

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

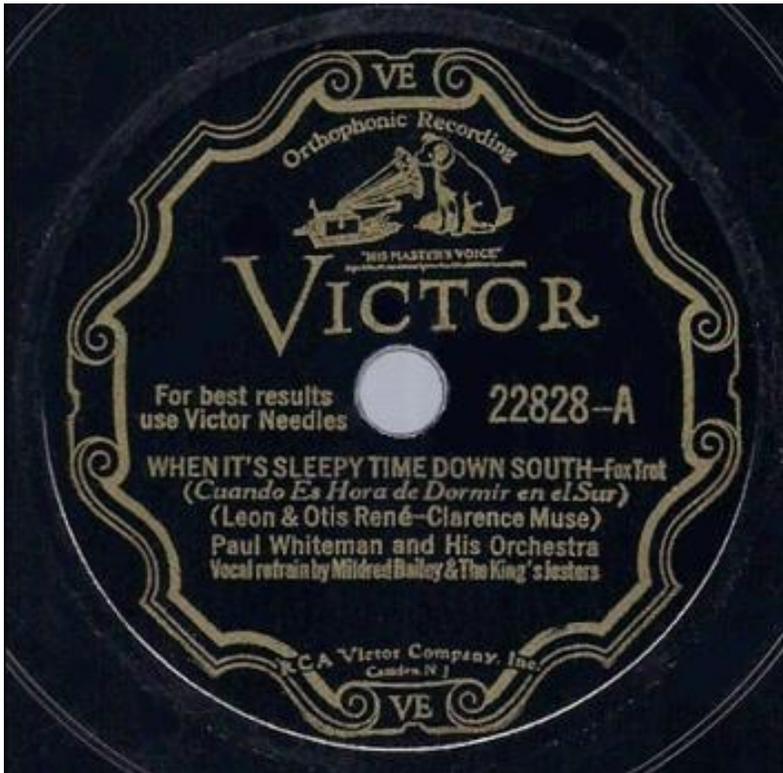
Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

When It's Sleepy Time Down South

"When It's Sleepy Time Down South", also known as "Sleepy Time Down South", is a jazz standard written by Clarence Muse, and brothers Leon and Otis René. Otis, once a New Orleans pharmacist, was born in New Orleans and Leon was born in Covington, Louisiana. Both moved to California with their family and became songwriters and record label owners. Otis had a number of hits, such as "When The Swallows Come Back to Capistrano" and Leon later wrote the classic "rock and roll" ditty, "Rockin' Robin".

"Sleepy Time" was an immensely popular hit in 1931 for Paul Whiteman and Mildred Bailey, released soon after it was written, but it became most widely known as the theme song of Louis Armstrong's band. Other New Orleans performers have given us their own unique interpretations, such as Louis Prima, the Boswell Sisters (featured in a Betty Boop cartoon), Al Hirt and Harry Connick, Jr. Sidney Bechet's recording was exceptionally good.



As popular as the song has been, it is full of bygone stereotypes, and there's always that insinuation that folks in the South are a little sleepy and sometimes a bit lazy.

The first few lines set the scene:

Pale moon shining on the fields below,
Folks are crooning songs soft and low.
Needn't tell me so because I know,
It's sleepy time down south.

That's not to say there haven't been incidents of sleepiness in the Crescent City, such as one involving "sweet sleep on cotton bales" reported in the *Picayune* on August 10, 1849.

SLEEPING ON THE LEVEE.—Upwards of twenty individuals, who had sought repose and sweet sleep on cotton bales, &c., along the levee, were last night poked up by the First Municipality police, and accommodated with lodgings in the watch-house. They were all allowed to travel this morning, and it is more than probable that one-half of them will be arrested agulá to-night.

On other occasions sleep was entered into reverently, as described below in the *Weekly Picayune*, dated March 21, 1842.

Veneration—Sleeping in church, and snoring during a sermon.

Still many would argue that there were times, such as the 1830s and 1840s, when the city was teeming with commerce. Steamboats were arriving and departing daily, and thousands of people were busily working with considerable vigor. A visitor to New Orleans in 1834 named James Creecy remarked on this phenomenon:

"The business appearance of this city is not surpassed by any other in the wide world: It might be likened to a huge beehive, where no drones could find a resting place. I stepped on shore, and my first exclamation was, 'This is the place for a business man!'"

Often this great port city was such a beehive of activity, that those coming here found it difficult to find suitable lodging. A place to sleep for the night was truly hard to find.

 So thronged is the city now, that any new comer who can secure to himself two chairs and a bolster as a sleeping couch in any of our hotels, may consider himself comfortably accommodated. The population of the St. Charles is about 800; the Verandah, Hewlett's, the St. Louis and all the other public houses in proportion.

