

Odd Bits

Beloved American children's author, cartoonist and poet, Dr. Seuss (real name Theodor Seuss Geisel, 1904 - 1991) once famously remarked, "You have to be odd to be number one." So don't be afraid of things that are a bit offbeat. Embrace the odd bits, which are much more interesting than the commonplace ones.

Odd, in addition to its definition as "not even" numerically, can mean differing in nature from that which is ordinary, usual or expected; or it can mean singular or peculiar in a strange or eccentric way. Odd may also describe something that is fantastic or bizarre.



Before John Law's "Mississippi Bubble" that helped finance France's Louisiana colony, Jan Brueghel the Younger painted "Satire on Tulip Mania" (segment shown above) circa 1640, poking fun at foolish speculators and tulip merchants gambling their fortunes away.

A bit is a small quantity of something, from the Old English *bita* meaning "bite or mouthful," of Germanic origin; related to the German word *bissen*, meaning to bite. A bit, in computerese, is the smallest unit of measurement used to quantify computer data. It contains a single binary value of 0 or 1. You may also think that it comes from the same source, since it, too, is a small quantity of something. But you'd be wrong. Bit in computer jargon is short for "binary digit".

But let's not bite off more than we can chew. It's time now to embrace some "odd bits" of New Orleans history and culture.

In the beginning, there was *lumière*, the French word for light. Then there was that philosophical, cultural, literary and intellectual period known as the *Age of Enlightenment* that dominated the world of ideas in Europe during the 18th century, known as the *Siècle des Lumières* (Century of Enlighteners) in France. The *Lumières* movement, almost exclusively a development of the ideas of Renaissance humanism, was dominated by the ideas of Isaac Newton, John Locke, Pierre Bayle and Baruch Spinoza.

And let us not forget the Lumière brothers, French inventors who pioneered the early manufacturer of photographic equipment and devised an early motion-picture camera and projector called the *Cinématographe*.

Lumière was also a character in Walt Disney Pictures' *Beauty and the Beast* (1991).



The character Lumière, from Beauty and the Beast

Anthropomorphism, the reader should remember, is the word meaning the attribution of human characteristics, emotions or behavior to animals, inanimate objects or to gods. In this case the object was a French candelabra. And he wasn't alone. Other characters in *Beauty and the Beast* are the humanized Featherduster, Mrs. Potts (the wise housekeeper-turned-teapot, whose nose is her spout) , Cogsworth (the Clock), Chip (the teacup) and, last but not least, *Lumière*.

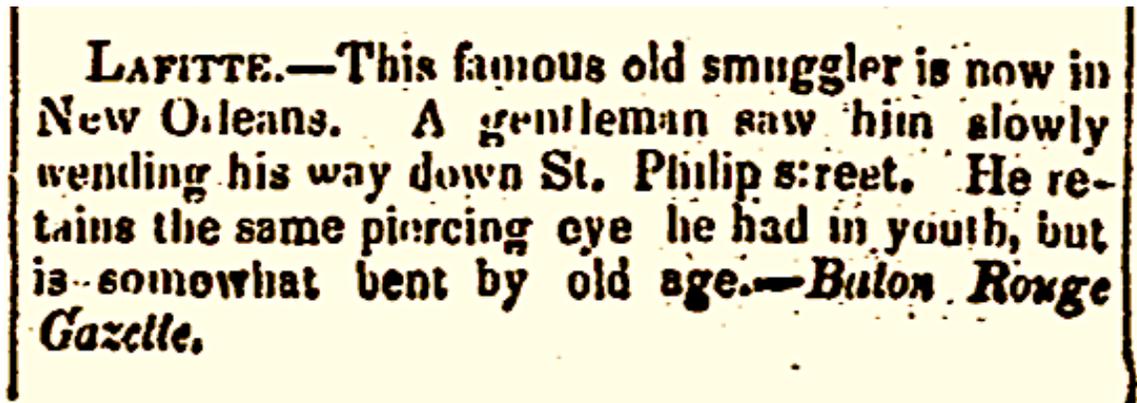
But if you think *Lumière* was a relatively recent idea, think again.



The exquisitely costumed "Candelabrum Masker" (above), from The Mistick Krewe of Comus' The "Triumph of Epicurus", 1867

The beautifully illustrated plate of this multi-candled reveler is featured in Perry Young's *The Mistick Krewe, Chronicles of Comus and His Kin*, Copyright, 1931, Renewed 1959. Disney animators could do no better than this extraordinary New Orleans Carnival creation. The "Candelabrum Masker" proceeded behind "Le Gourmand" and other *papier-mâché* clad Mistick Krewe members representing humanized food items in a three-course dinner, such as raw Oysters, Macaroni and, of course, a "roast plate of garlanded Boeuf-Gras".

