

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Monkey Business

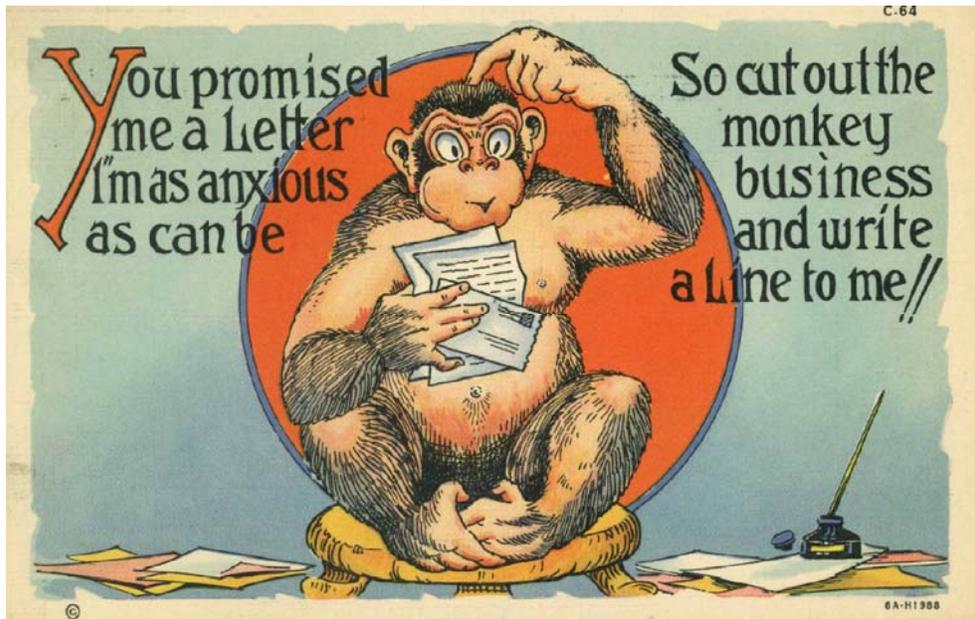
Wherever there are monkeys, it is inevitable that there will be monkeys on the loose. There have been countless reports through the years of monkeys escaping: not so much the dutiful ones, such as those of French Quarter organ grinders trained to retrieve contributions from amused onlookers, but the confined ones – yearning to be free.



The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* reported on the antics of one wayward monkey in 1864, a subject on which I have previously written. The naughty primate broke loose from a “hurdygurdyist” after a quarrel and “sought refuge beneath the steel-ribbed crinoline of a beautiful young lady and refused to be dislodged.” Brave gentlemen were unable to help since “modesty forbade their interference”. An

1860 ladies' magazine referred to these crinoline infrastructures as "bird cagey contrivances." To this simian intruder, it was the New Orleans MiniDome, for which he had not paid admission. He finally exited with a grin on his face.

In 1902, according to the New Orleans *Item*, a night watchman at Mr. Eisenhower's residence on St. Charles Avenue (apparently no relation to Ike), was charged with possession of a stolen monkey. The monkey had escaped from his cage at J. V. Levy's home and went on "a campaign of destruction among the handsome flower gardens on the avenue" and "played havoc with Mr. Eisenhower's flower pots." The charges were dismissed by Judge A. M. Aucoin.



In 1912, reported the *Picayune*, Jocko (a monkey in the big cage at City Park) planned a "frame-up" with his companion. Hoping to escape incarceration and find a coconut tree (so he could bombard coconuts "on the heads of passers-by"), Jocko enlisted the help of one of his monkey pals to jump on the back of Joseph Baum of the City Park force. Due to this distraction, Jocko made it to freedom – but, alas, no coconut trees. He was easily apprehended. "Detective Clifton said that he had heard Jocko the previous day "jabbering away with another monkey," obviously planning the so-called "frame-up." With this, Clifton said, he may have prevented the prison break, "but then he does not understand monkey talk."

Four years later, the New Orleans *Item* reported another ape escape. This time it was six of them, fed up with participating in experiments at the pathological department of Charity Hospital. For several days they were "frisking about Tulane Avenue," and, while they were out, small boys were having "delightful sport." An exchange of "stones and brickbats" resulted in countless broken windows up and down the

avenue – but the monkeys were unharmed. According to the paper, “The plate glass business boomed.”

The following year, 1917, monkey mayhem broke loose at the Cosmopolitan Hotel on Royal Street. A monkey eluded his owner and caused havoc in the hotel dining room where women “jumped from their chairs” and “fled in a panic.” The gaily frisking monkey “perched upon a column over the bar” where “offers of the most tempting refreshments” could not bring him down. Finally returned, “The monkey showed his anger at losing his liberty by biting his owner on the hand.”



The Cosmopolitan Hotel

The following incident occurred at Spanish Fort Amusement Park in the summer of 1919. Happy couples were dancing beneath the pavilion to a unique type of New Orleans music – Jazz! All of a sudden a hirsute figure “came flitting upon the dance floor.” According to the New Orleans *Item*, the monkey had “escaped from one of the cages and been drawn by the jazz, thereby adding evidence,” the paper claimed, “in support of the Darwinian theory of man’s origin.” Things got out of hand when the escapee bit five-year-old Harold Roser of Valmont Street. A policeman came to the rescue and shot and slew what the paper called “the hairy peril!” The *Times-Picayune’s* account reported

that the jazz-enticed monkey "continued into the dancing pavilion and entered into a wild abandon of the Simian 'shimmy' and 'tickletoe'" before being shot. Coincidentally, a woman across town on St. Philip Street was bitten by a totally different monkey. This time, with "no dancers and no policemen," the monkey's life was spared.

