

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

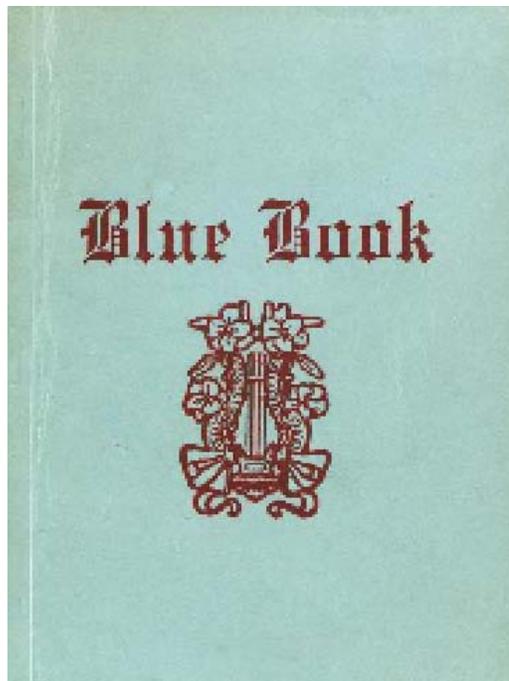
By Ned Hémard

The Blue Book from The Red-Light District

In 1897, the City of New Orleans passed unique legislation that confined and regulated prostitution within a designated district of the city. The special area was an attempt at social reform, a way to monitor and regulate “the oldest profession” by limiting its practice to one specific area of town. Because the ordinance banned prostitution in most of the city, the city fathers could claim to be reformers without actually shutting down a lucrative sex trade that drew thousands of visitors to the Crescent City each year. Much to the dismay of Alderman Sidney Story, who proposed the ordinance, “The District” (as it was known to locals) was nicknamed “Storyville”. The late, great jazz banjoist Danny Barker described the city’s vibrant red-light district as “a wide open area of pleasure palaces, cat houses, and honky-tonks, twenty-four hours round the clock — all in the direct center of the commercial business district.” And to know the players back then, one needed a playbook. In New Orleans, it was called the *Blue Book*.



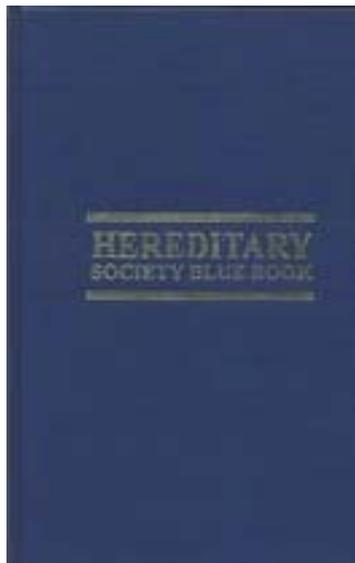
Alderman Sidney Story



Cover of The Blue Book

This *Blue Book* is not to be confused with *The Hereditary Society Blue Book*, a publication that provides information on no less than 147 lineage organizations, their officers and other members. With no connection to “bluebloods” other than as a client base, the New Orleans issues of the *Blue Book* (appearing between 1898 and 1915) nonetheless parodied a published list of 400 wealthy and influential Americans at that time — calling its list the “Tenderloin 400”. The term “Tenderloin” was often used for districts known for prostitution. The list also demonstrated the very large number of women working in that profession within the district.

It was Social arbiter Ward McAllister who once said that there were only 400 people who could be counted as members of Fashionable Society among the *über* rich families of Gilded Age New York. He did not, as is commonly believed, determine this number based on the capacity of Mrs. Astor’s New York City ballroom.

