

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

They Say It's Spring

Spring cleaning is the age-old practice of thoroughly cleaning one's house (or room) in the springtime. It is believed that this ritual dates back to the ancient Jewish practice of thoroughly cleansing the home in anticipation of the memorial feast of Passover, recalling the Israelites' hasty flight from Egypt. Another possibility has been suggested that spring cleaning dates back to the Iranian *Norouz*, or Persian new year, which falls on the first day of spring. Iranians call it *khooneh tekouni*, meaning literally "shaking the house" when everything in the dwelling is thoroughly cleaned, from the furniture to the curtains.

In New Orleans, the *Times-Picayune* reported that housewives in Spring would "get their rugs and carpets out of the way by having them cleaned and stored for the summer months." But unlike Iran, the *Picayune* also advised in a 1928 article that oriental carpets should be stirred but never "shaken," and (in the case of storage) "rolling is always safer than folding." The best way to clean rugs, said the paper, was a "hand brush, used in the one direction only."



Baseboards and other decorative moldings were cleaned with vinegar and oft times in New Orleans, since windows were thrown open to let in the fresh air, ivory linen slipcovers were placed over the furniture to protect the fabric from dust and soot in the atmosphere – not to mention the sweat from those seated (induced by the warmer weather on those pre-air conditioned days).

Sadly, the work involved in spring cleaning fell disproportionately upon women, as shown below in an advertisement in the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, dated April 21, 1894.



"a look of dread"

Traditionally, the Catholic Church thoroughly cleans the altar and everything connected with it on Holy Thursday, the day before Good Friday. In Scotland, cleaning the house and paying off bills is part of *Hogmanay* (December 31st), the last day of the year.

It's all about "out with the old, in with the new." Goodbye dingy, hello fresh. Spring cleaning is therefore used metaphorically, as well, for starting anew and jettisoning old ideas and habits. It's also used to

describe any kind of in-depth cleaning or organizing effort. A person who gets his affairs in order before an audit or inspection could be said to be engaged in some spring cleaning.

A poem printed beneath the heading "Lagniappe" in the *Picayune*, dated April 28, 1893, read in part:

"Scrub up the winders of the mind,
Clean up an' let the spring begin;
Swing open wide the dusty blind
An' let the April sunshine in."

So without further ado, this particular writer shall cast off the dust and cobwebs from a few unfinished stories and collected facts, take them down from my shelf, and present them here for the reader.

"Cokie"

Most New Orleanians, when hearing the name "Cokie," think of journalist and author Mary Martha Corinne Morrison Claiborne Roberts (née Boggs), daughter of the late Majority Leader of the U.S. House of Representatives Hale Boggs and his wife Lindy. Lindy, née Marie Corinne Morrison Claiborne (1916-2013), also served as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives and later as U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See. Daughter "Cokie" received her sobriquet because her young brother Tommy could not pronounce the name "Corinne."



But many Crescent City natives are unaware that "Cokie" was the original name of Madisonville, Louisiana, derived from the French word *coquille*, because of the abundance of shells in the area. The town was renamed for President James Madison circa 1811.

Don't call me a Locofoco

✂ In our paper of Saturday last we stated that Mr. Morte, who ran against Ellis in the Parish of St. Tammany, was a Locofoco. We have since learned that he is a Whig and ran as such.

Notice in the Daily Picayune, July 16, 1840

The Locofocos (also known as Loco Focos, or Loco-focos) were a faction of the Democratic Party that was in existence from 1835 until the mid-1840s. Generally speaking, they were supporters of Martin Van Buren and Andrew Jackson, and were in favor of free trade, legal protections for labor unions and for greater circulation of specie (i.e., money in the form of coins rather than notes). They were against paper money, financial speculation and state banks. Essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said this of the Locofocos:

"The new race is stiff, heady, and rebellious; they are fanatics in freedom; they hate tolls, taxes, turnpikes, banks, hierarchies, governors, yea, almost all laws."

