

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Wisdom of the Ages

The burning of the Royal Library in Alexandria, Egypt, is noteworthy for the historic loss of thousands of irreplaceable scrolls and books, the wisdom of the ancients. This conflagration has become the very symbol of the destruction of the world's knowledge and culture. The Great Library, like nine of the streets in New Orleans, was dedicated to the Muses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who preside over the arts and sciences. And it wasn't just one fire that finished it off. There were four possible occasions for the Library's complete or partial destruction: the first occurring at the time of Julius Caesar's Civil War in 48 BC and the last coming with the Muslim conquest of Egypt in, or after, 642 AD.



The burning of the Great Library at Alexandria, Egypt

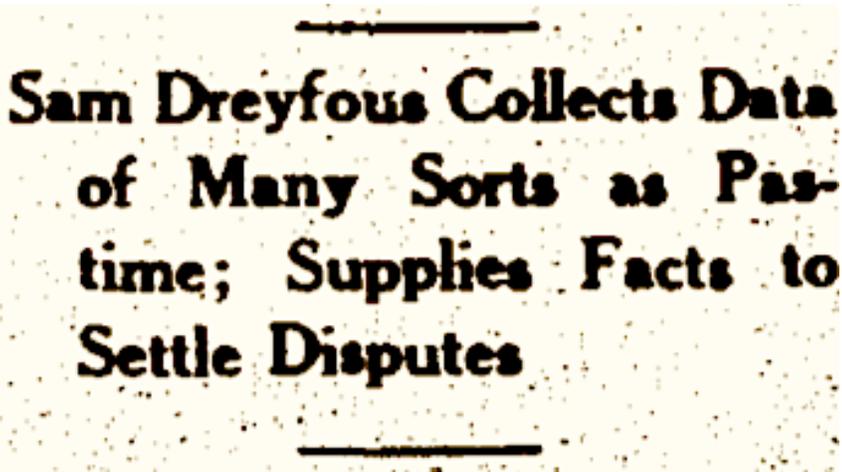
Perhaps contained within the famous Library were the works of lyric poet Simonides of Ceos (c. 556 – 468 BC). According to myth, he was the clever Greek who invented the technique known as the "mind

palace” after attending a banquet gone wrong. He ventured outside the banquet hall as the building was collapsing behind him. Though the victims inside were too badly crushed for their remains to be identified, Simonides was able to put a name with each body based on his vivid recollection of where they had been sitting in the hall. That mnemonic device, also known as the “method of loci” or the “mind palace,” is familiar to viewers of BBC/Masterpiece’s *Sherlock*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch.

There’s also a popular proverb, thought to be African in origin, conveying a similar message: “When an old person dies, a library burns to the ground.”

Today, there’s a tsunami of knowledge stored digitally on our computers to retrieve if only we know the right places to look for it.

But on August 2, 1936, according to an article in the *Times-Picayune*, the go-to source in New Orleans for “world events, Louisiana history, believe-it-or-not facts, price trends, yellow fever statistics and how to fix plumbing” was Sam Dreyfous of 2708 South Carrollton Avenue.



**Sam Dreyfous Collects Data
of Many Sorts as Pas-
time; Supplies Facts to
Settle Disputes**

Sam, almost 85 years old back then, worked since he was “14 years old, because he wanted to.” Although a clothing merchant like his father before him, whenever he saw anything interesting about “plumbing, mechanics, carpentry, the care of birds or the sales resistance of Arctic dwellers,” Sam would just clip it and file it away within his special system.

Then old Sam would sit by silently as others engaged in loquacious debates, “those arguments or discussions in which the fixed beliefs of participants concerning matters of which they know next to nothing contribute so devastatingly to the ignorance of the world.” At the first opportunity, Sam would ascend to the little room on the second floor of his residence, which was also “his night chamber, his office, his study and his storehouse of facts and figures.”

After opening a looseleaf notebook, with information on subjects he had collected for over a half-century, indexed from A to Z, he would locate "the topic of discussion which ... incited him to investigation." Opposite the line would be a number, leading to a stack of boxes upon a cabinet where he would find the corresponding number. An envelope or brochure dealing with the controversy would be produced the next day to "show, unobtrusively, to some erring expounder, in black and white, just how and wherein he ... erred."

Sam didn't remember all these facts, but he did recall quite accurately just where to find where he filed them. Some facts, however, he did indeed remember.

He remembered, for example, "sitting in mud in Jackson Square in a white skirt when he 4 years old to watch the unveiling of the Andrew Jackson statue," which took place February 9, 1856.



