

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Bob Was a Shoo-Shoo**

Every boy that grew up in New Orleans (at least in my age group) that managed to get himself into the least bit of mischief knows that the local expression for a firecracker that doesn't go off is a "shoo-shoo". It means a dud, something that may have started off hot, but ended in a fizzle. It just didn't live up to its expectations.

It could also be used to describe other things that didn't deliver the desired wallop, such as an over-promoted "hot date" or even a tropical storm that (fortunately) wasn't as damaging as its forecast.

Back in 1968, I thought for a moment that I was that "dud" date, but was informed by the young lady I was escorting that she had called me something entirely different. "*Chou chou*" (pronounced exactly like shoo-shoo) was a reduplicative French term of endearment, meaning "my little cabbage". Being a "*petite*" healthy leafy vegetable was somehow a lot better than being a non-performing firecracker.

At least I wasn't the only one. In 2009 the Daily Mail reported on a "hugely embarrassing video" in which Carla Bruni called Nicolas Sarkozy my '*chou chou*' and "caused a sensation across France".



*Bruni and Sarkozy: no "shoo-shoo" here*

The glamorous former model turned pop singer planted a passionate kiss on the French President and then whispered "'*Bon courage, chou chou*', which means 'Be brave, my little darling'." The paper explained, "A '*chou*' is a cabbage in French, though when used twice in a row becomes a term of affection between young lovers meaning 'little darling'."

I even noticed in the recent French movie "*Populaire*" that the male lead called his rapid-typing secretary and love interest "*chou*", which somehow became "pumpkin" in the subtitles.

But how did "shoo-shoo", that other expression for the fizzled-out firecracker, come into use in New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana? It's an interesting tale, but first some explanation on how hurricanes are named.

Before the 1950s, significant hurricanes may have been named for creatures of mythology, saints, locations, or even politicians. Very often, if truly powerful, they were known by just the year. The New Orleans Hurricane of 1915 was an intense Category 4 hurricane that killed 275 people and caused \$13 million (1915 US dollars) in damage. The city lost countless church steeples, and the *Prebytère* was minus its cupola. The 1947 hurricane was tough on the city, as well, and was also known as the Fort Lauderdale (or Pompano Beach) Hurricane. It hit Florida as a Cat 5 and made landfall again in Louisiana as a Cat 3 with the eye passing directly over the Crescent City. Overall, it killed 51 people and caused \$110 million (1947 US dollars) in damage.

In 1953 a set of twenty-three women's names were used to name hurricanes, and (after the active but mild season that year) the public seemed favorable to the new system. The identical list was adopted for 1954, but with a single change: Gilda replaced Gail. After some storms got a lot of publicity, their names were replaced with new ones. In 1960 forecasters began rotating four alphabetical lists of female names that were repeated every four years. This went on until 1972 when they came up with nine lists, but in 1977 the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) relinquished its naming rights to a regional committee of the WMO (World Meteorological Organization).

Beginning in 1979, the WMO came up with six new lists, and no longer would there be just women's names. Now there would be alternating male names, as well as some Spanish and French names to reflect the different cultures and languages of the Atlantic Ocean, Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea. Tropical Storm Ana was first that year, but male hurricane #1 was Bob.

# ★ Hurricane

New Orleans reported the collapse of one wall of a building, and some billboards were blown down. But as in the rest of the state there were no deaths or injuries, and little major damage.

Residents in lower Terrebonne Parish called Hurricane Bob "le 'ti petar," meaning the little firecracker.

Junius Domangue, a lower Montegut resident, said he had expected much worse.

"The way it built up so fast, then came rushing at us, I expected it to be kinda like Audrey was when it hit Cameron. We really didn't have much warning, you know."

Many Terrebonne residents were waiting for Hurricane Bob, having followed its progress on radio and television, with many taking what proved to be an accurate cue from New Orleans meteorologist Nash Roberts who called the time and location of landfall almost exactly.

"Podnuh, if Nash says it, you can believe it," said Clebert Martin of lower Little Caillou. "I started watching him at four o'clock yesterday (Tuesday) and he called it right down the line."

After spanning the marshland from the Gulf through lower Terrebonne, the storm gained forward speed, but not wind velocity. Official recorded gusts never reached more than 65 miles per hour.

The city of Houma, sideswiped by Bob about 8 a.m. Wednesday, showed no effects of the 65 mph winds, but did suffer a good soaking from the rains which began late Tuesday afternoon and continued through about noon Wednesday.

No injuries or undue inconvenience were reported by the Terrebonne sheriff's office.

Hubert Martin of Chauvin called Bob a "shoo-shoo."

