

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Fascinating Facts, or A New Orleans Gallimaufry

There are perhaps some of my older readers who remember fondly serene summers spent in and around Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. And, if one's family had a house there, or in Waveland, or Pass Christian, it often necessitated a trip to the hardware store. In the Bay, the place to go was Alden Mauffray's Hardware Store.

Aisles of screws and bolts of every size, oyster rakes, rubber boots, pulleys, brass candlesticks, teapots, ladders, dog collars, hammers and nails, electric heaters, fishing tackle, rope, paint - you name it - Mr. Mauffray knew where it was.



Old postcard view of Bay St. Louis

"That sir, you can find on aisle 3, three-quarters of the way back, up two rows from the bottom in bin number 6," he would answer without hesitation.

Once my father tried to trip him up by conjuring up the name of a fictional piece of hardware:

"I need a 5/8th inch left-handed plivet. Oh, and I need it galvanized."

Mr. Mauffray, taken somewhat aback, stated that he was out of that item but would be happy to order it.

The store was a complete hodge-podge of merchandise, but to this well-memorized proprietor everything was in its place.

Mr. Mauffray, whose father opened the store in 1903, died in 1990. The progenitor of the Hancock County Mauffray family was born in France circa 1803. Mauffray is probably the alternate version of the French name Maufré.

This is all a round-about way of explaining the meaning of "gallimaufry" [galə'môfrē], or more simply [gal-uh-maw'-free].

Isaac D'Israeli, British scholar and man of letters, as well as Prime Minister Benjamin's father, wrote in his book entitled *Amenities of Literature*:

"Another contemporary critic announces that 'our English tongue was a gallimaufry or hodge-podge of all other speeches.'"

This brings us to the actual definition of gallimaufry:

"A medley, hash, hodge-podge," dating from the 1550s, from French *galimafrée*, meaning a hash, ragout, or a dish made of odds and ends. This came from the Old French *galimafree*, or *calimafree*, meaning a "sauce made of mustard, ginger, and vinegar; a stew of carp" (14c.), which is of unknown origin. This is perhaps derived from the Old French *galer*, meaning "to make merry, or live well," combined with the Old North French *mafrer*, meaning "to eat much," from the Middle Dutch *maffelen*. Etymologist Ernest Weekley offered "hotchpotch" and also noted the French proper name *Maufré*.

One wonders what Mr. Mauffray would have thought about all this.

To futher clarify, hodge-podge, a variant of hotchpotch, first recorded in 1615-1625, is defined as a heterogeneous mixture, or jumble.

With that, I offer my own saucy medley of New Orleans odds and ends, an interesting hodge-podge of fascinating facts.

Slow Molasses Ideal for Fast Track

In January 1909, the New Orleans historic Fair Grounds was preparing for a special "speed carnival" scheduled for Mardi Gras, February 20, 21 and 22. But it wasn't a championship race of horses, but of automobiles, and the track needed a surface-packing treatment that would transform it to a cement-like oval.

An "easterner proposed one preparation, composed of the refuse of a glucose factory, while another was offered by an oil well syndicate in Jennings, Louisiana.

But the most unusual offer came from "a wealthy Louisiana planter," reported the Baton Rouge *Daily State-Times* on January 8, 1909. This gentleman had "several hundred barrels" of "coarse grade molasses in storage" and he had discovered quite by accident its unique surface-packing properties. The contents of one of the barrels had spilled on the road, after which "it was soon noticed that for several square yards the roadway was like a cement floor." Once our gentleman planter learned of the need for a hard surface by club officials, and that others were bidding for the contract, he offered "to furnish five hundred barrels of molasses free to demonstrate the practicability of his product."

Going To The Chapel

A New Orleans trio consisting of sisters Barbara Ann and Rosa Lee Hawkins, in addition to their cousin Joan Marie Johnson, had been singing together since grade school. They had grown up in the Calliope Housing Project. New Orleans-born singer Joe Jones, who had a Top Five 1960 hit, "You Talk Too Much," became their manager and took them up to New York. There, renowned songwriters/producers Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller signed them to their new Red Bird Records label. Their debut single as the Dixie Cups was "Chapel of Love."

