Absinthe and Athletics

The Aleix Family of New Orleans

The New Orleans Saints, one may be surprised to learn, was not the first athletic organization in the Crescent City to select black and gold as their team colors. It all happened over a century ago.

On September 2, 1872, the New Orleans Athletic Club was envisioned by the youthful mind of Jacinto Charles Aleix, who, along with a group of other young men, decided to construct their very own gymnasium in Aleix’s back yard at 1614 Esplanade Avenue (original address 248 Esplanade). They had checked out Harry Hammersley’s well-equipped operation at 103 St. Charles Street, also known as the American Gymnasium, and believed that enthusiastic young gymnasts who lived below Canal Street should have a similar, if not better, outlet to experience the numerous physical advantages which gymnastic exercises offered and to be able to master the technique of horizontal and parallel bars. Proficiency in fencing and boxing was a further goal they had set for themselves.

Harry Hammersley’s Gymnasium, opposite the St. Charles Theatre, offered the “only resort for the relief of the Debilitated, Mental and physical organization”, and for only $1 per month.

After Aleix and a handful of his friends had erected parallel bars in his back yard, they decided to call themselves the INDEPENDENT GYMNASISTIC CLUB. Aleix became the Club’s first president, and dues were to be a mere 50 cents per month. The Club’s constitution was
drafted with its name officially chosen, and the membership was not to exceed, under any circumstances, more than fourteen members. Like the dues, that too would change. And the President of the Club was required to always “have a gentlemanly deportment carried on at all meetings and show no partiality” and would also see to it that “the Rules and Regulations” would be “strictly enforced.” The Club adopted as its motto, Mens Sana in Corpore Sano (a healthy mind in a healthy body), and “old gold and black” were to be used as the colors, to be used by the members in all gymnastic engagements.

Jacinto Charles Aleix, born circa 1851, son of Joseph Aleix and Emma Goldenbow, as he appeared in the Picayune, September 3, 1897

In addition, members had to be over 16 and under 35 years of age, wear coats and ties, and “be of good moral character and gentlemanly deport” and could never assemble in front of the club “for talk on the banquette.”

Within just two years of the Club’s founding, membership grew to 50 and dues increased to 75 cents per month, necessitating a search for new quarters. A committee was formed May 21, 1873 to find a more
suitable home, and (after renting a couple of back rooms on Canal Street, near Rampart, for a few months) the site ultimately decided upon was an old stable, with its floor covered in sawdust, at the corner of Rampart and Bienville Streets. The Club moved into its new digs in October 1874, and all manner of athletic apparatus, such as dumbbells, Indian clubs, weights and pulleys, found a place on the walls and racks of the new gymnasium.

In 1875, J. C. Aleix’s tenure as president ended, and the name of the Club, was changed, by acclamation, to the YOUNG MEN’S GYMNASTIC CLUB.

Membership climbed to 350, and the old building was in need of repairs. After quadrupling the rent in 1884 and requiring a five-year lease, the landlord also placed full responsibility for all repairs upon the Club. As a result, arrangements were made to purchase an old high school building located at 37-39-41 Burgundy Street for $6,000 cash, and the sale was finalized in February 1885. Continuing to thrive, the Club then bought the old Masich mansion at 44 North Rampart Street, NOAC’s present location. It was originally the home of the widow of Xavier Alexandre Edouard Hardy de Boisblanc, and designed for her by architect James Gallier, Jr. The edifice was remodeled into a club house with imported chandeliers, marble mantelpieces and a large terrazzo lobby. An annex to the house accommodated the Club’s new gymnasium, swimming pool, professional glove contests and other entertainments. And by the time of the Club’s 25 year jubilee in 1897, the Club boasted “magnificent Turkish and Russian baths,” reported the Picayune.
By 1920 and with about 600 members, the club building was in terrible condition and something needed to be done. Irwin F. Poche, athletic director, was instrumental in developing businessmen’s classes and other health programs designed to attract membership. Dances were held in the gym, and a handball court was opened.

After various goals were met, the mansion was demolished in 1929 and the present-day club house was constructed at a cost of $400,000 (almost $6 million in 2018 dollars). Along with a new building came a new name in May 1929: the NEW ORLEANS ATHLETIC CLUB.