"We got ready for a big firecracker," he said, "but all we got was a shoo-shoo." And he added, "But thank God nobody got his fingers popped off."

*Hurricane Bob, the first male-named hurricane was a shoo-shoo*

The Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate* reported on July 12, 1979, that lower Terrebonne Parish residents "called Hurricane Bob 'le 'ti petar,' meaning the little firecracker", and "Hubert Martin of Chauvin called Bob a 'shoo-shoo.'"

"We got ready for a big firecracker, Mr. Martin said, "but all we got was a shoo-shoo."

Those readers fond of Shakespeare will remember the lines from *Hamlet*:

"For 'tis the sport to have the engineer  
Hoist with his own petar'."

Hamlet's school chums, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (spying for Claudius) were to be an example of "the bomb maker being blown up with his own bomb", or at least his representatives.

A *petard* was a small bomb employed in breaching fortifications and exploding gates and walls, a word of French origin and dating back to the sixteenth century. Today *petard* is the modern French word for firecracker, derived from the Middle French *peter*, meaning to break wind, as well as the earlier Latin *pedere* and Greek *bdein* (both meaning to break wind).

Who knew how flatulence and explosives were so intertwined? Wonder if the great professional French flatulist Joseph Pujol, *Le Pétomane*, who could play "*La Marseillaise*" in the most unusual way, ever had a performance that was a "shoo-shoo". And Governor Le Petomane was a character in Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles*, his name suggesting that he was full of hot air.

So how did "shoo-shoo" come into the Louisiana vernacular. It also had to do with firepower, and its use dates back to the early years of the Twentieth Century in France.



*The Chauchat*

While the French 75 was a successful artillery weapon of World War I and the inspiration for a champagne cocktail, the Chauchat automatic rifle issued to American soldiers during World War I was "plagued with problems". Tom Laemein in the September 17, 2012, issue of *American Rifleman* magazine wrote, "The French called it *Le Fusil Mitrailleur* 1915 CSRG. The Doughboys and Marines of the American Expeditionary Force called it 'Show-Show' or 'Shoo-Shoo' — or several other names that cannot be printed in this magazine."



*Le Fusil Mitrailleur Chauchat, modèle 1915 CSRG*

Work on the Chauchat light machine gun, named after its primary inventor Colonel Louis Chauchat, was initiated between 1903 and 1910 in a French Army weapon research facility located near Paris. The Chauchat machine rifle was in widespread use in 1917-1918 by the AEF (American Expeditionary Force), where its official designation was the "Automatic Rifle, Model 1915 (Chauchat)".

Lemuel Shepherd, later a four-star general and Commandant of the Marine Corps, was quoted while only a lieutenant:

"I spent the last few weeks [of World War I] back in the hospital, but I'll tell you one thing the boys later told me: The day *after* the Armistice they got the word to turn in their Chauchats and draw Browning Automatic Rifles. That BAR was so much better than that damned Chauchat. If we'd only had the BAR six months before, it would have saved so many lives."

It seems that the muddy trenches of France had revealed some design flaws in the Chauchat. The gun's magazine (made of thin stamped metal and open on one side) allowed the easy entry of mud and dust and caused jamming. The machine gun stopped functioning when overheated, and the barrel sleeve remained in the retracted position until the weapon cooled off. Although it wasn't exactly the correct pronunciation, American GIs called the gun a "shoo-shoo".

Over time, the Chauchat machine rifle's barely passable job performance in the first world war has prompted some present-day experts to assess it as the "worst machine gun" ever fielded in the history of warfare. It was an unreliable "dud", and therefore the name "shoo-shoo" came to mean a piece of firepower that didn't work as

specified. Doughboys returning to New Orleans and South Louisiana after WWI likely used that expression, and their sons and grandsons repeated the term.

Some have tried to defend the weapon's bad reputation. First of all, the American models of the Chauchat modified to .30-06 were, themselves, not as well made as the 8mm Lebel firing French models. Also, because Americans diligently cleaned their rifles, the Chauchat was stripped down more often than it should have been. This resulted in damaging delicate (or perhaps inferior thinly pressed) parts, thus further reducing the gun's reliability.

In any event, a "shoo-shoo" became a common expression back in New Orleans after the "War to End All Wars". It was only natural for dads and their sons to apply the term to faulty fireworks — or to a hurricane that didn't do much harm.

On October 5, 2013, the *Times-Picayune* headline on nola.com was "Tropical Storm Karen becoming a shoo-shoo, judging from 4 p.m. update". Old expressions fizzle out slowly in New Orleans.

P. S., Special thanks to Mike England for his suggestion that the Chauchat might be the source for the local expression "shoo-shoo".

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