

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Sir Thomas Lipton,

Once a New Orleans Streetcar Driver

If you've ever had tea (hot or iced), you're likely to associate the "Lipton brand" name with inexpensive boxes of individual tea bags and the slogan, "Brisk Lipton Tea". But a century ago, the name "Lipton" stood for the largest chain of grocery stores in the world. And the company's founder, Thomas J. Lipton (May 10, 1848 – 2 October 1931), was perhaps the most loved and admired man on the planet. A marketing genius, he discovered how to brand himself.



Sir Thomas J. Lipton, the man and the brand

Sir Thomas Johnstone Lipton, 1st Baronet, KCVO (Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order), born into poverty to parents who had fled Northern Ireland and the Irish famine of the 1840s, was also one of New Orleans' most celebrated streetcar drivers. Sir Thomas Lipton,

famous multimillionaire tea merchant and yachting enthusiast, was employed as a mule-driver on the New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad (now the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line). It is because mules and horses were used in New Orleans that locals still say "streetcar" instead of "trolley." Trolleys are the electrified version, which were introduced in New Orleans on February 1, 1893. A special song, the "Trolley Polka," was written to celebrate the event, but New Orleanians stuck to calling them streetcars.

Thomas J. Lipton was born the youngest of five children in Glasgow, Scotland, May 10, 1848, although he would later state his birth year as 1850. At seventeen he traveled to the United States with less than eight dollars in his pocket. Lipton not only worked on a New Orleans streetcar, but also for a New York grocery. It was there that he began to learn and master the lessons of American merchandizing:

"The man who on his trade relies
Must either bust or advertise."

Saving enough money to return to Scotland, Lipton continued his rags-to-riches story by expanding a small provision shop into the world's first chain of grocery stores, which eventually numbered 300.

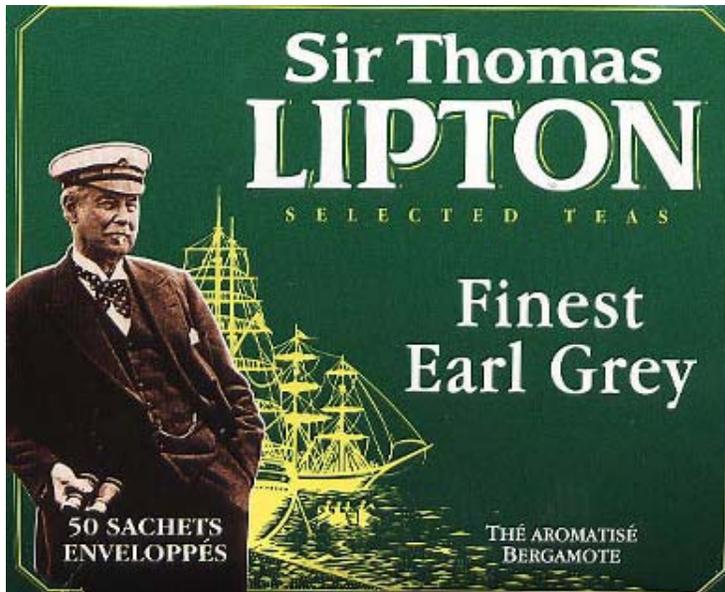


Lipton's first grocery store

Through shrewd acquisitions, spotlighted by clever advertising and promotions (jingles, leaflets dropped from hot-air balloons, gold coins

hidden in cheeses and parades featuring elephants and pigs), he became a millionaire by age 30. He learned common sense business ideas, such as having clean and well-lighted shops displaying quality merchandise to its best advantage (rather than hiding flaws and passing off second-rate goods). Before long, he was importing tea.

This self-made man, while creating the Lipton tea brand, developed the concept of consistent packaging. His tea packets were identical in every location and each time they were purchased – and at half the price of his competitors!



