

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Lenten Observances

After having been bestowed with beautiful parades and bombarded by an unrelenting barrage of beads, New Orleans natives bid farewell to Carnival and to meat (or flesh, as some may interpret it) as Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten Season.



Most inhabitants of the Crescent City believe Carnival comes from the Latin expression *carne vale*, which means “farewell to meat” or its dual meaning “farewell to the flesh”. In a city with excellent cuisine (as well as those other temptations), the etymology makes perfect sense. Another interpretation of Carnival as the last days when one could eat meat before the fasting of Lent is the Italian phrase *carne levare*, meaning “to remove meat” in anticipation of its Lenten prohibition. The late Charles L. “Pie” Dufour believed that Carnival derived from “Carnis” and “Levamen” meaning “consolation of the flesh,” or that final comfort before fasting. A more obscure theory is that Carnival comes from the Latin *carrus navalis* (ship cart) for the cart in a religious procession that first honored the god Apollo. There’s always been excitement “Live at the Apollo”.

After that lengthy farewell, many find the annual application of ashes to the forehead quite welcome. The Latin term for Lent is

quadragesima, meaning the “fortieth”, since there are forty days in Lent before Easter (the Sundays aren’t counted because they are mini-Easter feasts along the way, celebrating Jesus’ victory over sin and death). In French the term for Lent is *carême*, also the name of one of France’s greatest chefs.

In New Orleans, even the talk of Lent returns to food, and (in all things culinary) Marie-Antoine Carême was the *crème* of the crop. He gained fame for his *pièces montées*, elaborate architectural centerpieces of sugar and pastry. Tested by Talleyrand, he baked Napoleon’s wedding cake. He wowed his later employer (the future George IV of England) at Brighton’s Royal Pavilion, created dazzling masterpieces for Russia’s Czar Alexander and served gold-flecked soufflés for banker James Mayer Rothschild. Carême also designed the standard chef’s hat (the *toque*) and came up with the classification of the famous “mother sauces” (not to be confused with Louisiana’s “mother roux”).



Marie-Antoine Carême

Oh yes, Lent. Well, back in medieval times English-speaking people replaced the Latin term with their own. The English word Lent is

derived from the Germanic root for spring – the time of lengthening days. In Old English it was *lencten*, and the Anglo-Saxon word for March was *lenct* (usually the month immediately before Easter).

As for the forty days, they represent the time Jesus spent in the desert tempted by Satan (not to mention other numerous Biblical references). It could also be the reason why there are phorty phunny phellows, although they have the order turned around. These Carnival revelers call themselves the Phunny Phorty Phellows. They're phunny that way.



Phunny Phorty Phellows 1883 Invitation

For Catholics and other Christian denominations that observe Lent, the Lenten Season is a time for the practice of justice in the form of prayer (justice toward God), fasting (justice towards oneself) and charity or almsgiving (justice toward one's neighbor). But with the bountiful seafood available in New Orleans, it is difficult to see how Lenten fasting is much of a local sacrifice. Nowhere else on the planet is substituting meat for seafood more pleasurable.

One must pity Kansans fasting on "no place like home" frozen fish sticks while fantasizing about Oz, but "down in New Orleans where the blues was born" *les fruits de mers* are everywhere ... and outstandingly delectable.

Wonderful memories abound of Friday nights out at West End when all Fridays used to be fast days, not just during Lent. While parents were still fiddling with their boiled crabs, the young ones (having finished

their trout sandwiches) loved to ride on the white mechanical steed at Swanson's (only five cents). Maybe Fontana's was one's choice, or dining out over the water at Fitzgerald's. Some kept it simple at Maggie and Smitty's, sittin' under the overhang sippin' Dixie Beers. For sheer tradition and great fried flounder dishes, Bruning's was the favorite of many. Sadly, Hurricane Katrina was the *coup de grâce* for the West End seafood restaurants.



Swanson's at West End

Outside of Louisiana, there were special dispensations over the years. Medieval clergyman and chronicler Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis), who lived most of his life in the twelfth century, wrote of "great and religious persons" who classified beaver tails as "fish". Covered by a scalloped skin, they superficially resembled the anatomy of fish (and were probably considered a delicacy by the clergy).

