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Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

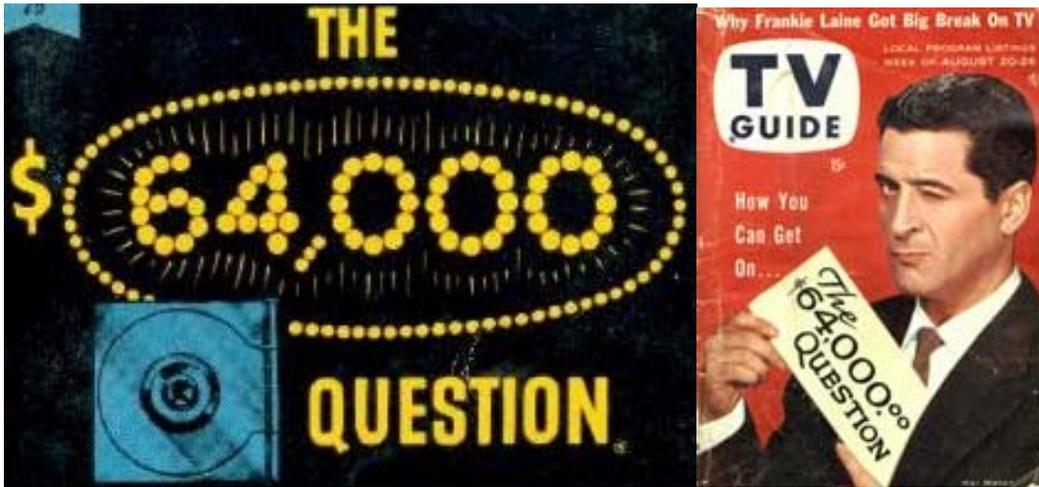
By Ned Hémard

The \$64,000 Question

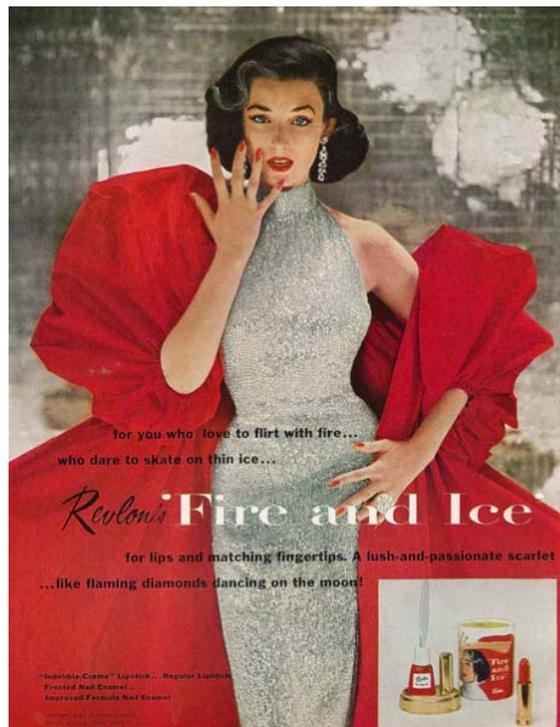
Long before the popular quiz show "Jeopardy", which debuted on NBC on March 30, 1964, there was Television's "\$64,000 Question". The "\$64,000 Question" had its beginnings in the CBS radio quiz program, "Take It or Leave It," which ran from April 21, 1940 to July 27, 1947. This and other quiz programs followed in the tradition of the pioneering "Professor Quiz," radio's first true quiz show (which began in 1936).

Contestants on "Take It or Leave It" were asked questions that increased with difficulty as one progressed. After answering a question correctly, the contestant had the choice to "take it" (the prize amount) for that question or "leave it" (in exchange for a chance to proceed to the next more valuable question). The first question was worth only one dollar, but doubled for each successive question, up to the seventh and final question being worth \$64.

During the 1940s, if someone encountered a considerably difficult problem or question, he would say, "That's the \$64 question!" From 1947 to mid-1952, the show continued on television, hosted at various times by Garry Moore, Eddie Cantor and Jack Paar. Louis G. Cowan, who had created radio's "Quiz Kids" and the television series "Stop the Music," came up with the idea of increasing the \$64 amount to a much more coveted \$64,000, but he needed a sponsor.

