

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **The “Chic” of Arabi, Part II**

Upon learning that Arabi, Louisiana, is named after Egyptian-born Arabi Pasha (April 1, 1841 – September 21, 1911), who led a much-publicized revolt against the Khedive of Egypt and Sudan, my readers would not be fully informed unless some mention was made of two modern-day Arabi *pashas*.

*Pasha* is a Turkish word (originally from the Persian) signifying a high rank in the Ottoman Empire’s political hierarchy, usually granted to generals, governors and high-ranking dignitaries in countries under Turkish rule. Major General Charles George Gordon of Khartoum, Governor-General of the Sudan, was known as Gordon *Pasha*. One of the highest titles in pre-republican Egypt, *Pasha* is roughly equivalent to the British title of Lord. There were three ranks of *pashas*, and the highest class rated three horsetails on its standard. The second class rated two, and the third only one.

One of the Arabi, Louisiana, *pashas* wasn’t a big deal in Turkey but he certainly ruled the roost in the world of chicken.

Alvin Charles “Al” Copeland (February 2, 1944 – March 23, 2008) founded the Popeyes Chicken & Biscuits fast food chain in 1972 in New Orleans’ neighboring suburb, Arabi, Louisiana (in St. Bernard Parish). Copeland’s was a rags-to-riches story. He left high school at 16, working at Schwegmann’s Super Market and then for Tastee Donut, a doughnut chain part-owned by his brother, Gil. At only 18 years of age, Copeland sold his car to purchase one doughnut location from his brother. This experience gained him exposure to the restaurant business and the idea of franchising.

Popeyes began in 1971 as “Chicken on the Run” with the marketing slogan “So fast, you get your chicken before you get your change.” Copeland then came up with a spicy chicken recipe that people loved and renamed his chain after “Popeye” Doyle, Gene Hackman’s character in *The French Connection*. Reopened with these changes in 1972, the restaurant was first named Popeyes Mighty Good Fried

Chicken. After a year and a month, and the opening of a second store, "Mighty Good" became "Famous". Fame happened fast for Al Copeland, franchising his chicken chain in 1976-1977. Lamar Berry's advertising with the "Love that Chicken from Popeyes" jingle was an immediate hit with the public, too.

By the late 1980s Al's empire included some 750 outlets, and in March 1989 Popeyes, then the third-largest chicken chain, (with junk-bond financing) purchased Church's Chicken, the second largest. The parent company, Al Copeland Enterprises, operated the two chains separately, consisting of over 2,000 locations. Trouble was, there were too many outlets too close to one another. Al couldn't sell off the excess stores in time, and (after filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy) he lost control of his company. But he did retain the right to supply Popeyes with his unique seasonings and various side dish recipes through his company, Diversified Foods & Seasonings (a contract that will last until 2025). He also continued with his Copeland's restaurants and tried other ideas for new dining experiences.

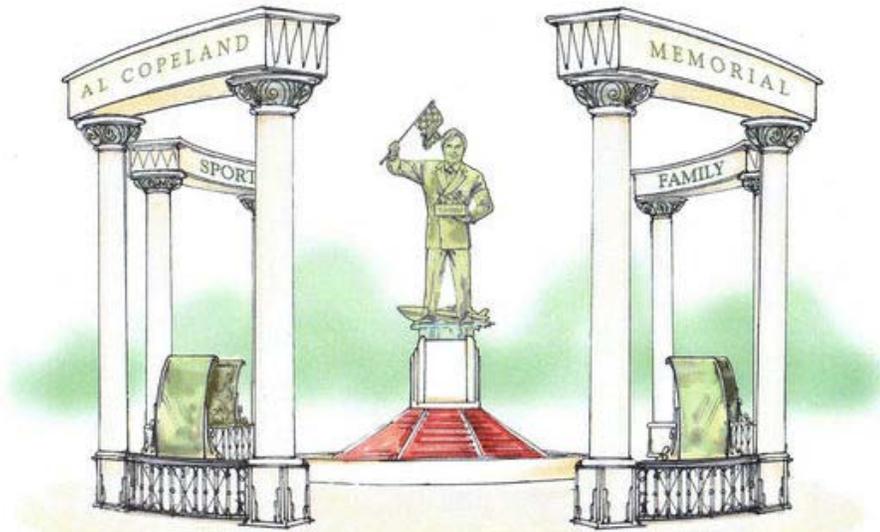
Al Copeland was always one of those over-the-top, larger-than-life figures. He was known for his flamboyant lifestyle, his lavish weddings (four in all) and his annual Christmas light show extravaganza at his Metairie home. He set speedboat records and collected fancy cars, such as Rolls-Royces, Lamborghinis and custom Jags. He got into a fistfight with former casino owner Robert Guidry in 2001, and had a verbal feud in 1997 with the New Orleans-born writer Anne Rice (nee Howard Allen Frances O'Brien), best known for her romantic vampire tales. Rice placed a full page ad in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, calling Copeland's restaurant on St. Charles Avenue "hideous" and "a monstrosity".

