

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### The “Chic” of Arabi

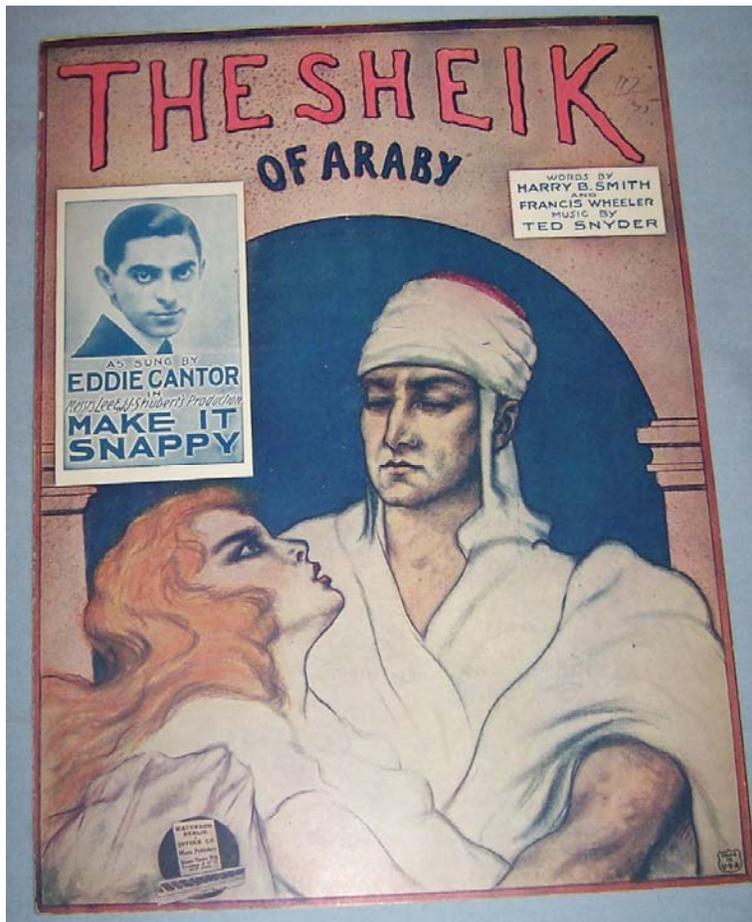
The “Lark in the Park” is a great fundraising event held each year by the “Friends of City Park”. I was pleased to attend the festivities back in the early 1980s, when the theme was film stars of the silent screen era. Recently returned from Egypt and the Holy Land, I had purchased a souvenir *keffiyeh*. It’s the Arabic headwear held in place by a rope circlet, called an *agal*. Colonel T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia), splendidly portrayed by Peter O’Toole, was probably the most famous Western wearer of the *keffiyeh*. He was the British Army officer who gained fame for his liaison role during the Sinai and Palestine Campaign, as well as the Arab Revolt (1916–1918) against Ottoman Turkish rule.



*Lawrence in keffiyeh with double-agal*

To dress appropriately for the "Lark in the Park" gala, I decided I would wear black tie and my white dinner jacket, don the *keffiyeh* and presto: Rudolph Valentino. Well, that was the idea. Hoping to be both "*chic*" and "*sheik*", but carrying a few more pounds than the great screen lover, I had my costume for the *soirée*.

Once there, a lady's voice behind me travelled over my shoulder. It sang these words mellifluously: "The Sheik of Araby ... your love belongs to me." Without looking back, I responded: "At night when you're asleep, into your tent I'll creep." She came right back at me with the next lines, and we turned around and completed our duet.



*"Sheik" Sheet Music from 1921*

I was surprised and delighted to discover that my mystery song partner was none other than the first woman elected to Congress from Louisiana, Lindy Boggs. She just loved to sing the old songs.

Lindy (Marie Corinne Morrison Claiborne Boggs), widow of former House Majority Leader Hale Boggs, was also the first woman to preside over a major party convention (1976) and would later be appointed United States Ambassador to the Holy See. Her daughter is author and news commentator Cokie Roberts, and her other daughter is the

late Barbara Boggs Sigmund (who served as mayor of Princeton, New Jersey). Son Thomas Hale Boggs, Jr. is a prominent lobbyist.



