

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Gone Pecan**

According to the *Double-Tongued Dictionary* which specializes in an ever expanding lexicon of slang words and phrases in the English language, "gone pecan" is: "a person who is doomed, defeated, or beyond rescue; a goner." Could be a doomed object, as well, like the last praline up for grabs. The information in this dictionary is compiled, written and edited by lexicographer Grant Barrett, who is also co-host of the nationally aired public radio program *A Way With Words*. He is also editor of McGraw-Hill's *Official Dictionary of Unofficial English*.

Since "gone" and "pecan" are made to rhyme in this expression, Barrett added an editorial note on the pronunciation: "*pecan* is pronounced to rhyme with *gone*, so it's something like 'puh-KAHN' rather than 'PEE-kann.' This expression is particularly common in Louisiana." So much so that acclaimed Louisiana blues guitarist Sonny Landreth (born in Canton, Mississippi, but resides in Breaux Bridge) has recorded a song entitled "Gone Pecan".

I mention this because a national survey conducted in 2003 revealed that the "PEE-kann" pronunciation was the overwhelming choice among Americans over "puh-KAHN" or "pa-KAWN". People in New Orleans and Louisiana (myself included) continue to buck the national trend and go with the latter two utterances.

The word "pecan" is in fact Native American (Algonquian) in origin and was used to describe nuts that required a stone to crack. In the hickory family, its botanical name is *Carya Illinoensis* and is native to south-central North America, especially Louisiana, Texas and parts of Mexico. Growing naturally along the river bottoms, old, wild trees can grow to over 130 feet in height and as much as 3 feet in diameter. Native Americans and wildlife enjoyed pecans centuries before the first European settlers arrived in North America. A great source of protein and unsaturated fats, the nutritious pecan provides two to five times more calories per unit weight than wild game (without any involved

preparation). The first Europeans to come into contact with pecans were Spanish explorers in the 16th century.

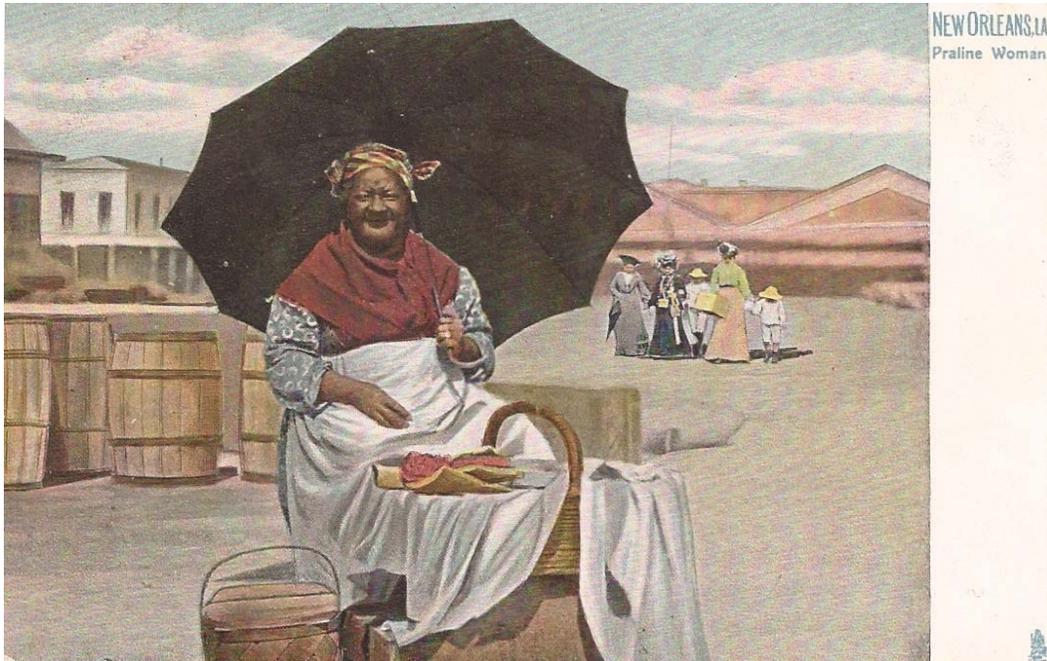
On September 24, 1699, André Joseph Pénicaut signed a deed of indenture as a ship's carpenter and went on Iberville's second voyage to Louisiana aboard *Le Marin* and established himself in Mobile. In those early years, times were a bit rough for the fledgling Louisiana colony. Due to food shortages caused by overdue supply ships from France, Iberville's brother Bienville released many of his men into the woods to live among the Indians until relief arrived. Pénicaut journeyed upriver to stay with the Natchez tribe where he was introduced to a nut that he wrote was "scarcely bigger than one's thumb" and (according to the spelling of this early chronicler) the Indians pronounced this delectable nut "pa-KAWN."