Even odder was a news clipping from March 1841:



LAFITTE.—This famous old smuggler is now in New Orleans. A gentleman saw him slowly wending his way down St. Philip street. He retains the same piercing eye he had in youth, but is somewhat bent by old age.—Baton Rouge Gazette.

What makes this particularly strange is that, according to historian William C. Davis in his definitive *The Pirates Laffite: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf* (2005), Laffite, wounded in battle, is said to have died just after dawn on February 5, 1823. He was buried at sea in the Gulf of Honduras. The Colombian newspaper *Gaceta de Cartagena* published his passing, noting, "the loss of this brave naval officer is moving." No American newspaper carried the famous privateer's obituary.

So who was Laffite's doppelgänger? Or was it really the famous old smuggler wending his way through the French Quarter?

Perhaps the mysterious gentleman was following some "New Orleans Ladies", who according the words of the song by Louisiana's LeRoux "sashay by" ... "All the way from Bourbon Street to Esplanade."

"Sashay" is one of those great words frequently used in the Crescent City to describe the act of walking confidently while moving ones hips from side to side in a way that attracts the appropriate attention. The word was first used in the mid 19th century as a corruption of the French word *chassé*, which is a gliding dance step. It could also be

used to describe someone taking his or her sweet time while walking in quite a casual manner.

That description fits my most memorable local experience upon hearing "sashay" used in a sentence. I was in an elevator one day at the old main branch of the Whitney Bank when I spied someone walking down the hall toward us. But then a voice next to me chimed in, "Leave him behind. Hit the button."

"Why I asked?" somewhat perplexed.

He was "sashaying," I was told. "Leave him. Hit the button."

"Sashay" is also in the first lines of the wonderfully energetic *Tremé Song* by New Orleans singer John Boutté:

"Hangin' in the Tremé
Watchin' people sashay
Past my steps
By my porch
In front of my door"

And RuPaul (full name RuPaul Andre Charles), probably the world's most successful drag queen, repeats the phrase "Sashay! Shantay!" in the chorus of his (or her) hit song *Supermodel (You Better Work)*. His name "Ru" is of a Louisiana provenance, derived from *roux*, the all-important base for gumbo, crawfish *etouffée* and other Creole stews and soups. His mom, Ernestine "Toni" Charles, who named him, was, after all, a Louisiana native.

When questioned on the use of "Shantay!" in his 1992 song, RuPaul explained that the word means "to weave a bewitching spell", which he probably borrowed from the French *enchanté*, meaning "enchanted". As for using he or she, him or her, or any other gender pronoun used to address him, RuPaul has been notably indifferent, writing in his autobiography: "You can call me he. You can call me she. You can call me Regis and Kathie Lee; I don't care! Just as long as you call me."

Sashay, it must also be noted, is a move (in American square dancing) in which partners circle each other by taking sideways steps. *Dos-à-dos* (usually spelled "do-si-do" in English) is the name for a move where two dancers circle each other while facing the same direction. Also from the French, meaning "back to back", it is a

popular call in square dancing, along with "Promenade" and "Allemande Left", from the French word for "German". During the 16th century, "The Allemande" was an animated German dance, which was full of turns. Though numerous alternate explanations abound, it is most likely that "Allemande Left" simply means do a left turn as people used to do in the old "Allemande" dance. In square dancing today, it is a move in which two facing dancers take left hands or forearms, turn halfway around to the left, let go, and step forward.

Des Allemands, Louisiana, was settled in 1721 by German immigrants to the Louisiana colony under John Law's paper money scheme known as the "Mississippi Bubble". Located along Bayou Des Allemands, which is the boundary of Lafourche and St. Charles parishes, Des Allemands is a town not known for square dancing but is instead renowned as the "Catfish Capital of the Universe" and hosts the Louisiana Catfish Festival the third weekend in June each year.



Memphis Minnie, nee Lizzie Douglas

Things can be somewhat odd in Louisiana, such as a French word for Germans. Another wonderful oddity is Memphis Minnie, who was not a Memphis native at all. Acclaimed as one of the most influential and

pioneering female blues singers and guitarists of all time, she was born Lizzie Douglas June 3, 1897, in Algiers, Louisiana. Having learned to play banjo and the guitar as a child, Lizzie ran away from home at the young age of thirteen and made her way upriver to Memphis, Tennessee. She joined the Ringling Brothers Circus and was discovered by a talent scout while playing in a Beale Street barbershop.

