

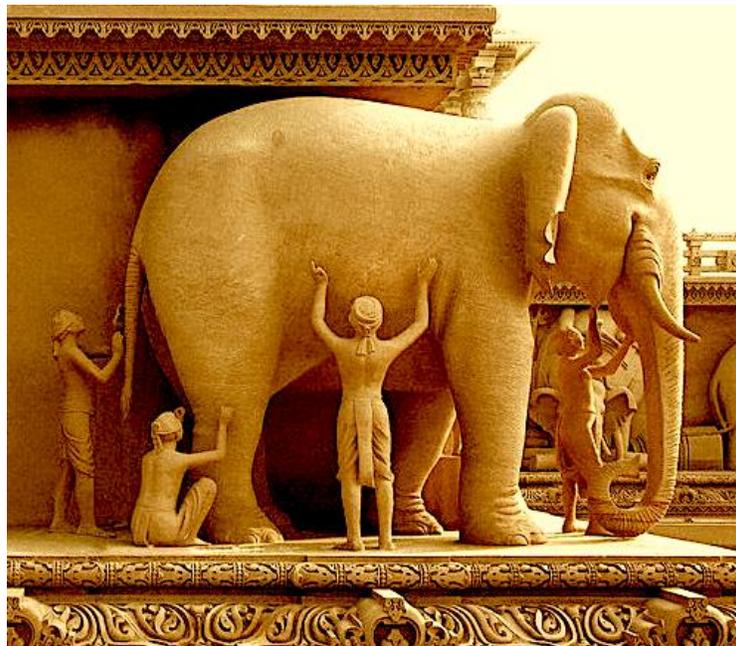
NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Blind Men and New Orleans

American poet John Godfrey Saxe (1816 - 1887) got his inspiration for his poem, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, from a fable that was told in India many years ago. Six blind men all perceived the elephant differently by only experiencing one part of the pachydermal puzzle. One grabbed the tail and believed the elephant to be a rope. Another grasped the leg and thought the elephant to be a tree. The ears seemed to make the elephant a fan, and so on.



When it comes to understanding the city and its people, most New Orleanians feel that the rest of the world just doesn't get the full picture. The inhabitants are black, white and other shades, have different accents, different religions and live in different parts of town. Some of these areas are above sea level and some are below, but all have "neutral grounds" nearby. Most spend Mardi Gras with their families, and most don't bare their breasts beneath balconies for beads. There are different and intricate meanings of the word *Creole*. Most say crawfish, mosquito hawks, snowballs and soft drinks instead

of crayfish, dragonflies, sno-cones and sodas. There are beaucoup barrooms yet countless churches in this great port city. There's Rex and Zulu; rich history and rich coffee; artists, musicians and writers; culture and "cultchah"; all manner of restaurants and shops; the Upper Pontalba and the Lower Ninth Ward; and lots of other ups and downs. But any attempt to narrow in on some all-purpose definition is probably impossible. One must savor the city's splendor over a very long time, or else he too may be like one of the blind men in this new take on a classic poem.

The Blind Men and New Orleans

The Poem



New Orleans is Like an Elephant, artwork by Lauren Hémard

There once were six Americans
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see New Orleans
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First was a Director.
To his actors he would call:
New Orleans is a Southern town,

So they all must have a drawl.
"God help me! When you say your lines,
you each must say *you all!*"

The Second, too, was making films,
And cried, "There's Cajuns there
Riding airboats through the city,
To me they're everywhere.
The wonder of New Orleans
Is that everyone says *Cher!*"



Fais do-do in Bucktown, from the 1986 movie, The Big Easy

The Third believed the city was
Most elegantly styled
With sturdy, lacy balconies,
Where loose ladies can be piled.
"I see," quoth he, "New Orleans
Is the home of Girls Gone Wild!"

The Fourth arrived on Sunday,
And he went to Jackson Square.
"Everyone at the Cathedral
Makes it mighty plain," *mon frère*,
"That the City of New Orleans
Has its people deep in prayer!"



Jackson Square, both sacred and profane

The Fifth man, much more scholarly,
Said: "the town's historic scenes
Make this tourist destination
Just the place for Kings and Queens,
And everyone in this fair town
All call it New Or-Leenz!"

"They call it N'Awlins, Dawlin'
Where the hell have you been at?"
The Sixth man scolded Mr. Five
And swore he was no Yat:
"You don't know 'bout makin' groceries
And you don't know dis from dat!"



And so these six Americans
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

Moral:

So oft some new observer
Who is not from this fair land,
Rails on in utter ignorance
Till it's gotten out of hand,
And prate about New Orleans,
Which he doesn't understand!



New Orleans' own Indian elephant, Itema, photographed with her trainer in 1925 at the Audubon Zoo – named for the New Orleans Item, which encouraged the city's schoolchildren to donate their pennies for her purchase

NED HÉMARD

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