

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

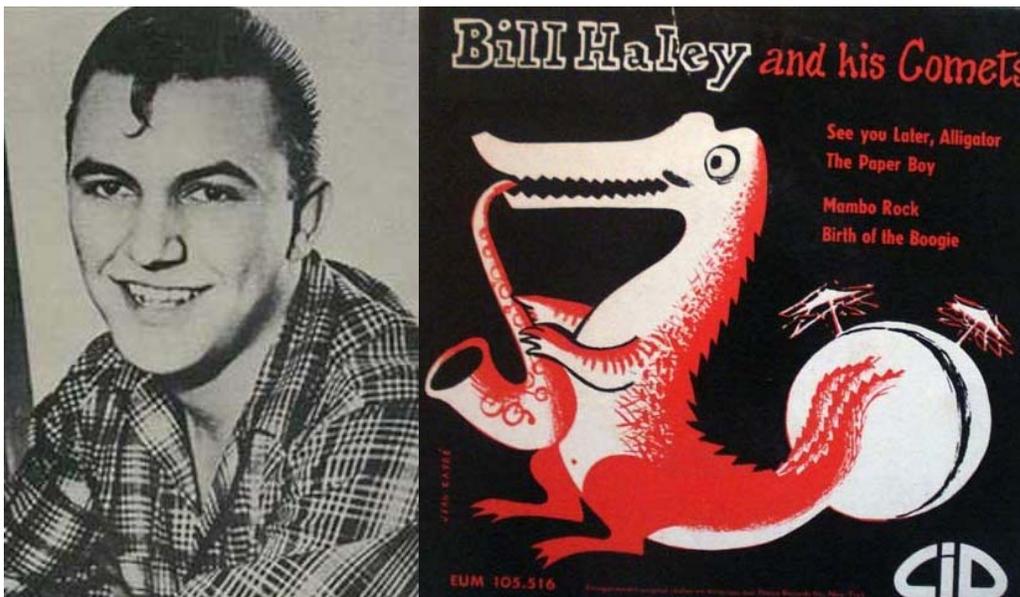
Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

See You Later, Alligator

Long before “Bobby Charles” Guidry, a native of Abbeville, Louisiana, composed the iconic Rock and Roll classic, “See You Later, Alligator”, the people of Louisiana have been quite familiar with *Alligator Mississippiensis* (the gator’s scientific name).

Bobby Charles (Guidry’s stage name) penned and recorded the tune in 1955, but Bill Haley and His Comets’ cover was the big national hit. Based on a twelve-bar blues chord structure, “See You Later, Alligator” (though more commonly spelled without the comma in the title), was equally famous for its response: “After while, Crocodile”. Singer-songwriter Guidry, who died in 2010, also wrote “(I Don’t Know Why I Love You) But I Do,” performed by Clarence “Frogman” Henry and the immensely popular “Walkin’ to New Orleans” by Fats Domino. Besides his contributions to Rock and Roll, Bobby helped to pioneer the South Louisiana musical genre known as swamp pop.



Bobby Charles

Bill Haley's Record Sleeve

The reptile known as the alligator, renowned for its hide among other things, was called *alligarta* in its earliest incarnation. This was derived from the Spanish *el lagarto*, meaning "the lizard". Later English spellings included *allagarta* and *alagarto* until *alligator* became the final anglicized form.

Though not the same as a crocodile, the alligator is a crocodylian of the genus *Alligator* of the family *Alligatoridae* (that's not Gatorade). There are two living species of alligator, the American alligator and the Chinese (*Alligator sinensis*). And there are several extinct species of alligator, having first made their appearance during the Oligocene epoch about thirty-seven million years ago.

