

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **The Martin Brothers or Battistella?**

#### **History of the Po-Boy (Part Two)**

They say, "Success has many fathers and failure is an orphan." And so it is with the origin of the Crescent City's quintessential sandwich. Like the roast beef gravy and "debris," or abundance of mayonnaise that makes its way out of these ample sandwiches, the history of the "poor boy" can best be described as pleasantly messy.



*A tantalizing Parran's fried shrimp po-boy*

Variations are found throughout the nation. Philadelphia's large sandwich is the "Hoagie". In New York, it's the "Hero," while San Antonio and San Antonio have the "Torpedo". If you live in Boston, Detroit or other cities along the Eastern seaboard, it's the

"Submarine," but if you're from Hartford, San Francisco or Cleveland, it's the "Grinder." The "Cuban" is popular in Miami, but also enjoyed in New Orleans and other areas of the country. There are other names out there, but in New Orleans and other cities in the South it's the "Poor Boy," but they don't have the bread that New Orleans has. The city's French bread bakeries, now including those that are Vietnamese, are beyond compare.

In *The History of the Po-Boy (Part One)*, the reader discovered that there were French bread sandwiches being made in New Orleans many years before the advent of the "poor boy," or "po-boy". They were called loaves, the most significant one being the "oyster loaf," aka "The Peacemaker". But how did the "poor boy" arrive on the scene?

According to the prevailing history, the "poor boy" owes its existence to two brothers from Lafourche Parish named Bennie and Clovis Martin, who moved to New Orleans in the mid-1910s from Raceland, Louisiana. Both had been employed as streetcar conductors before opening their modest Martin's Coffee Stand and Restaurant at the French Market in 1922.

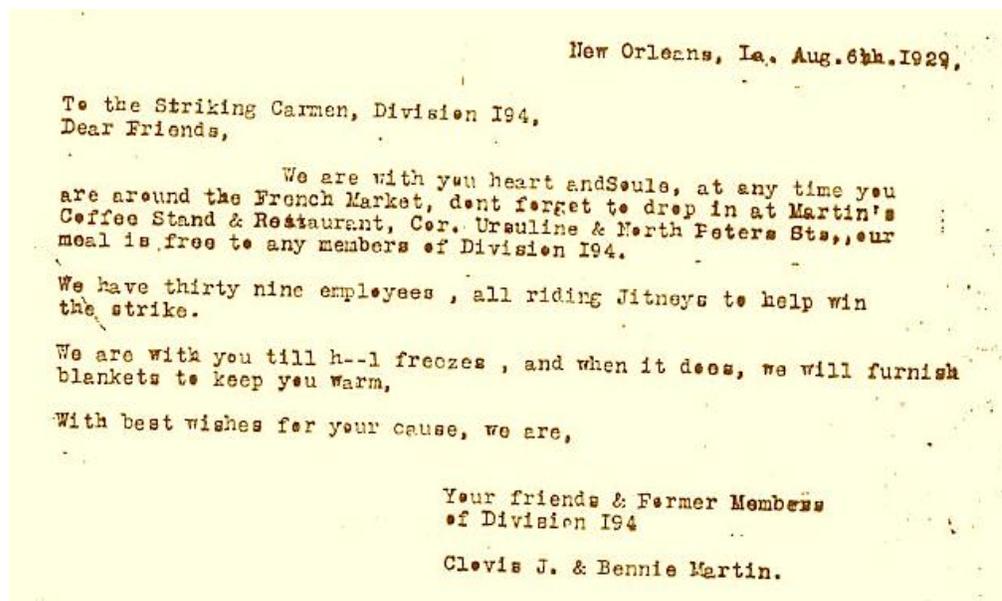


*Martin's, cor. Ursulines and N. Peters streets, at the French Market, with "Oyster Loaves" listed as sandwich fare on the wall to the left*

Their narrow hole-in-the-wall stand (shown above), so the story goes, became the birthplace of the poor boy sandwich following a 1929 streetcar strike. The stand was only about twenty-five feet long with

mirrored walls above counters with rotating stools at three-foot intervals. Contract negotiations for better hourly wages between the Carmen's Union and New Orleans Public Service, Inc. (NOPSI), had come to an impasse, and the strike began July 1, 1929. 1,100 jobs were at stake and, due to their connection with their former co-workers, the Martin Brothers were in solidarity with the streetcar employees.

There were numerous examples of public support for the Carmen's Union, and small and large businesses alike tried to help by donating goods and services to the strikers. But, as long as the strike was going on, the men on the picket lines would have to abandon their posts to go get food. Not only that, without wages they were hardly able to afford a meal. They were "poor boys," so to speak, at that point in time.



