

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **New Orleanians Hate to Leave**

For those of us who live here, it comes as no surprise that the residents of New Orleans have a strong attachment to place. Both Louisiana and New Orleans have an exceedingly high share of existing residents who were born in the state or city, just as generations of family members before. There were worries that after Hurricane Katrina there would be a departure of many native-born citizens, resulting in a decline in New Orleans' highest-in-the-nation nativity rate (77.4 per cent according to the 2000 Census). But these fears seem to have been allayed in 2008, when Louisiana was tied with New York as having the highest nativity rate in the country, with 82.1 percent of residents born in the state.

With all the many things to enjoy in the Crescent City (rich cuisine, great music, museums, the French Quarter and more), people hate to leave – not only permanent moves but those periods Americans call being “on vacation” and Europeans call “on holiday”.

Parisians leave the “City of Lights” when things get hot. August is the time they head for the countryside or beach. Wealthier Parisians ship off for Cap d’Agde, St-Tropez or some other *chic* locale. A few New Orleanians head off for Destin, but many don’t leave home at all:

“We are but stupid stay-at-homes, it may be, but we are contented for all that, and thoroughly satisfied with New Orleans. It is true, our police ought to be more perfect, our city councils a little livelier, and our newspapers some what more vigorous; but there is no use in grumbling, and so we take things as they come.”

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If you think these words were written recently, think again. They appeared in the June 7, 1855 edition of the New Orleans *Daily Delta*, in an article entitled “The Won't-Get-Away Club”:

“Here we are — we of the Won't-Get-Away — and here we intend to remain. Our platform is New Orleans, her interests and her future. Our principle is that of Mark Tapley, to “be jolly” under every

circumstance. As that distinguished worthy used to say, “there is some credit to being jolly” when the thermometer gets into the nineties!”

Mark Tapley is an indomitably cheerful fictional character in Charles Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit*, well known to readers in the 1850s. Believably human like Mr. Pickwick, Tapley is on a self-proclaimed mission to remain “jolly” at all times, no matter how tough the circumstances.



*“Jolly” Mark Tapley*

The 1855 article continued:

“Well, we have many facilities for being jolly. We have a fine city, with pleasant outlets; delightful watering-places within reach; a glorious shell-road to enjoy an evening 2:40 upon; and excellent hotels beside the breezy Lake, where everything can be had, from easy chat to delicate tenderloin trout; from cool air to iced Amontillado; from soda-water and valetudinarianism to champaign (sic) and laughter. There are ‘cakes and ale’ enough to terrify Malvolio, and satisfy Sir Toby Belch himself.”

Nineteenth Century New Orleanians could take the Shell Road (that ran alongside the New Basin Canal) out to the West End on “breezy” Lake Pontchartrain, where there were a selection of fine hotels, restaurants serving “tenderloin trout”, bathing facilities and “pleasant outlets” for leisurely amusement and musical entertainment. Mark Twain wrote about the Shell Road in *Life on the Mississippi* (1874):

"Thence, we drove a few miles across a swamp, along a raised shell road, with a canal on one hand and a dense wood on the other; and here and there, in the distance, a ragged and angular-limbed and moss-bearded cypress, top standing out, clear cut against the sky, and as quaint of form as the apple-trees in Japanese pictures — such was our course and the surroundings of it. There was an occasional alligator swimming comfortably along in the canal, and an occasional picturesque ... person on the bank, flinging his statue-rigid reflection upon the still water and watching for a bite".

John Chase wrote that the Shell Road, "now Pontchartrain Boulevard," has long "been part of Carrollton life. Until 1910 tolls were collected for use of this road to the lake, 6½¢ for a man on horseback and 25¢ for carriages." The tollhouse can be seen below.



*1906 Postcard view of the Shell Road, along the New Basin Canal*

Amontillado is a type of Sherry named for the *Montilla* region of Spain, not to be confused with a *mantilla* (the silk or lace veil worn over the head and shoulders by *señoritas y señoras*). The reader may remember Edgar Allan Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*, a short story about the narrator Montresor's revenge by bricking in a person chained alive behind an impassable wall. That unfortunate stay-at-homer never made it out of town either. But he most probably *was* concerned with "valetudinarianism". That's being constantly and morbidly concerned with one's health. In this case, rightly so.

