Fascinating Facts, Part 3

The Other Mark Twain

Most of you are probably aware that Samuel Langhorne Clemens (November 30, 1835 – April 21, 1910) is more popularly known by his pen name Mark Twain. American writer, humorist and lecturer, he spent time as a cub pilot on the Mississippi River between New Orleans and St. Louis, and his nom de plume came from a water depth measurement term. A “mark” was the same as a fathom on the sea, or six feet. “Twain” signified the number two. And the person on the riverboat, who took the soundings with a lead line and called them out to the pilot in the pilothouse, was called the leadsman. His cry, “mark twain,” two times six, or twelve feet deep, was a “safe water” depth for a steamboat of the day.

What you perhaps did not know is that Sam Clemens was not the first writer to use the famous pseudonym, “Mark Twain”. That honor belongs to Captain Isaiah Sellers, who is said to have made more than 460 round trips to New Orleans from various points up the river. “This ancient mariner” (as Clemens called him) also contributed river reports to the New Orleans Picayune that afforded much delight to younger pilots such as Sam Clemens. Captain Sellers would provide his opinions and prophesies and recite incidents and comparisons on the river dating back as far as 1811, the year the first steamboat, the New Orleans, “disturbed the waters of the Mississippi.”

Isaiah Sellers, Master of the splendid steamboat ALTON, The New Orleans Picayune, July 28, 1839

Clemens later wrote in Life on the Mississippi, “The old gentleman ... used to jot down brief paragraphs of plain practical information about
the river, and sign them ‘MARK TWAIN,’ and give them to the New Orleans Picayune. They related to the stage and condition of the river, and were accurate and valuable.”

Young Sam seized upon the idea of parodying the old captain’s reports by writing a humorous burlesque version of his own. Published in the New Orleans True Delta in May 1859, Clemens’ satirical piece was a “preposterous” tale of a cruise made in 1763 with a Chinese captain and a Choctaw Indian crew. The unfortunate result was that Captain Sellers was offended and hurt and never again wrote for the newspapers. His “literary pride had been wounded,” reported an article in the Times-Picayune, dated April 10, 1921.

From “Louisiana Lore and Legend” by Roy Aymond, Time-Picayune, October 17, 1937

“It was a great pity,” Clemens explained, “for it did nobody any worthy service, and it sent a pang deep into a good man’s heart. There was no malice in my rubbish; but it laughed at the captain … a man to
whom such a thing was new and strange and dreadful. I did not know then ... that there is no suffering comparable with that which a private person feels when he is for the first time pilloried in print.”

“Captain Sellers did me the honor to profoundly detest me from that day forth,” Clemens later explained. “He never printed another paragraph while he lived, and he never again signed ‘Mark Twain’ to anything. At the time that the telegraph brought the news of his death, I was on the Pacific coast. I was a fresh new journalist, and needed a nom de guerre; so I confiscated the ancient mariner’s discarded one, and have done my best to make it remain what it was in his hands — a sign and symbol and warrant that whatever is found in its company may be gambled on as being the petrified truth; how I have succeeded, it would not be modest in me to say.”

An article entitled “California Items” in the December 23rd, 1866, issue of the Picayune announced, “Mr. Sam Clemens (‘Mark Twain’) is delivering his amusing lectures at San Francisco.”

Captain Isaiah Sellers, born circa 1802-1803, died of pneumonia in Memphis, Tennessee, March 3, 1864. He chose to be buried in Bellefontaine Cemetery in St. Louis, Missouri. His beautiful tomb
marker is a striking monument to his many years behind the wheel of steamboats on the Mississippi. “It is his image, in marble, standing on duty at the pilot wheel; and worthy to stand and confront criticism, for it represents a man who in life would have stayed there till he burned to a cinder, if duty required it.” (from Life on the Mississippi).

Tomb of Captain Isaiah Sellers, the first “Mark Twain”

It was only after Sellers’ death that Samuel Clemens began to use the name “Mark Twain” as a tribute to the old gentleman mariner and made it live on forever.

Clemens explained it in a letter, stating, “as he could no longer need that signature, I laid violent hands upon it without asking permission of the proprietor’s remains. This is the history of the nom de plume I bear.”
Moonlight Over Hollandaise

At the historic and internationally acclaimed Galatoire’s Restaurant in the French Quarter, it would not be unusual to encounter David Gooch, fourth generation descendant of Jean Galatoire, the restaurant's founder.

David has seen it all over the years: a countless stream of celebrities; “Blue Dog” artwork painted upon a tablecloth and a loaf of French bread by the late artist George Rodrigue; and a telephone call from then-President Ronald Reagan. The president had placed the call to then retired U.S. Senator J. Bennett Johnston of Louisiana who was standing in line that Friday, like all the other eager customers. After the President’s call was completed, the senator graciously returned to his place in line. Now, that’s New Orleans!

According to an article in The Tulanian, David has also observed that whenever there is a full moon in the Crescent City, the hollandaise sauce breaks down. “I've noticed it a number of times — the sauce separates. You can bring it back, but it's a pain. When it comes around full moon time, I keep a good eye on the hollandaise sauce.”

Seersucker and Madras

When did “Madras” and “Seersucker” first arrive in the Crescent City?
Was it back in 1909 when Joseph Haspel founded his eponymous clothing line and determined that a puckered cloth called seersucker from India would stand up as a fabric to his native New Orleans heat?

Or was it during the “preppy” 60s when we danced the night away to “Double Shot (Of My Baby’s Love)” (1966) by The Swingin’ Medallions, all dressed in Madras slacks?