*Lindy Boggs*

Lindy isn't the only one who loves "The Sheik of Araby". New Orleanians Louis Prima, Fats Domino and Harry Connick, Jr., all recorded the popular Tin Pan Alley Song. Tin Pan Alley is the collective name given to the music publishers and songwriters of New York City who dominated the U.S. popular music market in the late 19th and early 20th century. It was originally a specific area, West 28th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenue in Manhattan, and the song-pluggers playing different tunes on all those upright pianos were said to sound like "tin pans banging in the alley". As one can see from the sheet music cover, the song was written in 1921 by Harry Smith and Francis Wheeler with music by Ted Snyder. It was composed to cash in on the popularity of Rudolph Valentino in the film "The Sheik".

The song became a jazz standard, having been adopted by early New Orleans jazz bands. Such a part of the Jazz Age, a term coined by F. Scott Fitzgerald himself, it is even mentioned in his book *The Great Gatsby* (once again brought to the screen in 2013). Previous film adaptations of "*Gatsby*" were in 1926, 1949, 1974 and 2000.

The Beatles also recorded "The Sheik of Araby" in 1962, and New Orleans-born Don Albert (real name: Albert Dominique) and his band recorded a mildly naughty version chanting "with no pants on" added between the lines of the lyrics. Another tradition of jazz bands performing the tune for humorous effect was (and still is) to make reference to the town of Arabi, Louisiana, a small municipality in St. Bernard Parish located between New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward and Chalmette. That's the town made famous in song by Benny Grunch in

his "Twelve Yats of Christmas": "On'da foist day'a Christmas mah Mawmaw gave'to me a crawfish'dey caught in Arabi."

But how did Arabi, Louisiana, get its name. The "Araby" in the song was a poetic reduction of Arabia (at the time, a far-off mysterious locale). It was a place that Bedouins dwelled. "Bedouin" is derived from a plural form of the Arabic word *badawī*, as it is pronounced in colloquial dialects. It, in turn, comes from *bādiyah* meaning semi-arid desert, with "Bedouin" (by extension) meaning "those in *bādiyah*" or "those in the desert". A early Creole Carnival organization, known as the Company of Bedouins, staged a spectacular parade in 1852 (considered the finest prior to Comus). But this had no influence on the naming of Arabi, Louisiana. Nor did the fact that the English word "cotton" (a giant money maker for the Greater New Orleans area) derives from the Arabic term *al qutun*, meaning "cotton fiber".

"Araby" was also a short story by James Joyce published in 1914, in which he wrote: "The syllables of the word Araby were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over me."

Arabi, Louisiana, however, had a much different origin. The community, once a part of Orleans Parish, was earlier known by the unattractive name "Stockyard Landing", because of the many slaughterhouses and feedlots located there. Another name for the area was Jacksonburgh, a name believed to be derived from the hero of the Battle of New Orleans. A law passed in the 1880s stated that slaughterhouses could not be located within the City of New Orleans. The stockyards business interests wished to be free from control of New Orleans and convinced the state of Louisiana to transfer dominion of the area to downriver St. Bernard Parish.

Arabi, Louisiana, is named after Arabi Pasha (a transliterated spelling of Egyptian Colonel Ahmed Orabi (or Urabi), who led an incendiary revolt against Tewfik Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt and Sudan, as well as the increasing European domination of the country (especially by the British).

Local residents of "Stockyard Landing" were also handy with the torch, and they burned the courthouse down in the 1890s. This was according to a 1941 account published by the *Federal Writers' Project*, reportedly "because the incendiary activities of an Arabian sheik were at that time much in the news." He wasn't an Arabian sheik at all, but was Egyptian-born of Balkan, Circassian and Turkish origin. In 1882, Arabi Pasha (according to an article in the *New York Times*) "let loose upon the doomed city" of Alexandria, setting much of it ablaze "before his withdrawal". The British were particularly concerned that Arabi Pasha would default on Egypt's massive debt and that he might attempt to gain control of the Suez Canal.