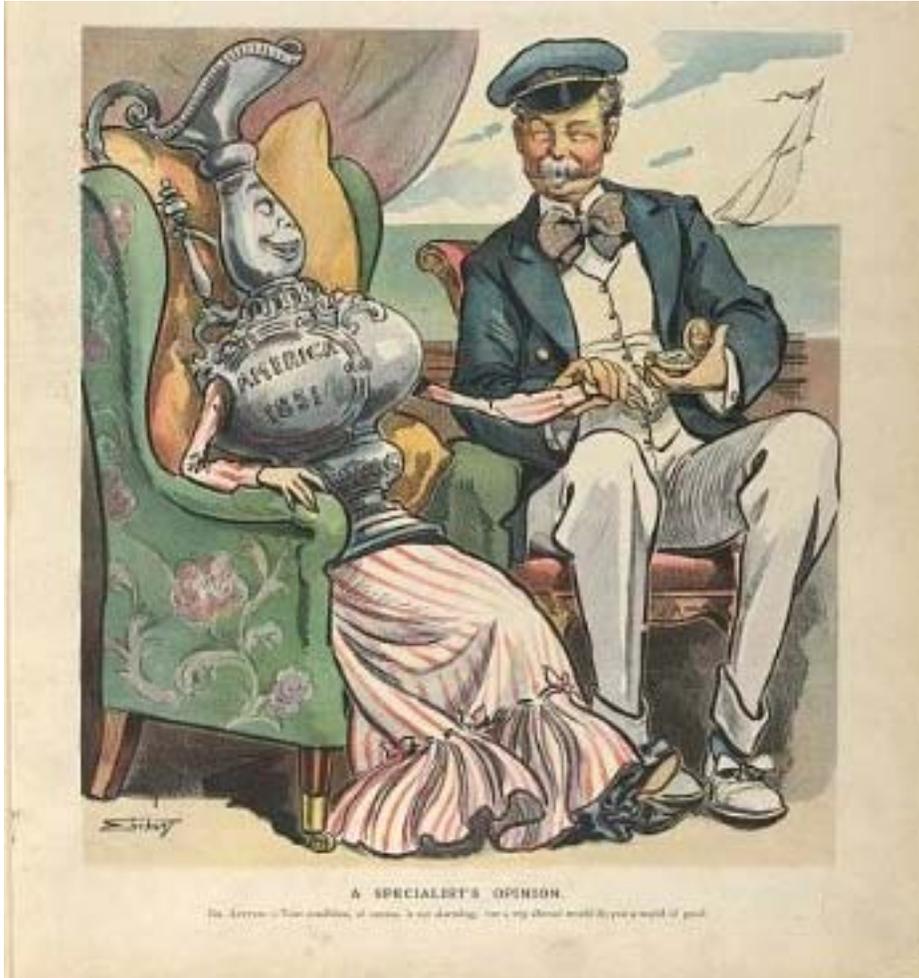
Lipton Tea Packaging

As his empire grew, so did the Lipton persona. Lipton, full of infectious enthusiasm, called himself “The Great Lipton”. He promoted himself as a happy captain of industry, freely giving philanthropist and avid sportsman (the complete antithesis of the “robber baron”). The people loved him.

Lipton saved the day in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, by writing an anonymous check for £25,000 to fund the Princess of Wales’ dinner for the poor. Immense publicity followed when the name of the generous donor leaked out two days later. By the following year, when Queen Victoria knighted him, Lipton owned shops all over Britain, tea plantations in Ceylon and various businesses in America. By the late 1800s Thomas Lipton controlled 10% of the world tea trade.

As a yachtsman, he undertook his personal and romantic quest of promoting yachting on both sides of the Atlantic. He failed in five attempts to return America’s Cup to his homeland, spending millions, but his good humor won him widespread affection and admiration throughout the United States where he was presented a special

sportsmanship award. He had several yachts named "Shamrock" in honor of his Irish roots. "Shamrock V" was launched in 1930.



