

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **From Oyster Bay to Oysters Rockefeller**

Although born in New York City, Theodore Roosevelt spent many long vacations and summers of his youth in the Oyster Bay area of Long Island. There (in his early twenties) he purchased 155 acres as the site for his shingle-style Queen Anne residence he would name Sagamore Hill. It became known as the "Summer White House" during Teddy's years as President, and he would die there in 1919.

His fifth cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt of the Hyde Park branch of the family, met his future wife Anna Eleanor Roosevelt (Teddy's niece and godchild) at a White House reception. The couple (fifth cousins, once removed) had actually encountered each other as children, but not in any serious way. Theodore and Franklin each paved their way to the White House by serving as Assistant Secretaries of the Navy, and they each visited New Orleans (but neither was the first Roosevelt to do so).

Nicholas J. Roosevelt (1767-1854, brother of Theodore Roosevelt's great grandfather) was an inventor, mining engineer and a dear friend and business associate of Benjamin Henry Latrobe in the production of steam engines for the Philadelphia Waterworks and other ventures. Latrobe was a famous architect who worked on the United States Capitol, and he and his son both died in New Orleans. Latrobe partnered with Nicholas (who built the first Mississippi steamboat named "New Orleans" in Pittsburgh) and Robert Fulton (who furnished the design). The "New Orleans" would leave Pennsylvania for its eponymous destination in October of 1811. Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston, along with Nicholas Roosevelt had come up with a good design, and Nicholas and his family would make the test run.

Nicholas and his wife (Benjamin Latrobe's daughter, Lydia) took along their first child, Rosetta Mark Roosevelt. Their second child, Henry Latrobe Roosevelt, was born during the voyage on October 30, 1811. The journey wasn't easy, and river conditions became perilous when America's largest earthquake had destroyed New Madrid just beneath the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The great comet of that year was visible for months, and the earthquake caused the Mississippi to run backwards for a time. The Roosevelts finally reached New Orleans in January of 1812, and the age of steam riverboats had begun.

In 1898, a Roosevelt would return to New Orleans. As Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Teddy Roosevelt had advocated war with Spain and prepared for it. He resigned his post to organize the 1st U. S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment (known as the Rough Riders), and at the end of May they passed through the Crescent City on their way to their point of embarkation in Florida. Colonel Roosevelt and his staff were entertained at the Pickwick Club before departure. Roosevelt's valor in Cuba led to the Presidency and a lasting friendship with a fellow Rough Rider, John A. McIlhenny.

Besides running the Tabasco empire on Avery Island, McIlhenny served the President at the U. S. Civil Service Commission, eventually becoming the U. S. Minister Plenipotentiary to Haiti in 1922. He and Teddy went on a famous bear hunt in Mississippi where the President refused to shoot a helpless Louisiana black bear. From this event the first "Teddy Bears" were created, and they have been popular ever since. Teddy came to New Orleans as President on October 27, 1905, but his daughter Alice caused a sensation on her visit two years earlier.

For the 1903 Mardi Gras John McIlhenny was to keep an eye on the President's daughter, who became famous for her gowns of "Alice Blue" (inspiring a popular song in the 1919 Broadway musical "Irene"). As it turned out, Alice was a "pepper" for which McIlhenny was unprepared. She is said to have soaked him by playfully pushing him into a New Orleans fountain. Teddy once threatened to defenestrate his daughter for interrupting him and fumed, "I can either run the country or attend to Alice, but I cannot possibly do both."

The New York Times covered Alice's New Orleans trip stating, "The McIlhennys have leased the beautiful home of James T. Hayden, President of Whitney National Bank, for the carnival and will entertain

lavishly in Miss Roosevelt's honor during her stay." The Haydens were traveling in Egypt. After her later marriage, Alice would become Alice Roosevelt Longworth.

When FDR was in New Orleans in the 1930s, the famous dinner at Antoine's with Mayor Robert Maestri took place. Upon dining on Jules Alciatore's rich creation, Oysters Rockefeller, the mayor blurted out the famous line to the President, "How ya like dem ersters?"

Perhaps foremost in the city's memory is the efforts of the Roosevelt administration and its Works Progress Administration in beautifying City Park during the Great Depression with the building of bridges, fountains, roadways, lagoons and the stadium. On April 29, 1937, FDR visited City Park to dedicate the stadium and other WPA projects including Roosevelt Mall (named for the President).

Louisiana's Huey Long and FDR had a rocky relationship, but Huey managed to spend a great deal of time in New Orleans' Roosevelt Hotel. Beginning as the Grunewald, the name was changed to honor Theodore Roosevelt. It has since been the Fairmont and will soon be rebranded the Waldorf-Astoria (another New York name of distinction).

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was staying in the French Quarter at the Monteleone Hotel on April 9, 1934. From there she wrote of her feast at Arnaud's: "I made it a memorable one: two gin fizzes, some kind of marvelous shrimp concoction known as shrimps Arnaud, pompano baked in a paper bag, potatoes soufflé, a pint of sauterne ..." Besides being godmother to Walter Stauffer McIlhenny (Rough Rider John's son), Eleanor Roosevelt was loved and respected for her dedication to those less privileged in life. Winston Churchill said she possessed "a spirit of steel and a heart of gold."

When Teddy Roosevelt was President, his Secretary of the Navy was Charles J. Bonaparte (grandson of Jérôme, Napoleon's younger brother). William Henry Hunt served as Secretary of the Navy under Garfield and Chester A. Arthur. He finished his legal training after Yale in his brothers' office in New Orleans, where he was admitted to the bar in 1844. Like Teddy and FDR, Ernst Lee Jahncke of New Orleans also served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. And Sean O'Keefe (great grandson of New Orleans Mayor Arthur O'Keefe) also served as Secretary of the Navy from 1992-1993. He became the Administrator of NASA in 2001 and is today Chancellor of LSU. "How ya like dem Tigers?"

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