

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

**New Orleans' Own Shirley**

Long before Shirley Temple hit the big screen, the Crescent City had its own "Shirley," referred to in a *Times-Picayune* article dated March 22, 1936, as the "Shirley Temple of yesteryear". The young actress who earned that title was "Little Bessie" Shields of New Orleans, who indeed had much in common with Hollywood's number one box-office star from 1935 to 1938.



"Little Bessie" Shields

The *Times-Picayune* described the young Miss Shields as "Dancing-eyed with golden curls," a person who "captured the hearts of the New Orleans theater public of the 1900s," just as Shirley did in the 1930s. Bessie Shields Fourton, as she became known after her marriage to Frank C. Fourton, "started acting on the boards of the old Grand Opera House as a member of the Baldwin-Melville Stock Company, when she was 3 years old. In this company she was associated with William and Dustin Farnum, who became idols of the early motion pictures, and later played here in support of Lionel Barrymore."

The paper also reported that it "was William Farnum who offered Miss Shields the lead in the stage version of 'The Littlest Rebel,' taken afterwards by Mary Miles Minter. Had Bessie not had ambitions to go to college, quitting the stage at the age of 13, it is believed that she might have gone on, as Miss Minter did, to a screen career." The film version of "The Littlest Rebel," which today would be considered politically incorrect, was one of the top box office draws of 1935 for Shirley Temple, who danced alongside the incomparable Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Temple was 20th Century-Fox's biggest asset and helped the film company through the Depression years.



*Silent Star Dustin Farnum      Shirley Temple as "The Littlest Rebel"*

"Little Bessie" also played "Little Lord Fauntleroy" before Freddie Bartholomew portrayed him on screen over thirty years later. She wore "the traditional black velvet suit, lace collar and long curls,"

reported the *Times-Picayune*, which were considered a little too much for the movie version.

Bessie Shields was born in New Orleans October 17, 1891, to Bernard Cohen Shields and Bessie Smallwood. Her father (a native New Orleanian, born March 19, 1853, to Thomas Henry Shields, of New York, and Sarah Van Ostern, of Philadelphia) was active in a broad range of civic and social activities. Upon his death at sea on his way back to New Orleans from France, the Baton Rouge *State-Times* mentioned a few of his numerous accomplishments: "During his lifetime he was a Shakespearean scholar, a learned man and politician. He served two terms in the Louisiana legislature, and put through valuable fiscal ordinances as a member of the city council of New Orleans. He was a Mason of high rank and a charter member of the Elks club and the New Orleans Chess, Checkers and Whist club."

In addition, "He was one of the founders of the Louisiana Society for the prevention of Cruelty to Animals," and the "back tax office in the city government grew out of a department conceived in his brain." He was in the service of the city government of New Orleans for half a century, the greater part of which as secretary of the Board of Liquidation of City Debt. "He was a lawyer, a graduate of Tulane University," wrote the *Times-Picayune*, as well as a "tennis player," an "expert telegrapher and wireless operator" and an "amateur photographer," once "president of the old New Orleans Camera Club." With a "slender figure, erect carriage," and "sonorous voice," Mr. Shields, "an amateur actor of unusual ability" could not help but form "an impressive figure."

According to a *Times-Picayune* article (dated July 1, 1932), covering the death Mrs. Shields, nee Bessie Smallwood, she was "the first woman press agent in America and one of the first women newspaper reporters in New Orleans." Born in Lexington, Missouri, Mrs. Shields "began her journalistic career as a child, writing articles for the *New Orleans Herald* under a fictitious name. In 1880 at the age of 18 she became city editor of the *New Orleans Daily States*, blazing the trail for women journalists of the South." An accomplished actress in her own right, she, too, appeared frequently on stage. She and her husband, Bernard, had five children: two boys and three girls.

Bessie Smallwood Shield's sister, Martha Reinhard Smallwood Field, was the acclaimed Louisiana writer better known by her pen name, Catharine Cole. Also born in Lexington, Missouri, she moved to New Orleans and secured a position on the *Times* and in 1881, the *Picayune*.

Catharine Cole once wrote, "Once upon a time it was my fortune to live across the way from a house that had a Queen Anne front built onto its plain Anne back."

"When nature exudes in a swamp in Louisiana it is rich, tropical, juicy, dark, verminy, repellent and lovely all in one," she wrote in 1889. "It is like a coffin crowned with flowers; a death trap baited with roses."



