

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Goober Peas

Most Southerners recognize the terms *goober* and *goober pea* as other names for the peanut. Also known as earthnuts, groundnuts, monkey nuts, pygmy nuts and pig nuts, the peanut (*Arachis hypogaea*) is a species in the “legume” family (*Fabaceae*), the third largest family of flowering plants. Of all the “legumes”, the peanut is especially fascinating because it develops below the ground. And like the tomato and the potato, the cultivated peanut was probably first domesticated in Peru.

By the time Columbus reached the New World, it was being grown throughout the warmer regions of the Americas. Soon the peanut was introduced into Africa and Asian countries where it became an important ingredient in their local dishes. Brought to China by Portuguese traders in the 17th century, the peanut is widely used in Southeast Asian cuisine (particularly that of Thailand and Indonesia). This delicious “legume” came to Indonesia from the Philippines, where it arrived from Mexico in times of Spanish colonization. What would *satay* be without its delicious peanut-based sauce?

The peanut root system contains nitrogen-fixing bacteria that convert inert atmospheric nitrogen into ammonia. Other bacteria convert the ammonia into nitrites that enrich the soil. George Washington Carver was one of many USDA researchers who knew this and encouraged Southern cotton farmers in the South to grow peanuts instead of, or in addition to, cotton, because cotton had depleted so much nitrogen from the soil. He is often credited with inventing 300 different uses for peanuts (which did not include peanut butter but did include salted peanuts). Peanuts can be made into solvents and oils, used in cosmetics, plastics, medicines, textile materials, dyes and paints, and even nitroglycerin! Popular confections (such as candy bars, cookies, peanut brittle and cups) would be nothing without them.

Peanut oil is excellent for cooking, because it has a mild flavor and a relatively high smoke point. And because of its high monounsaturated content, it is considered healthier than most other oils. Research has

uncovered the health benefits of antioxidants in peanuts. Roasted peanuts rival the antioxidant content of strawberries and blackberries, and are far richer in antioxidants than carrots or beets. And although 1-2 percent of the population may suffer some form of allergic reaction to the peanut, it is also a significant source of resveratrol, a chemical with potential anti-aging effects, reduced cardiovascular disease and reduced cancer risk. But back a century and a half ago, the versatile “legume” was simply the lowly peanut.

It wasn't much, but it provided Johnny Reb something to eat when crops were destroyed along Sherman's “March to the Sea”. After being cut off from rail lines and their farmland, the Southern soldiers subsisted on increasingly short rations. A humorous and delightful song first published in New Orleans took notice of this fairly accurate culinary condition of having to eat boiled peanuts for subsistence:

Verse 1

Sitting by the roadside on a summer's day
Chatting with my mess-mates, passing time away
Lying in the shadows underneath the trees
Goodness, how delicious, eating goober peas.

Chorus

Peas, peas, peas, peas
Eating goober peas
Goodness, how delicious,
Eating goober peas.

Perhaps one has sung along to this song in his childhood. Singers from Burl Ives and the Kingston Trio back then to Elton John today (in his live performances) have sung this Civil War favorite. In a duet with Johnny Cash, Burl Ives told the audience that the man who pulled up “some weeds” with “things on the roots” called peanuts was named “Mr. Goober”. This was charming, of course, but totally incorrect.

Goober comes to the English language by way of Africa. Like *gumbo* and *okra*, *goober* (from the Kongo or Kimbundu word, *nguba*, meaning peanut) is of Bantu origin. These language borrowings were brought over by slaves, like *yam*, which is ultimately derived from the Wolof word *nyam* meaning “to taste” or “sample”. Wolof, an Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo language family, is spoken in Senegambia. Peanuts grow well today in southern Mali and Senegal. Prepared there with onions, garlic and vegetables like carrots, cabbage and cauliflower, peanuts can be a vegetarian diet supplement or served with meat (usually chicken). The major exporters/producers of

peanuts are the United States, Argentina, Sudan, Senegal and Brazil (accounting for 71% of total world exports).