Sleeping accommodations were in extremely short supply when the city was "thronged", as explained above in the *Picayune*, dated February 23, 1844. The magnificent first St. Charles Hotel (mentioned above and shown below), completed in 1837, was destroyed by fire in 1851.



First St. Charles Hotel, site of today's Place St. Charles

A few miles outside New Orleans in South Louisiana, one might come upon a Cajun dance party known as a *fais-do-do*. According to the folk etymology, the term originated prior to World War II when young mothers gave the loving command to their infants to "make *do-do*," or "go to sleep", so they could get back to the dance floor in a hurry, perhaps worried that the husband might be dancing with some other young *jolie blonde*.

I remember my Irish mother using the French expression *do-do* for sleep, a shortening of the French verb *dormir*, meaning to sleep. For her and other Louisiana mothers, it was used primarily in speaking to small children.

In kindergarten (at my school, Sam Barthe's School for Boys, it was called primer) we sang the French nursery song *Frère Jacques*:

*Frère Jacques, frère Jacques,
Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?*

The *dormez-vous?*, of course, another form of *dormir*, means "are you sleeping?" And *Dormez-vous* is also apparently the name of the #1 mattress retailer in Québec, also known as "Sleepy Time Up North".

In an article entitled CREOLE LULLABIES AND NONSENSE SONGS by Adele Drouet, printed in the *Times-Picayune*, dated June 5, 1927, we learn that songs such as *Frère Jacques* were "taught in the French class in most kindergartens, so that it is quite the usual thing to hear a group of children in the most American of uptown neighborhoods

chanting with more or less Anglicized accent: 'Frère Jacques, frère Jacques, dormez-vous?'"

All of this brings us to another bold example of portraying New Orleans not entirely in the best light. It was not intended that way, but the expression "The City Care Forgot" has been misinterpreted over time.

Where and when did New Orleans, also known as the "Paris of the South", acquire such an apparently appalling appellation?

It all began at New Orleans' St. Charles Hotel, but not the first one. Nor was it the second St. Charles Hotel, which stood from 1852 until its destruction by another fire in 1894. The slogan "The City Care Forgot" had its origins in September 1910 when a new manager, Alfred S. Amer, assumed control of the third St. Charles Hotel.

Mr. Amer was, according to the *Picayune* article announcing the new slogan, dated September 13, 1910, "a great believer in advertising" and he believed that the new catchphrase would not only succeed "in making the St. Charles Hotel better known" but would also "rebound to the benefit of the city."

Amer Adopts a Slogan.
"The City Care Forgot."
This is the slogan that will be used by Alfred S. Amer, the new manager of the St. Charles Hotel, who assumed charge yesterday upon his arrival from New York.

Amer and his slogan, Picayune, September 13, 1910

NEW ORLEANS
"THE CITY CARE FORGOT"

The St. Charles
 "The Center of the City's Hotel Life."

EUROPEAN PLAN

**A Well Ordered Hotel for a Discriminating Public
 Traveling for Business or Pleasure.**

(One Person)	}	RATES	{	(Two Persons)
Room with detached bath, \$1.50 and up				Room with detached bath, \$2.50 and up
Room with private bath, 2.50 and up				Room with private bath, 4.00 and up
		Parlor suites from \$10.00 upwards.		