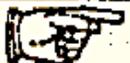
Her *Bumble Bee Blues* and *Me and My Chauffeur Blues* are blues classics; and her song *When The Levee Breaks* (1929) was later covered (in altered form) by both Led Zeppelin and Bob Dylan. Memphis Minnie died in 1973 and was inducted into the Blue's Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1980. Not bad for an Algerene from the West Bank.



To bring all these odd bits together at the end, I should mention the Odd Fellows. Also known as Oddfellows, the Odd Fellowship or Oddfellowship, it is an international fraternal organization dating back to its earliest lodges first documented in 1730 in London. Devoted to fraternity and fellowship, it was introduced in the United States in 1806.

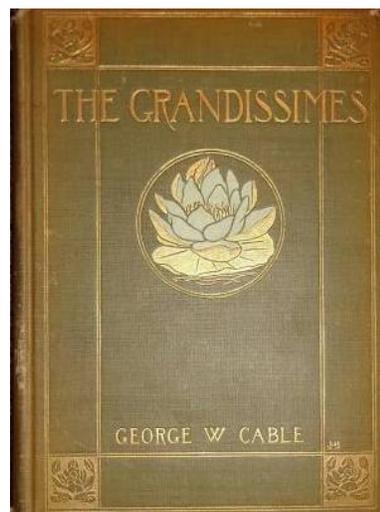
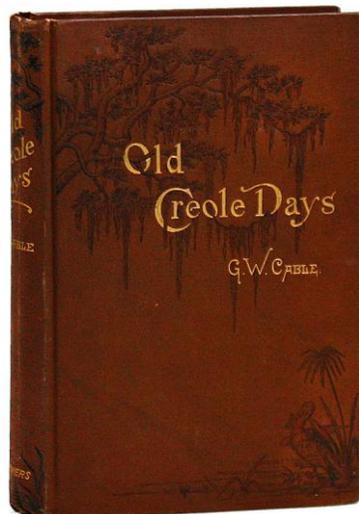
"On January 29, 1848," according to a 1911 article in the *Picayune*, "the Grand Lodge of Odd Fellows of the Louisiana jurisdiction bought a lot of ground on the Metairie Road in the name of the lodge and for the purpose of founding a cemetery." That they did, and in October of that year, "the contract for the first sixty vaults was let." Most New

Orleanians are all-too-familiar with the cemetery at the end of Canal Street known as "Odd Fellows Rest". The organization's symbol, appearing above "Odd Fellows Rest" in the photograph on the previous page — three interlocking rings, or links — represents friendship, love and truth. This symbol first began appearing on regalia and artwork by Odd Fellows Orders in the late 1830s to early 1840s.



To the Members of the Order of Odd Fellows.—The books for subscription of stock in the *Association for the erection of Odd Fellows' Hall in New Orleans*, are now open at the office of F. Haynes, Banks' Arcade. Those members who have subscribed will call and obtain the certificates of their stock from the Secretary. By order of the Commissioners:
014 1m G. W. CABLE, President.

The above newspaper notice posted in the *Picayune* on October 24, 1843, entreated members to subscribe so that an Odd Fellows' Hall might be built. Please note that George Washington Cable, author of *Old Creole Days* (1879) and *The Grandissimes* (1880), was not President. He wasn't born until the year later, October 12, 1844. President of the Commissioners at the time was G. W. Cable, Sr., the author's father. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows had been founded in Louisiana on February 20, 1831, and the senior G. W. Cable, a wholesale merchant, was one of the founders.



The Odd Fellows eventually raised enough money to construct their hall, on land bounded by Camp, Lafayette, Magazine and Girod streets. A fire destroyed that building and the association then acquired property on Camp Street between Poydras and Lafayette streets to build a new hall, dedicated in 1868, which was eventually demolished in 1914. Seized in the 1930s due to unpaid mortgages, the land was acquired by the Pan-American Life Insurance Company for only \$31,000. The Odd Fellows thrived in New Orleans well into the 20th century, but began to wane by the end of World War II. No longer active in the Crescent City, the last local lodge closed in 1979. The Odd Fellows Rest Cemetery, now privately owned, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places the following year.

George Washington Cable, the author, always thought of as an "outsider" in the city, was much criticized by writer Grace King who suggested that he put down New Orleans while trying to please the Northern press. And historian Charles Gayarré characterized Cable's perceptions of Creole New Orleans as "monstrous" and absurdly exaggerated. While his opinions on racial and social inequality brought about a decline in his popularity as a writer in the South, these same critiques earn him accolades today from modern readers and literary critics.

Well, enough talk about odd bits and Odd Fellows. It's time to give this article a rest.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Odd Bits"
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