Top Recordings

'Dixie Cups' Edge Beatles;

Headline in the Baton Rouge Advocate, June 7, 1964

Originally, the fledgling girl group was going to be called Little Miss and the Muffets, but were named the Dixie Cups just prior to their "Chapel of Love" release. The *Advocate* called their song a "ring-a-dinger," and it was in June 1964 that "Chapel" knocked the Beatles off their spot at Number 1 on the Bill Board Chart and stayed at Number 1 for three weeks. "Chapel of Love," a song that Phil Spector, Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich had originally written for the Ronettes, was a genuine blockbuster.

Several other popular hits followed, one of which had a distinctly New Orleans birthright. Barbara Ann Hawkins said it happened in 1964 while clowning around during a break in the recording studio. The tune was a Mardi Gras Indian chant her grandmother sang when she

and her sister were kids. Many old-timers remember this tune as "Jock-A-Mo" by James "Sugarboy" Crawford.

"So we started drumming on — let's see, we had an ashtray, drumstick, Coke bottle, and there was an aluminum chair," Hawkins related. "Jerry and Mike were in the control room and they recorded it."

The resulting hit was "Iko Iko," a Top 20 hit in 1965. It was The Dixie Cups' fifth and final hit. Years later, the Dixie Cups still perform (at events such as Jazz Fest), but with changes to the line-up. Joan died in 2016.



The Dixie Cups in 1964

An Unruly Congregation

Some of you may actually be aware of some of the strange names for groups of certain animals and birds: A murder of crows? An exhaltation of larks? A business of ferrets? A crèche of penguins?

Perhaps you did not know that the collective noun for alligators is a congregation, a group in which the smaller alligators are acquiescent to the largest, most dominant alligator. A group of newly hatched alligators, or juveniles, is referred to as a pod. There is no truth to the rumor that these Millennial reptiles have podcasts.



A congregation of Molasses?

Earlier this year, two enterprising individuals, Ian Barrilleaux and Eliot Guthrie, opened Congregation Coffee Roasters coffee shop in Algiers at 240 Pelican Avenue, deciding to name their new business after a gathering of alligators. Curiously, a group of Pelicans, just like a group of young gators, is called a pod.

Justice and Fair Play

"A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust, and a hearty 'Hi-yo, Silver.' The Lone Ranger!"

Without that dramatic introduction and minus the William Tell Overture, the six-foot, two-inch western star arrived in New Orleans in 1956. He made three personal appearances at the Saenger Theater where his first feature-length movie, "The Lone Ranger," was being shown. Two youngsters "turned almost to stone," reported the *States-Item*, upon each of them being handed his guns (silver bullets presumably removed beforehand).

"Who was that masked man?"

Clayton Moore, the actor who most of us remember as the iconic western hero. He said he "always has tried to carry a message justice and fair pay to the youngsters" who followed him on TV, Radio and in the comics. "His clothing emphasizes neatness and cleanliness. He never shoots to kill, and his silver bullet calling card is a symbol of justice."



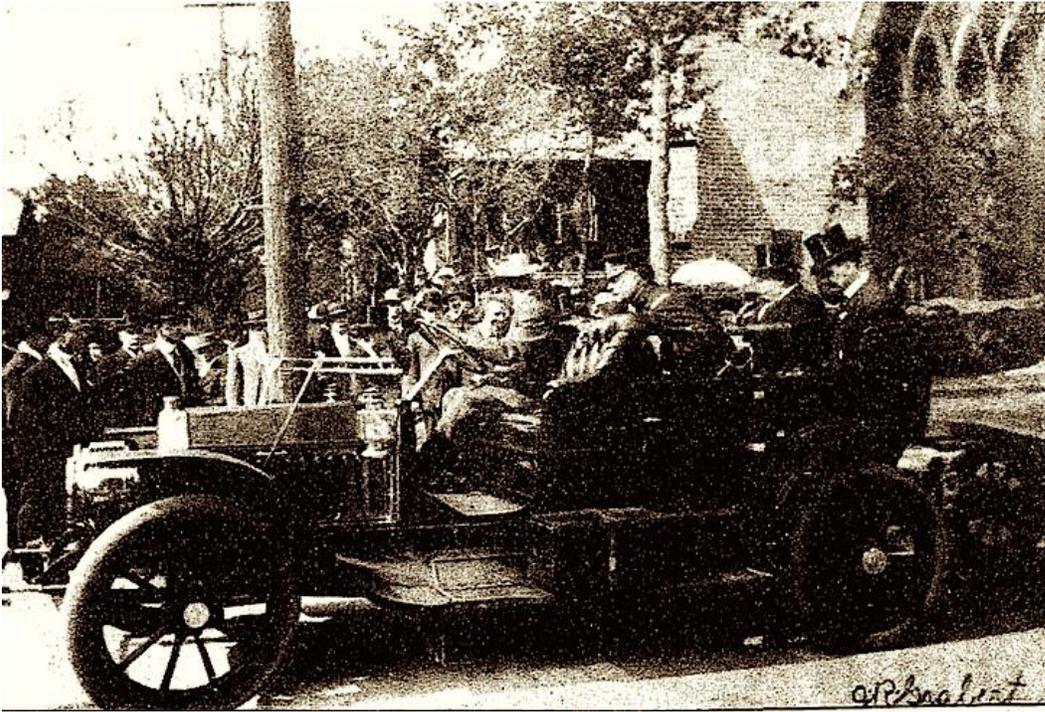
The Lone Ranger also visited the children's ward at Charity Hospital and stopped at American Bakeries on Tulane Avenue, where then City Councilman Jimmy Fitzmorris gave him a key to the city.

