

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Christmas in the 50s

For many readers old enough to remember, Christmas in the 50s was a streetcar ride with Mom (wearing white gloves and hat) for a day of Christmas shopping on Canal Street. D. H. Holmes (pronounced Homezes' by many locals) and MB Department stores had exceptional window decorations, and one could sit on Santa's lap for the annual photograph. Mr. Bingle, the spritely little snowman with the same initials as Maison Blanche, starred in a wonderful puppet show.

"Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" had been such a huge success as a yuletide mascot for Montgomery Ward in Chicago, that other stores followed suit. MB's display director Emile Alline figured a mascot was needed in New Orleans, too, and came up with the idea of a little candy cane-toting snowman brought to life by Santa himself. Maison Blanche introduced its snow-covered promo man (with holly wings and an ice cream cone hat) in 1948.

That was a year before the whole country fell in love with Gene Autry's version of "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer," a song that sold 2.5 million copies the first year and eventually a total of 25 million. It remained the second best-selling record of all time until the 1980s. Another Bingle, Harry L. "Bing" Crosby is still number one with Irving Berlin's "White Christmas", the best-selling single recording of all time, with estimated sales in excess of 50 million copies worldwide.

Mr. Bingle dominated the Crescent City's Christmas in the 1950s when he first appeared in puppet form, after MB hired Edwin H. "Oscar" Isentrout to bring the playful snowman to life (including his voice). Isentrout had been doing an act on Bourbon Street with puppets doing a strip tease. Who better to do continuing puppet shows at Maison Blanche for all the local children? And there were Mr. Bingle musical performances on radio and television, as well.

And who could forget the gigantic Santa (several stories high) carrying a large package from Sears at the corner of Baronne and Common streets. And for others it was the magical spectacle of the Centanni home at 4506 Canal Street, at the corner of South Murat. The Centanni display had everything from Santa and his Rocket Ship to my

personal favorite, a huge Christmas elephant. The illuminated winter wonderland of the Centanni family inspired a young Al Copeland to later go all-out in decorating his Metairie home for the holidays.

But what was Christmas like in the 1850s? Architect-Diarist T. K. Wharton fondly remembered a Mazarin blue cloak he and his wife gave as a Christmas gift to his son in 1853, and he wrote in 1854 of the “splendid” array of Christmas and New Year’s novelties on display in the stores on Chartres and Royal streets.

An eve of Christmas Eve entry in the *New Orleans Daily Delta* described the store windows in 1855:

“We behold indications of the rapid advance in every show-window, and hear it in every stray fire-cracker that startles the still air in our streets. Never have we seen better preparations made for the holidays than are now being made all around us. Everything, except the weather, which continues dismally dull, and wonderfully woful (*sic*), has assumed an appearance of gaiety. There is not a store of any pretensions throughout the city that has not donned its holiday attire, and lays claim to the admiration of the passers by. Such a display of toys was never before witnessed—such soldiers and castles, dolls and dogs, horses and heroes, tin whistles and monkies (*sic*), fire-crackers, and pretties of all sorts, have never astonished the eyes of wondering juvenility on any previous occasion.”

And, like later generations, the paper expressed the opinion that too many of little boys’ playthings glorified war:

“One peculiarity we notice in the matter of toys this year is, that the majority of them are of warlike character—in one window particularly we saw the entire city of Sebastopol,—as it appeared during the siege—defended by long coated Muscovites, who were charging most desperately sever detachments of the Zouaves. The forts and castles are all there in perfect order, well manned and fully mounted with guns.”

In 1859 the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* described the city’s show windows as a “tempting profusion of riches.”

On Christmas Eve 1855, the *Cowbellions* held the first of “a series of Mask and Fancy Dress Balls, at the neat little Pelican theatre,” the paper announced. “As a matter of course, all the votaries of Miss Terpsichore, will attend these balls.” That meant devoted followers of the Muse of Dancing.