The song "Goober Peas" was first published in 1866 in New Orleans by the musical publishing house (located at 167 Canal Street) of Armand Edward Blackmar (May 30, 1826 - October 28, 1888) and his brother Henry. Words to the song were credited to "A. Pindar, Esq.", with music by "P. Nutt, Esq." Folk song expert Irwin Silber, who compiled scores of Civil War period songs and their histories, explained that every Southerner immediately recognized these humorous *noms de plume* as synonyms for the peanut: "P. Nutt" for peanut and "A. Pindar" for (there's) a P (pea) in dar (there). Armand Blackmar, himself, was responsible for capturing or writing the actual words and music. He was quite a versatile individual.

Born in Bennington, Vermont, Armand Blackmar was an accomplished violinist and pianist, a chess expert and a charter member of the Chess, Checkers and Whist Club of New Orleans. He attended Western Reserve College in Ohio. From 1852 to 1855 he was professor of music at Centenary College in Jackson, Louisiana. In 1858 he and his brother Henry started a music publishing company in Vicksburg, Mississippi. By 1860 they had moved to New Orleans, where they remained until at least 1882, except for a short period of time from 1862 to 1865 when his brother moved the business to Augusta, Georgia, because Armand had been fined and imprisoned by General Benjamin "Beast" Butler for publishing "seditious" music.

The music publishing firm founded by the Brothers Blackmar would become the most successful such company of the American Civil War, issuing a great number of the songs released during that era. Besides "Goober Peas", Armand's published work included the "Bonnie Blue Flag", "The Southrons' Chaunt of Defiance", "Dixie War Song", "Short Rations", "Southern Marseillaise" and the "Beauregard Manassas Quick-Step", to name a few. Clearly, the song titles reveal his political leanings. But even more indicative of his sympathies is the name of his first child, born in 1861, Louisiana Rebel Blackmar.

Blackmar's "Bonnie Blue Flag" in 1861 served as a primary anthem for the Confederate cause, and incited intense patriotism. Blackmar published nine separate editions in New Orleans and Augusta, but when New Orleans fell to Union forces in 1862, General Butler took control of the city and declared that anyone caught singing the song in public would be fined and jailed. Butler, as mentioned before, arrested and incarcerated Armand Blackmar and destroyed all copies of the music for "Bonnie Blue Flag" that could be found.

In April of 1864 Lincoln's future assassin John Wilkes Booth, while performing in New Orleans, was goaded by a friend to sing or whistle the "Bonnie Blue Flag" while walking down the street. He did just that and was almost jailed like Blackmar, but perhaps due to his acting fame, or his claim

that he didn't know that the song was forbidden, he escaped imprisonment. Instead there is a *carte de visite* by Anderson & Turner photographers from their studio at 61 Camp Street in New Orleans. It consists of a striking three-quarter pose of John Wilkes Booth wearing a heavy overcoat cape with astrakhan (lambs-wool) collar with one gloved hand.

Armand - due to his Northern accent - managed to continue working out of the Crescent City for a while, but the Union raid on his business forced him to stop working. He lived in Louisiana for some time and published songs of his own, under a pseudonym, through his brother.

Armand is perhaps best known for an article appearing in the July 1882 issue of Brentano's Chess Monthly, wherein he introduced an opening novelty 1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.f3. He was the first player to publish an analysis of this opening in the chess literature. The popularity of the original Blackmar Gambit, however, was short-lived, as it was basically unsound. The evolved form of the gambit was offered by German master Emil Joseph Diemer (1908-1990), and is today commonly known as the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit (or BDG). Diemer popularized the interpolating move 3., Nc3 to be followed by f3 on White's fourth move. This gambit is considered an aggressive opening, and its soundness continues to be the subject of much debate both on and off the chessboard.

Final Verse

I think my song has lasted almost long enough.
The subject's interesting, but the rhymes are mighty tough.
I wish the war was over, so free from rags and fleas
We'd kiss our wives and sweethearts, and gobble goober peas.

Chorus

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Eating goober peas
Goodness, how delicious,
Eating goober peas.

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