New Orleans, La. Aug. 6th. 1929.

To the Striking Carmen, Division I94,  
Dear Friends,

We are with you heart and soul, at any time you are around the French Market, dont forget to drop in at Martin's Coffee Stand & Restaurant, Cor. Ursuline & North Peters Sts., our meal is free to any members of Division I94.

We have thirty nine employees , all riding Jitneys to help win the strike.

We are with you till hell freezes , and when it does, we will furnish blankets to keep you warm,

With best wishes for your cause, we are,

Your friends & Former Members  
of Division I94  
Clevis J. & Bennie Martin.

### 1929 Letter to the "Striking Carmen, Local Division I94"

To remedy the situation, the Martin Brothers contacted local bread baker John Gendusa to make a loaf of bread approximately 32" long that would maintain a uniform, rectangular shape from one end to the other. It was also longer and narrower than what they were selling at the time. The Martin Brothers would slice these new, bigger loaves down the middle, load them up with delicious sandwich contents, and cut them up into 12" - 15" sections. They would then wrap up these "poor boy" sandwiches and bring them out to the picket lines. Thus, the New Orleans po-boy was born. Bennie Martin remarked, "We fed those men free of charge until the strike ended. Whenever we saw one of the striking men coming, one of us would say, 'Here comes another poor boy'".

Clevis and Bennie promised, "Our meal is free to any members of

Division I94 ... We are with you till h--l freezes, and when it does, we will furnish blankets to keep you warm."

Making their way home from the French Market on foot (since they certainly would not use the transit system), the strikers carrying large "poor boy" sandwiches under their arms provided great free publicity for the benevolent Martin Brothers.

After a few short years, the Martin Brothers acquired larger quarters at 2000 St. Claude, at the corner of Touro Street (shown below):



*Martin Brothers on St. Claude and Touro and, as the sign says, "Originators of 'Poor Boy Sandwiches'"*

38 waiters and waitresses were employed. People arrived from miles around to feast on the giant 15-cent "poor boy" sandwiches. Over 1,000 loaves were consumed each day, as well as 100 Virginia hams and 800 to 900 pounds of roast beef. Open 24 hours and with drive-in service, it was often the late night place to be.

All of the above facts are true and an important part of the city's history. And yet, there are other stories to be considered

Another contender for the creator of the "poor boy" sandwich is Spanish-American war veteran Andrew Battistella (June 29, 1881 – March 9, 1944). As early as December 25, 1930, Battistella's "FRENCH MARKET COFFEE AND LUNCH STAND," A. Battistella, Proprietor, was taking credit for being the "ORIGINATOR OF THE

'POOR BOY'S SANDWICH'" with an ad in the *Times-Picayune*. Wishing his customers "A Merry Xmas" and a "Happy New Year," the man whose shop was located in the French Market at the "Lower (River) End" of the fish market at "Ursuline and N. Peters Streets" was announcing to all that he was the one who came up with the idea for the iconic sandwich and the "poor boy" name.



*From an ad in the Times-Picayune, Christmas Day, 1930*

According to a *Times-Picayune* article dated October 6, 1974, when the French Market was being renovated in 1974, Battistella's, "where longshoremen, artists, farmers and Vieux Carre residents enjoyed gumbo and red beans and rice for over half a century," not to mention the "poor boy" sandwiches, closed its doors for good. Rents were going to be almost doubled and the restaurant's floor space was to be cut in half. At that time, Andrew Battistella's daughter Viola Cristadoro, who owned and ran the restaurant since the year her father died, decided not to reopen, making the following comments:

"We started out with farmers and butchers and we kept them, but they soon found themselves dining with bankers, lawyers and numerous celebrities like Tennessee Williams and sculptor Enrique Alfarez."

Although Martin Brothers apparently has the strongest claim to have originated the poor boy sandwich, Mrs. Cristadora insisted that it was her father who made the very first one. She said he held a copyright on the sandwich for many years but let it expire. It was only then that others in the city began advertising their own versions. He could not have held such a copyright long because there were numerous ads for "poor boy" stands in the early 1930s. There was a "Tony's Poor Boy Sandwich Shop" at 1131 St. Bernard in 1931. Another "POOR BOY

sandwich shop" was located at 1204 N. Rampart Street in 1932. Also in 1932, a 27-year-old resident of Mandeville Street was arrested trying to smuggle morphine and a hypodermic needle concealed in a large "poor boy" sandwich into a cell at the city's First Precinct police station. In 1933, Vincent Longo offered for sale a "Poor Boy Sandwich Stand" on Washington Avenue. There were numerous other "poor boy" establishments listed in various newspaper ads. The one below appeared in the *Times-Picayune* October 11, 1935.



