

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

You Had To Ax

Ax or axe? The spelling more commonly used in the United States is ax and, in Great Britain, axe, although in neither nation is there a great deal of consistency. In New Orleans, you'd have to ax someone (or is it axe?).

Now this author doesn't have a particular axe to grind (or ax), a phrase commonly attributed to Benjamin Franklin or Charles Miner. It is difficult to trace its origin, as both men wrote and printed cautionary metaphorical tales concerning the sharpening of axes (as well as numerous axioms).

New Orleans has had quite a history with axes. Some may remember perennial segregationist candidate and self-proclaimed racist, Addison Roswell Thompson, who ran for Louisiana governor (1959, 1963 and 1975) and Mayor of New Orleans (1965, 1969 and 1973). In all, this bigoted Don Quixote (and owner of a small taxi company) ran for office fourteen times as an avowed Klansman. His motto was "Put the Axes to the Taxes!"

And axes figured prominently in New Orleans music. The Meters' wonderful novelty song, "They All Asked for You", runs down the list of creatures at the Audubon Zoo, the Deep Blue Sea and the Big Old Sky that "all axed for you".

Another great New Orleans song recorded by Roger & the Gypsies in 1969 was the infectious funky instrumental entitled "Pass the Hatchet". It was appropriately punctuated with voices chanting enthusiastically "Let me chop it, let me chop it, LET ME CHOP IT!"

Earl Stanley was lead guitarist for the band, named for his cousin Roger Leon (who came up with the song's title). It became the first hit record for Joe Banashak's Seven-B label, and the late great Eddie Bo served as the producer and arranger.

The soundtrack to the film "Desperado" (with Antonio Banderas and Salma Hayek) earnestly endeavored to capture the style of "Pulp Fiction", and Quentin Tarantino appeared in the movie. Upon Tarantino's entrance into the bar, "Pass the Hatchet" was playing in the background. "Aww, pass off the hatchet, baby!"

But these were not the only songs about axes. Joseph John Davilla wrote another. Born in New Orleans in 1885, Davilla obtained a patent in 1924 (No. 1,428,277) for a music roll perforator and printer. But he was more famous as a composer, having written Sophie Tucker's novelty number, "Give Me Back My Husband, You've Had Him Long Enough".

He was even more famous for a song he wrote concerning a New Orleans serial killer entitled "The Mysterious Axman's Jazz or (Don't Scare Me Papa)". Life Magazine's "Greatest Unsolved Mysteries of all Time" describes the song as being "composed specifically for the night targeted by the Axman and was performed lustily throughout the city". By midnight almost every house and night spot in town was alive with music. How it came to pass that this ax murderer prompted the performance of this new composition and other jazz music all through that night is but another tale of the Crescent City shrouded in mystery.

Just after dawn on the morning of May 22, 1918, the New Orleans police were called to the corner of Upperline and Magnolia streets and discovered a horrific sight. A grocer named Joseph Maggio and his wife, Catherine, lay sprawled on their bed covered with blood. Both victims had been struck several times in the face, and Catherine's throat had been cut so violently that her head was almost severed from her body. An ax (propped up in their bath) and a straight razor were found at the scene. The razor belonged to Joseph's brother, Andrew, who found the bodies with brother Jake. Andrew was arrested but cleared for lack of evidence.

Other attacks came two weeks later. Grocer Louis Besumer survived, but his mistress Anna Lowe did not. In March the Axman performed the grisly act of killing a father and his two-year-old daughter (the mother survived). The Maggios were the first of no fewer than twelve victims of a murderer who killed until the autumn of 1919 and stopped as mysteriously as he had started. The killer who earned the sobriquet "Axman of New Orleans" was perhaps the first serial killer since Jack the Ripper who wrote tauntingly about his exploits to the press. Each victim (most were Italian and either grocers or bakers) was brutally attacked in his own residence by an assailant who gained entry by carefully chiseling a panel out of the backdoor. And on each occasion, the murder weapon was left behind for the police to find.

This bloody bogeyman wrote to the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* to directly threaten the city. His missive postmarked "Hell, March 13, 1919" was addressed to "Esteemed Mortal":

"They have never caught me and they never will. They have never seen me for I am invisible, even as the ether that that surrounds your earth. I am not a human being, but a spirit and a demon from the hottest hell. I am what you Orleanians and your foolish police call the Axeman."

Claiming a "close relationship with the Angel of Death", he continued:

"at 12:15 (earthly time) on next Tuesday night, I am going to pass over New Orleans. In my infinite mercy, I am going to make a little proposition to you people. Here it is: I am very fond of jazz music, and I and I swear by all the devils in the nether regions that every person shall be spared in whose home a jazz band is in full swing at the time I have just mentioned. If everyone has a jazz band going, well, then, so much the better for you people."

He went on to write that any "people who do not jazz it on Tuesday night" would "get the axe".

The Axman spared New Orleans that evening (maybe because of all the jazz), but he returned later that same year to claim at least three more lives, the last of them that of another grocer named Mike Pepitone. In December 1920, Pepitone's widow was arrested in Los Angeles after shooting dead a man whose name is generally listed as Joseph Mumfre (who she recognized to be the New Orleans Axman). Yet aside from Mrs. Pepitone's testimony, there was insufficient evidence to directly link Mumfre to any of the murders.

There have been over the years faint suggestions that the Axman had some connection with the Black Hand, or Mafia, and New Orleans was the first city in the United States to have a Mafia family of its own (dating back to at least 1879). It is plausible to believe that the attacks on Italian grocers attributed to the Axman of New Orleans were actually by-products of extortion and vendettas fought among the Mafiosi of the city. The Ripper-like correspondence with the press may have been the perfect cover for these activities. Nevertheless, the ax murders of New Orleans remain unsolved to this day. And the mystery of why this diabolical axman loved jazz music will probably never be known. But, of course, you just had to ax.

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