

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémar*

### **Mormon Memories**

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the fourth largest Christian denomination in the United States was among the first to arrive with assistance through its efficient distribution network. Food and supplies were on the way well before the storm's landfall. Wearing yellow T-shirts, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had come to New Orleans in its time of need. But some of their ancestors had traveled through New Orleans long before.

The Mormon Church originated from the Latter Day Saint movement founded by Joseph Smith, Jr. on April 6, 1830. The Church's largest denomination is headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, and has congregations worldwide representing some 13 million people. Before their journey to Utah, the Mormons settled in Missouri and later Nauvoo, Illinois. At its peak, Nauvoo's population of 15,000 exceeded Chicago's (only 4,470 in 1840). From around the world they came, and many made that trip with a stop through the Crescent City.

One such Saint was Captain Dan Jones, a Welsh-speaking missionary of the Mormon Church. The first Mormon congregation in Wales was established in 1840, in Flintshire by missionaries from Liverpool. Jones was born there, emigrated to the United States and was for a while engaged in the transportation of Mormons from St. Louis to Nauvoo upon his vessel, the "Maid of Iowa". In 1843 he had met Joseph Smith and was converted to the Mormon faith. In 1849, Jones took out 249 Welsh saints to Utah on a trip that began in Liverpool in February on the "Buena Vista" and arrived in New Orleans at the end of April. He took them up to St. Louis by steamboat and from there a wagon train carried them westward to Utah.

Soon more Saints made their pilgrimage through New Orleans. The "Italy" sailed with 28 Danish Mormons, but two infants died before the ship's arrival in New Orleans on May 10, 1852. 297 emigrants came aboard the "Forest Monarch" to New Orleans in 1853 from Denmark,

Sweden and Norway. There were deaths recorded on this fifty-nine day passage, but three children were born during the crossing.

Many Mormons kept a record of their New Orleans observations in their diaries as they approached the Queen City on the Mississippi between 1851 and 1853. John Woodhouse described the mouth of the river as "filled with dense growth of large bamboo canes, common to the tropics" with the first dwellings "built on piles, and only accessible with boats". It was there he marveled at "the largest oysters I ever saw ... Some of them as long as eight inches and large in proportion." Just before New Orleans he viewed the "large orange groves" with oranges "laying thick on the ground". Jean Rio Baker was a wealthy Mormon woman who also commented on the orange groves, "the perfume from which is very delightful, as the breeze wafts it toward us. Thousands of peach and plum trees are here growing wild and now in full bloom." She also mentioned seeing foxes, wild geese, storks and raccoons.

Baker also wrote about the plantations she saw:

"The houses of the planters are built in the cottage style, but large with verandas on every side, and beautiful gardens. At a little distance are the negro huts. From 30 to 50 on each plantation. They are built of wood with a veranda along the front, painted white, and mostly have either jasmine or honeysuckle growing over them. Each cottage has a large piece of garden ground attached to it in general appearance they are certainly very far superior to the cottage inhabited by the poor in England."

Conway B. Sonne in his "Saints on the Sea, A Maritime History of Mormon Migration" paints an interesting image of the city in those days. All was not rosy, for there had been epidemics of cholera and yellow fever. He calls it "a city of many facets – a cultural oasis, a thriving business capital, and a pesthole". He further describes New Orleans as the colorful, romantic and exciting "Paris of the Bayous", but a port whose economy was based on cotton, shipping and slavery. And slavery was something foreign to these traveling Mormons. Woodhouse wrote, "A row of Negro women" being offered "for sale in the street, seemed strange to us".

Some of the sights and sounds recorded were in the French Market, where Charlotte Elsmore Shelley mentioned "the large red tomatoes". Others were along the streets. Baker's diary is rich in detail of the architecture (with houses "as noble as any in Regent Street"), as well as the slave women ("clad in frocks of embroidered silk or satin, and elegantly worked muslin trousers, either blue or scarlet, morocco walking shoes and white silk stockings, with a French headdress, ... composed of silk with all the colors of the rainbow ... jewelry glitters on

their dusky fingers (which are plainly seen through their lace gloves) and in their ears."

The Mormon religion has often been at the center of controversy and may have cost Mitt Romney the nomination in 2008. Teryl Givens, a professor of literature and religion at the University of Richmond, believes that "the apotheosis of anti-Mormon sentiment was probably evident at the scientific meeting in New Orleans in 1861". It was there that the "Mormon race" was portrayed as a racial stereotype with "sunken yellowish-greenish eyes, cadaverous visage, gelatinous constitution – all of these delightful words." And there were literary stereotypes, as well.

Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, made his debut in "A Study in Scarlet", first published in 1887. Doctor John Watson tells the tale in the first person of a mystery involving a corpse found in a derelict house. The second half of the story is entitled "The Country of the Saints" and (excluding the last two chapters) is in a third person narrative style. This story of love and revenge focuses on the Mormon community in the United States, and Brigham Young is included as a somewhat villainous character.

Doyle depicted the Latter Day Saints as a hotbed of kidnapping, enslavement and even murder. He later said, "I cannot withdraw that". But Doyle's daughter admitted that "father would be the first to admit that" his first novel was full of errors. In it Dr. Watson states he was invalided out of the army after a shoulder wound in the Second Afghan War. In later stories, the wound moved to his leg. Years after the death of Arthur Conan Doyle, Levi Edgar Young, one of Brigham Young's descendants, claimed that Doyle had apologized privately.

Steve Young, Hall of Fame quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers, is also the great-great-great grandson of Brigham Young. Besides receiving his law degree from Brigham Young University J. Reuben Clark Law School, Steve also traveled to New Orleans to play against its particular variety of "Saints".

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