Civil War, Sir William Howard Russell recorded this statement made to him by the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff, “a great, burly six-foot” revolver-toting man who claimed New Orleans to be a “perfect hell on earth, and that nothing could ever put an end to the murders, manslaughters and deadly assaults till it was made penal to carry arms.”

One of the areas of town that had more than its share of this activity was Gallatin Street with its numerous saloons, dance halls and brothels, a place the *Daily Picayune* described as “filled with low grogeries, and is the resort of the worst and most abandoned of both sexes. Thieves, murderers, prostitutes and drunkards congregate there.” It was so rough the police wouldn’t even venture forth. With all the nightly brawls and pistol fire, it was considered a miracle if a patron could make it out alive from this lair of nefarious criminals. Male habitués were almost surely relieved of the contents of their wallets after visiting one of Gallatin Street’s bordellos. John Chase wrote that for thirty years, “beginning in 1840, these were the bawdiest, filthiest, wickedest two blocks in any community anywhere.”

Swiss-born Albert Gallatin (1761-1849) was the longest-serving United States Secretary of the Treasury (under Jefferson and Madison), whose efforts in great part facilitated the Louisiana Purchase without a tax increase. Gallatin succeeded in funding by bond issues a \$69 million deficit caused by the military costs associated with the War of 1812, and then participated in negotiating the Treaty of Ghent that formally brought the war to an end (the Battle of New Orleans brought it to an actual close). He helped found what would later become known as the House Ways and Means Committee. As a business owner he had the first glass blowing operation west of the Alleghenies, and he helped charter the Second Bank of the United States in 1816.

A diplomat, linguist, ethnologist, politician and Congressman, he was also a founder of New York University in 1831. All of these wonderful accomplishments only to have a notorious two-block long New Orleans hellhole named for him.

No longer in existence, Gallatin Street was located where the French Market flea market operates today (near the Mint at Esplanade and the Mississippi River).

New Orleans was not alone in having areas of serious criminal activity. Herbert Asbury (who wrote *Gangs of New York* about the "Five Points Gang") also wrote about crime in the Crescent City and of Mary Jane Jackson (the scourge of Gallatin Street). He described her as "a husky, full-bodied strumpet whose mop of flaming red hair had earned her the sobriquet of Bricktop". She was never bested in a brawl (against man or woman), and during her career as prostitute in New Orleans she killed four men and stabbed many others. She clubbed one man to death in 1856 for calling her a whore and stabbed another, known as Long Charley (almost seven feet tall), with her specially designed knife with a five-inch long blade.

Finally serving a short prison term for one of her killings, "Bricktop" linked up with John Miller, former boxer and temporary jailer. Miller had lost an arm and augmented his stump with a formidable iron ball and chain, which he used as a weapon. In 1861, he made the mistake of deciding to thrash "Bricktop" with a cowhide whip. She grabbed it and delivered him a flogging instead. An attempt to strike her with his ferrous prosthetic had her seize the iron orb in mid-air and drag him around the room by his own ball and chain. She bit his hand when he pulled a knife, then used his own weapon to kill him.

"Bricktop" Jackson's combative eruptions caused her and some equally violent femmes to be barred from the Gallatin Street dance halls. Seems they were too tough even for this patch of Hell. In 1857 these sisters in crime moved in together on Dauphine Street. There was the diminutive but terrifying Ellen Collins; America Williams, stronger than most men at almost six feet tall; and Delia Swift, another redhead who went by the name of Bridget Fury. Next to "Bricktop", Bridget was probably the meanest, toughest woman in the city at that time.

Then there was a New Orleans Irish street gang based out of Gallatin Street known as the "Live Oak Boys" (named for their oaken clubs) that were hired out by local businessmen to commit vandalism, arson, assault and other crimes against competitors.

Gallatin Street denizens such as George Kent, Archie Murphy and John Swan had a penchant for stabbing and shooting people. Swan ran an oyster saloon and brothel. Murphy was a thief and a violent thug. Kent ran an infamous whorehouse known as the "Lion's Den".

Gallatin Street's unsavory tenderloin activity lasted until about 1900, and in the 1930s the houses on the street's riverside were demolished to make way for new market buildings.

Jazz great Johnny Wiggs (John Wiggington Hyman) remembered the lurid lane of lust in song with his composition entitled "Gallatin Street Grind". And long before the HBO series *Treme*, there was a show about New Orleans that tackled the subject of crime on Gallatin Street. It was the 1958-1959 CBS series *Yancy Derringer*. Starring Jock Mahoney (before playing Tarzan and after becoming Sally Field's stepfather) as the title character, Mississippi gambler, adventurer and suave lady's man residing in New Orleans immediately after the Civil War. His mute über-cool shotgun-toting Native American sidekick was Pahoo-Ka-Ta-Wah (Pahoo, for short), meaning "Wolf who stands in water" in Pawnee. Played so effectively by the German actor with the strange name, X Brands, Pahoo was actually European by descent while ironically Jock Mahoney was part Cherokee.

It was in the second episode of *Yancy Derringer* on October 9, 1958, that Yancy comes to the aid of a sea captain who (like so many other real-life victims) was cheated out of his cash in a dubious dive on Gallatin Street.

The running theme of the show is that Yancy is employed by city administrator John Colton as a secret agent of sorts to help maintain law and order in the city. Pahoo communicates with Yancy with only hand gestures, and appears ready in a flash to use the shotgun that he always carries. Most of the time however, he accesses a throwing knife sheathed in his headdress. Yancy owns a riverboat, the *Sultana* (presumably not the one that exploded in 1865 creating the greatest maritime disaster in U.S. history), and lives at his family's former plantation, *Waverly*. The good-looking gambler can usually be found at his favorite restaurant, the *Sazerac* (Miss Mandarin, proprietor) or with Madame Francine (his love interest).

Here's part of the show's theme song:

They sing of Yancy Derringer
On every danger trail,
On riverboat, in manor house
And now and then in jail.

They say that Yancy Derringer
Had ruffles at his wrists,
Brocade and silver buckles
And iron in his fists.

Perhaps this New Orleans themed "Western" prompted Mattel to come out with its trick belt buckle in 1959 marked on the front "Remington Derringer 1867". A miniature, working single shot cap gun mounted within a buckle appears to be merely an intricately carved belt embellishment. Though it has a safety, when the safety is off, the wearer can flex his stomach muscles and the Derringer swivels outward and fires. Pull the front loop bracket forward to release the pistol from its mooring for individual use. Yancy kept his Derringer hidden in his wide brimmed white hat.

This toy weapon wasn't as horrifying as John Miller's ball and chain appendage, but it was clever. Did you have one as a child? I did.

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