No, think much further back in time — like shortly after the Louisiana Purchase, more than two centuries ago.

The above advertisement in the *Louisiana State Gazette*, February 11, 1811, lists “Seersuckers” and “Madras” handkerchiefs for sale by Hugh Monro & Co., Toulouse Street, New Orleans.
Madras handkerchiefs were advertised even earlier in New Orleans publications.

Ad in the Telegraphe et le Commercial Advertiser, July 21, 1804

In 1962, a GANT Madras shirt cost only $5.95 to $8.95 at Rubenstein’s Madison Shop.
As you can see, “puckered” and “bleeding” fabrics were available in New Orleans much earlier than you may have thought possible.

And for those of us who remember the Swingin’ Medallions in their Madras trousers, Louisiana had its own Baton Rouge-based band that dressed just the same: The Greek Fountains. Shown below in all their Madras splendor, they opened for such concert performers as Sonny and Cher, The Animals, Paul Revere and the Raiders and the Dave Clark Five. Their big (regional) hit on Mercury Records was “Counting The Steps”.

“Counting The Steps” was written by drummer Cyril Vetter (lower right in the above photo), who also wrote “Double Shot (Of My Baby’s Love), recorded by The Swingin’ Medallions. In 2003, Vetter produced Deacon John’s critically acclaimed and award-winning music CD,
concert video and documentary film, entitled “Deacon John’s Jump Blues”; and in 2010 he was inducted into The Louisiana Music Hall of Fame. “Deacon John” Moore was a 2000 inductee in The Louisiana Blues Hall of Fame and a 2008 inductee in The Louisiana Music Hall of Fame.

Rock ‘n’ Roll Is Here To Stay?

Fantastic lineup of Rock ‘n’ Roll stars, concert at the Loyola Field House, two shows on May 19, 1956, N.O. States: Bill Haley and his Comets (“Rock Around The Clock”), Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters (“Honey Love”), Big Joe Turner (“Shake, Rattle and Roll”), Frankie Lymon and The Teenagers (“Why Do Fools Fall in Love”), The Platters (“Only You”), Bo Diddley (“Bo Diddley”/”I’m A Man”), The Teen Queens (“Eddie, My Love”), The Flamingos (three years before “I Only Have Eyes For You”) and so much more!

On Saturday, June 23, 1956, Eisenhower was the nation’s president, “Uncle Earl” Long was governor of Louisiana and “Chep” Morrison was
mayor of New Orleans. The *Times-Picayune* reported that the last piling for the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway had been driven the day before, and Gogi Grant had the number one song in the country: “The Wayward Wind”. But a new personality, regarded as one of the most significant cultural icons of the 20th Century, was making a huge splash across the nation. Elvis Presley had recorded his first songs for RCA earlier that year, on January 10th.

Today’s condominium and townhome community, DeLimon Place in Old Metairie was yesterday’s Rock ‘n’ Roll central at the DO Drive-In

Remembered fondly as the “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll” or simply “The King”, Elvis would dominate Billboard’s number one spots for most of 1956.
But just what were New Orleans columnists of the time thinking about these two new phenomena, namely Elvis and Rock ‘n’ Roll?

One of the *Times-Picayune*’s reporters during the 1950s was Pen Wilson, who had a Sunday column entitled “Point of View”. In 1960, he left for Washington, D. C., to work as administrative assistant to Louisiana Congressman F. Edward Hebert.

*Pontchartrain Beach the scene of a “nervous epidemic, July 28, 1955; Fats headline, Times Picayune, September 20, 1956 and Elvis at the Municipal Auditorium, two shows, August 12, 1956*

Commenting on the pages of the *Picayune* that June 23rd, Mr. Wilson offered an interesting take on the subject. First, he correctly opined that this Rock ‘n’ Roll was neither immoral nor nothing new to the Crescent City. Fats Domino had a similar observation that Rock “n’ Roll “wasn't anything but the same rhythm and blues I’d been playing down in New Orleans.”
However, he didn’t think Rock ‘n’ Roll would last. Here are Pen Wilson’s words:

“Nothing is really new, they say, and in New Orleans we are particularly aware that Rock ‘n’ Roll is old hat indeed.

Why our blues shouters have been doing just that for over half a century and King Oliver and his likes were playing it all along.

New Orleans’ own Fats Domino explained that the kids couldn’t dance to “bebop”. “It ain’t got a beat,” he said. “Rock ‘n’ roll has a good steady beat. When the kids heard it, they liked it.”

To call Rock ‘n’ Roll immoral is a new low. We recall in the late 1930s, when Benny Goodman played at the Paramount in New York, that the kids danced in the aisles and once the cops were called out when the whole joint nearly jumped across Times Square. It wasn’t immoral in the ’30s and it’s not immoral in the ’50s.

Personally, we can get along very nicely, thank you, without Rock ‘n’ Roll. In fact, if we could find out just what it is that Elvis Presley wants, we’d be glad to take up a collection and maybe he’d go away.
Meanwhile, we have nothing to fear but Rock ‘n” Roll itself. It’ll last no longer than “The Tennessee Waltz” lasted and 20 years from now the kids will still be dancing in the aisles, only then it’ll be the Shimmy or the Bunny Hug.”

Twenty years later, Paul McCartney and Wings had the number one song in the country, “Silly Love Songs.” The kids were dancin’ to a disco beat, but Rock ‘n’ Roll was still going strong.

And today in the 21st Century, it’s still very much “here to stay”

**NED HÉMARD**

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