

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Beards in the Breeze

A New Orleans teenager in 1960 could have tuned his radio to WNOE, 1060 AM, and listened to this tune as a "name it and claim it" selection. Or he may have caught it on WNNR (pronounced WNNR-ruh) 990, "The Center Aisle of Your Radio Dial" or on WTIX, "The Mighty 690." The song "New Orleans" was a top-ten hit that year for Gary U.S. Bonds, reaching #6 on Billboard, and recorded locally by "Big Boy" Myles on the Ace label:

"Come on take a stroll down to Basin Street
And listen to the music with the Dixieland beat.
The magnolia blossoms fill the air
And if you ain't been to heaven, then you ain't been there.
French moss hangin' from a big oak tree,
Down the Mississippi down in New Orleans."



Gary U.S. Bonds and his 1960 hit recording, "New Orleans"

"French moss" was easier to work into the rhyme scheme than the

usual name "Spanish moss". But it is neither French, nor Spanish, nor is it a moss.

"Spanish moss" is *Tillandsia usneoides*, but this is a misnomer since it is not a bryophyte, or true moss. True moss is any of various green, usually small, nonvascular plants of the class Musci of the division Bryophyta. The word moss comes from the Middle English, from Old English *mos*, meaning bog, from Medieval Latin *mossa*, moss (of Germanic origin). *Sphagnum* is a genus of numerous species of mosses commonly called peat moss, due to its prevalence in peat bogs. These mosses that cover the ground are the kind a "rolling stone" fails to gather.



Moss draped oaks in Audubon Park, old postcard view

Tillandsia is an angiosperm, one of a large plant genus of tropical and subtropical "air plants" in the bromeliad family, which ranges from "Spanish moss" to pineapples. Which brings us to one of the most frequently mentioned fun facts on Southern swamp or nature tours, "Were you aware that 'Spanish moss' is in the pineapple family?"

There were more colorful common names through the years. Native Americans called it "*Itla-okla*" (tree hair) and the French mockingly called it "*Barbe Espagnol*" (Spanish beard). It reminded them of the long black beards of the early Spanish explorers. The Spaniards, on the other hand, considered this a term of ridicule and asserted that a more appropriate name should be "*Cabello Francés*," or (French hair). "*Barbe Espagnol*" seemed to roll off the tongue better and for many years Louisiana moss was referred to only as "Spanish Beard". But, seeming a bit too silly, this name did not last. The accepted name became "Spanish moss".

Native Hawaiians had another idea for the name, and once again it

involved beards. "Spanish moss" was introduced to Hawaii in the 19th century, and became a popular ornamental and lei plant. It is typically referred to as "'umi'umi-o-Dole", named for the beard of Hawaiian Governor Sanford B. Dole (1844–1926). His beard really *did* look like "Spanish moss"! And Dole's cousin (once removed) was "Pineapple King" James Drummond Dole. It is not unusual to see a lei of plumeria blossoms and "'umi'umi-o-Dole" festooning a Hawaiian outrigger canoe. But more recently "Spanish moss" is occasionally called "Pele's hair" after the Hawaiian goddess of that name. The term "Pele's hair" also refers to a type of filamentous volcanic glass.



Governor Sanford Dole and his moss-like beard

"Spanish moss" ranges from Argentina up through the southeastern United States, growing wherever the climate is warm enough and has a relatively high average humidity. In the Southern United States, "Spanish moss" seems to prefer residence upon the Southern live oak or bald cypress because of these trees' high rates of foliar mineral leaching (especially calcium), providing abundant nutrient supply to the plant. The plant has found a way to nourish itself by processing minerals that dissolve in water that run off leaves and branches of the tree to which it is anchored. Moisture absorbed from the air readily provides the moss all it needs. "Spanish moss" is, in fact, about twenty-five percent water.

Tillandsia plants are epiphytes (also called aerophytes, or air plants, which normally grow without soil while attached to other plants. "Spanish moss" is not a parasite and rarely starves or kills trees, but can reduce a tree's growth rate by limiting the light essential to the tree's own leaves. It can also offer wind resistance to hurricanes, making quick work of heavily loaded trees. Although live oak and bald cypress are favorites for colonization, "Spanish moss" can be found in other tree species such as hackberry, sweet gum, elm, crape myrtles and other oaks. Its presence on pecan trees tends to reduce the yield due to shadowing the buds of the fruit.

Although producing a tiny green flower in June (followed by seeds), the normal mode of propagation is fragments of phytomers (portions of the plant between the joints) known as festoons being carried from tree to tree by birds or blown there by the wind. Birds (like yellow-chested Parula warblers) frequently use moss fragments in building their nests, and in this manner distribute the festoons. Evergreen trees seldom have moss on them, for their needle-like leaves are less likely to make a connection with the festoons.