*Ahmed Orabi, aka Arabi Pasha*

Irish dramatist Isabella Augusta, Lady Gregory (whose motto was taken from Aristotle: "To think like a wise man, but to express oneself like the common people") wrote about the revolt. The earliest work to appear under her own name was *Arabi and His Household*, originally an 1882 letter to *The Times* in support of Ahmed Orabi Pasha and his goals. The *New York Times* reported all the media frenzy of the time with a note that "The New Orleans *Picayune* has discovered that Arabi Pasha once sold confectionery in that city. But the *Picayune* has a habit of occasionally discovering things that are not so."

Dubiously confected confectionery pushed by the *Picayune*, or was it more likely the kindred spirit shared by Arabi Pasha with the residents and their own fiery revolt against the local government? It was most certainly the latter. Government seemed to get in the way of all sorts of endeavors back then. One such activity was gambling.

In 1907 Friscoville Avenue was developed in Arabi. Because gambling was prohibited within the city limits of Orleans Parish, the area along the 100 block of Friscoville became a gambling center with a handful of gambling halls. Located just outside of the Orleans Parish line (as Monticello Avenue in Jefferson Parish was to the west), Friscoville was, at that time, easily accessible to gamblers by streetcar.

The authorities raided the clubs from time to time for effect, one such raid occurring in 1928 when Governor Huey Long delivered the request to have the clubs raided by the National Guard in person. But in 1952

Colonel Francis Grevenberg was superintendent of the Louisiana State Police. The super-big crackdown came that year.



*"They All Axed For You"*

Of the 225 persons found in the Jai-Alai Fronton and the Arabi Club, all of their names were taken down for future reference. Jai-Alai, a sport of Basque origin, is a game involving a ball bounced off an open-walled playing area known as a fronton. It enjoyed popularity as a gambling alternative to horse or dog racing. During the big raid, three officers and five men entered the Jai-Alai Club, and two officers and five men raided the Arabi Club - each establishment facing each other on the same street. The police entered heavily armed, and then a warning shot rang out. There were women screaming and fainting. Money on the gaming tables was quickly scooped up. Order was eventually restored. And just as in the earlier days of Arabi Pasha, incendiary action was soon underway. A huge bonfire consumed whatever gambling paraphernalia was flammable. Slot machines and the remainder were smashed with axes.

If fire has played a significant part in the history of Arabi, so has water. On the evening of September 9, 1965, Hurricane Betsy created a huge strong storm surge in the MRGO (Mississippi River Gulf Outlet), a deep-water shipping channel to the east and south of the City of New Orleans. The water spilled over the levees along the channel and on both sides of its terminus at the Industrial Canal in the Ninth Ward. The storm flooded areas of Gentilly and both the upper and lower Ninth Ward and inundated most of Arabi (except for the high ground near the river).

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina delivered an even more powerful surge, flooding all of Arabi, with water reaching over twenty feet in some areas. The MRGO levees were again destroyed, and the area was re-flooded weeks later by Hurricane Rita after a temporary levee patch failed. But like Arabi Pasha, Arabi residents know how to keep coming back.

Arabi Pasha was eventually captured and tried by the restored Khedivate for rebellion on December 3, 1882. He was sentenced to death, but the sentence was immediately commuted to banishment for life in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He died in 1911 but remains a national Egyptian patriot and an anti-imperialist hero. It is remarkable how his passionate resistance made its way to the New Orleans-Saint Bernard border and played a part in the naming of Arabi, Louisiana.

Jimmy Buffett, who spent a great deal of time in the Crescent City, called it "a great place, really a catalyst creatively". In his song, "Pencil Thin Mustache", he expressed his desire to be "The Sheik of Araby":

"Oh, I could be anyone I wanted to be  
Maybe suave Errol Flynn or the Sheik of Araby."

I got that chance that night long ago, when Lindy and I crooned:

"The stars that shine above  
Will light our way to love.  
You'll rule this world with me,  
The Sheik of Araby."

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia

"The '*Chic*' of Arabi"

Ned Hémard

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