

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Halloween in New Orleans



Krewe of Boo is a popular Halloween celebration in New Orleans.

With Halloween 2015 now a recent memory, it is interesting to reflect on the history of All Hallows' Eve in New Orleans, past and present. New Orleans of late has consistently been chosen one of the country's top-ten premier Halloween destinations, if not the world's. Often it has been ranked Number One. The city is a natural for this accolade, since it has so many great activities associated with this ancient holiday.

New Orleans-born author of gothic fiction, Anne Rice, has obviously played a part in the city's acquiring this designation. She is best known for her immensely popular series of novels, *The Vampire Chronicles*, and the character known as Lestat. Two film adaptations were made from her writing, *Interview with the Vampire* in 1994 and

Queen of the Damned in 2002. The Vampire Lestat Fan Club convenes each year at its annual Undead Conference with four days of events.

And for the last fifteen years, Voodoo Fest has been a huge success. Actually called "The Voodoo Music + Arts Experience (formerly "The Voodoo Music Experience"), the well-attended fall extravaganza is a multi-day music and arts festival staged in City Park in New Orleans.

Add to that the haunted nature of the French Quarter and other parts of the city. Each evening, tourists visit the French Quarter residence of Madame Lalaurie in droves. Marie Delphine Lalaurie, née Macarty (circa 1780 – 1849), Creole socialite, is famous for allegedly torturing and likely murdering her household slaves. She kept up appearances in New Orleans society until April 10, 1834, when a fire in her Royal Street mansion brought firefighting volunteers who found bound slaves in her attic. The evidence revealed a history of cruel and inhumane treatment over a long period of time. The house was subsequently sacked by an outraged mob of local citizens, and the infamous Madame Lalaurie made her escape to France.



The demonic Madame Lalaurie

Family fun for little ghosts and goblins is available each year at the "Boo at the Zoo," a safe and secure, fun-filled Halloween event for

children up to age 12, featuring trick-or-treat houses with candy, a ghost train, haunted house, games and much more. For older “kids,” there are some great haunted houses. None, of course, could compare with the ones staged in the 1990s by Sheriff Foti in City Park. During those periods leading up to Halloween, his O.P.P. prisoner artists would decorate a menacing labyrinth of scary fun. Trouble was, the guy in the rubber mask with the chain saw, was he a deputy or an inmate? The thrill was in not knowing.

Each year upon the expansive lawn of Darryl and Louellen Berger, in front of their Thomas Sully designed home on St. Charles Avenue, is an extraordinary array of skeletons in tableaux guaranteed to tickle your punny bone. No longer just a bare-bones skeleton crew, the display has gotten more expansive with each new Halloween.



In addition to New Orleans’ above ground cemeteries, there are abundant and colorful pumpkins at the French Market. The annual Boo Carré Halloween & Harvest Festival takes place there each October featuring a spooky second line. For those who love six-legged creatures, there’s always the Crawlween at the Audubon Butterfly Garden and Insectarium. And for Friends of the Cabildo, the annual Ghostly Galavant Fundraiser is held, along with ghostly tours and an “Eat, Drink and Be Scary” Costume Party.

The Crescent City has always been strong on masquerading, especially in the Faubourg Marigny. An appearance on Frenchmen Street is a

must on Halloween night. It's a giant street party with costumes you might not believe.

As for the spooktacular Krewe of Boo, it's the only major Halloween parade with full size floats rolling through the French Quarter. Dating from 2007, the artists of Kern Studios continue to fashion *papier mâché* and fiberglass sculptures and scary props that "come to life" to thrill and frighten parade goers each October. The crowds eagerly cry out, "Throw me somethin' monster!"

Love was in the air for Halloween 2015. One young man proposed at the Thriller Flash Mob while dancers replicated the moves of the late Michael Jackson in front of City Hall. She said, "Yes." A newlywed couple and their wedding party, undeterred by rain, enjoyed a Halloween second line through the Quarter. And at BJ's on Burgundy in the Bywater, an engagement party gathered amid good music, darts and pool.

