

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Life's No *Fête Champêtre*

Louis-Philippe (born 1773), King of the French, was the eldest son of Louis-Philippe-Joseph, duc d'Orléans, and of Louise Marie-Adélaïde de Bourbon, daughter of the duc de Penthièvre, and while in exile was a visitor to New Orleans before ruling France. On his father's side he was descended from the brother of Louis XIV, on his mother's from the Comte de Toulouse, "legitimated" son of Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan. Toulouse Street in the *Vieux Carré* is named for *le comte*.

Before becoming King, life was no *pique-nique* for Louis-Philippe. He got out of Dodge (Paris, that is) just in time to escape the Reign of Terror. His father wasn't so lucky. He was guillotined.

Louis-Philippe finally became King in 1830. Later on in 1843, Victoria and Albert were entertained in France by the French monarch. The young Queen Victoria wrote about her visit:

"We were with the King for five days; he took us about the country and there was a *fête champêtre*. Then we saw some plays which I loved – particularly the comedies at which I laughed heartily."

There was a huge write-up and sketch of Louis-Philippe's 1843 *fête champêtre* in the *Illustrated London News*. It showed the numerous pavilions, open tents with broad striped fabric and *beaucoup* guests being fed and entertained.

So just what *is* a *fête champêtre*? Well, it's like a *picnic*, more specifically a "pastoral festival" or "country feast". The *fête champêtre* was a very elegant 18th or 19th Century garden party, a form of entertainment sometimes involving whole orchestras hidden in trees, with guests sometimes in fancy dress. The park areas of Versailles were the locations for some of these events, often landscaped with pavilions, temples and follies (architectural elements built primarily for decoration).

Some 18th century garden follies represented Egyptian pyramids,

Chinese temples, Tartar tents or ruined abbeys, to represent different historical themes. Some represented pastoral villages with rustic cottages, to symbolize rural virtues. Since wealthy Frenchmen and their ladies could flirt and play and act out scenes, the *fête champêtre* is closely related to the *fête galante* (where, within the intimate townhouses of Paris, the idle rich - elegantly attired - could play out their fantasies).

And a picnic, in contemporary usage, is simply a pleasure outing at which a meal is consumed *en plein air* (outdoors or *al fresco*), ideally taking place in the country, in a park, along a scenic roadside stop, or beside a beautiful lake or stream with an interesting view. In New Orleans during the early 1890s, that ideal location was in City Park.

In 1860, Jean-Mariè Saux built a coffeehouse alongside the Park on City Park Avenue, which is today Ralph Brennan's popular restaurant "Ralph's on the Park". But back in early 1890s, Saux sold his establishment to Fernand Alciatore, third son of the renowned Antoine Alciatore (founder of the city's oldest restaurant, Antoine's). Fernand turned the place into a superb New Orleans restaurant named "*A La Renaissance des Chênes Verts*" or "Rebirth of the Live Oaks" (to commemorate the famous "Duelling Oaks"). Alciatore hosted a fund-raising event out-of-doors beneath the majestic oaks in City Park, calling it the "Tenth Grand Festival and *Fête Champêtre*".

What more romantic location in those days could there have been than beneath the draperies of moss, where *épées* once clashed and pistols roared in the early dawn. Fernand planned the menu for weeks, orchestrated his staff, and prepared a *fête* for the Ages. Many of the Crescent City's most prominent citizens turned out to attend the feast, including politicians C. P. Drolla and Anthony Sambola.

Captain Anthony Sambola was an excellent artillerist who for years presided over the firing of a national salute at the head of Canal Street in October to mark the end of straw hat season in New Orleans. Described in the *Kansas City Journal* of October 10, 1897, the cannon fire was "intended to shoot off all the straw hats worn within the boundaries of Louisiana." The annual custom provided that "after that if a man is seen on the streets wearing a straw hat he is followed by all the urchins and every man who sees him, crying 'Boom! Boom!'" Mayor Walter C. Flower in 1897 requested that Senator Sambola postpone his salute due to yellow fever that year.

There were no cannons fired at Fernand Alciatore's *Fête Champêtre*, but (after the dining, speeches, musical performances and short comedy routines) the evening ended with a grand display of fireworks, bombarding brightly while the stately oaks cast their shadows upon the ground.

While the French may have perfected the *fête champêtre*, the British played their part. After all, what's a *picnic* without a *sandwich*?

The 4th Earl of Sandwich (1718-1792) and the 4th Earl of Chesterfield (1694-1773) were contemporaries. The modern *sandwich* is named after Lord Sandwich, who evidently had been a very conversant gambling man. With no time to leave for a meal during his long hours of card play, he would ask his servants to bring him slices of meat between two slices of bread - and thus the *sandwich* was born. Still, the exact circumstances surrounding the lunchtime favorite's invention continue to be the subject of debate.