Back in the early 1800s, a missionary priest in Michigan named Father Gabriel Richard allowed his flock of French-Canadian trappers to eat muskrat during Lent (reasoning that the mammal lives in the water). Bishop Kenneth Povish later wrote, "anyone who could eat muskrat was doing penance worthy of the greatest saints."

It is said that even Louisianians were granted a Lenten dispensation so they could eat *poule d'eau*. Commonly spelled puldoo, the American coot (or water hen) has such a diet that it was considered more fish than fowl.

In 2010, Gregory Michael Aymond, Archbishop of New Orleans, offered his own interpretation. The alligator, while actually a reptile, for purposes of fasting is considered seafood according to the Archbishop.



Engraving of gentleman with "seafood" over his shoulders, 1807

"Yes, the alligator's considered in the fish family, and I agree with you — God has created a magnificent creature that is important to the state of Louisiana, and it is considered seafood." These slithering saurians were once on the Federal endangered list, but are today available on the menu of even the finest restaurants. New Orleans' historic Antoine's has been offering a delicious *potage alligator au sherry* for quite a number of years. This rich turtle soup-like bisque has been served to the restaurant's patrons with little if any protest.

St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* provided the legal foundation for these fasting technicalities. He wrote that meat, eggs and dairy products afforded greater pleasure and nourishment as food (than fish) to the human body "so that from their consumption there results a greater surplus available for seminal matter, which when abundant becomes a great incentive to lust." Guess he didn't hear the one about "Eat oysters. Love longer."



Lenten "Seafood Specials" available at Fausto's on Veterans

The Christian tradition of fasts and abstinence has its origin in Old Testament practices, which were an integral part of the early church community. The forty days of fasting have been reduced over time. In the Catholic Church today, fasting rules state that "every person 14 years of age or older must abstain from meat (and items made with meat) on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all the Fridays of Lent. Every person between the age of 18 and 59 (beginning of 60th year) must fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday." Not eating meat is still encouraged on all other Fridays, but other forms of penance or charitable works may be substituted for abstinence.

One should deduce from the above that fasting and abstinence is not the same thing. Fasting is reducing the amount of food consumed from normal, which the Church defines as the equivalent of one meal a day. Abstinence is refraining from eating something altogether, such as meat on Fridays in Lent.

The custom of distributing ashes to everyone's foreheads on Ash Wednesday came about some time around the fourth century, undoubtedly as a symbolic representation of the practice of wearing ashes by public penitents. Wearing sackcloth and ashes as a sign of repentance is mentioned early in the Old Testament (Jonah 3:5-7). Still, it is impossible to determine exactly when the seventh Wednesday before Easter was first designated as the beginning of Lent. And, in the Catholic Church (officially since 1970), Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends at sundown on Holy Thursday.

So how does that equal forty days? Back in the time of the Council of Nicea in 325, Lent began on the sixth Sunday before Easter and ended at dusk on Holy Thursday - forty days. In the fifth canon issued by the

Council, Lent (*tessarakonta* for “forty” in the original Greek) was mentioned for the first time in recorded history. But fasting and any other acts of penance on Sundays were forbidden, even in Lent, so there were only 34 of the 40 days for fasting. After numerous changes through the centuries, today the season of Lent (Ash Wednesday to Holy Thursday) is actually 44 days in length, but the number of fasting days is still 40: 44 days minus the six Sundays = 38, plus Good Friday and Holy Saturday = 40. Please consider the above math as penance for whatever malevolent thoughts you might presently have for this author.

I will end my treatise on “Lenten Observances” by including the first two stanzas of a Lenten poem published in the *New Orleans Item*, April 6, 1891, by Tebault’s Furniture Store at 37 Royal Street in the French Quarter.

“I Believe It, for My Mother Told Me So.”

The Carnival is over, dull Lent is with us now,
To Mardi Gras and fancy balls for a year I’ve made my bow,
I must starve myself and go to church, I dare not see my beau,
It’s very horrid, so it is, but mother told me so.

Oh yes, I must believe it, for my mother told me so,
That vanities and pleasures are a fleeting show ;
But still I can’t help thinking, there is nothing much amiss
If your lover should forget himself and steal a little kiss.

Since the print may be too small to read, I have printed the words to the poem below. Hope you enjoy:

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