NEW ORLEANS ATHLETIC CLUB, 222 N. Rampart Street

From John L. Sullivan to Clark Gable, from Huey Long to Tennessee Williams, many have enjoyed the facilities at the NOAC. Johnny Weismuller swam in the Club’s old saltwater pool. Countless others have taken advantage of the Club’s ballroom, library and barroom.

Today the NOAC proclaims, “An exuberant history ... a sophisticated future!” And, where rules once forbade members from wearing swimsuits in the pool, the Club is no longer just for men. The Club today offers Individual, Family and Student memberships. What Jacinto Charles Aleix began continues today, almost 150 years later.
But years before the establishment of the INDEPENDENT GYMNASTIC CLUB, an earlier Jacinto Aleix was making his mark in the city of New Orleans at the historic “Old Absinthe House”.

Of all the ancient and iconic structures in the New Orleans French Quarter, perhaps none has a more glorified past than the plastered...
brick building at the corner of Bourbon and Bienville streets, known as the “Old Absinthe House”. With an intermediate floor known as an entresol, a fine wrought-iron balcony and beautiful fanlight transom windows, this extraordinary combination commercial and residential building, wasn’t always known by that name.

Jacinto Aleix c h (coffee house), Bienville corner Bourbon, shown in Gardner’s New Orleans Directory 1866

In its over 200 year history, countless celebrities have walked through its doors. This list includes writers Mark Twain, Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, as well as singers, from Jenny Lind to Enrico Caruso, and Frank Sinatra to Liza Minelli. Other visitors have included showman P.T. Barnum, both Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt and General Robert E. Lee. Contrary to claims that Robert E. Lee never visited the Crescent City, he passed through the city in 1846, 1848, 1860 and 1861, all while serving in the United States Army. While here, he was quartered at Jackson Barracks, known then as the New Orleans Barracks, in the Lower 9th Ward.

The "Old Absinthe House" had its start in the year 1806, its year of construction, as the importing and commission firm of Juncadella & Font, whose partners, Francisco Juncadella and Pedro Font, were Catalonians from Barcelona, Spain. Eventually Señor Juncadella died and Señor Font returned to España, leaving relatives to run the business which bartered in tobacco, shoes, clothing, foodstuffs and

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alcohol in bulk from Spain. For its first forty years, it was an épicerie (grocery and provision-merchant’s store) and cordonnière (cobbler, or boot and shoe shop) and the ground floor corner was set up as a liquid refreshment establishment circa 1815. A 1933 article in the New Orleans States states that the bar was opened in 1826. Since they were not called saloons in those days, alcohol purveyors used certain euphemisms, such as “Oyster House” or “Coffee House”. Since Señora Juncadella’s young nephew, Jacinto Aleix, would be running things, it was called “Aleix’s Coffee-House”. Jacinto Aleix (born circa 1795-1800) was the son of the brother of Señora Juncadella, nee Rose Aleix.

After running his successful drinking establishment for many years, Jacinto Aleix died June 2, 1861. After the Civil War, in 1869, Cayetano Ferrér (also from Barcelona) became bartender for “Aleix’s Coffee House”, which as early as 1871 was renamed the “Absinthe Room”. Ferrér had previously served as bar-keeper at the French Opera House, located at the uptown lake corner of Bourbon and Toulouse, just down the street.

Alexis [sic] “Absinthe Room” donated $10 to The Overflow Relief Fund, according to the New Orleans Republican, June 9, 1871

A year later, it was advertised as the “Absinthe House”, with L. Aleix as the sole proprietor, Picayune, May 12, 1872. Trouble is, Customhouse was the original name for Iberville Street, not Bienville.
In 1874, Cayetano Ferrér leased the property from the Aleix family. The “Absinthe” in the name “Absinthe Room” and later “Old Absinthe House” came from the historic saloon’s famous cocktail, the Absinthe Frappé, created by Cayetano Ferrér. Large marble fountains with brass figures, imported from Europe, dominated the bar. They allowed water to drip, by each small drop, into glasses filled with absinthe, until the ideal balance was achieved. Absinthe, an anise-flavored spirit, derived from Artemisia absinthium (grand wormwood), was dripped and served to patrons by Ferrér in the Parisian manner. Often referred to in historical literature as "la fée verte" (the green fairy) or sometime the “green monster”, the importation and sale of absinthe was eventually banned by the U.S. Government on October 1, 1912, as it was then considered “dangerous to health.”