Al was the father of nine children (five sons and four daughters). His oldest son, Al Copeland, Jr., became the CEO of Al Copeland Investments in 2003.

In December 2007, Copeland began treatment for a malignant tumor of the salivary glands, caused by a rare form of cancer. Treatments in Germany were unsuccessful, and he died in Munich on Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008, at aged 64. His body was brought back to New Orleans and buried in Metairie Cemetery.

On Wednesday, May 1, 2013, the Jefferson Parish Council voted to build a monument in Lafreniere Park to the former Popeyes chicken founder. His family originally wanted a life-sized statue of the fried chicken baron holding a box of Popeyes Fried Chicken in one hand and a checkered racing flag in the other. There is also a speedboat at his feet in this elaborate (some have said in "poor taste" and "very gaudy") "coliseum-baroque design" shown below.

## CONCEPTUAL - A



### Al Copeland Memorial

- Landmark that features local culture
- Landscape beautification to four corner planters
- Seating area
- Refurbish water feature to create wishing well
- Copeland Family will incur building expenses

According to Al Copeland, Jr., the over-the-top initial concept of the monument featured above is only a rendering and not what the final monument will look like. That design was rejected in January. Those involved are finalizing a concept that will be approved by the Jefferson Council, the park and the Copeland Foundation (which is donating a new permanent stage at Lafreniere Park, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars). As part of the deal, the statue will be erected near the stage.

Al Copeland, however, is not the only Arabi *pasha* considered flamboyant and over-the-top. There was another young man who dreamed big and made millions. His name is Ronnie Lamarque.

In 1954, Arabi High School (which got its start as Joseph Maumus High School on Friscoville Street in Old Arabi) changed its name to Chalmette Senior High School and moved to the current site of Chalmette Elementary School, previously known as Chalmette Middle School. Ronnie Lamarque is an alumnus.

What else can you say about Ronnie Lamarque, Arabi's native son and the millionaire entrepreneur with multiple automobile dealerships? He's another rags-to-riches millionaire that's larger-than-life. He sings and dances in his own commercials. And yes, he had a soap opera-worthy tidal wave of marriage troubles.

Back in 1994, Ronnie's wife Carmella plead guilty to having Lamarque bumped off. Seems Ronnie got involved with a younger woman, and

his wife of 21 years was not happy about the situation. Carmella allegedly paid a cousin of hers \$20,000 to set up Ronnie's murder in the middle of their bitter divorce. The flamboyant huckster was not harmed, and his wife was arrested after the would-be hit man turned out to be a police informant. The cops informed Lamarque what was going down, and he was supposed to play along as if he didn't know what was happening until the police were able to nab the plotters. While going along with this plan, Lamarque nervously watched his back.

This being the Crescent City and Lamarque not strongly pressing the issue, Carmella avoided jail time after pleading guilty to a charge of soliciting murder in a plot to kill her husband, who told a judge he still feared for his life.

"I forgive, but I don't forget," Lamarque stated.

Carmella received five years' probation and had to spend time in a psychiatric hospital until the judge freed her several weeks later. All over the Greater New Orleans area bumper stickers popped up that read "Free Carmella". They seemed to be everywhere.

"Ronnie Lamarque never met a microphone or a reporter's notebook he didn't love," remarked Louis J. Roussel III, the other half of a partnership that made history in 1988.

Roussel and Lamarque were the owners of "Risen Star", the son of the great Triple Crown winner "Secretariat" out of the mare "Ribbon". The noteworthy thoroughbred started off 1988 by winning the Louisiana Derby and (just two weeks before the Kentucky Derby) the Lexington Stakes. He failed to win the Kentucky Derby, coming in third behind "Winning Colors" in first and "Forty Niner" in second place. But "Risen Star" won two-thirds of the Triple Crown by winning both the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes, the latter by a stunning 14 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> lengths. "Risen Star" should have won the Derby.

In typical fashion, Ronnie Lamarque sang the praises of "Risen Star" in the winner's circle. Yes, he actually sang. To the tune of "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans," Ronnie let loose something like this:

"Way down yonder in New Orleans,  
Risen Star is the king of kings.  
He's the talk of the town there,  
You know what I mean!"

For the last several years, Ronnie's been crooning for the New Orleans Saints. In one of his Saints' commercials, there's Ronnie with breakdancers in the background, as well as a chimpanzee.

Besides two genuine Arabi *pashas*, Al and Ronnie, Arabi is also home to Christina Cuenca (born 1980), a former American beauty queen and Miss Louisiana USA of 2006. Christina is 5 ft., 10 in. tall with brown hair and brown eyes. She competed for five consecutive years before winning the crown, including placing second runner-up three times.

Christine returned for her final stab at the title in the 2006 pageant, which was due to be held in Lafayette, Louisiana, in November 2005 but was postponed until January 2006 due to the ravages of Hurricane Katrina upon the state. Christine won the title Miss Louisiana USA 2006 in her final try, and went on to represent her state in the nationally televised Miss USA 2006 pageant. Despite being widely favored by many pageant fans, Christine failed to make the semi-finals.

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