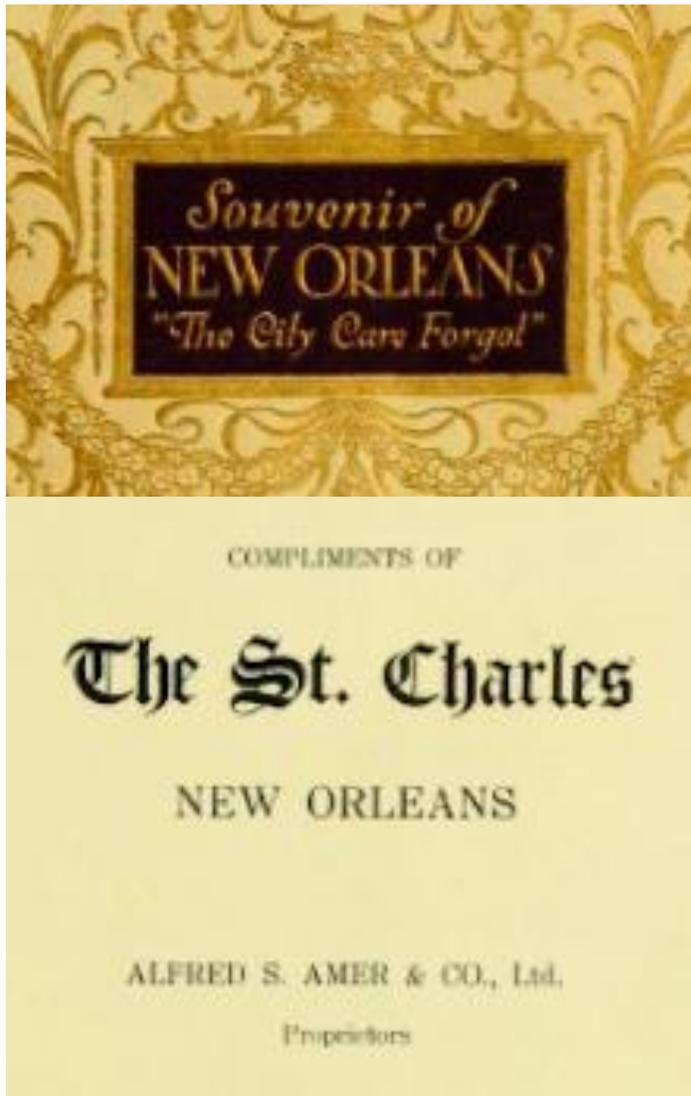
ALFRED S. AMER & CO., Ltd., Proprietors

St. Charles Hotel ad in Picayune, February 9, 1912

The capable hotelier Mr. Amer came to New Orleans directly from New York, where he was a member of the managerial staff of the world-famous Waldorf-Astoria, and also the managing director of the Manhattan Beach Hotel. Mr. Amer worked his way up to top-management, beginning as a bellboy in Toronto in 1882. From there, he advanced along the line at the Windsor Hotel, New York; Lafayette Hotel, Philadelphia; and the Laurel House at Lakewood. His initial managerial post was the Coleman House, Asbury Park, New Jersey. A succession of management positions were representative of his mercurial rise leading up to his arrival in New Orleans to replace J. Russell Blakely as manager of the St. Charles and to head his own company, Alfred S. Amer & Co., Ltd.

Two years later, the metropolitan moniker was catching on. In 1912, Edna Worthley Underwood penned a poem to New Orleans in which the first line began: "In the City Care Forgot". It was published in the *Picayune* on December 22, 1912.

Continuing his advertising campaign, Amer and the St. Charles Hotel provided guests in 1917 a complimentary booklet, entitled "Souvenir of NEW ORLEANS 'The City Care Forgot'".



But that same year, "The City Care Forgot" became "The City That Care Forgot", at least in an advertisement run in the *Times-Picayune* on November 18, 1927. Acknowledging the city's sobriquet, the Y.M.C.A. called attention to the city's generosity while seeking contributions. It announced, "Mail That Check TODAY - We're called 'The City That Care Forgot' but we don't want to be known as "The City That Forgot to Care!"

It was a necessary observation. The slogan doesn't mean that the city is merely carefree in a happy-go-lucky way, nor does it indicate being careless or uncaring (i.e., not giving sufficient attention to the needs of the community). One could say it means free from care, i.e., hardship or worries, but how can that be the case? The city has endured wars, yellow-fever, hurricanes and so much more. Sadly, an alternative interpretation of the slogan implies neglect, or that care has simply forgotten the city. This perception of neglect was odious to numerous business leaders in the city very early on.

John B. Swinney of the Tulane College of Commerce said "that the calling of New Orleans 'The City That Care Forgot' might do something

to attract visitors here, but it could do nothing to attract business or industrial enterprises," as reported in *The Morgan City Daily Review*, December 13, 1917.

In 1919, at a banquet given by the Allied Building Council to the General Contractors' Association at the Grunewald Hotel, Mayor Martin Behrman implored, "Do away with the slogan of 'the City Care Forgot' when speaking of New Orleans." As part of a presentation that predicted the future of the city as one with "Skyscrapers in abundance" and "a great sea wall along the lake front," the mayor continued, "Don't speak of a 'city care forgot' but let the world know we are serious business people."



**BUILDERS FORESEE
SKYSCRAPER AGE**

Headline in the Times-Picayune, dated April 23, 1919

Business leaders that same year, 1919, attempted to promote a more positive descriptive slogan for the city, "The Gateway to the Mississippi Valley". It was advertised in many U.S. newspapers as a new designation, but the old name was too difficult to do away with completely – and so it remains.

But just what should the slogan "The City That Care Forgot" mean? An insightful explanation appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette Magazine*, dated June 5, 1927:

"The real charm of 'the City That Care Forgot' is just that. Care has forgotten it. New Orleans is living; enjoying life to the utmost; playing today and planning for the play tomorrow – yet going on with its work all the while. Easy going, carefree, gay, typically Southern – yes, but intensely interested in everything it is doing. Business is important – certainly, but New Orleans is never too busy to be happy, friendly."

Further discussion should be over a leisurely lunch at Galatoire's.

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