

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### Historical Tidbits

The late *New York Times* columnist, presidential speechwriter and lover of etymology, William Safire, once offered an explanation for the choice between the words "historic" and "historical":

"Any past event is historical, but only the most memorable ones are historic."

With that in mind, I offer some "historical" tidbits and hope that some of them will someday become sufficiently memorable to be termed "historic".

John Lennon's mother, Julia Stanley Lennon, encouraged her son John musically by playing for him Elvis Presley records and teaching him to play the banjo. The first song John Lennon learned to play was Antoine "Fats" Domino's New Orleans classic, "Ain't It A Shame," aka "Ain't That A Shame".

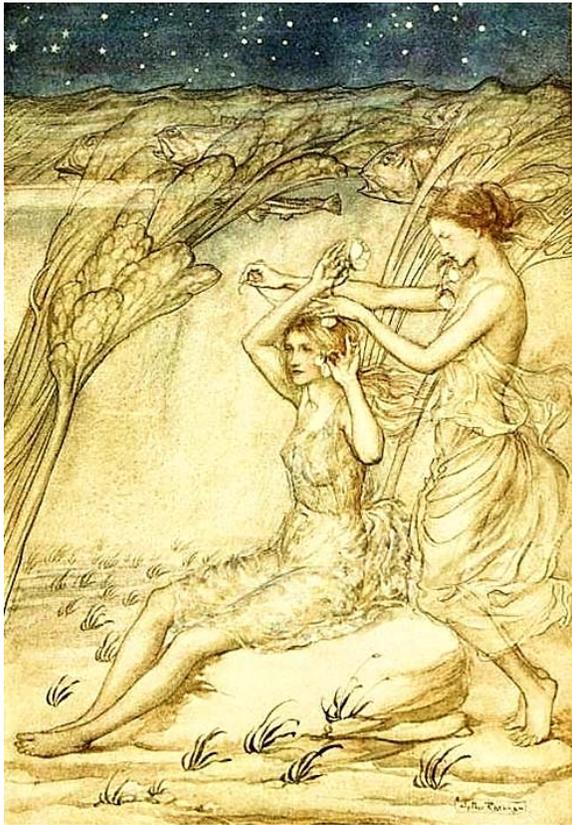


Pines Village, a New Orleans East neighborhood off Downman Road, has a name in no way connected with evergreen trees. It was named

for the developer and president of the Pines Construction Company, Sigmund Pines. An ad in the August 27, 1950, issue of the *Times-Picayune-New Orleans States* announced a two-bedroom home available there with a "complete General Electric kitchen" for "\$8990".

What does the oldest Carnival krewe in New Orleans and the 1954 film *Sabrina* have in common?

Their titles each come from a play written by John Milton entitled *Comus, A Masque*, presented at Ludlow Castle in 1634 (a masque in honor of chastity, by the way). In the play, "The Lady" becomes separated from her two brothers and "Comus" urges her to "be not coy" and drink from his magical cup (symbolic of intemperance and sexual pleasure). But right reason wins out, and she does not yield to these baser impulses. With a song, "The Attendant Spirit" conjures up the gentle nymph "Sabrina," a "virgin pure" made "Goddess of the river", who frees "The Lady" because of her steadfast virtue:



*Sabrina Fair*, 1921 illustration by Arthur Rackham

"Sabrina fair  
Listen where thou art sitting  
Under the glassie, cool, translucent wave,  
In twisted braids of Lillies knitting  
The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair,  
Listen for dear honour's sake,  
Goddess of the silver lake,

Listen and save."

*Sabrina Fair* (subtitled *A Woman of the World*) was the original title of the play from which the 1954 movie (with Audrey Heburn, Humphrey Bogart and William Holden) and its subsequent 1995 remake (with Julia Ormond, Harrison Ford and Greg Kinnear) were taken.



*1954 Stars of Sabrina*

The St. Charles Avenue streetcar line, originally the New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad, beginning in 1835, is the oldest continuously operating street railway system in the world.

Renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright (June 8, 1867 – April 9, 1959) never designed a house in Louisiana. The "Wrightian" residence at 7929 Freret Street in New Orleans was designed in 1917 for Salvadore D'Antoni by New Orleans architect Edward F. Sporn (1881 – 1956). The nearest house bearing Wright's signature was the Fuller House in Pass Christian, Mississippi, located at 317 Sandy Hook Drive, designed in 1951. Knowing that tidal waves could pose a problem in that area, Wright poured concrete and steel columns to anchor the structure. Despite these preventive measures, the house was completely swept away in 1969 by Hurricane Camille's 24 feet storm surge, along with the famed architect's original presentation drawing, which was mounted on the wall.

The Fuller house was considered part of Wright's Usonian phase: smaller, more affordable homes for the middle class or upper middle class that utilized well-thought-out design features such as passive heating and natural ventilation, as well as less expensive building materials like concrete. While creating a natural flow between the interior and the exterior, Wright hoped to come up with plans that he believed were superior to the conventional boxy houses that he deemed lacking in beauty or functionality for modern families. Wright designed about sixty of these types of homes, beginning in 1936 with the Jacobs House in Madison, Wisconsin.



*Fuller residence, Pass Christian, before Hurricane Camille, photograph by Philip Roach, Jr.*

New Orleans musical legend and self-coronated "Emperor of the Universe" Ernie K-Doe is buried in St. Louis No. 2 Cemetery, in a tomb that is almost two centuries old. How this came to be the final resting place of the man who brought us "Mother-In-Law" and "'Taint it The Truth" is a fascinating tale.