Mrs. Cristadora continued, "I have heard my father tell the story many times" about a needy man "who came into the restaurant one day and begged for something to eat. My father told one of the waiters to 'give that poor boy a sandwich.' And they made him a huge one – thick slices of ham and cheese, with lettuce and tomatoes, on French bread. And," she added, it was always called a 'poor-boy – never a 'po-boy'".

It is interesting to note that both Batistella's and Martin's Coffee Stand and Restaurant were located in the French Market at Ursulines and N. Peters Street. So, whoever originated the poor boy, the contending founding locations are but a few paces apart.



ANDREW BATTISTELLA AT COUNTER IN 1944

*Did Andrew Battistella create the first "poor boy" sandwich?*

And, as if these two remarkable origin stories aren't interesting enough, there is another theory as to the birth of the "poor boy" sandwich, which a 1933 article in the *Times-Picayune* entitled "Sandwich Chatter" described as the city's "newest creation, invented, we believe, here in New Orleans, the 'poor boy,' or, as some have it, 'po boi' sandwiches - long, large and rib-fattening."

Some scholars believe that the name "poor boy" had been applied to sandwiches in New Orleans much earlier than the streetcar strike. They believe in a nineteenth-century origin for the sandwich's name, from a totally different source, the French word "*pourboire*".

*Pourboire* comes from *pour boire*, meaning literally (money) for drinking, therefore a tip or gratuity. It is also something that is begged for, such as a handout. It can also be a sum of money given for services rendered or anticipated, such as graft or a bribe.

In *The New York World*, dated October 26, 1875, mention is made of Benamin F. Butler, who was in command of the City of New Orleans during the Union Occupation during the Civil War. The citizens called him "Beast" Butler. *The World* said he had "what the French call '*une politique de pourboire*'".

**Mr. BENJAMIN F. BUTLER has what the French call "*une politique de pourboire.*"**

So how did *pourboire* figure into the "poor boy" sandwich's origin? The story goes like this. Hungry waifs knocked on the local convent doors for money or a little food or drink. Nuns sliced loaves of French bread lengthwise and filled them with slices of meat, cheese or whatever else was found in the larder and delivered the filling sandwiches to those down on their luck. This example of *pourboire* is said to have evolved into the "poor boy".

Variations on this theme are that these abundant sandwiches were purchased with worker's tips (French: *pourboire*) or that the sandwiches were put together using the "tips" from a loaf of French bread.

Perhaps there is an element of truth to each of these histories. Maybe the Battistella sandwich stand and the Martin Brothers establishment were both serving similar sandwiches, incredibly ample and at a bargain price – just the ticket for "poor boys" everywhere – not to mention people of every economic strata. And today "poor boys" are available all over the city, not to mention the rest of the South and beyond. We all have our favorite purveyors, whether it's Parkway Bakery, Domilise's, Parasol's, Johnny's, Liuzza's or Mother's.

Even a new Battistella's opened after Hurricane Katrina, but it was located in Raleigh, North Carolina. Brian Battistella brought a bit of the Vieux Carré to the picturesque Raleigh's City Market, dating from 1914. A child of the Ninth Ward, Brian remembered working at his cousin Preston's wholesale seafood operation, also called Battistella's, which had been in the family for decades. Brian has cooked and been interested in seafood his entire life. Sadly, his restaurant Battistella's only lasted five years.

This past week, an enthusiastic crowd celebrated the Oak Street Po-Boy Festival's 10th anniversary. The Blue Oak on Carrollton took first place for the best beef po-boy, while Bratz Y'All took first in two other categories (pork and sausage). A Shrimp with Pimento Cheese po-boy was a first place shrimp po-boy winner for the Redfish Grill.

The "poor boy" sandwich is the ever-evolving bedrock of New Orleans food culture. Local Historian Michael Mizell-Nelson wrote that it is the "shotgun house of New Orleans cuisine." Each crisp loaf encases "the most pedestrian and exotic of foods: shrimp, oyster, catfish, soft-shell crabs as well as French fries and ham and cheese." What started out as simple, sturdy fare continues to be just that, the ultimate New Orleans comfort food.



*A po-boy from Battistella's, Raleigh, North Carolina,  
photo by D. L. Anderson*

But you can bet that as each year comes around again, there will be some new and imaginative interpretation.

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"The Martin Brothers"  
Ned Hémard  
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