

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### Feisty Femmes

New Orleans has always had its share of independent-minded women who were willing to fight what they believed. There was the indomitable and persevering Myra Clark Gaines who spent years in the courts pursuing her claims to the estate of her late father, Daniel Clark. Adah Isaacs Menken shook things up when she once gave a press conference lying on a tiger-skin, wearing a short skirt, smoking a cigarette (daring in those days) and sipping champagne. She certainly had the flare for marketing.

And who could forget the tough-willed Baroness Micaela Almonester de Pontalba and her battles with her father-in-law? Steps taken to protect her fortune enraged her husband's father to the breaking point, bringing him to shoot her point-blank with a pair of dueling pistols. He then killed himself after having delivered shots to her chest and hands (with her fingers shattered). She survived to fight future skirmishes with architects during the construction of the Pontalba Apartments.

But she wasn't the only broad-minded, battling baroness in town. The Baroness de Bazus was the title assumed late in life by another New Orleans lady who did things her own way. Born in New Orleans as Miriam Florence Follin, she married publisher Frank Leslie. The second of her four husbands, Leslie died in 1880 leaving her a business in truly bad shape. Miriam really tuned things around, got circulation to skyrocket under her management and even went so far as to have her name legally changed to Frank Leslie. One journalistic coup occurred when she heard rumors of the shooting of President Garfield in 1881 by a disgruntled office seeker, Charles Guiteau. Mrs. Leslie managed to rush artists off to Washington and get the story engraved way ahead of her competition. She netted fifty thousand dollars for that initiative, and it insured that Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper* would continue to be a nineteenth-century success story.

Another of Mrs. Leslie's gossip-worthy liaisons was with the Marquis de Leuville, who was the epitome of the aesthetic movement then in

vogue. He sported a corseted waist, tight trousers, padded shoulders and puffed hair. She then took up with a so-called Russian prince who got involved in a whip encounter with the Marquis in Hyde Park.

While traveling abroad in 1891, she married William Wilde (Oscar's brother). She informed a reporter from the New York *Tribune* that she hoped to become in America "what Lady Wilde is in London". She began this transformation by decorating her apartments with exotic ornamentations from Japan, Turkish curtains, Spanish flags and Venetian mirrors. After an aesthetic overload, in less than six months she had had enough of Willie. She took him back to London and left him with his mother. She went home and began divorce action.

She then wrote "Are Men Gay Deceivers? and Other Sketches" in 1893.

In her will Mrs. Leslie named Carrie Chapman Catt residuary legatee, so that her fortune would be devoted to woman suffrage. Miriam Leslie died in 1914 and her relatives contested the will. The legal contest cost her estate over a million dollars. But a million remained, and it helped change the course of history by bringing about the Nineteenth Amendment.

New Orleans had its share of outspoken women whose actions caused much ado during the Union occupation of the city during the Civil War. The "ladies" would make derisive comments and even spit on the blue uniforms of their captors. Captain David G. Farragut was even victimized by the contents of a chamber pot emptied on his head from above. This brought about General Butler's infamous edict, issued in New Orleans on May 15, 1862. His order embarrassed many in the North and caused indignation in the South and throughout Europe. Implying that they were "ladies of the evening" was a huge mistake on his part. The mystique "must and shall be preserved".

Just over one hundred years later, Betty Friedan critiqued that mystique. But back in New Orleans in 1864, her ideas would not have sounded exactly new. While reading the following (which appeared on January 3, 1864 in the *Daily Picayune*), remember that "phiz" means face or visage (as in physiognomy) and that "Phiz' was the *nom de plume* of Dickens' illustrator.

### "A Young Lady's Soliloquy"

Uselessly, aimlessly drifting through life  
What was I born for? "For Somebody's wife,"?  
I am told by my mother. Well, that being true,  
"Somebody" keeps himself strangely from view:

And if naught but marriage will settle my fate,  
I believe I shall die in an unsettled state.  
For, though I'm not ugly—pray, what woman *is*?—  
You might easily find a more beautiful phiz;  
And then, as for temper and manners, 'tis plain  
He who seeks for perfection will seek *here* in vain.  
Nay, in spite of these drawbacks, my heart is perverse,  
And I should not feel grateful "for better or worse,"  
"To take the first booby that graciously came?  
And offered those treasures, his home and his name.  
I think, then, my chances of marriage are small,  
But why should I think of such chances at all?  
My brothers are all of them younger than I,  
Yet they thrive in the world—why not let *me* try?  
I know that in business I'm not an adept,  
Because from such matters most strictly I'm kept,  
Why *am* I not trained up to work of some kind?  
Uselessly, aimlessly drifting through life,  
*Why* should I wait to be "Somebody's wife?"

## **NED HÉMARD**

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