Because of the forecasted rainfall on Saturday, October 31st, 2015, the local news media succeeded in getting the word out that door-to-door trick-or-treating would take place on the previous Friday evening. But there was a time in New Orleans when trick-or-treating did not exist. The term "trick or treat" did not appear in local newspapers until the 1940s, and I've been told that ringing doorbells for treats did not become the custom in New Orleans until after World War II. Before that, as depicted in the 1944 movie *Meet Me in St. Louis*, it was all about tricking (i.e., playing pranks) and not treating.

In 1914 New Orleans, the *Picayune* described how children "rendered the young night discordant with the clanging of gongs, the rattling of tin boxes and the unceremonious jerking of defenseless door bells." In 1921, according to the paper, the police was to be on the lookout for "disappearing gates and signs or snakes and other crawling things that may wriggle across sidewalks in front of frightened pedestrians." At the same time, police issued warnings that "any Halloween pranks or vandalism would be punishable by arrest." How much easier things became when there was the option of a treat in lieu of a trick – and what a windfall for the candy companies!

A New Orleans Halloween Ball at the Elks Club in 1914 was artistically decorated with *papier mâché* "black cats and ripe yellow pumpkins." In what other ways was Halloween celebrated in the past?

The *Picayune* on October 31, 1894, related the "superstitious practices" connected with the holiday. "In the section of the city lying below Canal Street ... somehow the old Creoles have appropriated customs which certainly did not originate in France." Young girls "in the Second and Third districts on All Halloween after nightfall" walked around the block "with their mouths filled with water, with three barley

seeds." They do this because "the first name they chance to hear" will be that of their future husband. In the French Quarter, the young ladies are blindfolded and led to grab one of three ribbons. A red ribbon signifies she will marry someone in the army; "the blue stands for the navy, and black represents the civilian." Ducking for apples was also a customary activity in 1894 New Orleans, as illustrated in the *Picayune* (below).



In 1914, the Mystic Order of Hobgoblins took to the streets. The parade organized by African-American maskers consisted of a burlesque band and two floats, one with witches and the devil and the other with Santa Claus in his conventional chimney. A long string of carriages followed behind with the women hobgoblins, bemantled in ghostly attire.

In 1916, according to the *Times-Picayune*, "Society gathered at a big reception and dance at the Country Club." The scene was one of "witches and hobgoblins." What's more, "Through the black curtain of night witch lanterns glowed the luminance from round glaring eyes, throwing into relief Jack-o'-Lantern faces, wizard heads and owls.

Overhead swung long lines of incandescent lights, lighting the way from the road." There were also a number of theater parties and "lots of masquerade balls." But no treating.



A modern day New Orleans Jack-o'-Lantern: All Saints

In parts of North America, trick-or-treating has been a Halloween tradition since the late 1920s, but the custom of going house-to-house collecting food at Halloween goes back at least as far as the 16th century in Britain and Ireland. Another tradition, just as old (recorded in Scotland), is "guising," or the wearing of costumes on All Hallows' Eve. All Hallows' Eve is especially important in New Orleans, since the next day (All Saints' Day) is the day the city is out *en masse* visiting the tombs of departed loved ones at New Orleans cemeteries.

All Hallows' Eve, contracted to Hallowe'en and later Halloween, is a Christianized observance with possible pagan roots, and apparently influenced by Celtic harvest festivals. "Guising" was said to help scare off malevolent spirits who might mess with crops. "Guising" first took place in North America in 1911, where a newspaper in Kingston, Ontario, reported children going around the neighborhood dressed in costumes. Impersonating these ghostly figures, or wearing a disguise, was also believed to offer protection from them. It has been suggested that "guising" is the act of personifying "the old spirits of the winter, who demanded reward in exchange for good fortune".

The Eve of All Saints is a hallowed, or holy, evening where Jack-o'-lanterns are carved in order to frighten away evil spirits. In 1914, the holiday was summed up by the *Times-Picayune* this way: "Halloween is a night of mystery; its traditions partake of the superstitions of the ancient Britons, the hardy Saxons, conquering Romans, and the

savage Scots and Picts.” In New Orleans, Halloween is a “night of pleasure for old and young.”

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