

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémond

First Draft

With a city rich in history like New Orleans, there is always a great likelihood that (for every interesting building) there is an even more intriguing structure or business that operated there before it. The Cat's Meow at 701 Bourbon Street is just such an example.

Since 1989, countless Karaoke performers have seized the opportunity to croon nostalgic tunes amidst partying bar patrons, enjoy the commanding view from the balconies or check out the "BourboCAM". Mounted on the stage, this web camera looks out toward the unfolding French Quarter panorama and sends streaming video directly to the internet.

Previously this dynamic nightspot was home to a lively establishment known as Dixie's Bar of Music. First located on St. Charles Avenue in 1939, this musical emporium (founded by sisters Irma and Yvonne "Dixie" Fasnacht) moved to 701 Bourbon ten years later. The house band included Dixie on clarinet, Johnny Senac on bass, Judy Ertle on trumpet and Dorothy "Sloopy" Sloop on piano.

Born downtown in a house on the corner of Laharpe and Rocheblave, Dixie Fasnacht had traveled in and out of the Crescent City with all-girl bands (such as the "Southland Rhythm Girls" and the "Sophisticates of Swing") before running the bar with her sister.

Regular club patron and author, Lyle Saxon, lined up modernist artist Xavier Gonzalez to paint a striking jazz mural for the Dixie and Irma's place. It featured famous entertainers of the day like Louis Prima and Benny Goodman, and visiting celebrities signed their autographs and best wishes. The popular jazz spot closed in the late 60s, and the mural is now on display at the Old New Orleans Mint on Esplanade.

Years earlier, the Fasnacht family name played a prominent part in another historic landmark. Today this property is known as the Cotton Mill Apartments, an award-winning historic restoration of the A. A. Maginnis Cotton Mill constructed in 1882. Developers Pres Kabacoff, Eddie Boettner and Tom Crumley did a splendid job in preserving and restoring the heart-pine floors, and special artwork was created from the factory's machinery.

Once again, others had come before. Jean-Baptiste Poeyfarré and his wife, Louise Forstall, had a residence at that location where they lived for about six years until the old gentleman passed away in 1824. His widow continued living in this home for a number of years, and soon the land was subdivided into 57 lots that were auctioned off in 1831. A new street was cut through the acreage and named Poeyfarre for her husband, and Madame Poeyfarré moved to the Quarter on Ursulines Street in 1833.

After having arrived in New Orleans from Switzerland in 1846, Louis Fasnacht started in the catering business. After the year 1848, there was an ever-increasing influx of German immigrants to the city along with some changes to the population's drinking preferences. With this opportunity, Louis Fasnacht partnered with his brother Samuel to open New Orleans' first brewery in 1852. They rented and later purchased the Poeyfarré home and incorporated it as part of the brewery. Fasnacht Beer was brewed there until 1865 when the enterprise was sold to Erath and Company Brewery. Samuel Fasnacht reacquired the facility but abandoned its operation in 1876.

Soon the city would have beer gardens, saloons and numerous other breweries. In 1898, there were eight hundred saloons in New Orleans. And some fifty years ago, the city was dubbed the "brewing capital of the South". Dixie is perhaps the most familiar (since 1907), as are the more recent Falstaff, Jax and Regal; but there were quite a number of older and less familiar ones like Old Union, Lafayette and George Auer Eagle.

A popular tradition was "rushing the growler", which involved hurrying forward with a tin pail or similar container to be amply filled by the saloonkeeper with beer for consumption off the premises. Often young boys were entrusted with this mission.

In 1881, Arthur Ambrose Maginnis demolished the Poeyfarré home that had stood there for 116 years and, with it, the historic first brewery. The following year, the largest cotton mill in the South took its place. Closed in 1944, the structure at 920 Poeyfarre Street is today a complex of beautiful luxury apartments and penthouse condominiums. Archaeologists have even done some digging around the site.

Also unearthed is a most enlightening bit of cultural and linguistic information:

While the Crescent City celebrates each year on Fat Tuesday, the British are enjoying Pancake (or Shrove) Tuesday. Meanwhile, the people of Germany are having a delightful time *fasching* during *die närrische saison* (the foolish season). Lucerne, Switzerland, has a lantern-lit parade where hundreds turn out in masks and costumes. In both Germany and Switzerland this celebration on the "eve of fasting" (as well as New Orleans' very first beer) is quite appropriately known as "*Fasnacht*", the German word for "Mardi Gras".

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