

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Cockroach Chronicle

Italian author Carlo Collodi created the wonderful story of *Pinocchio*, a marionette who goes through a number of exciting adventures. This classic is most remembered as the animated Disney movie of 1940. "Jiminy Cricket" (with the voice of Cliff "Ukelele Ike" Edwards) was the wooden boy's conscience and a prime character in future Disney promotions and movies. The original story has a less perky talking cricket warning *Pinnocchio* of his bad behavior, for which the pine-knotted puppet smashes the cricket to death with a wooden mallet. If Collodi had been born in Arabi instead of Tuscany, it would have been a cockroach with an attitude crushed in the corner by a pointed shoe.

Collodi's story begins: "Once upon a time, there was ... 'A king!' my little readers will say right away. No, children, you are wrong. Once upon a time there was a piece of wood ..."

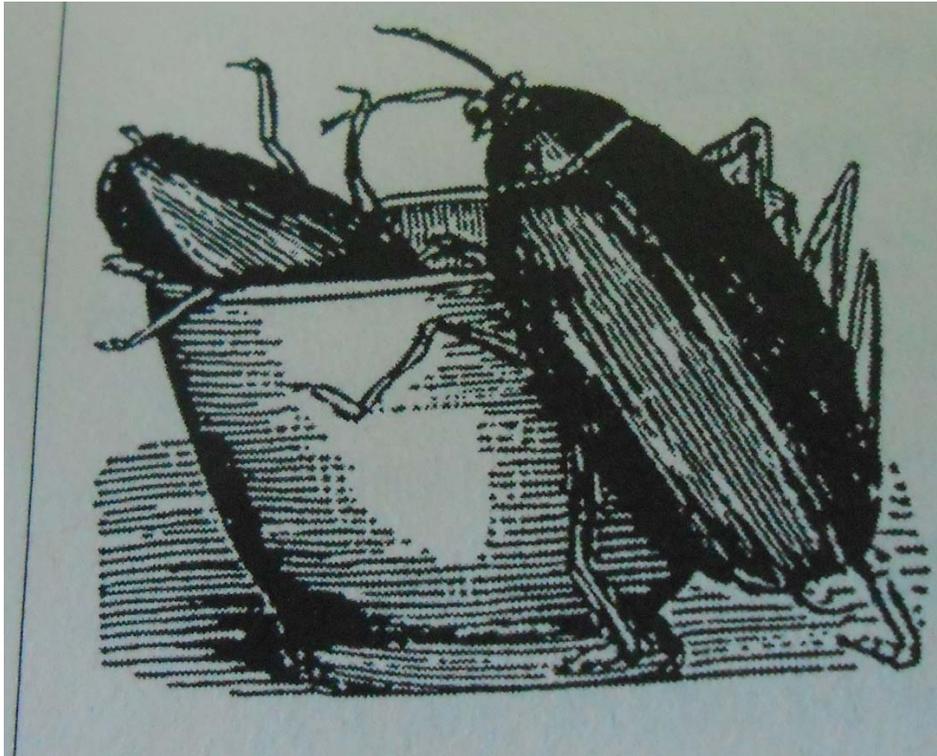
And way before that there was the cockroach! Through so many countless geologic ages it has survived, and it has made itself quite at home in the Crescent City.

In New Orleans the cockroach is even a king, or at least one of his brethren has a kingly name, "Rex". In his immensely popular cartoon series, "Vic and Nat'ly", Bunny Matthews created a surreal world that takes place at the title characters' eponymous seafood, bar and po-boy establishment. In 1983, the all-wise wisecracking "Rex da Roach" made his debut there crawling on the countertop. Boldly asserting himself before teacup-sized "Tootsie, the Chihuahua", "Rex" was there to stay. Yet sometimes he threatens that he's "eatin' out".

As much a part of the culture as the mosquito, the cockroach has a rich history in this port city. Before attaining international fame as the chronicler of Japan, Lafcadio Hearn (June 27, 1850 – September 26, 1904) a writer who spent ten years scouring New Orleans for the more sordid side of the story, the crime, debauchery, opium and other forms of vice, the haunted and the hauntings, and (yes) even the cockroaches. His writings for national publications helped paint a new

picture of New Orleans with a colorful culture more European and Caribbean than the rest of the country. It was he who discovered (or invented) that different reality, and (with writers like Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner having drawn from it) this concept continues to this day.

Hearn's sketches written for the *New Orleans Daily Item* are vivid and often accompanied by his own woodblock prints. In his October 13, 1880, contribution to the *Item* he wrote of "festive" cockroaches alongside his woodblock of two of them in a bowl or teacup of cream. Chihuahuas of the "Nint' Ward" had not yet considered this as suitable housing.