*Catharine Cole*

Both Catharine Cole, nee Smallwood, and her sister, Bessie Smallwood Shields, were daughters of Colonel William Smallwood, who in 1880 organized the old New Orleans Produce Exchange, the forerunner of the New Orleans Board of Trade. In 1880, William Smallwood was a commercial reporter of the old New Orleans *Times* when he first established a trading center on the sidewalk on Magazine Street. In a short time, trading became so active that he had to rent a room and establish a regular office.

As for the five children of Bernard and Bessie Shields, the oldest daughter, Sydney Shields (1888 – 1960), first took to the stage as a young girl in vaudeville acts with her mother, two sisters and two brothers (Bessie, Sarah, Bernard Saxon and Santos). When Sydney became too old for the juvenile roles, Bessie took her place. Sydney, however, was enticed back onto the stage and by 1910 was touring vaudeville with her own company. In 1913 she was chosen for the starring role in "Reckless Age", produced by Cecil B. DeMille shortly before he began directing films. Sydney's New York stage debut came two years later, and in 1918 she joined the Over-There Theatre League that became the first company of American actors to tour post World War I Europe. Very early in her career Sydney appeared in at

least two silent films and then made a decision to remain on the stage. She married actor Edward H. Robins, her second husband.

Sister Sarah became Madame Paul Prevot, wife of a glove manufacturer in France. In December 1922 the brother-sister team of Santos Shields and Sydney Shields appeared at New Orleans' Tulane Theater in Walker Whiteside's mystery play, "The Hindu." Santos died in 1967.

Elizabeth "Bessie" Shields Fourton, New Orleans' own Shirley, died in New Orleans September 23, 1979. She was survived by her daughter Rose Mary Fourton and sister Sarah (then Mrs. Sarah Cook of Forest Hills, New York).

There are a few interesting facts connected with the above story.

Two-time Academy Award winner Dustin Hoffman was named for actor Dustin Farnum. Hoffman explained that his parents were expecting a girl and did not have a boy's name selected. When his Mother was pressed to come up with a name for her baby boy, she chose the name Dustin from a magazine the other lady in her room was reading, which featured Dustin Farnum on the cover.

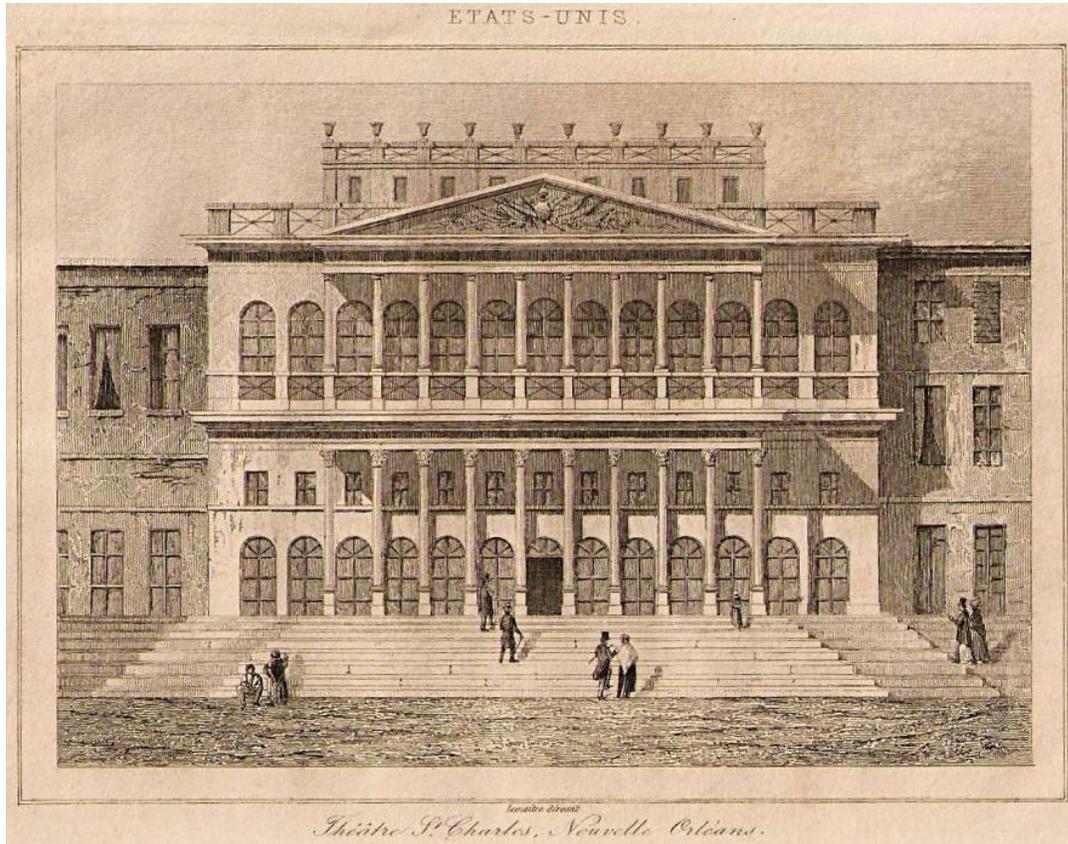
The "Shirley Temple" was for years the non-alcoholic kiddie cocktail of choice when your parents took you out to a nice restaurant, that is if you were a young lady. It consisted of Seven-up, ginger ale (or some combination of the two) plus a dash of grenadine and, of course, a Maraschino cherry. For us young gentlemen, it was the "Roy Rogers," which usually substituted cola for the Seven-up or ginger ale. It still had a dash of grenadine and a cherry.