Puck's take on Lipton romancing America's Cup

The smartly goateed gentleman, in his yachting cap and blue polka-dot bow tie, wrote to the Southern Yacht Club in New Orleans about its approaching seventieth anniversary in 1919:

"That I cannot visit New Orleans, the city of my happy boyhood days, is another cause of regret, and upon my return to America it is my sincere hope to have the pleasure of once more meeting all my good New Orleans friends." He kept that promise and did return in November of 1919 as a guest when he presented the club a handsome silver challenge trophy.

Other momentous things were happening that year. J. Rathbone DeBuys, an architect and Southern Yacht Club member with a keen interest in yachting, strongly believed in the need for a sturdy one-design sailboat of a kind that could be used for training or racing. He designed and introduced in 1919 what has become known as Fish Class sloops. Each of these 15'-10" gaff-rigged yachts were named for fish of the Gulf waters, but in time, the numbers on sails replaced the

names on the transoms due to easier identification. The club initially built six of these sloops, which were rented to members. Rapidly becoming the most popular one-design class, there were soon many in use by the Gulf Coast yacht clubs. Hundreds of skippers were trained on these boats, and each year the Fish Class boats contended for the handsome silver challenge trophy Sir Thomas Lipton presented to the club in 1919. Sir Thomas Lipton died in 1931.



*Lipton by Spy, artist Sir Leslie Ward
(observe Shamrock flag in upper right corner)*

By 1937, there were twelve yacht clubs participating in the Lipton Regatta. They continued to compete in the Fish Class until many of these boats were destroyed during Hurricane Camille in 1969. After that devastating hurricane, the Gulf Yachting Association made a change. The fiberglass Flying Scot was chosen to replace the wooden keel Fish Class sloop as the new inter-club sailboat that year.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans, causing widespread destruction there and throughout the Gulf Coast region. Although the Southern Yacht Club suffered only moderate flood and wind damage, there was a massive fire that inflicted the ultimate meltdown. Unchecked, many historic trophies (including the historic Lipton Cup) were lost in the conflagration.



The Southern Yacht Club's Lipton Cup

In early 2006, Southern Yacht Club's Commodore Hjalmar Breit, half in jest, made a suggestion to club member Tom Long that he contact the Lipton Tea Company to see if they would be interested in donating a new trophy. A meeting in London arranged with Peter Coleman of Comyns, one of England's oldest and most prestigious silversmiths, tracing its hallmark back to 1645. The company's rich legacy spanning three centuries includes an archive boasting more than 35,000 historical molds, patterns and drawings.

The good news was that this company created the original Lipton Inter-Club Challenge Cup given to the Southern Yacht Club by Sir Thomas himself. The bad news was that Comyns was having difficulty finding the original mold or drawing. And a new trophy would cost in excess of \$100,000.

What could be done? Fortunately, because the 39" trophy was allowed to travel each year from winning club to winning club, the Southern Yacht Club decided (in 1974) to keep the Lipton Cup in its clubhouse for protection. It made arrangements for a half-model to be cast and (in future) for this smaller trophy to be displayed at each winning club. The Bay Waveland Yacht Club, the most recent winner, graciously loaned the half-model to recreate the new full-size copy of the original.

As a result, the new Lipton Cup is a true second edition, not a replica or reproduction - and made by the original silversmiths.

The especially good news was that Comyns (famous for its "bespoke designs") agreed to reduce the price, and the Lipton Tea Company (one of the world's most recognized brand names) agreed to generously pay for it. It bears the original hallmarks (except the date): The Comyns Silversmith's mark, the Lion Passant (indicating guaranteed sterling crafted in England) and the Leopard's Head Uncrowned (indicating the trophy was made in London).

On Saturday, July 19, 2008, this sterling symbol of yachting history returned to the Southern Yacht Club in New Orleans, the second oldest yacht club in the United States. After two years of construction, the new SYC clubhouse (replacing a temporary facility) was opened in 2009.

Sir Thomas would have been delighted.

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