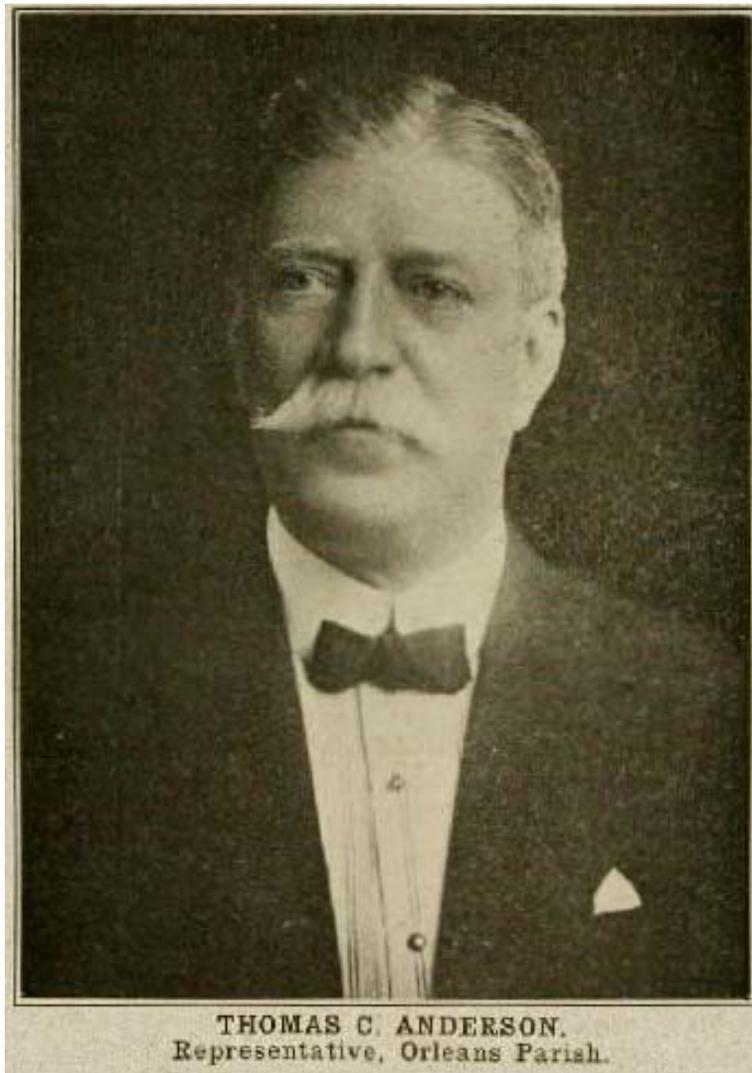


A very different kind of Blue Book

Storyville’s *Blue Book*, was the district’s guide for locals and tourists alike. It contained forty pages of personal promotion from each of the madams who earned their livelihood, from 1897 through 1917, within an area (as defined by the ordinance) bounded by Customhouse (now Iberville), Basin, St. Louis and N. Robertson streets. Today, with the exception of a few remaining structures, the district is occupied by the Iberville Housing Projects.

The *Blue Book* was underwritten and published by none other than the unofficial mayor of Storyville, Tom C. Anderson. Anderson’s Annex, Tom’s main saloon, was the headquarters from which Anderson controlled the operations of the district. From about 1905, his establishment was sometimes known as the Arlington Annex, after Josie Arlington’s bordello, one of the three largest and most popular

palaces of vice on Basin Street. The *Blue Book* is said to have been compiled by Billy Struve, aka "Billy News", an associate of Anderson's and a former police reporter for the New Orleans *Daily Item*.



Storyville's colorful boss owned a chain of saloons, was a member of the State Legislature and the head of an oil company. Tom Anderson later acquired a home at 4630 St. Charles Avenue, attended church regularly and gave to charities.

Issues of the *Blue Book* boasted the elegance of the bordellos, as well as the graces and qualifications of the women who worked there (mostly in demure terms by today's standards). Prostitution was never mentioned in the books, nor were sexual services or fees. The exception was "French", indicating fellatio. One could pick up a copy of the *Blue Book* at the Annex for twenty-five cents, where the names and addresses of the madams and prostitutes were listed. The "ladies of the evening" were identified as "white", "colored" or "octoroon". Earlier issues had "Jewish" and "French" listings, but as mentioned before, "French" did not mean "from France". Although thousands of

copies were printed each year the *Blue Book* was republished, they are very rare today — fetching as much as \$5000. It appears that gentlemen of the period disposed of these lust-filled leaflets before their wives could find them.



