

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Mules, Tigers, Waffles and Taffy

Founded by Bienville in 1718, New Orleans was laid out in a classic eighteenth-century gridiron pattern by engineer Adrien de Pauger. Outside this nascent metropolis was a hostile environment, and the young city's wooden palisades offered an uncertain barrier between war and peace.

The word *palisades* (as well as the word *pale*) come from the Latin word *palus*, meaning stake. *Palisades* refers to the stakes (or poles) that form a protective enclosure, and *pale* is a territory under a given authority. The expression "beyond the pale" (meaning to go beyond the limits of law or decency) had come into use during the previous century.

By the year 1900, war was still a problem in the world and the Crescent City was a natural and essential point of distribution. The Spanish-American War of 1898 had just ended, while the Anglo-Boer War was continuing in South Africa. The port of New Orleans had been shipping mules to Cuba and the Transvaal, according to a 1900 New York Times article, raising prices in America. Coincidentally, *Transvaal* means literally "beyond the pale" or beyond the *Vaal* (Pale) River.

The New York Times article continues with commentary on this offspring of a male donkey and a female horse: "the most valuable, are called the 'sugar' mules, deriving their name from the fact that they are well adapted to haul the huge wagons that are used on the plantations of Louisiana. To be classified as a sugar mule the animal must be from 15 ½ hands high to 16 hands 1 inch, and must weigh from 1,000 to 1,400 pounds." The Army, however, used only the "cotton" mules ("13 to 15 hands high" and "600 to 900 pounds").

New Orleans had other uses for the "sugar" mule. The New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad (known today as the St. Charles streetcar line) used these animals before electrification. A team of four or five "sugar" mules, bred for their endurance and strength, pulled each streetcar. Older New Orleanians remember days gone by when mules pulled garbage trucks, Mardi Gras floats and the wagons of countless street vendors.

Mardi Gras mules were replaced in the 1950s by tractors, while mules today pull tourists in carriages leisurely through the French Quarter.

As for the street vendors, a few still remember them. Dr. John (Mac Rebennack) in his autobiographical "Under a Hoodoo Moon" recalls:

"One of my first encounters with street music came from a guy named Bugling Sam DeKemel, a peddler who sold waffles ... He used to come down the street, blowing a bugle from his wagon real loud. Bugling Sam might not have been a great bugle player but he was a cranked-up loud one."

Bugling Sam made it into Time Magazine and Ripley's "Believe It Or Not" for being the only man to play jazz on an Army regulation bugle. Sam, whose real first name was Matthew, explained: "You got to have a tough lip to blow a bugle this way. You got to use your tongue, your throat and your stomach to push out those sharps & flats because you don't have any valves."

Sam and his dad (the waffle chef) actually had a horse-drawn wagon, and in the 1920s their waffles (covered with powdered sugar) were four for only five cents.

Around 1921 Sam started playing the "Tiger Rag" on his bugle. It was such a popular song emanating from New Orleans that it had many authors claiming credit. Originally known as the "Jack Carey" or "Number Two", it was souped-up from a French quadrille. Its composer is said to have been Achille Baquet, with cornet and trombone breaks worked out by Punch Miller and Jack Carey. Jelly Roll Morton claimed it as his own, as did Nick La Rocca (whose Original Dixieland Jass Band made it famous in 1917-1918). And what LSU game is complete without a chorus of "Hold That Tiger"?

Another great waffle man was Louis Gandolini and his horse-drawn waffle wagon. When he retired, he tried to sell his waffle iron to another great street vendor named Sam. This time it was Sam Cortese, the original Roman Candy man. Sam declined the griddle.

Salvatore (Sam) Cortese (1890-1969) was the son of parents born in Alia, Sicily (perched on the southern hills of Palermo Province). The victim of a childhood streetcar accident (he had both legs severed below the knees), Sam began selling fruits and vegetables (as well as some home-made taffy) from age twelve. Sam's mule-drawn Roman Candy wagon was built in 1915, and the same wagon is in operation today.

The confection Sam called Roman Candy ("Italian Taffy" he believed would have limited sales) was from a recipe he learned from his mother, Angela Napoli Cortese. Coming down from generations of Sicilians who learned how to make it from the Phoenicians, it was originally designed for cleaning one's teeth. New Orleanians enjoy the chewy delights in three simple flavors: chocolate, vanilla and strawberry. And each stick was only five cents up until Sam's passing.

Sam died in 1969, and the business was taken over about three years later by his grandson, Ron Kotteman. The delay was due to the Army, who this time needed men more than mules. Ron was drafted.

Today Ron makes the candy on board the wagon, just as his grandfather had before him (although Grandfather Sam used a coal-burning stove). Ron works the taffy on a marble slab and pulls it on the very same hook. The wagon's unique design allows the cart to be driven from inside allowing the mule to guide Ron through the streets while the candy is being made. St. Charles Avenue, the Audubon Zoo and the French Quarter are some usual stops.

Hurricane Katrina caused some delays for the Roman Candy man because Patsy the Mule's stable was destroyed. The hurricane also reminded everyone that a city once surrounded by wooden palisades was now surrounded by levees (and just as vulnerable in spots). Amidst the tragedy, the city also had a sense of humor. An online satirical publication entitled the "Creole Tomato" published this headline:

"Corps of Engineers to Rebuild Levees Using Roman Candy"

The story stated:

"Ron Kotteman, better known simply as The Roman Candy Man, has already received a no-bid contract for 4.5 million sticks ..." "cost effective at only 75¢ a stick."

He was happy he didn't need to apply the 4.5 million wax paper wrappings. That would've been "beyond the pale".

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