BIG PET MONKEY, ON LARK, SPREADS CONSTERNATION

Later that same month, Old "Joco," a big, shaggy pet monkey climbed Sam Bonart's flagpole and invaded the second story of Sam's tailor shop at the corner of South Rampart and Poydras streets. The Sam Bonart Playground in New Orleans is named for Mr. Bonart, who was involved in numerous civic activities and charities. After "hugging Old Glory" and startling Bonart's employees, the monkey (reported the *Times-Picayune*) caused a woman to shriek in a dentist chair during a tooth extraction, mistaking him for a "gorilla"! The adventurous ape was finally found lying in a woman's bed at 524 South Rampart while she was outside "screaming for help."

In 1922, "Jimmy the Monkey" disrupted the "peaceful calm" in the neighborhood of St. Charles Avenue and Euterpe Street. His first act of naughtiness was "an expert demonstration in the art of breaking electric light bulbs which he found hanging about the yard" of the Ziegler residence at 1618 St. Charles Avenue. When the neighbors came to Mrs. Ziegler's aid, Jimmy was transformed into Major League pitcher "Walter Johnson and zipped a few bulbs at his indignant onlookers." On Euterpe Street, Jimmy emulated Joe Cocker and came in "through the bathroom window" and "emerged from the house brandishing" a polished steel razor. Along came Miss Alma Porter, an amateur dancer claiming to be a rope tosser "second to no one." But every time she threw her lasso at Jimmy, he ducked. Then two Second Precinct police patrolmen arrived. "Only a Monkey? The officers laughed loudly." Watch the experts handle this. The crowd *did* watch – "two perspiring officers for two hours: two officers who raved and ranted and gave up in disgust and wanted to shoot Jimmy."

Then the SPCA guy arrived with a net. Another failure. One of the two police officers shook his fist up at the elusive simian. Jimmy hurled half a brick at him. After hours of monkey madness, darkness came and the night's shadows deepened. "Jimmy climbed to the roof of his owner's residence, entered a second-story window and was captured sleeping soundly in his master's bedroom."

Police Capture Escaped Monkey



*Sergeant Clifford Reuther (left), Patrolman Frank Gervais
and scooped-up monkey*

In 1939, the escaped monkey belonged to Al Pilsbury of 2139 Esplanade Avenue. Pupils of John McDonogh High School aided the officers shown above in the monkey's rescue. The diminutive creature was observed swinging through the neighborhood trees before being captured with a scoop net provided by the SPCA.

In 1944, a freedom-loving rhesus monkey named Paul caused pandemonium in the 600 block of Carondelet. The pesky monkey kept a neighbor lady from leaving her house while he "menacingly kept guard on her front porch." The monkey's owner, Mr. John F. Williams, suffered a sprained ankle attempting to persuade his pet to come down from his perch.

While monkeys were out and about, most organ grinders had disappeared the streets of the Crescent City in the 1940s. Earlier, they were more prolific in the French Quarter. One familiar view was a smartly attired monkey climbing up to a Pontalba Apartment balcony to retrieve a coin for his master. Usually his little hat was tipped for a tip. A scene from the film *The Cincinnati Kid* featured Lancey "the

Man" Howard (played by Edward G. Robinson) handing money to a New Orleans organ grinder's monkey.

One exception was Ben Williams, who (with Mickey, his white-faced Capuchin monkey), performed during the 1950s for school functions and parties and entertained in the French Quarter, collecting tips from tourists and locals alike. But in 1949 there was a real shortage. One gentleman called the *Times-Picayune* three times trying to locate a "monkey man" for his five-year-old's birthday party. Mrs. Jacqueline Livaudais needed one, too, as did Mrs. Joseph Albano. The *Picayune* announced, "There may be organ grinders here for Mardi Gras and Spring Fiesta, but right now New Orleans seems to be bare of them."

ANY ORGAN GRINDERS?

Last week was organ grinder week — but there was nary an organ grinder in the city.

A 1950 headline read "Monkey Appears on Broadway" – not the "great White Way," but in the University Section of the city. It was thought to be a golden-brown ringtail monkey lost on the Gentilly Highway, more than ten miles away, and a Mrs. Geiger captured it. When owner Myrtle Cofil heard the news, she exclaimed, "That's a marmoset." She had advertised for it back in July. "I'll bet that's my July monkey." "But, alackaday," reported the *Times-Picayune*, the marmoset escaped Mrs. Geiger's cage and was on the loose again. The ringtailed monkey was still missing, too.

In 1985, a two-foot tall Capuchin monkey named Emile was on the lam. Belonging to Tillie Wilson of Metairie, Emile "made the best of his freedom." He found a pecan tree and then began eating bell peppers from a vegetable garden. He was captured with the help of the Jefferson Parish Animal Shelter in a cage baited with bananas, apples and grapes. Emile, however, was too clever. He figured out how to grab the fruit without setting off the cage's trip plate. Securing the fruit with fishing line finally did the trick, with Emile struggling to get the treat free.

Nowadays, monkeys may still escape from time to time, but the city has a new group of Organ Grinders – this time a parading Mardi Gras dance troupe and marching club. Their colors are blue and gold and they call themselves "sexah monkeys," renowned for their non-stop dancing during parades. The ladies who make up the Organ Grinders crank out well-executed entertainment, the best in music, marching, merriment and just a modicum of "monkey business."



The Organ Grinders are on the loose in New Orleans

NED HÉMARD

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