The mossy beards that flow freely from Southern trees appear frequently in Southern literature, as well. In Lyle Saxon's "Fabulous New Orleans," he describes City Park's majestic "Duelling Oaks":

"A single live-oak, growing alone in a field, assumes a dome-like appearance, so symmetrical is the curving sweep of bough and twig and leaf; but in groves the trees are less regular. Here they rise high in the air, and the branches are gnarled and twisted. To my eyes they have always seemed eternal fountains, dripping with their long streamers of gray Spanish moss."

George Washington Cable wrote of "a small, slender, almost dazzling green beetle inhabiting the Spanish moss".

And these words were written by Winston Churchill, "he cared but little for the mysterious courtyards, the Spanish buildings, and the novels of Mr. George W. Cable, which Honora devoured when she was too tired to walk about. He followed her obediently to the battle field of New Orleans, and admired as obediently the sunset, when the sky was all silver-green through the magnolias, and the spreading live oaks hung with Spanish moss, and a silver bar lay upon the Father of Waters."

Winston Churchill? How can that be? Such knowledge of New Orleans! The answer is that Winston Churchill (1871-1947) was an American novelist born in St. Louis, Missouri. The American met and occasionally communicated with the British statesman (as well as author) Winston Churchill. It was the American Churchill who became famous earlier, and (in the 1890s) was much better known than his

British counterpart. Both men had political careers and were both noted amateur painters.

Back to that “almost dazzling green beetle” nestled in Cable’s moss. The moss industry reached its peak in Louisiana during the 1920s and today is no longer economically viable, having been replaced by foam rubber and synthetic fibers after World War II. But for countless years “Spanish moss” was used as stuffing for bedding (mattresses) and upholstery, second only to curled hair in resiliency. It was also deemed highly desirable because no known insect would attack its fiber. So does it have bugs or not?

John O. Whitaker, Jr., Department of Ecology and Organismal Biology, Indiana State University, states, “There is a widespread belief in the southern parts of the United States that ... Chiggers ... are common in ... Spanish Moss ... However, no chiggers were found among the 3297 organisms collected ... in trees and from the ground on Cumberland Island, GA.”

Other creatures, including rat snakes and Red and Seminole bats, have found a home amidst the “Spanish moss”. One species of jumping spider has been found only on *Tillandsia usneoides*. As for beetles, they figure in a South Carolina legend:

A Cuban with his beautiful Spanish fiancée arrived on the outskirts of Charleston in the 1700s to establish a plantation. The bride-to-be had long flowing raven hair. Sadly, a band of Cherokee killed the young couple and (as a final warning to stay away) cut off the hair of the beautiful young woman and threw it up in an old live oak tree. When they returned to the scene of the crime, they began to notice the hair had shriveled and turned grey and had begun spreading from tree to tree. The “long hair” followed them clear out of the state, jumping from tree to tree defended by a large army of beetles.

During the Spanish Administration of New Orleans, “Spanish moss” was used as a binder in mud clay or cement for building houses. It was utilized in the construction of the Cabildo and a few years later as a binder for the plaster used in the Absinthe House on Bourbon Street. Besides bedding and upholstery, “Spanish moss” has been harvested for use in floral arrangements, and scientists have researched its possible medicinal values. It has been used for building insulation, mulch, packing material and fiber. In 1939, over 10,000 tons were processed. The moss industry certainly caused the disappearance of large quantities of “Spanish moss,” but the decline has continued and many currently believe it is due to various forms of air pollution.

Recently “Spanish moss” provides stuffing for “Voodoo Moss Dolls” for sale in the French Quarter. “Each doll is uniquely handcrafted” and varies “somewhat due to the individual design, fabrics, feathers,

beads, buttons, and other elements of each New Orleans Voodoo Moss doll.”



Voodoo Moss Doll

Today, if one drives on Moss Street he is travelling along Bayou St. John. Moss Street was once called Port Street, but a city ordinance back in 1894 changed it to Moss. From Moss, one can continue across Carrollton Avenue to City Park Avenue, along which one can view the “Duelling Oaks” and other gnarled and twisted oaks festooned in all their bearded finery.



Moss covered oak in City Park, New Orleans

As for that mysterious hirsute creature (Moss Man) covered from head to toe that appears at Mardi Gras and other occasions, former WWL-TV anchor-reporter Hoda Kotb (who left New Orleans years ago for New York and Dateline NBC, host of Your Total Health and a frequent Today Show correspondent), reported:

“That was the defining moment of my career! I had no idea about Mardi Gras; I’m ... reporting, with devil horns and wings on, and then I feel these big, hairy, mossy hands pick me up and twirl me around and all I could think about was ‘I AM FIRED!’ I was in hysterics ... I thought, If you’re gonna go out, this is the way to go out! And when I got back to the newsroom, they were like ‘I LOVE THAT MOSS MAN!’ I was like ‘I love New Orleans!’ I didn’t get how dead-on and funny the city was. I’ve never been the same since!”

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