

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

April Fools' Day in New Orleans

April Fools' (or All Fools') Day is that time, which comes once a year on the first day of April, set aside for playing pranks and practical jokes on each other. Friends and family members are sent off on foolish errands in an attempt to make "April Fools" of them all. Of course, Mark Twain called it the day "we remember what we are the other 364 days of the year."

Some say the "day of pranking" all came about during the reign of Charles IX of France.



Charles IX of France

When King Charles introduced the Gregorian calendar in France in 1582, the first day of the new year became January 1st. Prior to that, it was celebrated during the week of March 25 – April 1. Those who refused to acknowledge the change and continued to celebrate April 1st were said to be “fools” for not adapting to the change. It became commonplace to play jokes on these diehards. April Fools’ Day did have a number of much older influences

Some precursors of this “holiday of hoaxes” include the Roman festival of *Hilaria*, the super-colorful *Holi* festival of India, and the Medieval “Feast of Fools”. *Hilaria* was one of several days in the festival of Cybele, which in turn honored her son (and lover), Attis. March 15 celebrated her finding him among the reeds along the river (Moses, wasn’t the only one); and, as it turned out, it was also an ideal day to assassinate Caesar. March 22 recalled the self-mutilation of Attis, March 24, the fasting and mourning at his death and March 25, the rejoicing at his resurrection. How “hilarity ensues” through all this is questionable, but some of the activities associated with this feast are similar to those of April Fools’ Day.

The Hindu spring festival of *Holi* is the festival during which participants throw colored powders on one another, play music, laugh, dance and often get intoxicated. *Bhang* is an ingredient made from cannabis leaves, mixed into drinks and sweets, and consumed by a great many.



The incredibly beautiful colors of the Holi Festival

In Scotland, there is a very old custom of sending a person on what we would call a "wild goose chase," but their term for sending a fellow on a fool's errand is called "hunting the gowk". This centuries old practice is so-called because a gowk is a cuckoo, and to the Scots, the cuckoo is the very fool of birds.

In France, the "April Fool" is called *Poisson d'Avril*, or "April Fish," the idea being that a fish foolish enough to be caught in April is foolish indeed. Part of this tradition is attempting to attach a paper fish to an unsuspecting victim's back without being noticed.

April Fools' and related spring celebrations are connected to the vernal equinox. It's that time when nature itself plays tricks on us. It fools us with sudden changes from showers to sunshine. And it was the Romans who gave this month the Latin name *Aprilis*, thought to be derived from the verb *aperire*, "to open," something the flowers certainly do in April. On the first of April, however, we must be "open" to all manner of trickery.

In New Orleans, April Fools' has been celebrated with varying degrees of appropriate behavior through the years. April Fools' was the very day my father proposed to my mother. I guess he thought, if she turned him down, he would have a clever way out. Naturally, she accepted. They were married on Valentine's Day.

On April 2, 1840, *the Picayune*, reported a prank on an unsuspecting dentist, as shown below.

A HOAX.—A capital April fool hoax was played off yesterday upon a dentist. He was called upon and requested to make all haste, with his instruments, to a house high up in Magazine street to perform an operation. On arriving at the house he ascertained that all they wanted of him was to set the teeth of a hand-saw!

Not so funny was what happened in 1850. The *Picayune* reported how "some wag had contrived to tie a string to the bell-clapper" of "the bell suspended in the queer, high, old wooden tower, near by, in one corner of Washington Square," which "rang out a startling alarm of fire". There was complete mayhem in the Marigny with policemen, firemen and Aldermen running about frantically.

One needed help in avoiding the usual tricks, such as the wallet

attached to a string, the flower that shoots water or the eye-catching candy-covered cotton balls. In 1854, the *Picayune* offered April Fools' instructions: "Don't pick up small bundles you may see lying on the pavements, nicely done up with packthread. Be not lured by the sparkle of that spangle. It isn't gold; and if it were, it is glued down to the granite. Go on no fool's errand. Don't 'hunt the gowk.' Don't be 'un poisson d'avril,' That silliest of mackerel – the easiest caught. Pigeons don't give milk; and you can't buy any at any price."



1925 illustration in the *Times-Picayune*

In 1928, the March 31 issue of *The St. Bernard Voice*, a newspaper published in Arabi, carried a streamer headline announcing that Charles Lindbergh (who had just the year before completed his heroic solo nonstop flight from Long Island to Paris, France, in the *Spirit of St. Louis*) was expected to land near New Orleans on April 1. Hundreds of enthusiastic, albeit gullible, hero worshippers turned out to see him. "Lucky Lindy," however, knew nothing about it, and the newspaper, according to the *Times-Picayune*, "merrily shouted 'April Fool' to everybody." The hoax was so much fun that the St. Bernard newspaper struck again in 1929. It was announced that Generalissimo Gonzalo Escobar, head of the Mexican revolutionary army, was scheduled to stop in Arabi at the Mexican-tile roofed jai-alai arena (or *fronton*) located on Friscoville Avenue, before he was to have a Washington conference with President Hoover. This time, the people were wise and didn't show up.

The Audubon Zoo has been an April Fools' target in one way or another for years. Jokesters would either call the zoo directly, or they would call a friend and leave a message: Mr. Wolfe, Mr. Fox, Miss Behr, Mr. Lyon or Miss Ellie Phant called. They would then leave the zoo's telephone number, and later the zoo would be inundated with calls. "Is Mr. Wolfe available? I'm sorry I missed his call."



"Mr. Wolfe here – any calls for me?"