As for the differences between alligators and crocodiles, alligators have broad, rounded snouts while those of the crocs are narrower and more pointed. The crocodile has, as a rule, larger and more exposed teeth and is usually quicker and more vicious than the denizen of the Louisiana swamps. There are American crocodiles, but they cannot take the cold weather. In the continental U.S., they are found only in Southern Florida. In the Bond flick filmed in and around New Orleans, *Live and Let Die*, that daredevil croc-jumping escape scene was actually filmed in Jamaica with American crocodiles – not in Louisiana. Louisiana is home to alligators, but they have not always been called by their correct names.



Bond stuntman, Ross Kananga, hops over live American crocs

Despite the Spanish *el lagarto* derivation of alligator, it is interesting to discover that the early Spanish inhabitants of Louisiana called this saurian of the swamps a *cocodrile*, pronounced *ko-ko-dree'*, which is most probably a Spanish interpretation of the name given the alligator by the Frenchmen of Iberville and Bienville's entourage, the *crocodil*.

The Spanish pronunciation is responsible for some Louisiana place names, such as the bayous and the “Cocodrie” lakes found in Evangeline, St. Landry and Rapides parishes. The town of Cocodrie in Terrebonne Parish is a popular shrimping and crabbing village, and there is a Bayou Cocodrie National Wildlife Refuge in Concordia Parish.

The first French settlers, likening our local reptile to the crocodile of the Old World, called it by that name – but they pronounced it according to their own tongue: *crocodil*, or *kro-ko-deel'*, as shown in Le Page Du Pratz's *Histoire de la Louisiane* (published 1751–1753). The artist's engravings below make Du Pratz's *Crocodil* much more fearsome than the actual alligator.



Crocodil, as illustrated in Le Page Du Pratz's *Histoire de la Louisiane*

These French and Spanish influences on the naming of the alligator make *cocodrie* a common term for the creature in South Louisiana's Cajun Country. Cajun and Zydeco performer Zachary Richard even sings a song in which he says, "Me, I'm gonna catch-a-me a cocodrie".

The Ofo Indian tribe of the Yazoo River delta referred to the alligator as *akshoti*. The Biloxi Indians called this reptile *nuxwoti*. This *nuxwoti* nomenclature became part of numerous streams and bayous where the alligator was found in such great number that such streams were called *nuxodapayixya*. The Choctaws called the alligator *hachunchuba*, which means having "no hair", as in "Looky there, she ain't got no hair," the words sung by Henry Roeland Byrd, aka Professor Longhair, in his hit recording, "Bald Head."

The Choctaw *hachunchuba*, or the "no hair" alligator, is the reason there are so many "Chinchuba" towns, bayous and creeks in Louisiana and Mississippi. The Chinchuba institute for the Deaf closed in 2010 after 120 years of service. Founded in 1890 by the Archdiocese of New Orleans and the School Sisters of Notre Dame, it was one of the

first schools in the nation devoted specifically to teaching hearing-disabled children to speak. Originally based "in the beautiful woods of Chinchuba, within three miles of the old French town of Mandeville," according to a 1920 article in the Archdiocese publication *Morning Star*, the school moved to New Orleans before moving to the Hope Haven campus on the Westbank in 1940.

The alligator was held in reverence by a number of Native-American tribes in Louisiana and along the Gulf Coast. It became the totem, or distinctive badge, of the Bayougoulas, whose main village was located about where the present-day town of Donaldsonville now stands.

Antoine-Simon Le Page Du Pratz, historian, ethnographer and naturalist was raised in France, but he may have been born in the Netherlands. He served in the French army dragoons of Louis XIV and saw service in Germany before leaving La Rochelle, France, May 25, 1718, for the French colony of Louisiana.