Sir Toby Belch and Malvolio are characters appearing in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Jovial and intoxicated, Sir Toby made this remark to Malvolio: "Dost thou think, because *thou* art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" "Cakes and ale" represent the good life in

the city (but accompanied by fear of predators) in Aesop's fable, *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse*. The tagline: "Better beans and bacon in peace than cakes and ale in fear".

What else was there to do for the "Won't-Get-Away" New Orleanian of 1855:

"A little work in the forenoon — a quiet family dinner — an evening's excursion — social talk about 'things in general' — short sleep, early breakfast, existence always upward, and onward and true to the line — an occasional hearty thanksgiving breathed full in the face of the blue firmament; what more would you have? What more has the Czar or the Sultan? Has Louis Napoleon so much?"



*Louis Napoleon, aka Napoleon III, Emperor of France in 1855*

The article also recommended "books for a quiet hour" in an "easy rocking-chair near the open window". Charles "Dickens can be read at fifty cents a volume; Thackeray at the same price". Or, "if you are of a contemplative turn, what prevents you from an evening visit to Annunciation, Lafayette or Jackson squares, to take an innocent peep at the joyous children and the pretty children's maids? Opposite the old Calaboose, stretching its green garden-plots almost to the edge of the Mississippi, which rolls seaward tranquilly forever, you will find the air musical with young jubilant voices and the walks picturesque with the gay summer costume of the Creoles."

The "Calaboose" is the jail, referring to the Cabildo. The French built the first *corps de garde* (or jail) on the Cabildo site in 1723. The Spanish later constructed the *Casa Capitular* (or Council House) that (along with the council chambers) also included a jail and military prison. During this period, the jail was referred to as the "*calabozo*" (Spanish for jail). This became "calaboose" after the Americans came.



THE SHELL ROAD.

*The Shell Road as it appeared to Mark Twain*

The article went on to state, "But we, the steadfast members of the Won't-Get-Away, are not envious of" the various "peregrinations and pursuit of pleasure" undertaken by Dickens' *Hard Times* characters "Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Gradgrind, and a thousand other men of facts and figures," who "have been compelled to go North in search of amusement and relaxation." It was suggested they may be found in "the crowded Astor House, or in the showy St. Nicholas — in the hot streets of New York, with their glare and noise — in bedizened Broadway or headlong Bowery — or amidst the sickly displays of Saratoga and the snobby pretentiousness of Newport. We wish them joy of their trip, and hope to see them with a better peptic organization on their return."

The New Orleans "Won't-Get-Away Club" members of 1855, therefore, cared not for the snobby, crowded and pretentious haunts of Gotham

or Rhode Island. And they believed somehow that a “bedizened” (that is, all dressed up in a showy or gaudy manner) Broadway might lead to an uneasy gastrointestinal tract in need of peptic reorganization.

Renee Peck wrote, “Many New Orleanians can trace their local ties back generations. That brings a sense of community and tradition and appreciation for place unheralded elsewhere. However, it can also mean that people are resistant to change, always wanting things to be the way they’ve always been.” But new arrivals come to the city and make it their own, both embracing its culture and adding to it, as well.

Geographer Richard Campanella described the phenomenon, “By the humanist’s notion, the newcomers are actually breathing new life into local customs and traditions. Transplants arrive endeavoring to be a part of the epic adventure of living here; thus, through the process of self-selection, they tend to be Orleanophilic ‘super-natives’.” They inherit the New Orleans passion for food, Carnival, history, art, music, architecture and love of celebration. And, after a while, they don’t want to leave either.

This has been going on for years. Back in 1803, the Americans arrived and clashed with the entrenched Creole society. “What resulted,” wrote Campanella, was a “gradual cultural hybridization. Native Creoles and Anglo transplants intermarried, blended their legal systems, their architectural tastes and surveying methods, their civic traditions and foodways, and to some degree their languages. What resulted was the fascinating *mélange* that is modern-day Louisiana.” And to their descendants and to the newly enthusiastic transplants to the city: “Welcome to the Won't-Get-Away Club.”

So, as was said back in 1855, “a pleasant day to you, brothers of the Club — an intellectual evening and sweet dreams.”

## **NED HÉMARD**

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