The 1950s were popular "April Fool" years at Tulane University. The *Hullabaloo* staff would print some doozies: "FLYING SAUCER Lands on Campus!" or "Police Seize Slot Machines, Narcotics in Newcomb Raid; 24 Girls Taken!" and then again "Tulane Building Bursts into Flames; Gibson Hall Is at Last Destroyed; Campus Looks Like Hell!" Those were the headlines in 1951. Other headlines, going back to the 30s and 40s, reported the head of the Newcomb English Department heading a hell-bent safari to find "Paradise Lost," which "has been missing for years." Then there was the announcement, "Beer bottle tossing contest – Rare book room, library."

My good friend and astute columnist Angus Lind once wrote that one of the three rules for reporters to live by is: "Don't even think about, or suggest, writing a cute little April Fool's story." He said the rule came about during his tenure on the paper dating back to 1977 and 1978. "The King Tut Exhibition was coming to New Orleans in 1977," Angus explained, "and it was quite a plum." Reporter Richard Boyd decided to play a joke on the city, concocting a tale that the treasures of Tutankhamun were going to be displayed at the Superdome rather than at the New Orleans Museum of Art, as originally planned. The story, related Angus, was so convincing that everyone fell for it – even the Egyptian officials "who did not have a good appreciation for April Fool's jokes." Phones rang off the hook. If only they had read the disclaimer at the end of the article. But the newsroom staffers had to strike again in 1978. This time the bogus story involved then Saints owner John Mecom employing the Rockettes and bringing them down from New York to dance for the Saints fans. A fictitious statement by Mecom in "our April Fool's Page One story," wrote Angus, was reported: "If we can't give 'em a good game, at least we'll give 'em a

great halftime show.” Amazingly the wire services fell for the story and sent it around the country. So did the radio and television outlets.

I’m sure Angus would agree, those were clever, yet plausible April Fools’ jokes. But in 1983 it was no joking matter when police investigated a vacant lot in Algiers looking for a human limb. Instead they found a pants leg and shoe stuffed with scraps of meat. Not funny!

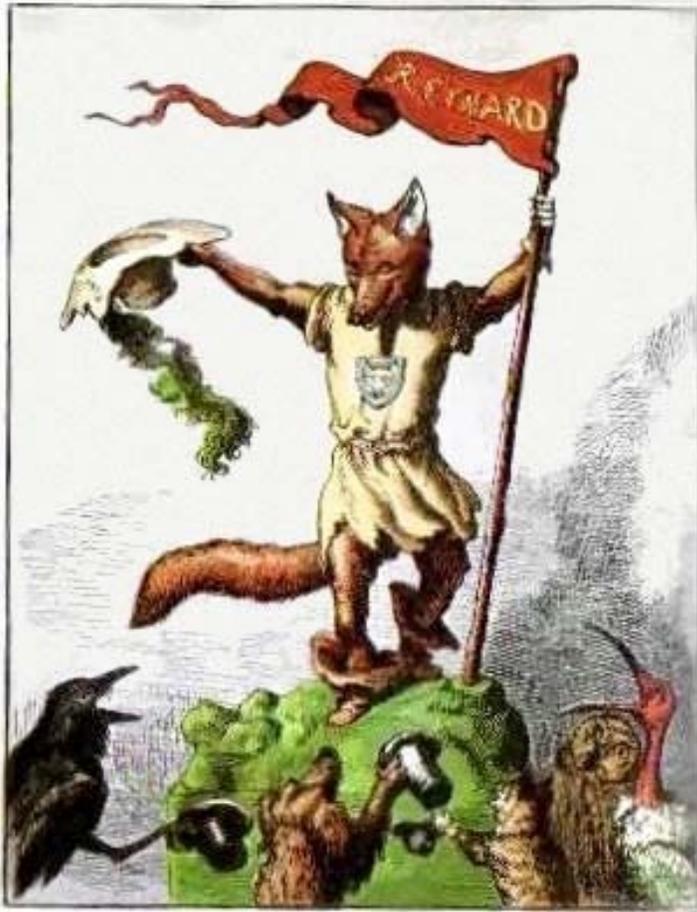
In 2014, Loyola University was the scene of some clever April Foolery.



After vandals destroyed most of the large white concrete letters in Loyola University’s front lawn sign, the university’s public affairs department took April Fools’ Day as an opportunity to put a humorous spin on the event. They released a bogus press release, along with photo, stating that the Loyola senior class had donated a permanent YOLO sign as a replacement, which (the release said) stands for “You Only Loyola Once.”

There are so many explanations as to the origins of April Fools’ Day that we find we are not sure which one to believe. Just because it concerns April Fools’ Day, it doesn’t mean one has to “fall for” one story at all. All of them may have had some influence on the present-day custom. One tale involves the Roman legend of Pluto kidnapping Proserpina and carrying her screaming to the lower world. Ceres, Proserpina’s mother, hearing her daughter’s anguished cries, began searching for her. The search, sadly, was a fool’s errand.

And fables, from Aesop to the present, in every culture around the globe, teach us about tricksters and how the gullible are fooled (cautionary tales and valuable life lessons). Reynard the Fox is the king of the tricksters, as shown below.



A 1907 article in the Baton Rouge *Daily State* wisely stated, "We are all fools, ever since Adam first set us the example; that some are innocent fools, some malicious fools, some just plain, ordinary common fools, and that everybody makes a fool of himself at least once a day, and the fool who is fool enough not to know he is a fool is the worst fool of all."

Fifty-four years later, it was Bobby "Blue" Bland who sang, "I Pity the Fool." In the 1980s, Mr. T (born Laurence Tureaud, no foolin') made it his mantra.

The Main Ingredient put it this way in 1972:

"Everybody plays the fool, sometime.
There's no exception to the rule, listen baby.
It may be factual, it may be cruel, I ain't lying.
Everybody plays the fool"

NED HÉMARD

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