

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

New Suits and Clothing Customs

"Every year for Carnival Time,
We make a new suit,
Red, yellow, green, purple or blue,
We make a new suit,
We all try to make ours, as best as we could,
So when we out at Carnival, We be looking good."

Recorded in New Orleans in 1970 by a ten-member band led by Bo Dollis (Big Chief of the Wild Magnolias) and Joseph Pierre "Monk" Boudreaux (Big Chief of the Golden Eagles), the song has become an anthem for all who love the pageantry, music and craftsmanship of the Mardi Gras Indians. Love and dedication goes into each costume with its color scheme, feather arrangement and intricate beadwork. Custom is powerful in the culture, so every year they make a new suit.

Wearing last year's model would not be *de rigueur*, although the big chiefs and second liners might not use that expression. The second line follows alongside the official parade, and what "follows" explains the whole concept of what is meant by the word "suit":

Whether a matching set of outer garments, a legal proceeding or any number of other meanings, the word "suit" (*sute* in Middle English) came via France from the Latin verb *sequere* (meaning to follow). In French, the verb is *suivre*. If the second comment has no relation to the first comment, it would be a *non sequitur* (meaning it does not follow). Sue, suitor and suite have the same source, as well.

The suit (as something one wears) has come into the language from *suivre* since the trousers (and vest in a three-piece version) "followed" the jacket in both color and material. In England during the reign of George IV, Beau Brummell is credited with bringing to the world of fashion the modern suit worn with an accompanying necktie. He also introduced black as the color for men's evening wear in 1810.

In New Orleans, if one receives an invitation with the words *costume de rigueur*, the meaning has been virtually the same for over a century. The French expression literally means "a mode of dress of a strict manner, or rigor" (in other words, dressed according to protocol or etiquette). In the Crescent City, it is a different protocol depending on one's sex. For the lady, it has been the long décolleté gown with bare arms accessorized by long gloves and striking jewelry. Some variations are allowed in the area of arm and cleavage coverage. For the gents, it is tails (consisting of black tailcoat and matching trousers, starched white shirt with stiff front and wing collars, white piqué tie and waistcoat, white gloves and black patent leather pumps or loafers). It is not appropriate to call this stiffness *rigueur mortis*.

Some fashions and customs rarely change, while others vary quickly as times change. Take undershirts. Clark Gable killed sales overnight with the popularity of the 1934 film "It Happened One Night" when he removed his dress shirt and there was only skin. New Orleans was the locale of the undershirt's comeback in 1951 when Brando played Stanley Kowalski in "A Streetcar Named Desire".

Another unusual custom in New Orleans was "Straw Hat Day", celebrated on a Sunday in early October during the city's *fin de siècle* and early 1900s. Men in their straw boaters realized their hats had experienced a difficult summer. Beat up, worn out and discolored by the sun, the hats were crammed down the huge barrel of a cannon and blasted out toward the Mississippi over crowds and official annual proclamations. It was *au revoir* to the straw hats and a ritualistic transition to new felt ones. Captain Anthony Sambola (1836-1903) was an enthusiastic participant in these activities.

Crinoline hoop skirts are seldom seen today except in the annual presentation of the New Orleans Spring Fiesta. Designed to support the wearer's skirts in the correct shape, it had an unintended use as reported in the "Daily Picayune" on February 28, 1864. The article revealed that a "hurdygurdyist" after a quarrel with his monkey was pursuing his sidekick "through the streets of the Garden District" when "the mischievous creature sought refuge beneath the steel-ribbed crinoline of a beautiful young lady and

refused to be dislodged." She was "trembling with agitation, and yet afraid to proceed to extremities for fear the ugly intruder would use his teeth or claws" and the young men standing round could not proceed there either, for "modesty forbade their interference". The lady quietly endured her ordeal until the monkey came out grinning, "as if laughing at the novelty of his last retreat".

Tight waistlines and these hip-enhancing cages brought about the need for fainting couches. Some ladies thought enough was enough. Ethel Hutson, New Orleans journalist, artist and women's rights activist, in 1893 had written her father (Charles Woodward Hutson, history professor and artist) that she had gotten involved in an "Anti-Crinoline League" protesting hoop skirts as an impractical mode of women's attire. She took an interest in civic causes in New Orleans, such as education, child welfare, public utilities and transportation and the preservation of the St. Louis Hotel.

An earlier attempt had been made to get women out of hoop skirts in Louisiana's most cosmopolitan city. A lady in bloomers first made an appearance on Tchoupitoulas Street on September 10, 1855, as reported in the "New Orleans Daily Delta":

This "lank and tall" lady "was walking rapidly up and down the middle of the street, with a delicate little Italian grey-hound in her arms and a green parrot on her shoulder. She was dressed in long, tight fitting pantaloons of black velvet". "Who is she?" said one; "a luny," said another.

New customs have come along (like "casual Fridays") and old ones have faded away (like ladies covering their heads at Mass). Men's chapeaux went out of fashion with JFK, and soon the ladies no longer wore hats to shop downtown on Canal Street. Eventually a circular bit of lace replaced hats in church. Sometimes the younger girls wore a *babushka* (often Madras) in the 60s. *Babushka*, the Russian word for "grandmother", can also mean "mother-in-law". Too bad there was no Ernie K-Dovich for the Russians. An ambassador of "love-ology" would've been his best suit.

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