

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Minit Made**

It all began in 1935 when an innovative and entrepreneurial young man named William Joseph Gruber (born April 2, 1909) opened his first restaurant at 1239 St. Charles Avenue, near the corner of Clio. His father had passed away and he wanted a business that would keep his German-born mother busy. There was a convention in town and he realized he needed to promote the fact that he was in the "fast food" business. Only in his twenties at the time, New Orleans-born Gruber had a restaurant with counter-seating for only ten customers. Cleverly, he put up a big billboard that read "*Meal-A-Minit*, seating for 1,000". But when one read the small print at the bottom of the sign, it explained the catch, only "Ten at a time."

Shortening words by misspelling them on signs and in other forms of advertising is not now (and wasn't then) uncommon, such as drive-thru, sno-ball and Rite Aid. Gruber decided to name his establishment "*Meal-A-Minit*", misspelled with the shorter M-I-N-I-T instead of the longer M-I-N-U-T-E. It was quicker to read, just as his meals were faster served.

William Gruber went on to own another five locations (all twenty-four hours) in and around the city, which had the following locations:

1000 Canal Street at the corner of University Place, featuring a dazzling bulb-lit sign. This is where during the 1950s, renowned New Orleans madam, Norma Wallace, would disguise herself as a little old lady and (over a cup of coffee) quietly observe all the rookie police officers on the Vice Squad that dined there. Her bordello stood at 1026 Conti Street, just inside the French Quarter, previously the home of Storyville photographer Ernest J. Bellocq of "Pretty Baby" fame.

A second Canal Street location at 1717 Canal.

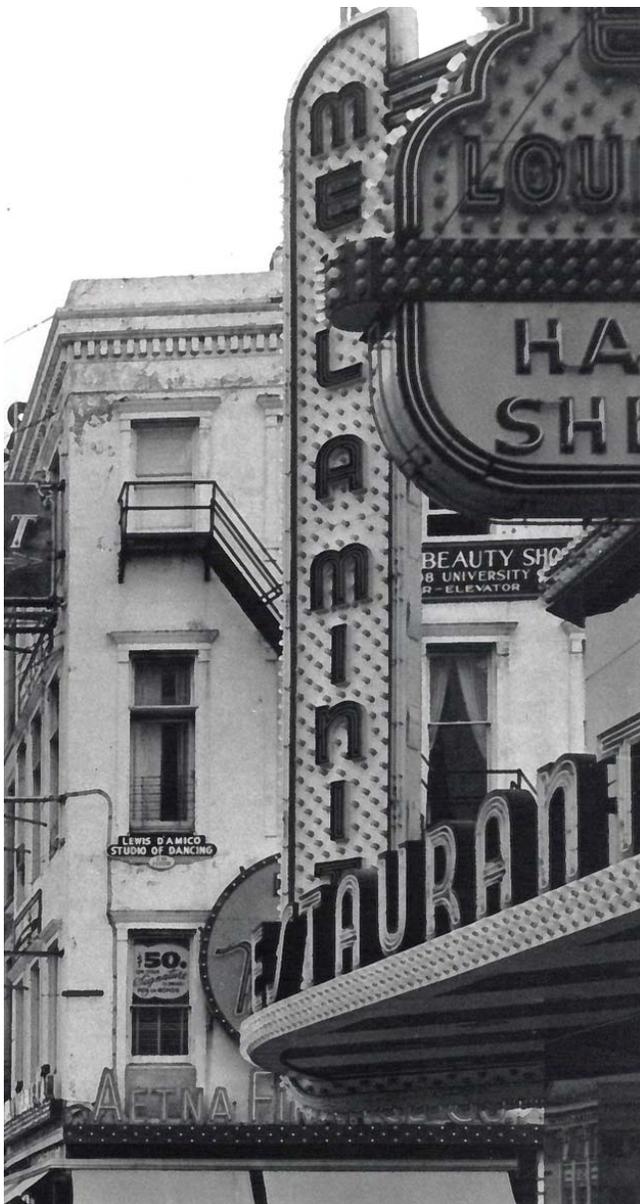
113 University Place (The Half Shell Oyster Bar and Sandwich Shop).

222 Loyola Avenue.

1801 Airline Highway, which was the inspiration for another momentous New Orleans institution. More on that in just a "Minit".

The "*Meal-A-Minit*" locations were some of the earliest restaurants to utilize an open kitchen concept for faster service. Gruber was also one of the first restaurateurs to have his own commissary, with food preparations also being supplied to other restaurants around the city. For example, "*Meal-A-Minit*" would prepare its own hamburger meat.

Some of the favorite "*Meal-A-Minit*" dishes included the "Night Hawk" sandwich, a triple-decker topped with melted cheese. There was a great variety to please each hungry patron, from steaks to seafood.



*"Meal-A-Minit" on Canal and University Place*

Having earlier served in the Coast Guard in World War II and having attained a law degree from Loyola University, William J. Gruber (Democrat) represented Orleans Parish in the 1940s as a Louisiana State Senator. He operated his restaurants until the 1960s. But that wasn't his only area of accomplishment. Besides being the founder and owner-operator of the "Meal-A-Minute" Restaurants, he owned the Lucky Strike Bowling Alley, the Prevue Night Club and he created and owned "Linen Look", a manufacturer of paper hats. He had horses that ran in the Kentucky Derby and he reigned as King of the Knights of Babylon, as well as King of the Krewe of Venus.