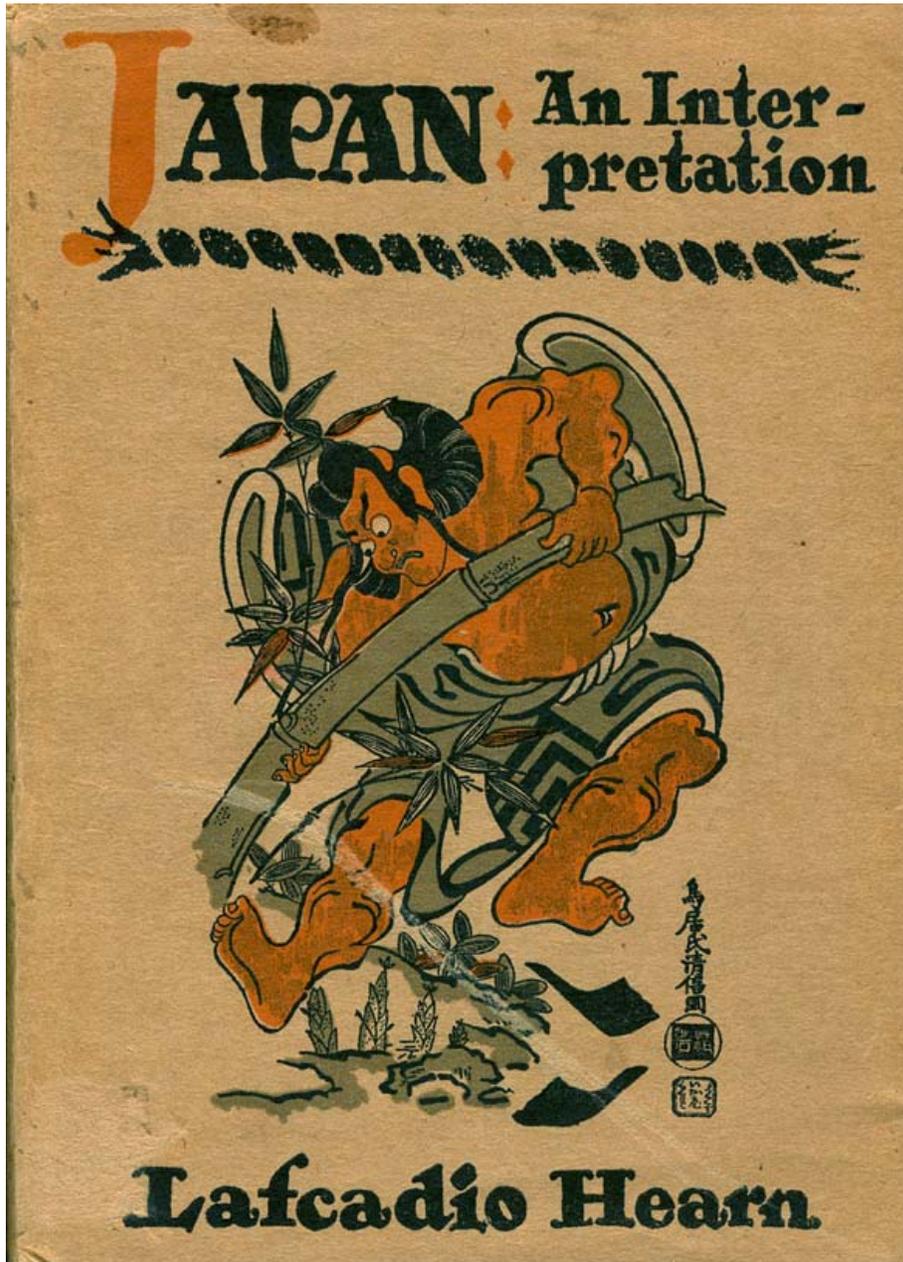


*Lafcadio Hearn woodblock print of New Orleans cockroaches
Is this why he left New Orleans for Japan?*

Of the cockroach Hearn wrote: "He maketh ghostly noises in the dead waste and middle of the night." Hearn loved haunting analogies. "He hath a passion for the green and crimson of beautifully bound books, and after he has passed over them they look as if they had been sprinkled with a shower of vitriol." And what's more, Hearn explained that this insect sometimes "attaineth" the size of a "No. 12 shoe" and "loveth to commit suicide by drowning himself in bowls of cream ..."

Additionally, a roach "explodeth with great noise" when stepped upon, "haunteth kitchens" and will miraculously reappear after a house has burned down to the ground and later rebuilt. "Five hundred thousand means have been invented" for the demise of these creatures, but

"none avaieth". He does mention a good thing or two about them, like mouse-practice for kittens. Writing long before the invention of the roach motel, Hearn's observations are just as familiar and humorous to the modern reader.



Lafcadio's work after New Orleans

And it is a subject still talked and written about. In October of 2006, "The Roachman" (a seven-foot cockroach man) made an appearance at the Prytania Theater's "Horrorfest". For a man who wrote about both New Orleans and Japanese ghost stories, Lafcadio Hearn would have been pleased.

Many in the city have shown a curiosity over what the difference is between a "palmetto bug" and a cockroach. According to Orkin:

"The term 'palmetto bug' is a general name commonly used to refer to several species of cockroaches in the southern U.S. and even some beetles. Other cockroach names are 'waterbug' or 'Croton bug.' Unfortunately, these names can lead to confusion and misidentification, since any moderate-to large-sized cockroaches and even beetles are often called these by the public."



One can go "green" today with his personal "solar cockroach"

The explanation continues:

"A cockroach species commonly called a 'palmetto bug' is the American cockroach (*Periplaneta americana*). Adult American cockroaches are large and winged. Their coloration is dark brown with a cream-colored prothorax that has dark markings that resemble sunglasses. American cockroaches prefer damp conditions and often are found in sewers, woodpiles and mulch. They will fly to lights. This particular behavior is disconcerting for homeowners who encounter a large roach that flies near their face when entering doors with lights nearby in the evening. Another large species that may be called a 'palmetto bug' is the smokybrown cockroach. The adults are a dark mahogany color and winged as well. They lack the sunglasses markings on the prothorax and are slightly smaller."

Are you thinking that the above paragraph is simply "TMI"?

The cockroach has also made those New Orleans "best" lists run by *Gambit*, the *Times-Picayune* and *New Orleans Magazine* over the years. For New Orleans voters participating in these annual polls, the best way to kill a cockroach "is stomping (preferably with a pointy toed shoe). That won out over "flushing it down the toilet". "Miller the Killer" and the "Orkin Man" have been known to help. But whatever one does, the cockroach (just like the indomitable spirit of New Orleans) will keep coming back.

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