

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Propriety of the Past

The 1850s were times of great change. John Stuart Mill's essay "On Liberty" emerged as one of the most powerful and enduring defenses of individual freedom ever written. Both enemies and advocates of personal freedom have found inconsistencies in Mill's reasoning, but they continue to discuss his views to this day.

Mill wrote about the three forms of tyranny that have, historically, endangered liberty through the ages. The oldest was the tyranny of the one (or the few) over the many. Dictators and their ilk could easily curb spontaneous individualism. The newest form of tyranny, Mill believed, was the tyranny of the many over the one (the majority over the minority). But what if you're in the minority?

The third tyranny, Mill argued, was the tyranny of custom and tradition:

"The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than the customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress or improvement."

That, of course, appears to be the antithesis of the very essence of propriety, conforming to prevailing customs and proper traditions of polite society. And New Orleans in the 1850s was very proper ... but a little rebellious, too.

"The sidewalks were black with people—the balconies trembled under the weight which oppressed them; the gas lamps presented as many figures dangling to them as their prototypes in the French revolution, though their occupants were not so aristocratic".

What was causing all this commotion on Tchoupitoulas Street? An "elephant," said a lad with a brogue. An escaped "sea-serpent,"

replied another. The "New Orleans Daily Delta" reported the creature to be an "old lady" in Bloomers with "perfectly gray" hair, "hung down her back". "Because she wears the Bloomers!" they feared, she had come from Massachusetts to impose "Woman's Rights amongst us".

Bloomers were worn by a few women in the 1850s, but were widely ridiculed in the press (not just in New Orleans). It was not the only clothing style to be criticized.

"The Mother of a Family" wrote of her shock to the editors of the "Daily Delta" on November 30, 1855. "We must confess," the editors replied, "that the shock which the mother's modesty has received gives us great pain."□

"Messrs. Editors, I have to find fault with one custom in your paper," wrote the aggrieved lady. "I allude to the new style adopted in advertising of balls, dancing academies, soirees, etc., by inserting a "cut" representing a ballet girl with both lower limbs bare, standing on one toe, while the other limb is at an angle of more than ninety degrees. Such pictures, Messrs. Editors, are calculated to create unpleasant sensations in the breasts of both myself and daughters, and must, of course, be a source of serious annoyance to any lady who has the slightest regard for the rules of propriety. Could you not have petticoats put on the dancing figures, or at least, you might encase their lower limbs in pantalettes. Now, do, Messrs. Editors, try and correct this evil, and relieve the anxieties of a modest woman, who is the mother of a large family of modest daughters."

Another offended femme wrote to the "Daily Delta" from her boudoir, employing the *nom de plume* of Lady Penelope Penfeather (a Sir Walter Scott character described by him as "a well-principled woman, but too thoughtless to let her principles control her humour, therefore not scrupulously nice in her society.")

"Mr. Editor," she protested, "I know it is an unthankful, and, I fear, an unprofitable task, that I am taking upon myself, but I have suffered a grievance, and can no longer keep silence on the subject. In fact, I find myself very much in the mood of the young lady, who, being annoyed past endurance, turned to her companion and said "hold me Jane, or I'll curse."□

"My vexation is occasioned by the conduct of men who daily congregate at the corners of the streets, and spend hours in gazing out of countenance the ladies who pass up and down before them."

She went on to complain, "It is on account of these gazers" that along St. Charles street, from Canal to Poydras, scarcely a lady is to be seen during the day", daring not to venture past those ogling gentlemen.

Lady Penelope's real gripe was not the notice "due to our charms". It "would show insensibility in your sex were it not given," she states. But she did object to the fact that "many of the remarks made on these occasions are repeated to the ladies."

"Mr. Editor, I am an advocate for woman's rights; and, standing upon these rights, I proclaim that tale-bearing is solely the prerogative of woman. We freely abandon to you all the greater vices, but require, in our turn, that you should not attempt to rob us of this indulgence. Nothing is more despicable, in the eyes of a true woman, than a scandalous man; and should one endeavor to insinuate himself into our company, we will gladly unite with your sex in ostracising the miscreant."

"Tale-bearing", an important (yet long forgotten) woman's right, but as the Four Lads sang a century later:

"Brother, you can't go to jail for what you're thinking
Or for the 'woo' look in your eye
You're only standing on the corner
Watching all the girls
Watching all the girls
Watching all the girls
Go by"

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Propriety of the Past"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2009