

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Lagniappe and Lincoln

When my sister and I were kids, we had a moneymaking enterprise that kicked into action every summer we went on a family vacation. Various tourist destinations, motels and restaurants offered free matchbooks and postcards atop their counters as an effective means of advertisement. But for two young entrepreneurs, these *lagniappe* items were something we could sell.

Each evening after traveling, we would put on some form of entertainment – usually a puppet show and a magic act (with an admission charge for Mom and Dad, of course). While I was performing a bit of lame legerdemain, my sister took on the role of match girl. Selling the free postcards and matches to our parents earned us even more spending money for our trip – and our profit margin was excellent!

If one is from New Orleans, he or she knows from an early age the meaning of *lagniappe*. Lafcadio Hearn wrote on the subject, providing a delightful definition of “that something extra”:

“Lagniappe c’est bitin qui bon. (Lagniappe c’est du bon butin.)
‘Lagniappe is lawful booty.’”

That might need a little more clarification in today’s jargon. I don’t want to impose any sort of legality to late night *lagniappe* calls.

Hearn went on to explain, “*Lagniappe* is a word familiar to every child in New Orleans, signifies the little present given to purchasers of groceries, provisions, fruit, or other goods sold at retail stores.” He said that when shopkeepers offered these extras, “the attractive qualities of their *lagniappe*” had the “chief purpose” of attracting children. “The little one sent for a pound of butter, or ‘a dime’s worth’ of sugar, never fails to ask for its *lagniappe*.”

Lagniappe is a little bit like “a baker’s dozen”, but not quite the same. Bakers in the old days may have thrown in an extra doughnut or *petit*

four. But it was usually one more of the same commodity. *Lagniappe* could be *any* little something extra, a small bonus of *any* kind.

This small gift given to a customer by a merchant at the time of purchase entered the English language from Louisiana French, which was a term actually derived from the American Spanish phrase *la ñapa* (meaning "something that is added"). The Spanish term comes from the Andean Indian dialect (*Quechua*) word *yapay* (meaning "to increase or to add"). Although this is an old custom, it is still practiced today in New Orleans, Louisiana and other parts of the Gulf Coast (but not as much as in days gone by). Vegetable vendors and other street sellers back then were expected to throw in a little extra. But the expression has survived and has travelled much farther.

For example, there is a Lagniappe Brasserie many states away in New Berlin, Wisconsin, which offers "A Little Something Extra". Marquette, Michigan, has a Lagniappe Cajun Creole Eatery and Voodoo Bar offering one an invitation to "Taste Louisiana and feel the Zydeco". It's all about "the passion of Chef and the Lagniappe Krewe". Here's what the "Krewe" in Michigan has to say:

"When you want a little something extra, come get a little more than you expected! Come get Lagniapped! Laissez Les Bon Temps Rouler!"

Even the Big Apple understands *lagniappe*. The New York Times published an article on May 7, 1987, entitled "A Lesson in Lagniappe". The piece offered statistics that, with all the "tumult about cigarettes", match sales were way down. What could merchants give away instead?

Ten years before, "the makers of resale matches, the kind given away with cigarettes, sold about 10 million cases (2,500 matchbooks each) a year." In 1987 the total was down to only 3 million. The invention of the disposable lighter and a decline in smokers was taking its toll.

The article mentioned that these retailers were looking "for other forms of lagniappe, souvenirs or trinkets sometimes given with purchases. Many banks used to give away matches; now they offer ball pens and little refrigerator door magnets."

The same article mentioned a humorous question raised in a New York Times Letter to the Editor by a distinguished Brit named F. Ashe Lincoln:

"On a recent visit to the United States, I found an almost fanatical campaign against smoking. Yet in every restaurant and hotel we were presented with matchbooks. What, I ask, are they trying to encourage? Arson?"

The gentleman from London who posed that very question had earlier been an example of *lagniappe* at one of our family gatherings. It was Christmas day and Captain F. Ashe Lincoln, QC, RNVR, was visiting New Orleans from across the ocean, and my uncle in England suggested we entertain him when he came to town. He became a most interesting and entertaining Yule dinner guest, having been awarded the King's medal for bravery during World War II. Our notable "extra added" guest was also Master of the Bench of the Inner Temple, a recorder and deputy judge of the Crown Court and deputy world president of the international Association of Jurists and Jurors. And what's more, our Christmas *lagniappe* guest was Jewish.



Captain F Ashe Lincoln
QC, RNVR

Fredman Ashe Lincoln (October 30, 1907 – October 19, 1998) joined the Royal Navy in 1939 and played a great part in the detection of mines and torpedoes, and helped in the recovery of one of the first magnetic mines. He was heralded for bravely neutralizing four torpedoes in the only German submarine to be captured and brought to Britain during the Second World War. U-570 surrendered after being depth-charged and machine-gunned by an RAF Hudson south of Iceland in 1941, and was taken to Vickers' shipyard at Barrow-in-Furness.

But the dockyard workers refused to take their blowtorches anywhere near the sub. The four 500 pound torpedoes, packed with TNT, could not be easily extracted because the tubes enclosing them were badly buckled. Lincoln had never dismantled a torpedo before, but he convinced one of the younger welders in the yard to show him how to cut the outer steel plates. In the pouring rain, three men (Ashe, the welder and Martin Johnson) worked carefully, all too aware that the sparks could set off the torpedoes. Finally, because the detonators were set into their primers to produce the biggest explosion, they had to use a screwdriver to force them apart. They gallantly succeeded.

Ashe Lincoln then volunteered for the Commandos and took part in the allied landing in Salerno. Later in the war, he was one of the first British officers to cross the bridge across the Rhine at Remagen, the only bridge left standing after the Germans had blown up the others.

After the war, Ashe aspired to become a Tory MP, but came up against some crude anti-Semitism and withdrew as a prospective candidate.

In 1948, Lincoln devoted his tireless energy to the service of Israel and advised David Ben-Gurion (Israel's founding father and first Prime Minister) on the need for a navy, which (apart from a great advantage in military operations) was instrumental in the protecting the many immigrant ships on their way to Palestine.

Captain Lincoln's books "Secret Naval Investigator" and "Odyssey of Jewish Sailor" were widely read, and he kindly gave our family a copy of "Secret Naval Investigator". We really enjoyed his company that Christmas decades ago. Who could've imagined, with all his honors and accomplishments, that he would later be featured in a New York Times article on "Lagniappe"?

Most people in New Orleans today are up in arms over "getting something less" rather than "getting that little bit extra". The Times-Picayune has announced it will only print the paper three days a week. Ironically, after taking away four days of features and articles, the paper has announced it will continue to include the *Lagniappe* entertainment section each Friday.

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