Du Pratz, only about 23 at the time, arrived in Louisiana August 1718 and spent four months at Dauphin Island before he and his company made their way to Bayou St. John where he set up a plantation. When he had at last reached New Orleans, which he affirmed "existed only in name," he had to occupy an old lodge once used by an Acolapissa Indian. Du Pratz took with him a servant and cook, a girl of the Chitimacha tribe, a young woman not lacking in bravery. Du Pratz writes that when frightened by an alligator approaching his camp site, he hurried for his gun. The Indian girl, never mentioned by name, calmly secured a stick and hammered the creature so forcefully on its snout that it retreated. As Du Pratz arrived with his weapon, ready to shoot "the monster," he explains: "She began to smile, and said many things which I did not comprehend, but she made me understand by signs, that there was no occasion for a gun to kill such a beast."

To answer the age-old myths concerning this reptile, Du Pratz writes, "I shall not contradict the accounts of venerable antiquity about the crocodiles of the Nile, who fall upon men and devour them; who cross the roads, and make a slippery path upon them to trip passengers, and make them slide into the river; who imitate the voice of a child, to draw children into their snares; nor shall I contradict the travellers who have confirmed those stories from mere hearsays. But as I profess to speak the truth, and to advance nothing but what I am certain of from my own knowledge, I may safely affirm that the crocodiles of Louisiana are without a doubt different species than those of other regions. In fact, I never heard them imitate the cries of an infant, nor is it at all probable that they can. Their voice is as strong as that of a bull."

But he was not fearful of them, believing them dangerous to man only in their watery habitat.

There have been other times when alligators and crocodiles have become confused. The gators and crocs weren't confused, just the people. I used to call them "alligator" shirts, those *Izod Lacoste* cotton polo shirts with the gator logo. But, in fact, these gators were actually little crocodiles. They were symbolic of French tennis player and clothier René Lacoste, who acquired the nickname "The Crocodile" because of his on-court tenacity.



René Lacoste



iconic Croc

Lacoste was the World No. 1 player for both 1926 and 1927, and in 1929 he introduced his world famous short-sleeved cotton piqué tennis shirt (his own creation), with flat collar, buttoned placket and slightly longer tail. In 1933, Lacoste co-founded *La Société Chemise Lacoste*, where his relentless nature carried over into his brand. He proudly placed it on his product. The brand name *Izod Lacoste* was sportswear licensed to *Izod* by *Lacoste* from 1952-1993. Today *Izod* and *Lacoste* both continue to offer similar polo shirts, often mistakenly believed to be produced by the same company. *Lacoste* polos still have the crocodile logo, while *Izod* polos do not. There have been numerous well-heeled imitators through the years, such as Ralph Lauren with his distinctive polo horseman in 1972 (helping to cement "polo shirt" as the descriptive term for Lacoste's original design). Brooks Brothers added its "golden fleece" logo to its polos, although it had been a company trademark since 1850. In the 1970s, Perlis of New Orleans came up with its own version of the branded cotton polo shirt - one sporting the popular Louisiana crawfish.

The adult male alligator ranges in size from 10 to 14 feet (with an average of 11.2 feet) and weigh about 500 pounds, and the average

size for a female is 8.2 feet and 200 or more pounds. Exceptionally large males can attain a weight of nearly 1,000 pounds. Both sexes have four short legs and a muscular flat tail. Their front legs have five toes while the back legs have four. The alligator's skin on the back is "armored" with embedded bony plates called osteoderms, or scutes. Their snout has upward facing nostrils at the end, which enables them to breathe while most of their body is submerged. The younger gators can be distinguished from adults by the bright yellow stripes on their tails. Adults have dark stripes on their tails. As alligators lose their teeth, they are easily replaced. An individual alligator has 74 to 80 teeth but can go through 2,000 to 3,000 teeth in a lifetime. Alligators reach maturity between 8 to 13 years and live between 50 and 70 years. Some may live as long as 100 years.

Alligators experience periods of dormancy during colder weather. They occupy excavated burrows known as a "gator holes". When alligators construct these depressions in the wetlands, they provide a future habitat for other animals during droughts and they help increase plant diversity. By dining on nutria and muskrat (which cause severe damage to coastal wetlands), alligators provide an additional ecological benefit.

