

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Pretty Women**

James H. Caldwell (1793-1863) was a multi-talented Englishman who is remembered for his success as a theatrical impresario. He moved to New Orleans in 1820, leased the St. Philip Street Theatre, organized a company of actors, and became the dominant manager of a far-flung theatrical circuit throughout the Mississippi Valley. He soon built the first American playhouse in New Orleans, on Camp Street between Gravier and Poydras (then a remote part of the city). Mr. Caldwell provided his patrons with banquettes (the local name for sidewalks) made from ship gunwhales, 2 1/2 feet wide. His "American Theatre" opened in January 1824 and was illuminated with gas, the first building in the Crescent City to be so lighted.

Theatre flourished in New Orleans in the 1830s and 1840s, and there were often "pretty women" upon the stage. An item from the May 22, 1838, *Daily Picayune* elaborated:

"There are no less than three French Theatres at present in successful operation below Saint Louis street – the Théâtre d'Orléans, Théâtre Marigny and Théâtre d'Élèves. We 'dropped in' at the latter establishment on Sunday evening, and were much pleased with the manner in which some of the lighter French vaudevilles are brought out. The theatre is at the corner of Champs Elysées and Rue des Grandes Hommes, and boasts the attractions of one or two very pretty women and good actresses, besides Mons. Victorin, the best eccentric comedian who has ever appeared upon the boards of a French theatre in this city."

Champs Élysées is Elysian Fields and Rue des Grandes Hommes (Great Men Street) is today Dauphine Street. Where there are "Pretty Women", "Great Men" are sure to follow (and sometimes "Good Children"). Great Men Street was one named by Bernard de Marigny, along with the streets Frenchmen, Good Children and Craps.

If one were to peruse page two, column two, of the October 28, 1855, *Daily Picayune*, he would discover the definition of "pretty women":

"Pretty Women - A pretty woman is one of the 'institutions' of the country - an angel in dry goods and glory. She makes sunshine, blue sky, Fourth of July, and happiness wherever she goes. Her path is one of delicious roses, perfume and beauty. She is a sweet poem, written in rare curls and choice calico, and good principles. Men stand up before her as so many admiration points, to melt into cream and then butter. Her words float round the ear like music, birds of Paradise, or the chimes of Sabbath bells. Without her society would lose its truest attraction, the church its firmest reliance, and young men the very best of comforts and company. Her influence and generosity restrain the vicious, strengthen the weak, raise the lowly, flannel-shirt the heathen, and strengthen the faint-hearted. Wherever you find the virtuous woman, you also find pleasant fireside bouquets, clean clothes, order, good living, gentle hearts, piety, music, light and model 'institutions' generally. She is the flower of humanity, a very Venus in dimitry, and her inspiration is the breath of heaven."

The June 14, 1862, issue of *Harper's Weekly* makes some reading recommendations. If one were not interested in the "Indian Tales" of Gustave Aimard, there were several of "Miss Pardoe's Charming Novels". One could choose "THE RIVAL BEAUTIES", "ROMANCE OF THE HAREM" or "CONFESSIONS OF A PRETTY WOMAN". Each was offered "Complete in one large octavo volume. Price Fifty Cents."

New Orleans has always had its "pretty women". When Amelie Marie Céleste Miltenberger Heine died on May 12, 1915, the *New York Times* carried the following headline:

"MME. HEINE DIES IN FRANCE – Noted New Orleans Beauty Was a Friend of Empress Eugenie"

Her death took place at "the Château Richelieu, sixty miles from Paris". She was the mother of Alice Heine, first Princess of Monaco, and "Georges Heine, the well-known French financier". "Noted for her accomplishments and beauty", Amelie was married to "Michel Heine, the French financier, who afterward floated the national loan to France in the German war of 1870". Madame Heine "soon became one of the belles of the Court of Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie, and was noted all over Europe for her beauty".

Born on Royal Street near Esplanade, she was one of many pretty "New Orleans Ladies", past and present. Like the "Louisiana LeRoux" song lyrics, "They sashay by" and they "roll just like the river, A little wave will last forever".

**NED HÉMARD**

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