William's son, Billy (William J. Gruber, Jr., born March 8, 1946) is also in the restaurant business. He has the popular eatery known as "Liuzza's By the Track". It was originally called merely "Liuzza's Lounge and Grill" (with no connection to the Liuzza's on Bienville), and was owned by Jack Liuzza before Gruber came along.



*"Liuzza's By the Track" (with sign unchanged)*

Some call this well-worn neighborhood joint a "five star dive" with outstanding gumbo (Billy's mother is a Boudreaux from Chacahoula) and the signature "BBQ Shrimp PoBoy ... stuffed into a French bread

pistolette" and fresh-sliced french fries. Also a favorite is the "Garlic Oyster PoBoy". Located at 1518 N. Lopez, the "Track" refers to the New Orleans Fair Grounds (a stone's throw away), home to fine thoroughbred horseracing and the ever-popular annual New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. Thousands stop in "Liuzza's By the Track" during Jazz Fest. The historic Fair Grounds is the second oldest site of horseracing in America still in operation, after the Freehold Raceway in Freehold Borough, New Jersey.

"Liuzza's By the Track" also has a great jukebox selection featuring many favorite local musicians and artists. Perhaps two of the most star-studded record albums ever produced in the Crescent City are *New Orleans, Home of the Blues*, Volumes 1 and 2. They came out on "Minit Records", a company Joe Banashak formed in 1959 with the city's foremost R&B disc jockey, Larry McKinley. Banashak had secured national distribution through Lew Chudd's Los Angeles-based Imperial Records (home to Fats Domino and Ricky Nelson).



*"Minit Records" clock logo ...*

*Notice the same spelling as in "Meal-A-Minit".*

Banashak (born 1923 in Baltimore, Maryland) entered the record distribution business early and ran the A1 Distributorship for several years before starting his own record label. With the talented Allen Toussaint as songwriter and house producer-arranger, "Minit", and its sister label "Instant", were responsible for many of the incredible hits of the early 60s from New Orleans greats such as Ernie K-Doe ("Mother-In-Law" and "A Certain Girl"), Benny Spellman ("Fortune Teller/Lipstick Traces"), Chris Kenner ("I Like It Like That") and Jessie Hill ("Ooh Poo Pah Doo", the label's first huge hit). There was a truly historic audition held January 1960 at the WYLD radio studio to recruit talent for the new label. K-Doe was already managed by McKinley and signed with "Minit", but Toussaint showed up that night, along with this stellar array: Benny Spellman, Aaron Neville, Irma Thomas, Joseph Arrington (stage name, Joe Tex), Wilbert Smith (stage name, Lee Diamond), Jessie Hill, Allen Orange and a vocal group called the

Del-Royals - all that one evening. Minit" also hit big in 1961 with a group from Washington, D.C., the Showmen ("It Will Stand").



*Loaded with hits, New Orleans, Home of the Blues, Volumes 1 and 2*

But just how did the label name, "Minit", come about?

Back in those days of fast-paced DJ patter, all the disc jockeys were eager to spin one-minute records (or short enough that they could play more radio commercials). That brought in more money for the station. Joe Banashak was driving down Airline Highway one day when he noticed the "Meal-A-Minit" sign over the restaurant there. He loved the name and how it conveyed that idea of a short and sweet recording, and decided to spell M-I-N-I-T just like he saw it in the "Meal-A-Minit" sign. In keeping with the same idea, he later formed the "Instant" label – even faster than a "minit".

In 1961, Banashak formed a subsidiary label to "Instant" called "ALON" (NOLA - for New Orleans, Louisiana - spelled backwards). It

was there that Allen Toussaint's group the Stokes recorded "Whipped Cream", later a big hit for Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass. When Toussaint left for the army in 1963, the label lost its creative mojo. Banashak sold the "Minit" catalogue to Lew Chudd of "Imperial". Also in the 60s, William Gruber, Sr., ceased his fast service "Meal-A-Minit" establishments, as did did Norma Wallace. Her discreet French Quarter brothel at 1026 Conti Street, frequented by a fascinating flow of gangsters, governors and movie stars, ended its form of "quick service" in the mid-60s.



*Norma Wallace, who arrived in New Orleans at age fifteen*

Banashak continued with "Instant" Records, whose most successful artist was Chris Kenner who continued to record for the label until 1969. "Land of 1,000 Dances" was but one of his hits. Toussaint would eventually leave Joe Banashak to join forces with Marshall Sehorn. Banashak created a "Seven B" label (seven Banashaks) in 1966, through which "Pass the Hatchet" by Roger & the Gypsies (actually Earl Stanley's group with Eddie Bo's voiceover) was released. Banashak rented an office upstairs at 715 Camp Street since Cosimo Matassa's latest studio was across the street. In 1969, Banashak came out with "Instant" Record's only LP, "Solid Gold", which featured Joe's biggest successes on the "Instant", "ALON" and "Seven B" labels.



*"Solid Gold" on the "Instant" Label*

Banashak vacated his Camp Street office in 1978. In 1980, Floyd Soileau of Floyd's Record Shop in Ville Platte, Louisiana (who had set up a record pressing plant) convinced Banashak to reissue many of his masters that he had piled up all those years in the record business. This was the "Bandy" record catalog of songs.

William Gruber, Sr., died on January 17, 1994. "Last Madam" Norma Wallace, nee Norma Badon, died on December 14, 1974, at Ochsner Foundation Hospital, from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

There never seemed to be a dull moment for Gruber, Banashak and Wallace, two "Minit" men and one lady ... lady of the evening that is.

P. S., I highly recommend Norma Wallace's biography, *The Last Madam: A Life In The New Orleans Underworld* by Christine Wiltz.

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