

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Obituary Cocktail Lounge ... and So Much More

A beloved homemaker of 95 years known to her loved ones as "Nanan" died in 2000. Her obituary in the Times-Picayune informed the public that "relatives and friends of the family are invited to attend the funeral Mass to be celebrated at All Faiths Funeral Home Chapel, 5200 Canal Blvd. 'former site of Lenfant's' on Saturday". A 93-year-old in 2002 and a 91-year-old in 2004 were both ladies "survived by many nieces and nephews", and their obituaries also read: "former site of Lenfant's".

These three ladies all lived into their nineties, and perhaps many of their friends had fond memories of the wonderful restaurant and cocktail lounge that once thrived there.

Lenfant's was a unique structure built in an architectural style known as "Streamline Moderne". It was a later form of art deco prevalent in a number of Hollywood films of the 40s and can be traced back to "Chicago's Century of Progress" World's Fair of 1933-1934. That's where the "Burlington Zephyr" made its record run, so it's not unusual that this style was incorporated into much of Pontchartrain Beach.

"Streamline Moderne" gained its inspiration from the kinetic lines and aerodynamic forms emerging from the drafting boards of industrial designers in the 1930s. The Zephyr rollercoaster ride enclosure was as sleek as the ride's train-like components. And the exterior of the monolithic concrete bathhouse at Pontchartrain Beach had rounded corners (instead of the more conventional square ones) and glass brick sections instead of windows for natural lighting.

And so it was with Lenfant's. This Lakeview landmark had rounded corners, flat roof, white stucco, glass bricks in abundance, horizontal neons along the top and crowned in the center with a crustacean waiter. This classic lobster in tuxedo stood above the words "Lenfant's Seafood Restaurant" which was above another sign reading "Cocktail Lounge". All of this was above a glass bricked entranceway that led to the wonders within.

If one were a young boy or girl visiting there with his parents in the 1950s, it may have been the place he or she had the very first "Roy Rogers" or "Shirley Temple". If one were a teen (or a little older), the back parking lot may have been the site of that very first kiss.

Benny Grunch laments Lenfant's passing in his obituary song entitled "Ain't Dere No More" and glorifies its memory on his website. He describes the décor as "old lakefront pre-war beach modern" and the view as having a "great advantage" in that "the parking lot overlooked the vast and quiet beauty of Greenwood Cemetery and railroad tracks with real passing trains". What could be more romantic than that? The speakers facing the shell parking lot played the latest tunes, and car hops like Hank and Billy took your drink and po-boy orders.

The restaurant had a huge bar inside and a pick-up window in the rear. Signs were great at telling the Lenfant's story. It served "Steak and Chicken Dinners", "Mixed Drinks" and "Sandwiches" in an "Air Conditioned" environment. And dinner could be had for "\$1.00 Up"!

And Lenfant's was a great location for music and dancing. The Basin Street Six played there every night in the late 40s (when Pete Fountain was a member), and (in the late 40s and early 50s) Johnny Reininger fronted his own orchestra there. He played clarinet and alto sax.

This venerable institution closed in the 70s and made an upscale comeback in the 80s. Between gigs at Art Deco Restaurant Jonathan and the Upperline, Executive Chef Thomas Crawford Cowman spent 1986 at Lenfant's and earned four beans. But the fame didn't last.

Many remember those earlier days. This author recalls his "Roy Rogers" cocktails as a kid and a few years later dancing to "Over The Mountain" and "You Cheated, You Lied" at a Student Council Dance at the "Boulevard Room". This was the reception hall next door where musicians like Deacon John honed their skills.

On Tuesday, February 15, 1995, another obituary appeared in the Times-Picayune. "Louis Oliver Lenfant, a retired restaurateur and caterer" had died the day before. "He was 91" and "he owned and operated Lenfant's Restaurant from 1940 to 1975. "A funeral Mass" was to be "held Thursday at 10:30 A. M." at the very site of his life's work, a place that brought so much joy and good times to countless New Orleanians. Friends and relatives came to the visitation at All Faiths Funeral Home in the 5200 block of Canal Blvd.

On September 9, 2006, All Faiths reopened with a new name as Greenwood Funeral Home. But for the many faithful, obituaries in the Crescent City will continue to read: former site of Lenfant's.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Obituary Cocktail Lounge ... and So Much More"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2007