Usually found in freshwater and in slow-moving rivers, as well as in brackish environments, they are at home in ponds, marshes, swamps and lakes. Alligators are not able to tolerate salt water for very long because they do not have salt glands. The majority of American alligators inhabit Florida and Louisiana, with about 1.5 million alligators in each state.

Alligators' primary prey are smaller fish and animals they can devour with a single bite, but they may kill a larger animal by grabbing and dragging it beneath the water to drown. Alligators are generally timid and shy away from humans (as Du Pratz described), but they can become very aggressive or defensive when they feel threatened. They are capable of short bursts of speed, especially in very short lunges. Almost all gator-related attacks and fatalities occur in Florida, where the inhabitants apparently don't respect the big lizards the way people in Louisiana do. According to Florida records, there are about a dozen attacks a year, with about 20 of them in the past 40 years being fatal.

The method of consuming prey by biting off flesh and then convulsing wildly until bite-sized chunks are torn off is referred to as the alligator's "death roll". Essential to the alligator's ability to initiate this manoeuvre, the tail must flex to a significant angle relative to its body. A gator with an immobilized tail cannot execute a death roll.

As for the alligator's jaw strength, most of those muscles have evolved to bite and grip prey. The closing jaw muscles are exceptionally powerful, but the opening muscles are relatively weak. Do not try this

at home, but an adult human can hold a gator's jaws shut bare-handed or by several wraps of duct tape when being handled or transported.

Alligators are raised commercially for their meat and skin, which is used for handbags, luggage, belts and shoes. They also provide economic benefits to the state by being an enormous tourist attraction. Anyone up for an airboat Swamp Tour?

Believe or not, there is a book entitled "The Culinary Herpetologist," by Ernest A. Liner, which features Antoine's "Alligator Soup with Sherry". Most will not notice any difference with a ubiquitous New Orleans favorite, "Turtle soup au Sherry". And as for fasting Roman Catholics, the Archbishop of New Orleans ruled in 2010 (for purposes of abstention from meat) that the alligator is considered as fish. The alligator was once overhunted and became an endangered species, but no longer since Louisiana and other states have enacted strict conservation measures and adequately regulated their numbers.

In recent years, Louisianans were introduced to a small number of unusual creatures collected from deep within a Louisiana swamp: white alligators. These ivory reptiles were part of a clutch of seventeen hatchlings discovered in 1986 by workers from the Louisiana Land and Exploration Company while surveying the area where they were found.

These extremely rare baby gators were later brought to the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans. These were not albino but leucistic animals, which means they possessed a rare genetic condition that causes just a minute amount of pigmentation around the mouth and a little bit on the tail, along with piercing blue eyes. They grew large in captivity, each ten to eleven plus feet in length, but in the wild they never would have survived. Deprived of natural camouflage, they would have been vulnerable to countless predators. After discussing these almost colorless gators, I shall now mention a most colorful array of "Crocs".



"Crocs"

in so many colors

Unveiled in 2002, these foam clogs known as “Crocs” originated in Québec. Ignoring party affiliation, these colorful shoes have been worn by everyone from George W. Bush to Michelle Obama. Fashion consultant Tim Gunn, however, is not so keen on the “Croc”: “It looks like a plastic hoof,” he told Time Magazine, “How can you take that seriously?” Chef and media personality Mario Batali obviously did, making shorts and orange “Crocs” his signature look. In 2013 when the company announced it was discontinuing his color, he pitched a fit while placing a final order for 200. Said Batali: “They’re gonna stop the Mario Batali orange! It’s preposterous!”

Frankly, I think it’s a “Croc”!

By the way, experts advise that (if one is attacked by an alligator), you should fight back. Use anything available as a weapon. If you have none, kick, punch or hit the gator in the snout or gouge at its eyes. These are essentially the same actions taken by Le Page Du Pratz’s unnamed Native-American protectress almost three hundred years ago.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“See You Later, Alligator”
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2014