

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Scent of a (New Orleans) Woman

Dating has always been a serious business, but two-person dating implies intimacy to young people today. Group dating provides a way to learn about others without the emotional intimacy of a traditional date. Back in the fifties and sixties, casual dating was much more the norm. On the Tulane-Newcomb campus of the sixties (if one was in a fraternity or sorority), there were three stages between the first date and marriage. Most would readily guess being pinned (giving one's fraternity pin to his girlfriend) or being engaged (marriage right around the corner). But there was another step before being pinned that was called "being dropped". How could "being dropped" be a good thing?

Drop letters are another name for a lavalier, a necklace that has a pendant charm or jewel or (in this case) fraternity letters arranged in a vertical drop formation. "Being dropped" is also called "being lavaliered". The smitten fraternity man could buy this charm at Balfour's and "drop" his heart's desire or "drop" her later if he lost interest. Or he could move up to the next steps: pinning, engagement and marriage. All of these stages were announced in elegant candlelight ceremonies at the sorority houses.

Lavaliering could never have occurred if it were not for the mistress of Louis XIV, Louisiana's namesake. This 17-year-old innocent (according to the Abbé de Choise) "had an exquisite complexion, blond hair, blue eyes, a sweet smile ... an expression once tender and modest." Mistress of the Sun King from 1661 to 1667, her name was Louise de la Vallière. The term *lavalrière* (lavalier), the name for a jeweled pendant necklace she wore, comes from her name. So does the term lavalier mike, a microphone that hangs around one's neck.

Louise's life was the basis for a character in the Alexandre Dumas novel "The Vicomte de Bragelonne". There are three parts to the novel, with the second part entitled "Louise de la Vallière". In the novel musketeer D'Artagnan smells something through an open

window. "A perfume of spices, mingled with another perfume less exotic, but more penetrating, namely, that which arose from the street, ascended to salute the nostrils of the musketeer."

No longer in business, La Vallière was also the name of a New Orleans *parfumerie*. La Vallière products were awarded the *Grand Prix* with Gold Medal by the 1929 International Exposition held in Nice, France. A 1944 advertisement suggested a visit to the "La Vallière display rooms at 610 Royal Street and 433 Bourbon Street in the old French Quarter". "Vetivert" was one of La Vallière's fragrances, which came in one of the company's plainer bottle designs (a flared octagonal with three larger center panels topped by a small hexagonal stopper). The company also produced a "vanishing peroxide cream" in a decagon-shaped bottle (ten sides).

It is not surprising that Tom Robbins' popular novel "Jitterbug Perfume" has a *parfumerie* in New Orleans run by a Madame Lily Devalier with assistance by V'lu Jackson and frequent doses of "hurricane drops". Robbins' tales are often wild, complex and satirical.

A *parfumeur* in France is also known as "*le nez*", where it really is important to have a nose for that particular business. The first full-time *parfumeur* in the Crescent City (a person whose skills in combining the scents of spices and flowers into subtle, alluring fragrances) was August Doussan. He arrived in New Orleans from France in 1843 and established the Doussan French Perfumery in the French Quarter that very year. A young chemist named J. H. Tindel joined him after some time, and they successfully marketed a number of scents and their secret formula *Eau de Cologne*. The shop was passed on to Tindel after Doussan's retirement and renamed the Bourbon French Perfume Company.

A young lady named Marguerite Acker became Tindel's star student, who later bought the business. She was married to Beauregard Caro. Their granddaughter, Alessandra Crain, inherited the perfume company in 1973. Alessandra, it so happened, also inherited "*le nez*" from her grandmother. She created the fragrances "Voodoo Love", "*Mon Idée*", "*Sans Nom*" and "Marguerite" (named for her grandmother). Under the Caro name, perfumes such as "Forever", "Garden of Dreams", "Chalamo", "White Gardenia" and "Peau D'Espagne" were marketed to devoted clientele from their location at 223 Dauphine Street.

The Bourbon French Perfume Company is still going strong since 1843. Mary Eleflore Behlar purchased the business from Alessandra in 1991. Bourbon French Parfums is now on Royal Street.

Back in the 1940s, the Aucoin Perfume Company claimed to be the "Oldest Perfumers in the South". Madame Aucoin (whose ads featured

her in a white fur stole) originated the famous "*Ce Soir ou Jamais*", "*Nuit de Fleurs*" and many others. Madame Aucoin's shop was located at 234 Royal Street in the *Vieux Carré*. Her "Louisiana Magnolia Kus-Kus" was another "vertivert" fragrance so popular in New Orleans.

Vetiver (the usual spelling) is a perennial grass native to India. In western and northern India, it is popularly known as *khus*, giving the earlier English name of *kuss-kuss* grass (the source of Madame Aucoin's appellation). It is closely related to other fragrant grasses like lemon grass and citronella, and it has characteristics that make it an excellent erosion control plant in warmer climates. This is because it does not form a horizontal mat of roots (unlike most grasses) but roots that grow exclusively downward. It is used in 90% of all western perfumes due to its ability to retard evaporation, and Haiti is one of the world's largest producers. Its scent is pleasing to humans but repels insects and rodents, and many Southern women line their armoires and linen drawers with the ubiquitous fragrance. It was "a scent to be carried throughout town as a fan", according to Amy van Calsem Wendel.

She is the fourth generation owner of *Hové Parfumeurs* at 824 Royal Street, which began in 1931 at 529 Royal Street in the residence of Spanish Governor Esteban Miró. It is another local *parfumerie* that offers a "vetivert" perfume. The large array of *Hové* fragrances includes "Tea Olive" (with the scent of the South's delightfully aromatic sweet olive), "Creole Days", "Bayou D'Amour", "Grandee", "Gardenia", "Mantrap", "Spanish Moss", "Louis Quatorze®" (had to have one for Louise de la Vallière's sugar daddy), "Pirates Gold" and "Spring Fiesta".

Hové Parfumeurs was founded by Mrs. Alvin Hovey-King, the daughter of a cavalry officer and a Creole French mother. In 1938 when her husband died, she moved her shop to 723 Toulouse Street where it remained for the next forty-four years. Her daughter took over in 1961 when Mrs. Hovey-King passed away, later taking in her daughter Julie as partner in 1970. Julie van Calsem moved *Hové* to the house in which she had grown up, the Dejan House at 824 Royal (its present location). Mr. van Calsem continued to run the business after his wife died, followed in 2003 by niece Amy van Calsem and husband Bill Wendel.

Creole ladies learned long ago that the path to "*le coeur de l'homme*" was often through "*le nez*", and New Orleans *parfumeurs* had no trouble making scents of all this.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"The Scent of a (New Orleans) Woman"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2009