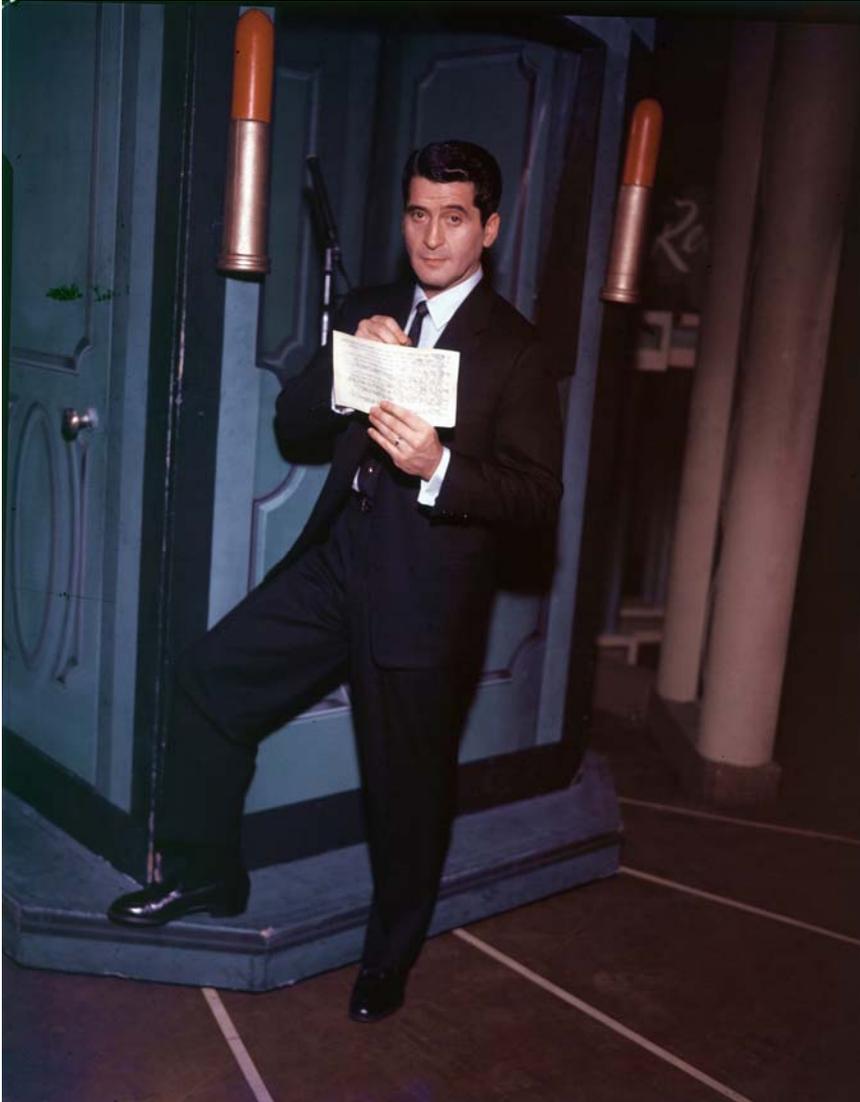


The "\$64,000 Question" premiered on CBS-TV on June 7, 1955, sponsored by American cosmetics giant Revlon. Charles Revson of Revlon, harboring his own personal bias against television advertising, reluctantly agreed to sponsor the show. Back then TV was black and white, and he was in the business of selling colors. In 1952, his company's striking "Fire and Ice" ad campaign was a visual masterpiece photographed by Richard Avedon. Featuring the iconic Dorian Leigh (Suzy Parker's sister), the ad debuted the brand's latest pairings of matching "lips and tips" shades for women "who love to flirt with fire ... who dare to skate on ice." Television as a medium was not what Revson would call, as he would say, "his dish of wax". An interesting metaphor, since early lipstick (as in the time of England's Queen Elizabeth I) contained beeswax and the red stains from plants.



Dorian Leigh in Revlon's dazzling "Fire and Ice" campaign, making Madison Avenue history

After contestants on the show arrived at the \$8,000 question, they were placed in the Revlon 'isolation booth", with mounted lipstick tubes on each side of the door. Inside they could hear nothing but the host's words. As long as the contestant kept answering correctly, they could stay on the show until they had won \$64,000. Hal March (1920 - 1970), real name Harold Mendelson, was the show's host for its entire run, 1955 – 1958.

