

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Universal Acclaim

What could the following possibly have in common: A famous New Orleans courtyard, "The Titanic", a movie mogul and his mistress, "Citizen Kane", Universal Studios, mysterious deaths and Nazi prison camps? The story all begins in 1816.



Brulatour Courtyard, old postcard view

In 1816 Francois Seignouret of Bordeaux, France, constructed a three-story *entresol* townhouse fronting his Royal Street property. An *entresol* is a low story situated above the first floor. There he operated an upholstery and furniture business and later a wine importing firm. The building's hidden interior, the Brulatour Courtyard, is one of the French Quarter's most identifiable landmarks. With its mysterious bending stairway behind a huge arch, the historic patio's fan windows and doors have attracted artists and photographers for years. Early studies in oil or charcoal show a massive pottery olive jar. Later photographs reveal that a fountain has replaced the jar. And it is the world of photography and film, along with the Brulatour name, that gives this tale its life.

Pierre Ernest Brulatour, also a wine importer from Bordeaux, bought the Seignouret building in 1870, the same year his grandson Jules was born.

Pierre Ernest Jules Brulatour, born in New Orleans on April 7, 1870, to Thomas and Marie Mossy Brulatour, was one of the foremost pioneering figures in the early days of the motion picture industry. A Tulane graduate, Jules Brulatour (after working as a modest clerk for a New Orleans cotton factor) landed a job with the Manhattan Optical Company in 1898 as a sales rep, and by 1907 he became the distribution chief in the United States for raw film stock from *Lumière Frères*. He then joined forces with Carl Laemmle in creating the Motion Picture Distributing and Sales Company in 1909. This consolidation weakened Edison's strong position and it also cut into Kodak mogul George Eastman's profits. Brulatour was then offered a contract with Eastman that put him in charge of Kodak distribution, as well. He made huge profits from the volume of film sold in the burgeoning movie industry.

Brulatour co-founded Peerless Pictures and was a producer for the French film company known as *Éclair*. Another pastry was *Éclair's* leading lady, Dorothy Gibson (already a famous artist's model), who became a popular star in a number of dramas and comedy hits, such as *Hands Across the Sea* (1911) and *Love Finds a Way* (1912). Off-screen, she was a personal hit with Mr. Brulatour. In 1911 she began a six-year love affair with the movie tycoon, although he and first wife Clara Isabelle Blouin were still married - and with three children. Brulatour was almost twice Gibson's age (forty-one years to her twenty-two) when they met at a film company ball. "It happened before I knew it," Gibson later recalled. "Only in youth can we love so much and so unwisely."

To make things even more interesting, on April 15, 1912, Dorothy and her mother (returning from a European vacation) survived the sinking of the "RMS Titanic" aboard lifeboat 7. Dorothy soon acted in a tremendously popular film, *Saved From the Titanic*, based on the event. Having written the scenario for this one-reeler, she essentially playing herself and wore the same white silk evening dress. Brulatour backed the movie, released just a month after the disaster. No prints are known to exist and film historians consider this to be one of the great losses of the silent film era.



Dorothy Gibson by Harrison Fisher, 1911

Meanwhile, Brulatour teamed up again with Laemmle to form Universal Film Manufacturing Company, later known as Universal Pictures. Begun in 1912, the corporation brought together competing studios into a spectacular reservoir of resources and talent. Brulatour served as Universal's first president, and Universal City Studios would soon follow. Universal (one of the six major motion picture studios) is the second oldest in the United States. Paramount is a month older.

In 1913 Dorothy killed a pedestrian while driving Brulatour's sports car in New York. The ensuing high-profile court case revealed the fact that Dorothy was Jules' mistress. Although he was already separated, this created a scandal followed by a divorce in 1915. When Jules and Dorothy married in 1917, Jules was a very rich man (reportedly worth several million dollars) but the marriage only lasted two years. First wife Clare died in 1924 from injuries in a car accident in Egypt.

Much has been written to suggest that Orson Welles' film *Citizen Kane* was all about William Randolph Hearst. But much of the story was

actually drawn from the lives of Jules and Dorothy Brulatour. The film's character, Susan Alexander, may have been partly based on Dorothy Gibson (the highest paid movie actress in the world at the time of her premature retirement).

Brulatour married a third time in 1923 to actress Hope Hampton, a redheaded beauty who had attended Newcomb College. Dorothy, on the other hand, never remarried. She and her mother settled in France in 1928 where Dorothy appears to have gotten involved in Fascist politics and espionage. She apparently switched allegiances once the war was under way, was arrested by the Gestapo, imprisoned, escaped and incarcerated again until 1944.



Brulatour with actress wife, Hope Hampton

The last twenty years of Jules Brulatour's life were less dynamic than his early ones. His wife Hope was quite the entertainer and was dubbed in the society columns as the "Duchess of Park Avenue". Jules was wounded in 1939 by a would-be assassin (or possibly himself) but would never reveal to the police who pulled the trigger.

Jules Brulatour, often in the public eye, would cheerfully tell photographers, "Take all the pictures you want. It uses film and that's good for my business."

Dorothy died of a heart attack in her quarters at the *Hôtel Ritz* in Paris February 17, 1946. Jules died in New York in October that same year. Jules' son from his first marriage, Claude Jules Brulatour was

vacationing in Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1961 with his wife. It was decided that, strangely, the couple both died of heart attacks on the same night.

The Brulatour mansion (today owned by the Historic New Orleans Collection) was purchased and restored in 1918 by tobacco company executive and philanthropist William Ratcliffe Irby. The 520 Royal Street home became his residence, and in 1921 he provided quarters in the rear of the building for the Arts and Crafts Club of New Orleans. Irby rescued other significant French Quarter buildings until his death in 1926.

WDSU Television had its studios in the Seignouret-Brulatour building from 1950 until the move in 1996 to its new corporate headquarters on Howard Avenue and Baronne. This NBC affiliate is today owned by Hearst Television, Inc. (formerly Hearst-Argyle Television). In 2009, Hearst Corporation announced that it would buy up virtually all of the stock of Hearst-Argyle not held by Hearst. "Argyle" was then dropped from the corporate name, and the company became a wholly owned subsidiary of the Hearst Corporation (named for old William Randolph Hearst). To that one can only say:

"Rosebud!"



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