"Hi-yo, Silver, Away!"

The Vanishing Bouquet

On a visit to New Orleans in 1909, President of the United States, William Howard Taft, took time to worship at the First Unitarian Church at the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Danneel Street (then called Peters Avenue and South Rampart Street).

The President went by car, accompanied by William B. Gregory, a professor in the College of Engineering at Tulane University and church president at that time. Gregory's daughter, Angela Brès Gregory, later an acclaimed New Orleans sculptor, being the youngest child in the church congregation at the time, was selected to present President Taft with a bouquet of flowers. Her recollection was that they were violets. Gregory further recalled, "The president was a rather large man. He didn't see the flowers ... and when he sat down he crushed them. It is still one of my most vivid childhood memories. I was crushed." And, of course, so were the violets.



President Taft, seated in rear, worships in New Orleans

Young Frankenstein

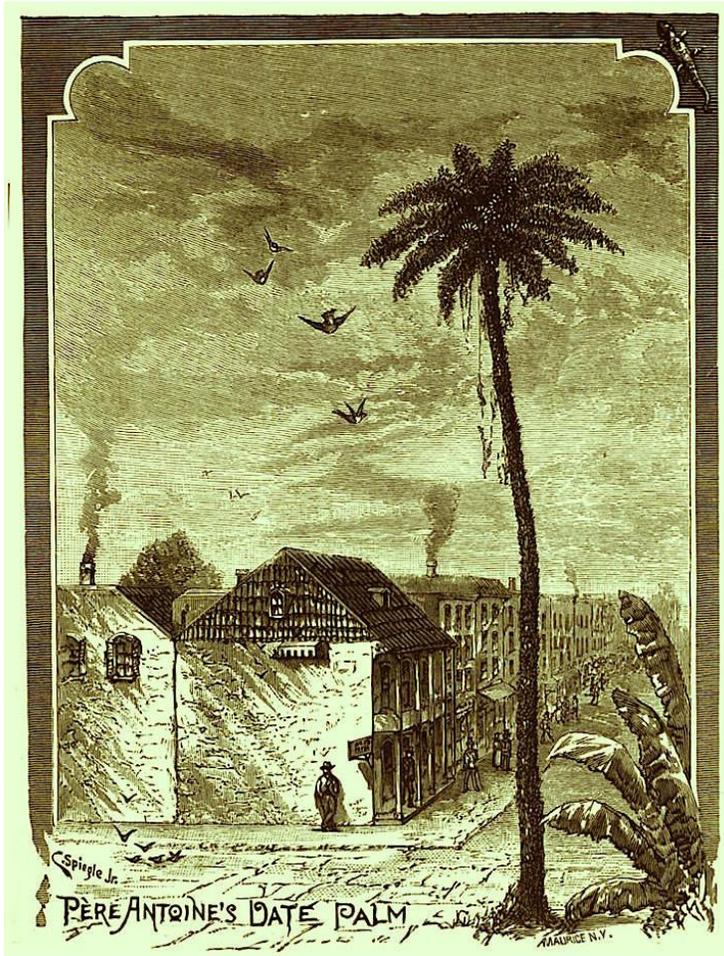
According to the *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, dated October 3, 1933, *Frankenstein, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary W. Shelley was available to purchase at Canal Street Bookseller and Stationer William McKean. This was a work "calculated to please and astonish," according to the paper.