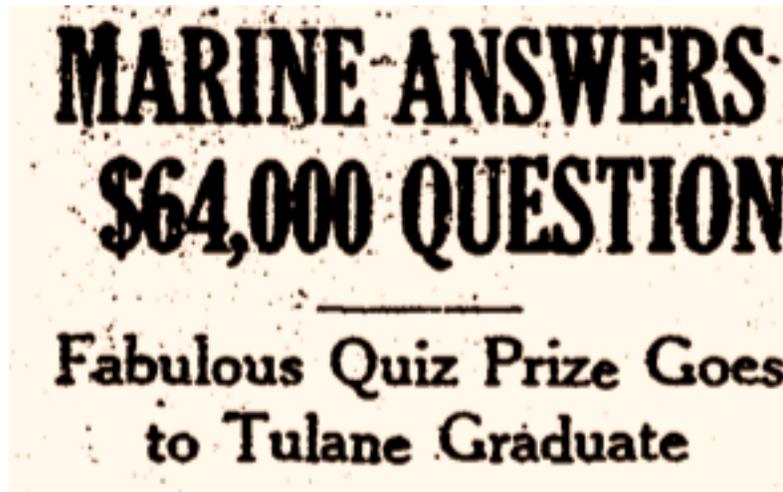


Hal March poses before Revlon's "isolation booth"

The first contestant to go all the way, successfully answering the \$64,000 question and winning the top prize money, was Richard McCutchen, a Marine captain whose subject was food and cooking. Three contestants before him all quit at the \$32,000 level, but on September 13, 1955, he made history.

Richard Sherrill McCutchen was born January 24, 1927, in Long Beach, California, the son of John C. and Carvel Mercer McCutchen. "In spite

of his minute knowledge of cooking," he was described in various newspaper articles of the day as "almost as lean as spaghetti a l'Italienne" and "on the string bean side". Not only that, Captain McCutchen graduated from Isidore Newman School in New Orleans and was a 1949 graduate of Tulane University. He married the former New Orleans native Betsy Griffin, a 1949 Newcomb College graduate. Stationed in Columbus, Ohio, he, his wife and three young daughters were living at the time in nearby Worthington. He was a teacher of Naval reserve Officer Training Corps subjects at Ohio State University.



Picayune headline

McCutchen became an overnight celebrity, appearing in papers all across the nation and overseas, with people stopping him on the street for his autograph.

Here's what *Time Magazine* had to say:

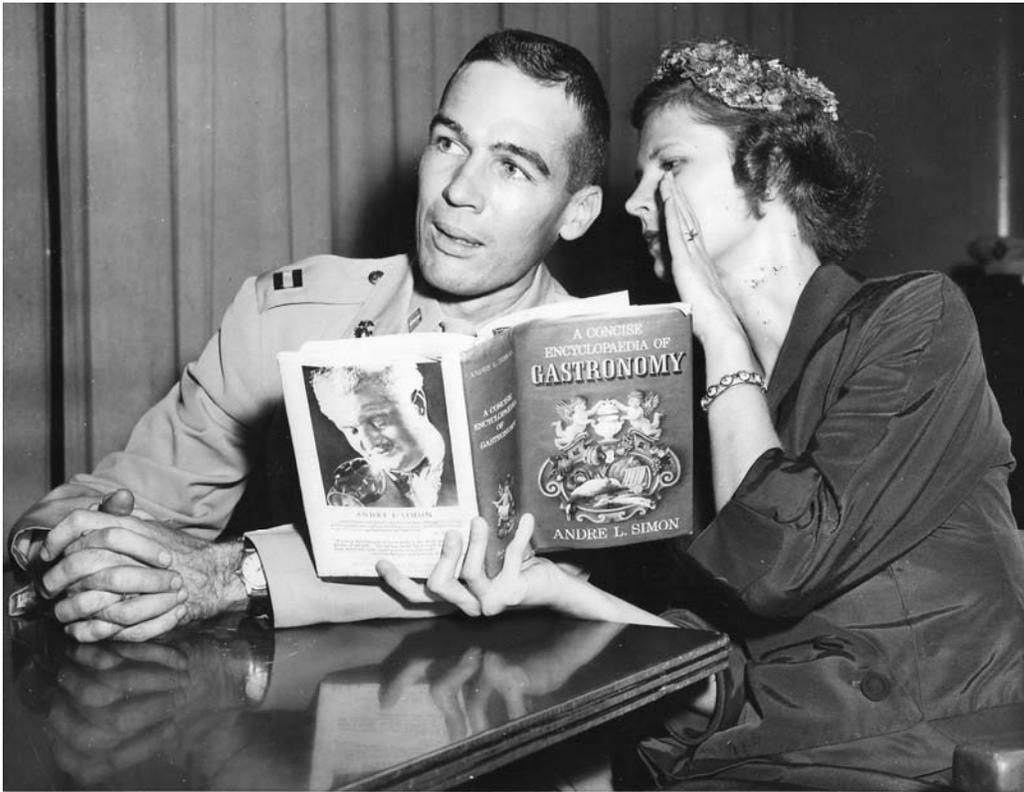
"After one splendiferous night last week, about as many living, breathing citizens remained unaware of Marine Captain Richard S. McCutchen, 28 — the first man to dare "The \$64,000 Question" — as there are whooping cranes left on the North American continent.