A quarter of a century before, a group of revelers in Mobile, Alabama, led by cotton factor Michael Krafft, who (likely influenced by his Pennsylvania Swedish and German mummer traditions) stayed awake all New Years Eve and rolled out a dawn parade armed with noise-making cowbells, hoes and rakes. They called themselves the

Cowbellion de Rakin Society, in a parody of French, and by the 1850s some of their members made their way to the Crescent City. The New Orleans *Cowbellions* had their Christmas Eve ball a year before founding in December 1856 the city's first Carnival krewe, the *Mystick Krewe of Comus*. They gathered at a club room above what once was the Gem Restaurant in New Orleans' French Quarter to begin celebrating Mardi Gras in an organized less crude, non violent manner. And so it continues.

The custom of decorating a Christmas tree was popularized in the 1840s when Queen Victoria's German-born husband, Prince Albert, introduced this custom to his family at Windsor. An 1848 issue of the *Illustrated London News* featured an engraved image of the Royal Family around their tabletop *tannenbaum*. As a result, prosperous families in England and America almost immediately followed suit. German immigrants in New Orleans brought along the custom with them, as well, and one of the earliest public displays of a Christmas tree in New Orleans was in 1855.

The ladies of St. Paul's Episcopal Church set up a decorated fir tree in the Masonic Hall on St. Charles and Perdido streets. The presentation was to raise funds for the completion of the interior of the new church at the corner of Camp Street and Coliseum Place. With regard to "their entertainment called the Christmas Tree," the *Daily Delta* wrote, "we anticipate a delightful entertainment, and hope the result may prove as profitable as the object is meritorious." The *Picayune* wrote that this "German custom" was "to the great delight of young folk" and described the St. Paul's tree as "hung with brilliant lights and laden with Christmas gifts, delicacies, ornaments, etc."

T. K. Wharton wrote that his wife had "astounded" his kids that very same gloomy Christmas with a "tasteful" Christmas tree. Remember that the weather was "dismally dull, and wonderfully woful (*sic*)."

As for Santa Claus, he was an American vision of the Dutch's *Sinterklass*, or St. Nicholas. The 1823 poem believed to be written by Clement Clarke Moore, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (also known as "The Night Before Christmas") permanently etched the author's impression of Santa upon the minds of the American people. His personal appearance, the sleigh and reindeer and the bringing of toys to children are all now part of the culture. And by 1859, these attributes of Santa were familiar to the children of New Orleans, too.

A poem in the *Daily Picayune* that year entitled "For the Young Folks," mentions "Santa Claus" and the "many fine things" he "left in my stocking," including a "doll and a sofa" (hopefully a doll's sofa). The poem ends with the hope that when the child is older the following year, she can "keep *wide awake* to see the reindeer".

As thoughts drift back to the 1950s and the present holiday season, a tune keeps ringing in my ears:

"Jingle, jangle, jingle,

Here comes Mr. Bingle

With another message from Kris Kringle."

So much has happened over time. MB was taken over by Mercantile Stores, which was acquired by Dillard's Department Stores. Eventually the Maison Blanche Canal Street store, Mr. Bingle's birthplace, was closed and converted into a Ritz Carlton Hotel. Dillard's continued to display Bingle's giant *papier-mâché* likeness until 2005, shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck the city, when the chain contributed the large, damaged Mr. Bingle to City Park for use in its "Celebration in the Oaks" annual Christmas light display. He's there this holiday season.

But since the Chateau Bourbon Hotel on Canal Street (formerly D. H. Holmes) has its Ignatius Reilly statue out front, here's another idea (with apologies to Irving Berlin):

Bingle's blue and he don't know where to go to.
Why won't he go where fashion sits?
Put him on the Ritz.

Snowmen types who wear a top hat, corncob pipe and
Cutaway coat.
Perfect fits.
Put him on the Ritz.

Dressed up like a "Mini-Me" Kris Kringle,
And the girls are happy that he's single (Single Bingle).
Gets his kicks with some of those chicks who pick tricks with
peppermint sticks in their mitts.
Put him on the Ritz.

Ritz Carlton, that is.

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