Trotsky Assassination

Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1879 – 1940), who later led a failed struggle against the policies and rise of Joseph Stalin, was expelled from the Communist Party and exiled from the Soviet Union. Because Trotsky continued to oppose the Stalinist bureaucracy while in exile, Stalin ordered his death. In August 1940, the assassination was carried out in Mexico by means of an ice axe wielded by Spanish-born Soviet agent Ramón Mercader.

On his way to Mexico in order to carry out Stalin's order, Mercader stopped off in New Orleans and stayed at the historic old St. Charles Hotel. Mike O'Leary, manager of the hotel, provided authorities with phone records and other information related to Mercader's movements.

Père Antoine's Date Palm



Two things we know for sure. One is that it was a New Orleans landmark for over a century; and, two, it has been gone from the Crescent City for long over a century. Shrouded in mystery, intrigue and romance, it is known as Père Antoine's date palm.

Our story begins in 1727 when New Orleans was less than ten years old. A French sailing ship delivered a mysterious Turkish passenger, claiming to be the exiled brother of the Sultan, who was given asylum in a cottage on Orleans Street under the care of Étienne Périer, who had become Louisiana Governor that same year. 1727 was also the year that the Ursuline nuns first made their arrival in the city.

Not long afterward, a Turkish ship appeared briefly in Baratavia Bay. The Sultan's spies came ashore, so the story goes, and eventually discovered the exiled Turk's retreat and assassinated the errant expatriot. The cottage gate on Orleans was left open and in the yard was found a fresh grave with the inscription: "The justice of heaven is satisfied and the date tree shall grow on the traitor's grave." The palm appeared and grew sixty feet high, blooming its last in 1853. It died in 1886, its wood soft as sponge and rotten, and was pulled down by the owner of the lot, Mrs. Claverie. But that was just one version of the story.

Another involved Father Antonio de Sedella (1748 – 1829), a Spanish Capuchin friar commonly known as Père Antoine, who first arrived in New Orleans in 1779.

Père Antoine served as the leading religious authority of the Catholic Church in the city during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Leading an abstemious life, he slept on hard boards in a rude hut that he constructed under a date palm tree that stood in his garden. The tree was either the same palm as that of the unfortunate Turk or one planted by Père Antoine himself. The latter view is one offered by Sir Chares Lyell, writing in his *Second Visit to the United States*. He said that the priest had related to a Mr. Bringier that he had planted the tree himself, when he was young.

According to an article in the Worcester, Massachusetts, *Daily Spy*, dated August 6, 1886 (the year the palm died), Père Antoine “cherished a special love” for the palm “and, among his dying injunctions, ordered that the tree must never be cut down or injured, but left standing for all time to come.” It had, after all, miraculously survived both French Quarter fires (1788 and 1794), “for fire twice burned the surrounding buildings without injuring it, or even scorching it, a favoring wind driving the flames aright.”

Historian Charles Gayarré wrote about the fabled tree, as did many others, including Lafcadio Hearn and Thomas Bailey Aldrich. One piece was a story of the lost love of a beautiful girl involving the friar when he was a young man.



Père Antoine

From *The Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs*, by William H. Coleman, 1885, the following words are attributed to Lafcadio Hearn:

“Whether planted by nature or by the hand of man, by Indian or Spaniard or French colonist; whether created by the sweet magic of a woman’s heart, as some men say; whether transplanted from the gardens in Constantinople, as the quaint tradition relates; whether it has witnessed the birth of this mighty city, and waved its cacique’s plume above houses that ceased to exist before we were born, through all the days of the old French and Spanish governors; whether its leaves were agitated by the distant thunder of the famous battle with English invaders; whether it looked down upon O’Reilly’s Spanish infantry filing by; whether it sometimes whispers its thoughts in the ear of Night – who shall say?”

This above passage was penned over 130 years ago, and yet just one year before this majestic palm’s demise.



Whether it's a girl group like the Dixie Cups, a congregation of alligators, or a crushed bouquet of violets, it's all a gallimaufry of fascinating facts.

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