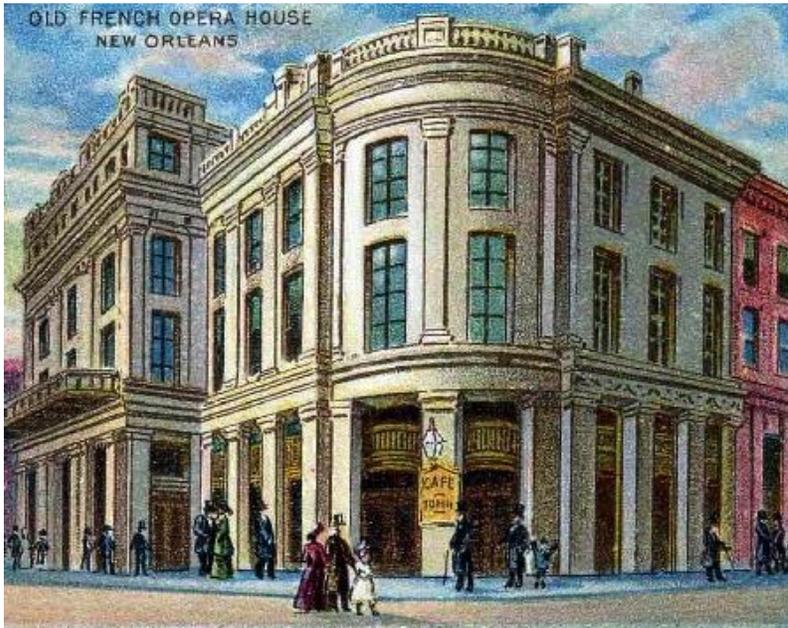
Jackson Square, 1855, by J. Dürler, Pessou & Simon lithographers

Six years later, Mr. Dreyfus remembered when Farragut's gunboats "came around the bend of the Mississippi river" as citizens scooped "sugar in buckets from the barrels in the warehouses and throwing them upon the huge bonfires of cotton bales set up with their own hands to keep supplies from the enemy."

Sam's recollections of the evening of September 14, 1874, were a bit more macabre. In the darkness along the riverfront after the so-called "Battle of Liberty Place," there appeared to be fireflies in abundance. Not a participant for either side in the fighting, Sam realized that the fireflies were instead "lighted matches in the hands of human wharf rats, pillaging the dead."

Sam witnessed quite a lot to program into his extensive memory bank.

Sam's father, Jacob Dreyfus, was a native of Alsace and distant relative of the famous Alfred Dreyfus, the French artillery officer who "won final vindication of the charge of treason against France." A wealthy merchant of the French Quarter, the senior Dreyfus' home stood on the corner of Toulouse and Decatur. Sam remembered sneaking out at night from the old homestead, swinging himself over to an adjoining gallery and down a drainpipe to a late-night engagement as a supernumerary at the French Opera House. It was a way to meet the Parisian ballet dancers, an activity banned by an older brother.



The Old French Opera House on Bourbon Street

Another vivid memory in Sam's life is right out of the movies. A "mercantile rival in a small Louisiana town" informed Sam with a loaded shotgun that "the town wasn't large enough to hold both of them." Sam faced the man down telling him to "shoot now," since "he could be disposed of in no other manner." His adversary didn't pull the trigger after all. The *Picayune* stated that one would never know by Sam's "benign appearance" that he had been "thrown in contact with the roughest and readiest swashbucklers of those past generations."

At 14 years of age, Sam was selling clothes to flatboat men at Cogan's store on Canal Street near the Custom House. Mr. Cogan, known as "the Happy Irishman," hired Sam to sweep and clean windows. Sam was clever and ingratiated himself with all "the money-jingling boatmen and practically captured their trade." He earned a raise in salary just two weeks after he began. On reaching the age of 21, he began keeping a record of his weekly earnings which, sixty-three years later, he still had – complete! Ever the salesman, Sam loved working on commission rather than earning a salary.

HUGE COLLECTION OF 'FACT SCRAPS' KEPT BY DREYFUS



During Sam's 70 years of active labor, he did everything that involved clothing. He peddled goods in the Bayou Teche country and traveled all over Louisiana representing various employers. For 47 years he was a salesman with a large Canal Street concern. And each year he filed away a plethora of amazing facts and statistics.

In 1878 he married Carrie Walsh, and they had a daughter, Leonie D. Frankel. Through the years, Sam loved the process of refreshing his memory by chatting with customers and old acquaintances. Over time, the ones that lasted became known as "old-timers."

"There are so few of them left," sighed Sam. "So few."

Sam attributed his good health and energy to finding pleasure in seeing that "everbody get along well."

"I never have let myself be jealous about the other fellow's success. On the contrary, I make it a point to be there with congratulations." And whenever Sam saw a friend who was "downcast and discouraged," he would not leave until he could get him to smile.

Sam believed everyone should "have an outside interest," and his, he explained, was "this collection of mine." Knowledge – what a worthwhile thing to collect!

A few years after the article on Sam's unique knowledge-filing system appeared, Sam reached the age of 91 (not nearly as old as some of our seniors today). On January 5, 1944 at the Touro-Shakespeare Home, old Sam Dreyfus died and a library burned to the ground.

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