The “Absinthe Room” (as shown on the beam above)

The Eighteenth Amendment, which set in motion the nationwide prohibition of alcohol beginning January 17, 1920, really hit the old saloon hard. In November 1926, the “Old Absinthe Bar” was padlocked. The Amendment, which was in effect for 13 years, was almost the bar’s “death knell”. It knocked the historic drinking place down - but not out.
The “Old Absinthe House” building was to be destroyed at the start of Prohibition as a powerful message across the land that alcohol sales would not be tolerated. In the cover of darkness the actual bar, upon which so many absinthe drinks were served, was moved to another Bourbon Street location in order to save it. An article in the New Orleans States, dated June 4, 1933, asked the question, “Will prohibition ever be repealed? Will the Absinthe House ever again be able to serve the milky greenish fluid that made it famous?” Later that year, on December 5, 1933, the 21st Amendment went into effect and Prohibition was over.

The historic bar, along with the three decorative green marble fountains used to drip cool water over sugar cubes into glasses of absinthe, were returned to the original “Old Absinthe House” in 2004.

All during the late nineteenth century and the early 20th century, another Jacinto was on the scene. His name was Jacinto Ferrér, known as “Josh” to the public, and he began his apprenticeship as a kid under his father Cayetano beginning in 1872. His bartending career spanned more than 65 years. He died in 1940.

In 1879, again the “OLD ABSINTHE ROOM”, Picayune, Dec. 20, 1879

In 1943, Owen Brennan, founding father of the Brennan’s restaurant dynasty, became proprietor of the the “Old Absinthe House” after a taunt from his friend “Count” Arnaud Cazenave of Arnaud’s Restaurant. A marketing genius, Brennan set up a tableau of the alleged clandestine meeting between Andy Jackson and Jean Lafitte that took place in an upstairs “Secret Room” in the building circa 1814, before its incarnation as a saloon. The tableau featured lifelike figures, and, to commemorate the purported meeting, a special drink was concocted – “The Pirate’s Dream”. Brennan also came up with the idea of having the bar’s multitude of visitors attach their business
cards to the inside walls, and he reintroduced and promoted the *Absinthe Frappé*, this time with an absinthe substitute.

Later on Tony Moran, son of famed restaurateur “Diamond Jim” Moran, became proprietor and ran a restaurant offering Italian cuisine at the site, behind the main bar.

*Tony Moran’s sign for the “Old Absinthe House Bar”*

*Old Absinthe House, as it appeared in 1903*
Earlier this year (2018), Ecuadorian-born _wunderkind_ chef and winner of numerous culinary challenges, Octavio “Octo” Ycaza, gave me a tour of the old “Tony Moran’s” restaurant site, which he was renovating. The ground-floor backroom houses the original bar and a small kitchen. One can see the antique marble fountains, each equipped with four brass taps through which cool water was piped. Atop each of the fountains is a brass figure, one of which is Napoleon Bonaparte.

The bases are now deeply pitted after years of the taps dripping upon them. They were already like this by the early 1900s, when occult writer and poet Aleister Crowley wrote: “Here, too are marble basins hollowed — and hallowed! – by the drippings of the water which creates by baptism the new spirit of absinthe”.

“Octo”, who worked under Chef Alon Shaya at “Dominica” and as sous chef at “Rio Mar”, was to open the back bar and restaurant as “La Mignonette” with comfortable seating and a menu of New Orleans classics plus Octavio’s own clever creations. We await such a future.
The current sign playing up Jean Lafitte’s mythic involvement in the history of “Old Absinthe House” and an 1807 founding date

In 1950, the owner of Maspero’s Exchange on Chartres filed suit against the Absinthe House over the right to post a historical plaque on the building. Each claimed that Andrew Jackson and Jean Lafittte met at their place to plan for the defense of the city before the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815. In February 1951, a Judge in Civil District Court, Parish of Orleans, State of Louisiana, dismissed Maspero’s lawsuit, ruling: “Legend means nothing more than hearsay or a story handed down from the past.” As such, both Maspero’s and the “Old Absinthe House” are free to lay claim to any legend they wish.

And the “Old Absinthe House” is without a doubt – legendary!

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“Absinthe and Athletics”
Ned Hémard
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