Early French settlers in the New Orleans area planted pecan orchards to answer the strong demand for this flavorful nut. Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson planted these "Illinois nuts" on their respective plantations, but the real credit for the development of a superior, hybrid pecan goes to an African American slave gardener named Antoine. In 1846 at Oak Alley Plantation, just upriver from New Orleans, Antoine successfully grafted a pecan of superior wild stock to a cultivated seedling pecan plant. After this success, Antoine's clones became the gold standard in the widespread commercialization of pecan production. His hybrid became known as the "Centenniel" after it won first prize for the "Best Pecan Exhibited" at the Philadelphia Centenniel Exposition in 1876.

In addition to Pénicaut's comments about the pecan, others were singing its praises from the very beginning. Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz, who arrived in Louisiana colony the very year New Orleans was founded, lauded the pecan and its use in "the *praline*", which he described as "one of the delicacies of New Orleans". Le Page du Pratz's *Histoire de la Louisiane* was published in three volumes in Paris in 1758. The first praline recipe had originated in France the century before and originally consisted of whole almonds covered in caramelized sugar. French settlers brought the recipe to New Orleans and replaced the single almond for a cluster of pecans, transforming it into a Creole delicacy.

Pecan trees were easily accessible, as was the sugar cane. House servants made extra money by selling this confection in the markets and on the streets of the French Quarter. Today it's a popular treat, among both tourists and locals. But just as the pronunciation of the word "pecan" is reinterpreted by people from other parts of the country, "pray-leens" is heard instead of "prah-leens" (as it's said in New Orleans). "Cray-fish" instead of "crawl-fish" is another example.

In case you were unaware, the pecan, like the fruit of all the other members of the hickory genus, is not truly a nut at all, but is technically a drupe, which is a fruit with a single stone or pit, surrounded by a husk. Some plants that produce drupes include coffee, olive, pistachio, almond, apricot, cherry, plum and peach, to name just a few.



*Old postcard view of a "Praline Woman" in New Orleans, from the collection of Ned Hémard*

Pecan trees may live and bear edible nuts for more than 300 years, but are "alternate-bearing" trees, which means good crops tend to be followed by smaller crops. Generally speaking, odd years are better for pecans. In addition to pralines, they are regularly used in cookies, pies, candies and other desserts.

Today, there are more than 1,000 varieties of pecans with more than 300 million pounds produced annually in the United States. According to the LSU AgCenter, on average, pecan production adds about \$12 million to the Louisiana economy each year.

Pecans are the only major tree-nut native to the United States, which produces about eighty percent of the world's crop. Georgia is usually the biggest pecan producing state, followed by other states such as Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arizona and Texas. In addition to the heart-healthy pecan nut (antioxidant-rich and cholesterol-lowering), the tree's wood is also used in furniture production and flooring.

A surprise customer for the crop has recently been driving up the price: the Chinese. In 2011, pecan prices more than doubled because of increased demand from Asian markets, China in particular. Five years ago the Asian market "bought just two or three million pounds," said LSU AgCenter pecan researcher Charles Graham. "In 2010, they bought more than 80 million pounds."

Found along fences, fields, back yards and river bottoms in Louisiana, pecans are also popular in Texas. The pecan became the official state tree of Texas in 1919, unquestionably because former governor James "Big Jim" Hogg liked the pecan so much that he requested that one be planted at his gravesite.

But only after he was a "gone pecan".

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