Ad for Veuve Clicquot, even then

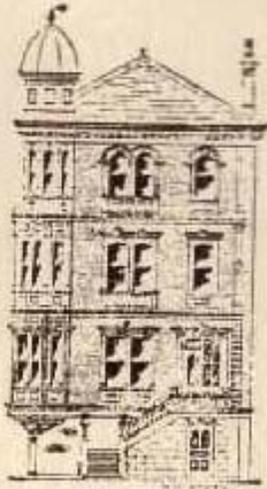
Preface with book's motto

The "famous octoroon" Clara Miller was advertised for "her disposition" and having been to "the principal cities of Europe and the Continent". "Why visit the playhouse to see the famous Parisian models," urged another ad, "when one can see the French damsels, Norma and Diana?" "If you have the blues," the book said, "the Countess and her girls can cure them." The "Countess" was famous madam, Willie Piazza. And "Gipsy" was "always ready to receive and entertain". Each pleasure palace (and the madams within) tried to outdo the other. The mansions were furnished with an abundance of gaudy tapestries and drapes, leopard-skin rugs and curios galore. Lulu White's Mahogany Hall housed forty women and featured a "Mirrored Parlor". Renowned photographer Ernest J. Bellocq's photographs provide us with a glimpse of the lavish furnishings of Lulu's gilt parlors, containing oil paintings, Tiffany stained glass windows, huge chandeliers and potted ferns.

MISS
JOSIE ARLINGTON

225 Basin Street

Phone 1888



The Arlington

Nowhere in this country will you find a more complete and thorough sporting establishment than the Arlington.

Absolutely and unquestionably the most decorative and costly fitted out sporting palace ever placed before the American public.

The wonderful originality of everything that goes to fit

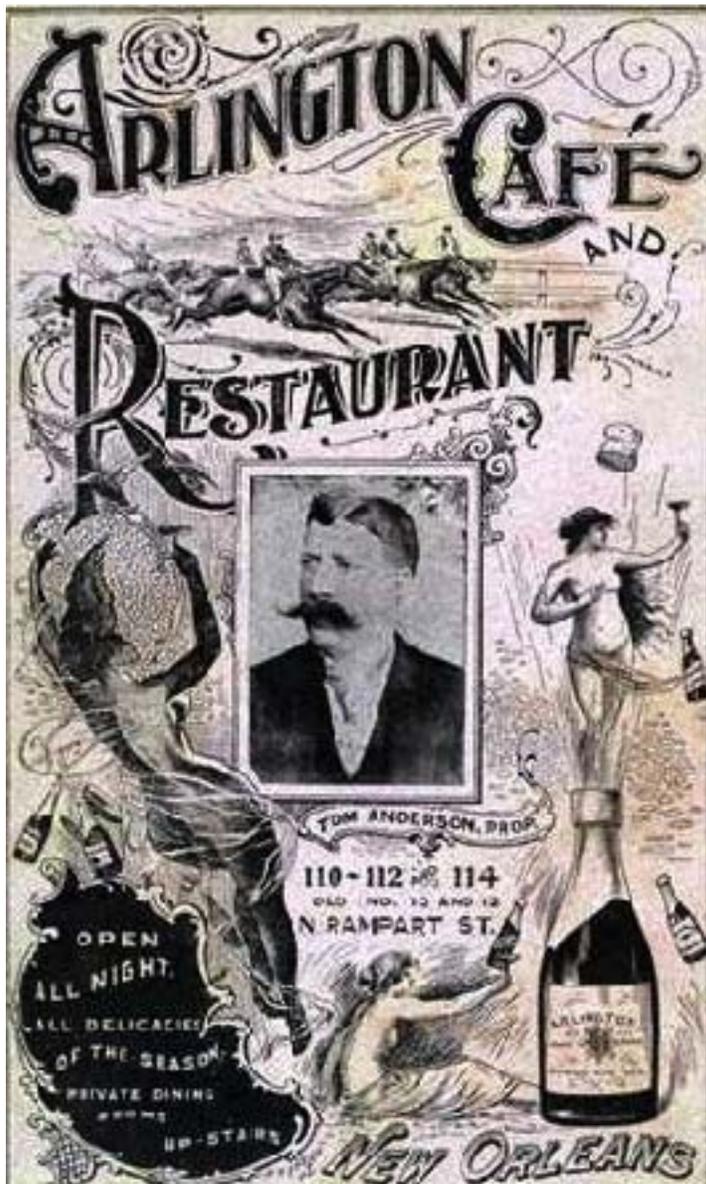
out a mansion makes it the most attractive ever seen in this and the old country.

