

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Louis Paulhan, King of the Air

Big things were happening in February of 1910. That Carnival saw the introduction of the wonderful hand-painted coconuts that the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club gives out each Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Zulu used to throw gold-painted walnuts on Fat Tuesday, but this tradition has been replaced long ago by delivering the larger and more desirable coconuts.

February 23, 1910, the New Orleans Rotary Club was founded exactly five years after the first Rotary Club in Chicago. The Crescent City club was one of the earliest pioneering clubs (sixteen in number) that pre-date the National Association of Rotary Clubs of America, formed in August 1910.

But on February 13, 1910, according to the American Review of Reviews, Louis Paulhan concluded "a series of aeroplane flights in New Orleans". Did he ever!

The debonair French aviator Isidore Auguste Mariè Louis Paulhan arrived in New Orleans shortly before Mardi Gras. The particularly well-skilled pilot was a huge sensation with the New Orleans fans, turning out some twenty-five thousand strong (at fifty cents each) to see him perform at the City Park racetrack. The French "birdman" lifted his flimsy-looking Farman biplane off the ground at a speedy twenty-five miles per hour and climbed up to a top speed of sixty miles per hour. The plane's wingspan was thirty-four feet ten inches with an overall length of thirty-eight feet. With the daring airman aboard, the plane's total weight was about 830 pounds. The biplane was powered by a fifty-horsepower seven-cylinder motor, spinning its eight-foot propeller a mighty fifteen hundred revolutions per minute.

Seems most New Orleanians have forgotten its first flying daredevil, but remember instead John B. Moisant (who also took off from the City Park racetrack later that year). But Moisant was thrown bodily from his Blériot monoplane on New Year's Eve 1910, and was killed. The tragedy occurred near the site of what was to become Moisant Field,

and the pioneer airman gave his name to New Orleans' airport for years before Louis Armstrong was given the honor.

Louis Paulhan began his career by making model aircraft. Stationed in Paris as a balloon pilot, Paulhan won first prize in a competition where a full-size construction of the winning design was the reward. His family and friends helped him obtain an engine for a Voisin airframe (the ultimate prize) and taught himself to fly in 1908. He became brilliant at it and obtained French pilot license No. 10. Becoming a master of the air, he took part in many air shows and broke many new records, for altitude, duration and speed.

Paulhan's many exploits led to an invitation in January 1910 to travel to America to take part in various air shows and competitions at the Los Angeles International Air Meet. The Wright Brothers came with their attorneys (patent infringement, they claimed), but flight enthusiasts came out to buy tickets. Paulhan took off anyway, winning all of the prizes and \$19,000. He set a new altitude record (4,164 feet) and a new endurance record. He gave William Randolph Hearst his first ride in an "aeroplane". Then it was off to Salt Lake City and New Orleans.

Later in 1910, Paulhan was one of the first pilots to fly a seaplane, "*Le Canard*" ("The Duck") designed by Henri Fabre, and won £10,000 for the most flights taken that year.

Also that February 1910, New Orleans got the jump on Houston by five days. The first airplane flight in the state of Texas occurred on the prairies just south of Houston on February 18, 1910 (five days after the exhibition at City Park). And once again it was Monsieur Paulhan who was paid \$20,000 by the Houston Post and Western Land Co. (\$900,000 in today's dollars) to demonstrate his skills and his Farman aircraft. A crowd of over two thousand gathered for the event, but the Texans paid a whole dollar per head.

A grander show (with more fliers) thrilled Texas a year later in January 1911 when "Moisant's International Aviators" arrived in town. They awed a crowd of over 20,000 Houstonians (with \$1.50 box seats, 50 cents general admission and 25 cents for the kids). Moisant's cosmopolitan cast of characters included a French trio: René Simon, who the press agents called "The Fool Flyer"; Roland Garros, "The Cloud Kisser"; and René Barrier, touted as "Record Holder of Flights over Cities". And there was short Edmond Audemars, of Switzerland, whose toothbrush moustache and bow tie earned him the moniker "Tiny".

But missing from the show was the organizer of this spectacular Texas "flying circus", John B. Moisant (who had just met his death in Kenner less than a month before), as well as the flier who first gave New

Orleans its first taste of the thrill of aviation, Louis Paulhan.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Louis Paulhan, King of the Air"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2009