Anna Ross Twichell, an active and devoted member of the Friends of New Orleans Cemeteries, owned the Duval tomb in St. Louis No. 2 that her husband's family gave the couple for their wedding present. When Anna Ross and her husband decided to separate, the tomb went to their only child Heather rather than having it listed as part of their community property. But wait ... it gets stranger.

Back in 2001, Anna Ross visited the Mother-In-law Lounge to extend condolences to Ernie's widow, Antoinette, and offer her (with musician daughter Heather's happy consent) space in the Duval tomb for Ernie's burial. He could have been buried in his family's tomb in Erwinville, Louisiana, but Antoinette said Ernie's wishes were to be buried in New Orleans. Trouble was, no one seemed to know where to locate the deed to the cemetery property.

What's more, in an attempt to free things up legally, Heather's father would not be able to sign necessary transfer papers later that day because he and Anna Ross were scheduled to appear in court for their divorce proceedings that very afternoon. As luck would have it, the deed to the tomb was found the very morning of Ernie's funeral, in (of all places) Anna Ross Twichell's lingerie drawer. When Ernie K-Doe's actual "Mother-In-Law," Antoinette's mother (of whom Ernie K-Doe was especially fond) died six months later, Heather offered her a spot in the tomb, too, next to Ernie.

I had the good fortune to view Antoinette K-Doe riding in the 2009 Krewe of Muses parade alongside the famous Ernie K-Doe mannequin. Sadly, just days later on the morning of February 24, 2009, Mardi Gras Day, Antoinette died at the Mother-In-Law Lounge of a heart attack.



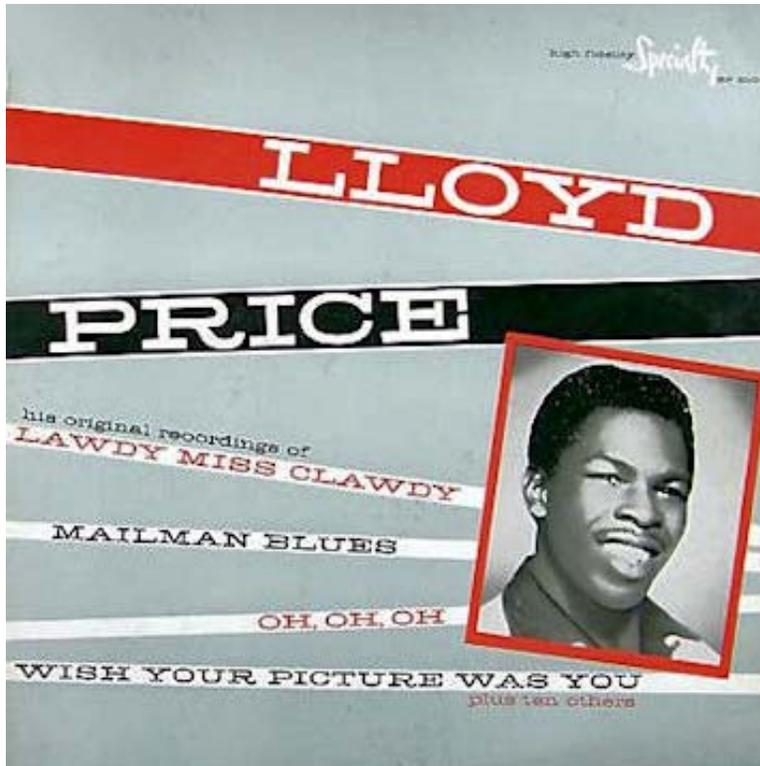
*Antoinette and Ernie: Now they're "gone and we feel so bad"*

At Antoinette's funeral procession, that same mannequin of Ernie was seated in the front seat of the mule-drawn carriage that followed her hearse. Only in New Orleans could Ernie K-Doe attend his own widow's funeral.

Chris Rose wrote that the Ernie K-Doe mannequin was "so lifelike as to once be equipped with a 10-watt transmitter so anyone within sight of it could tune into the lowest reaches of an AM radio and hear the self-proclaimed Emperor of the Universe talking on endless loop: "Sure I'm cocky! But I'm good!" You know it's the truth.

Does the date 11 Frimaire XIII, mean anything to you? According to the French Republican calendar, that's December 2, 1804, and it was

then at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris that another famous Emperor crowned himself. Pope Pius VII was officiating, but when the Pope said, "Receive the imperial crown...", Napoléon unexpectedly turned and, preempting the Pope, removed his laurel wreath and crowned himself and then crowned the kneeling Joséphine. Both K-Doe and Bonaparte are well remembered in New Orleans.



Also well remembered is the hit song "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," the first million selling song recorded by a teenager. It was recorded at the late Cosimo Matassa's J&M Studios in New Orleans by Lloyd Price in 1952, backed by Fats Domino's rolling trills on piano and Earl Palmer's distinctive shuffle beats on drums. The song was later recorded by over 150 different musicians, among them Paul McCartney, Elvis and Little Richard.

In 1951, the year before "Lawdy Miss Clawdy", Dutch-born chef Paul Blangé created the famous New Orleans dessert Bananas Foster. It was originally called Bananas à la Foster. A native of The Hague, Blangé was the executive chef of Brennan's Restaurant for 31 years. He was so devoted to his craft and to the restaurant that, when he died in 1977, knife and fork were placed in each hand crossed over a Brennan's menu resting upon his chest as he lay in the coffin.

Hope you savored these few historical morsels. The word "tidbit", first used around 1640, indicates any wee bit of interesting information (or small bit of delectable food). "Tid" (derived from "tit") indicates anything small, a somewhat shortened form of *petite*. Often these small bits loom large upon the vast canvas that is New Orleans history.

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"Historical Tidbits"  
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