

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

St. Joe and St. Pat, Altar Egos

The Irish and Italians have been in Louisiana since the earliest of times. Italian Henri de Tonti accompanied La Salle down the Mississippi River in the spring of 1682, where La Salle claimed the new territory for France and named it "*La Louisiane*" in honor of Louis XIV. Dublin-born Alejandro O'Reilly, an Irish officer in the employ of Spain, became the second Spanish colonial governor of Louisiana in 1769, and the first to actually exercise control over Louisiana after France ceded it to Spain. Fellow Irishman Oliver Pollock became a merchant and major financier of the American Revolutionary War. The Irish came to seek their fortune, others to escape famine. In the 1830s, Irish immigrants toiled on the city's New Basin Canal at the meager rate of \$1 per day per man - slave labor was considered too valuable! Yellow fever claimed many of the Irish diggers' lives. The Irish were soon a vital part of the community. St. Patrick's Church on Camp Street was founded in 1833 and completed in 1840.



Alejandro O'Reilly by Goya



New Orleans St. Patrick's Day display

Italian immigrants began to arrive in New Orleans in large numbers from Sicily in the 1880s. They joined a fair-sized, already existing Italian community, dating back to the French era. Even famous Creole Confederate General Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard was half Italian. His mother, H el ene Judith de Reggio, was descended from an Italian noble family, the Dukes of Reggio and Modena.

These Sicilians created social and benevolent organizations, which helped preserve their customs and provide a support network. Many settled in the then-neglected French Quarter, and they too played an important part in the economic and cultural vitality of the city.

A beloved New Orleans Italian contribution to the cuisine of the Crescent City is the *muffuletta*, a world-class sandwich of salami, olive salad, mortadella, ham and provolone – piled high inside a distinctive round loaf of Italian sesame bread. Salvatore Lupo created this iconic dish at Central Grocery (which he founded in 1906) at 923 Decatur Street in the Quarter. Countless locals and tourists continue to visit.



A Muffuletta at Frank's, also on Decatur

In addition to the many important Italian contributions to New Orleans

cuisine, like “red gravy”, the city has produced some successful native sons. There have been Italian mayors (such as Maestri and Schiro), musicians (such as Nick LaRocca and Louis Prima), businessmen and hoteliers. The elegant Hotel Monteleone on Royal Street was first established by Sicilian shoemaker Antonio Monteleone and is still run by the Monteleone family today.

There is a wonderful photo in the “American Italians of Louisiana Exhibition” of Joe Fallo, Charles Lamana and Peter Panno (co-founders of Lamana-Panno-Fallo Funeral Home) celebrating St. Patrick’s Day with friends in New Orleans, March 17, 1939. In 1897 Joe Fallo’s Aunt Lillie married the son of the Irish-born founder of the St. Joe Brick Company. Henry Di Trapani, a New Orleans druggist, born March 17, 1887, was called Pat. Graffagnino’s Tavern (gone but not forgotten) on the corner of Laurel and Calhoun, served green beer to patrons on St. Patrick’s Day.

None of these occurrences would be thought of as unusual in a city with such huge Italian and Irish populations. Given that the two Saints’ days are two days apart (Saint Patrick’s on March 17th and Saint Joseph’s on March 19th), the two groups even parade together. In the festival-oriented ethnic gumbo that is New Orleans, the elements manage to come together while still keeping their unique flavor.

In addition to partaking an Irish meal of corned beef and cabbage with green beer, one cannot help but love any one of the bountiful and delicious Sicilian feasts prepared for the Saint Joseph’s altars in New Orleans.

Sicilian tradition informs us that in medieval times Saint Joseph saved the island of Sicily after a long drought by bringing forth rain after the many prayers of a starving populace. Most of the crops had been decimated save for the lucky fava bean. Since then altars honoring Saint Joseph reappear each year before his feast day. They abound with *cannolis*, *biscotti* and (of course) fava beans. Breads fashioned into symbolic shapes like hammers and saws (since Joseph was a carpenter), as well as crosses, fish and shellfish can be seen on these magnificent altars.

The traditional meal is fish (in honor of the multiplying of the loaves and fishes) served with *Pasta Milanese* sprinkled with the sawdust from Joseph’s workbench (bread crumbs browned with a little sugar and perhaps a touch of cinnamon). The *pignolatti* are delicious pine cone shaped pastries, since Jesus is said to have played with pine cones as a boy. Many local favorites, such as stuffed mirlitons or stuffed artichokes, may augment the ample offerings. And other offerings are made, as well: those given to charity in the name of Saint Joseph.

Whatever one's ancestral history, everyone loves to take part in the festivities. Saint Joseph's Day is also important to the city's Mardi Gras Indians.



Big Chief David Montana, on "Super Sunday" and at Jazz Fest

In 1885, Plains Indians from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show marched in native dress on Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Later that year, the first Mardi Gras Indian tribe (or gang), "The Creole Wild West" was formed. Today there are numerous uptown and downtown tribes, which (in addition to Carnival Day) get together on "Super Sunday," usually the Sunday nearest Saint Joseph's Day. In 2014, due to rain, "Super Sunday" was postponed a week until March 30.

The late Chief of Chiefs Allison Montana (better known as "Tootie") was the great nephew of Becate Batiste, one of the founders of "Creole Wild West". David Montana, Big Chief of the Washitaw Nation, is "Tootie's" nephew, and (like his uncle) promotes non-violence among the gangs. The only showdowns should be over "who's the prettiest". "There's so much power inside the needle and thread," says David Montana. "In order to mask, you gotta sew, and if you think you're finished you gotta sew some mo'."

Music plays a huge part any Mardi Gras Indian procession. The very first recorded Mardi Gras Indian song, "To-Wa-Bac-A-Way" was performed in 1939 by New Orleans jazz pianist Jelly Roll Morton for the Library of Congress. The Meters made famous the similar cry, "Hey Pocky A-Way", with their recording in 1974.

So wear green on Saint Patrick's Day, visit a Saint Joseph's altar or plan a visit to Shakespeare Park (A. L. Davis Park since 1979). There,

at the corner of Washington and LaSalle, you will see the intricately beaded and colorfully feathered Indians and enjoy their soulful rhythms.

"Hey Pocky A-Way," they're on their way!

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