Miss Arlington recently went to an expense of nearly \$5,000 in having her mansion renovated and replenished.

Within the great walls of the Arlington will be found the work of great artists from Europe and America. Many articles from the Louisiana Purchase Exposition will also be seen.

Josie Arlington's Blue Book Ad

The *Blue Book* entries contained descriptions of these elegant interiors, with actual photographs of the better brothels. Also included were numerous advertisements placed by local and national distillers and cigarmakers, ads for glassware and crockery, piano tuners, attorneys, restaurants, as well as a few from neighboring pharmacies, funeral parlors and taxi companies. The books were sold in train stations, barber shops and saloons. "Why New Orleans Should Have This Directory," is answered with multiple reasons, one being "Because it puts the stranger on a proper and safe path as to where he may go and be free from 'Hold-ups' and other games usually practiced upon the stranger."



Tom Anderson's Arlington Café and Restaurant on N. Rampart, open all night, offered "all delicacies of the season".

The various *Blue Book* issues were inscribed with the motto (from the Order of the Garter) below the book's preface: "*Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense* (Shame Be To Him Who Thinks Evil Of It)". Advertisements during carnival season for "French Balls" seem to indicate heightened activity from visitors to the city during Mardi Gras.

The various "sporting houses" typically employed a solo piano player, usually called the "Professor". A teenaged "Jelly Roll" Morton earned his chops that way playing in the bawdy houses along Basin Street. He told his grandmother he was working as a night watchman, but failed to tell her what he was watching. When she found out, he was kicked out on his own.

"Professors" worked entirely for tips and were expected to play from an extended repertoire of music to entertain whomever dropped in. "Jelly Roll" played scandalous versions of all sorts of popular songs. Professor Tony Jackson, composer of *Pretty Baby*, played in the Storyville parlors and saloons, as did future jazz greats Buddy Bolden, Joe "King" Oliver, Bunk Johnson, Kid Ory and Sidney Bechet. Jazz did not originate in Storyville, but the district did give employment to those who would play and master New Orleans' unique style of music.

Although Roy Byrd, aka Professor Longhair, played piano, he was born a year after Storyville closed. It was the owner of the Caledonia Club (at the corner of St. Philip Street and St. Claude Avenue) who bestowed "Fess" with his professorial title because of his shaggy coiffure, not because of the vast musical selection "professors" in the bordellos were required to know.

The U.S. Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, in October 1917, shortly after the United States entered World War I, made a statement:

"These boys are going to France. I want them adequately armed and clothed by their government; but I want them to have an invisible armor to take with them . . . a moral and intellectual armor for their protection overseas."

In other words, prostitutes were not compatible with the Army or Navy, nor was New Orleans' famous red-light district. It was alright for "our boys" to die from war, but not from love."

In 1917, the U.S. Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, citing the district as a "bad influence", shut Storyville down for good.

The city strongly protested the profitable district's closing, but to no avail. Although Storyville was no longer open for business, new underground houses of prostitution quietly sprung up around the city.

New Orleans Mayor Martin Behrman summed up the situation beautifully when he said:

"You can make it illegal, but you can't make it unpopular."

NED HÉMARD

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