Loco-foco was originally the name of a self-igniting cigar, which was a combination of the Latin prefix *loco*, which had recently become familiar as part of the word "locomotive." It was misinterpreted to mean "self," and *foco* was a misspelling of the Italian word *fuoco* for "fire". The cigar product's name was originally thought to mean "self firing" or "self-igniting," and it was in this context that the faction derived its name.

The Whigs cleverly seized upon the name, stating that *loco* in Spanish meant "crazy-minded," and *foco* represented "focus." This new interpretation implied that the faction and (by extension) the entire Democratic party was the "focus of folly." This derogatory name for the Democratic Party continued well into the 1850s, even after the Whig Party dissolved in 1854.

Jambalaya, Crawfish Pie and Hank Williams

Alabama-born Hiram King "Hank" Williams (September 17, 1923 – January 1, 1953) was one of the most significant American singers and songwriters of the 20th century, a Country Music legend whose 35 recorded singles placed in the Top 10 of the *Billboard* Country & Western Best Sellers chart, including 11 at number one (three posthumously).



"Hank" Williams and his New Orleans wedding announcement

"Hank" was extremely popular in Louisiana. In 1947, he signed with MGM Records and released "Move It On Over," which became a huge country hit. The following year he moved to Shreveport, Louisiana, home of the *Louisiana Hayride* radio program, which he joined. The broadcast, carried via station KWKH's clear, long-range signal, thrust him into folks' living rooms all over the southeast.

Between broadcasts, "Hank" hit the road, including visits to Werlein's music store on Canal Street (home today to Dickie Brennan's Palace Café). In September 1949, "Hank" performed at the Municipal Auditorium as part of a traveling Grand Ole Opry show, returning for other such shows in June 1950 and April 1951.

Williams' Louisiana song "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)," first released in July 1952, was based on the Cajun song "Grand Texas" and sung the praises of South Louisiana cuisine and a girl named Yvonne.

Real life romance brought "Hank" back to New Orleans, this time for an onstage wedding!



Actors George Hamilton (left) and Tom Hiddleston as "Hank"

The date was Sunday, October 19, 1952, and the wedding venue was the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium. There, according to the *Picayune*, "the nation's top hillbilly singer and composer of the blues," wed Miss Billie Jean Jones, daughter of Lt. and Mrs. J. P. Jones of Bossier City, Louisiana. The couple met during Williams' recent Southern tour and decided to get married in a public ceremony before all of his fans. The pair had actually married the day before in a private ceremony in Minden, Louisiana.

"Hank" and Billie Jean said "I do" during two sold-out performances at the Auditorium. 28,000 attended for an admission of 50 cents. Both "Hank" and Billie Jean had been married before, however, and a judge ruled that their three wedding attempts that October were invalid since Billie Jean's divorce was not yet finalized - just like the lyrics of a country song.



TOM HIDDLESTON

ELIZABETH OLSEN

CHERRY JONES

BRADLEY WHITFORD

MADDIE HASSON

WRENN SCHMIDT

I SAW THE LIGHT

Tragically, "Hank" Williams died in West Virginia on his way to a concert less than three months after his onstage wedding. He was only 29 years old. His autopsy stated "insufficiency of the right ventricle of the heart" as the cause of death, but a life of hard living and his habitual abuse of alcohol certainly contributed to his early demise. That evening, when the gathered crowd realized that their beloved country star was indeed dead, they all sang out "I Saw the Light" in his memory.

Actor George Hamilton starred as "Hank" Williams in the 1964 biopic "Your Cheating Heart," while English actor Tom Hiddleston appeared in the most recent film on "Hank" Williams' life (2015), "I Saw The Light" (filmed in Shreveport).

Not long after Williams' death, Bilie Jean married Country recording artist Johnny Horton in September 1953, who "Hank" believed would some day make it big. He was right. Horton had a huge hit in 1959 with "The Battle of New Orleans."

Many New Orleanians anxiously await the return of the Municipal Auditorium, home through the years to numerous appearances by celebrities of all kinds. It has hosted Carnival balls, the Circus, ice hockey and even a famous Country Western wedding.

To make that happen, it's going to take a great deal of renovation and a whole lot of spring cleaning.

NED HÉMARD

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