

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Dr. Nut**

Dr. Nut was the name of an actual soft drink bottled in New Orleans at the corner of Elysian Fields and Chartres by the World Bottling Company (and later by another New Orleans company, Wright Root Beer) primarily during the first half of the 20th century. The beverage acquired a newfound fame with the popularity and acclaim of John Kennedy Toole's Pulitzer Prize winning *A Confederacy of Dunces*, in which the main character Ignatius J. Reilly consumes copious amounts of his favorite drink as part of his slovenly, undisciplined and gluttonous lifestyle.

This carbonated creation from the Crescent City, however, had nothing whatsoever to do with an earlier Dr. Nutt (with two t's), Dr. Haller Nutt, who was born February 17, 1816, at Laurel Hill Plantation in Jefferson County, Mississippi. This Dr. Nutt was responsible for developing an important and commercially viable strain of cotton.



*Dr. Haller Nutt, Cotton Planter and Plantation Owner*

In the spring of 1860 Dr. Nutt and his wife Julia decided to begin construction on a magnificent home in the "Oriental Revival" style, Longwood. They enlisted the services of Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan to design the largest octagonal house in the United States. The magnificent Longwood, with its byzantine onion-shaped dome, is located at 140 Lower Woodville Road in Natchez, Mississippi. The exterior work was completed by the beginning of the Civil War, but much of the interior work was halted when Sloan's artisans returned north at the start of the war. Sadly, Dr. Nutt died of pneumonia in 1864, leaving the work unfinished. Of the thirty-two rooms planned for the opulent mansion, only nine rooms on the basement floor were completed by slave labor in 1862.



*Beautiful Longwood, also known as Nutt's Folly*

Dr. Nutt and his wife had eleven children. Longwood, the family's unfinished symphony, is truly worth a visit.

New Orleans' Dr. Nut, the carbonated beverage, had a short but significant run as one of the most popular local soft drinks in the New Orleans area. The overly sweet almond-flavored soda debuted at restaurants, groceries and drug store soda fountains sometime in the late 1930s, a product of the World Bottling Company at 600 Elysian Fields in the Faubourg Marigny. Dr. Frank Gomila was the man at the helm of the bottling company, as well as serving as New Orleans Commissioner of Public Safety. The company also produced other beverages, including "Besmaid" ginger ale, sarsaparilla, lemon-flavored "Double L" and the not-so-enchancing-sounding celery phosphate.



*The soft drink Ignatius J. Reilly loved, a bottle of which was displayed at the Southern Food and Beverage Museum (SOFAB)*

Howard Jacobs was a popular writer for the Times-Picayune for over twenty-five years. In his "Remoulade" column, which began back in 1948, Jacobs wrote that Dr. Nut was "concocted in the early '30s by the Gomila family of New Orleans, flourished until the late 40's after World War II when it was discontinued. But in the early '60s Howell came along and placed it back on the market, where it survived for some four or five years." The "Howell" was "Evans Howell of Baton Rouge, who distributed the product" and eventually "sold the trade mark to 7-Up Pepsi Cola Of Jennings, whose owner, Fred Trahan" attempted to reintroduce Dr. Nut in order to cash in on the interest generated by *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Trouble was, previous die-hard Dr. Nut enthusiasts soon discovered – much to their dismay – that the new drink shared only the name with the old nut-flavored soft drink. The short-lived come-back concoction has been described as having a cherry cola flavor, nothing like the old sweet almond flavor of the original.

Various people have held different memories of the iconic Dr. Nut. The late Allen "Black Cat" Lacombe "remembered that it was advertised by a Warren Easton High school cheerleader who made the rounds in a white doctor's coat and a goatee plugging the product." Marcelle Saussy recalled that it tasted "like chocolate, or almonds, or both."

Lewis L. Butler thought that it was “manufactured at one time by the Franklin Bottling Co. which stood in Southern Park at Picheloup Place between Moss and Dumaine.”



*What one might call a “Real Nut Case” (from the collection of Ned Hémard)*

Dr. Nut was known for its slogans, such as “It’s Delicious” and for an older gentleman who ran in front of various Mardi Gras parades. This avid jogger of the 1940s and 50s was Charlie Manson, who belonged to the New Orleans Athletic Club (NOAC). He won many awards for his efforts. On his jogging duds he sported the name “Dr. Nut”, the local soft drink, and wore a sign that said “Life Begins at 75” (or whatever age he may have been that particular year). He continued to work well into his 70s and possibly early 80s. He even ran to work each day, his last job being with the New Orleans Recreation Department (NORD). He died in 1960 at age 85.



The Dr. Nut bottle featured a wonderful logo of a bushy-tailed squirrel nibbling on a large nut. This heavily sweet soda pop was the ideal drink for John Kennedy Toole's anti-hero, Ignatius J. Reilly, which Walker Percy described as a "slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one". Since the goddess Fortuna has spun Ignatius downwards on her wheel of fortune, the numerous Dr. Nuts helped him face "lurked pitfalls" like "newspaper reporters, stripteasers, birds, photography, juvenile delinquents, Nazi pornographers":

"The Dr. Nuts seemed only as an acid gurgling down into his intestine. He filled with gas, the sealed valve trapping it just as one pinches the mouth of a balloon. Great eructations rose from his throat and bounced upward toward the refuse-laden bowl of the milk glass chandelier. Once a person was asked to step into this brutal century, anything could happen."

And now we're in an even newer century. What would Ignatius think of conditions today? Perhaps he would write in his "Big Chief" tablet that the world just wouldn't be the same without Dr. Nut.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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