For those wishing to capture those days of yore, you can visit any of the fabulous "Dat Dog" locations in New Orleans. In addition to the many imaginative hot dog choices, there are cocktails available for young and old. Ask for a "Shirley Temple". Yes, it actually is on the menu.

Shreveport-born actress Mary Miles Minter (1902 - 1984), nee Juliet Reilly, appeared in over 50 silent motion pictures in the years 1912 to 1923. But in 1922, she found herself involved in the scandalous death of director William Desmond Taylor, whose murder was never solved. Minter called him her "mate." Gossip implicated her former actress mother, stage name Charlotte Shelby, but Minter's reputation suffered, and she gave up her movie career in 1923.

Historian John Smith Kendall, in his 1922 "History of New Orleans" wrote that James H. Caldwell (born in Manchester, England, 1793) was a relative of Thomas Henry Shields, Bernard Shields' father. Caldwell was a theatrical empresario who established theatrical productions in

English in New Orleans and (after organizing high-quality touring companies) began to concentrate on various civic projects, such as establishing municipal gas works in New Orleans. On November 30, 1835, Caldwell, a successful performer as well as manager, opened his impressive St. Charles Theatre, shown below. With seating for over 4,000, it burned March 13, 1842.



The second St. Charles opened January 18, 1843. Big names took the stage there, such as Edwin Booth, Joe Jefferson, Charles Keane, Jenny Lind and Adelina Patti. It, too, burned in 1899. The third St. Charles opened in 1902 and demolished in 1967. Sarah Bernhardt made her final local appearance on its stage. The Pan-American Life Insurance Building was constructed on the site of this famous theatre.

Shirley Temple (1928 – 2014) was first married at age 17 to John Agar with whom she starred in the 1948 movie, "Fort Apache". They divorced December 1949. In 1950 she met and married Charles Alden Black, a World War II Navy intelligence officer, the son of the president and later chairman of Pacific Gas and Electric. As Mrs. Shirley Temple Black, she entered the world of politics and became a diplomat, ably serving as U.S. Ambassador to Ghana and later to Czechoslovakia, and as Chief of Protocol of the United States under President Gerald Ford.

The Chief of Protocol is an officer of the United States Department of State responsible for advising the President, Vice President and Secretary of State on matters of national and international diplomatic

protocol. After first serving as Ambassador to Brunei from 1992 to 1993, New Orleans' own Donald Burnham Ensenat (a graduate of Isidore Newman School, Yale University and Tulane Law School) served as Chief of Protocol under George W. Bush from June 6, 2001, until February 18, 2007. The Chief of Protocol holds the rank of both U.S. Ambassador and Assistant Secretary of State.

Whenever you hear that "everything is copacetic," it indicates that everything is "fine" and in "excellent order". Shirley Temple's tap dancing partner Bill Robinson believed he was the one who had coined the word as a boy in Richmond, Virginia. But it appears that the term was in use as early as 1880 among Southern blacks, so it seems unlikely that Mr. "Bojangles" (born in 1878) could have invented the word. Another explanation is that the word is from the Hebrew phrase *kol be sedher*, indicating "everything is in order". Some think it is possible that the word was coined by Harlem blacks working for Jewish businesses. Yet the word's popularity among Southern blacks seems to indicate that it is more likely to have originated in one of the Southern cities in which Jewish communities thrived.

So, if everything's copacetic, please have a "Shirley Temple" on me.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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