The 4th Earl of Chesterfield, on the other hand, was the first to use the word *picnic* in written form in 1748. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word first appeared in English in a letter penned by Lord Chesterfield, who also associated it with card playing, drinking and conversation. It appears to have entered the English Language by way of the French word *pique-nique*. The 1692 edition of *Origines de la Langue Française* marks the first appearance of *pique-nique* in print, and mentions the word as being of recent origin. The term was used to describe a group of restaurant diners who brought their own wine. Makes sense since, for long time, a *picnic* retained the connotation of a meal to which everyone contributed something. But, whether it was actually based on the verb *piquer*, to "pick" or "peck", along with the rhyming *nique* meaning "something of little importance" is doubted by the OED (which says *picnic* is of unknown provenance). Yet the serving of an elegant meal out-of-doors, apart from a field worker's dinner in the harvest field, has been connected with respite from hunting since medieval times.

Lord Chesterfield also left the world some impressive quotes:

"I recommend you to take care of the minutes, for the hours will take care of themselves."

"Firmness of purpose is one of the most necessary sinews of character, and one of the best instruments of success. Without it, genius wastes its efforts in a maze of inconsistencies."

There was no way that the Earl of Chesterfield could have predicted that the cartoon character Yogi Bear, who was supposedly "smarter than the average bear", would mangle the pronunciation of the word first introduced by the Earl into the English language. Yogi, it was evident, just loved those "pic-a-nic baskets".

What sort of verbal assassination could Yogi perform on *fête champêtre*? Who knows, but now it's time for a quick art lesson. What's one way to differentiate between the French painters, Manet

and Monet? Here's a hint. They both did a painting entitled "*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*", or "The Luncheon on the Grass". Haven't guessed the difference yet?

Each painting features two men and two women, but in the Manet there's one woman totally nude and, in the background, a gossamer, chemise-wearing woman bathing. Monet's two couples are totally dressed. According to Émile Zola, "*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*", with its juxtaposition of a female nude with fully dressed men, "is the greatest work of Édouard Manet". Zola wrote that there was no "obscene intent in the disposition of the subject", but that "the artist had simply sought to obtain vibrant oppositions and a straightforward audience". The piece is now in the *Musée d'Orsay* in Paris.

An important precedent to Manet's masterpiece, dated to 1508-1510 and variously attributed to Giorgione, Titian or Sebastiano del Piombo, was named *Fête Champêtre* after it became part of the Louvre collection. The title is a bit misleading, as the pastoral painting most likely represents some story in mythology, not yet nailed down by art historians. The two women in this famous Renaissance work, amid two clothed men (like Manet's "*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*"), are both (for the most part) naked.

Then there's Pierre-Auguste Renoir's famous painting, "*Le déjeuner des canotiers*" or "The Luncheon of the Boating Party". Male and female partygoers overlook the water and dine and drink wine beneath a colorful striped canopy. Attendees range from an elegantly attired gent in top hat to boaters in straw hats and wife-beaters. One review of the work states that the lingering "memory of the aristocratic *fête champêtre* ... has not entirely vanished but a sharper impression of slightly vulgar jollity tends to dispel it."

There's often "vulgar jollity" on the streets of the French Quarter, especially at Carnival. The populace of New Orleans makes up a glorious gumbo, and life in the city is full of merriment and wonder - but it hasn't always been a *picnic*. Visited by yellow fever in 1897 (and other years), battles and military occupation, hurricanes and economic setbacks, the Crescent City has seen many a hardship. Hurricane Katrina truly took its toll. It affected so many, black and white - some certainly more than others. The races in New Orleans share so many things in common, like no other city. New Orleans residents love the same music and eat the same extraordinary cuisine. But not all is perfect, that's for sure.

Novelist Tom Robbins wrote in *Jitterbug Perfume*, "Even in slavery, the blacks called the tune. Proud and virtually fearless, they danced in Congo Square in such a graceful abandon." Their owners tried to outlaw the music "lest it escalate into rebellion", but "their white toes

tapped in their shoes." (Black and white toes throughout New Orleans and the world keep tapping to this day.) Robbins continued:

"White folks have controlled New Orleans with money and guns, black folks have controlled it with magic and music, and although there has been a steady undercurrent of mutual admiration, an intermingling of cultures unheard of in any other American city, South or North; although there has prevailed a most joyous and fascinating interface, black anger and white fear has persisted, providing the ongoing, ostensibly integrated *fête champêtre* with volatile and sometimes violent idiosyncrasies."

If New Orleans can learn to accentuate the positive and strengthen that already existent "mutual admiration" among the races, it will truly be a *fait* and *fête accompli*.

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