To 55 million viewers who saw him conquer an adman's dream of Everest, Dick McCutchen proved a perfect dish. Shaken well, he had the drawling deference of a vintage Jimmy Stewart, the nerve of a riverboat gambler, and the Montezuman morale of a Marine. Not the least, he had an astronomical gastronomical education, inherited from his globetrotting naval-officer father, who has spent years accumulating exotic recipes."

Before tackling the big question, he said, "I belong to a very proud organization and the answer is – go!"

Here is the actual tough seven-part question, based on the actual menu of a dinner given at Buckingham Palace March 21, 1939, by King George VI for French President Albert Lebrun and his wife. Seven

courses were served – soup, fish, vegetable, sauce, desert and two wines. The names of each were announced and McCutchen was asked to describe each.



Captain Richard McCutchen is prepped by his wife, Betsy, with a copy of André Simon's "Concise Encyclopedia of Gastronomy," described as follows: "Recipe-wise it's a cornucopia, with recipes for everything from sauce béarnaise to hedgehog, thrush and squirrel - even blackbird pie!"

The French dishes were: Soup, *Consommé Cannelle*; fish, *filet de truit saumonée*; vegetable, *Petit Pois à la Française*; sauce, *maltaise*, served with asparagus; dessert, *Corbeille*; wines, *Château Yquem* and *Madeira Sercial*.

McCutchen was allowed to have an expert assist him in the "isolation booth". He chose his dad, retired Navy Captain John C. McCutchen, who was stationed in New Orleans in 1937 as director of training for the Eighth Naval District. The *Boston Advertiser* described him as "slender, amiable and weatherbeaten" and "known at many posts and stations and aboard the battleship Maryland as 'Captain Mac.'" The elder McCutchen was renowned for "his interest in food and his mastery of unusual recipes". He first invaded his wife's kitchen in 1932 and for his son Dick's tenth birthday party produced a succulent Lobster Newburg. That was the unusual culinary environment in that household. His father retired the year before the "Question" in 1954 and was living in NYC. He and his son conferred in whispers in the

"isolation booth" while son Dick cracked his knuckles. After this dramatic bit of consultation, the younger McCutchen, answered the descriptions of the seven courses in order this way:

"Consommé is a broth of either meat, fish or fowl stock. *Cannelle* is what is called a forcemeat, a meat, fish or fowl dumpling.

Truit saumonée is trout born, hatched in fresh water, which migrated to the sea and returned. Steelhead, we call them in this country. *Filet* is a boneless cut.

Maltaise is a hollandaise sauce with orange juice and little orange peel in it.

Petit Pois Française are little garden peas with onion chopped up, with sugar and with butter.

Corbeille is a pure French word meaning either a basket of fruit or a basket of flowers, so let's say a basket of fruit.

Château Yquem is a sweet dessert wine from the Bordeaux District of Sauterne."

After a minor pause for discussing it with his dad, McCutchen finished up his coup with these words: *"Madeira Sercial* is a dry wine from the Madeira Islands. I believe the grapes are *Sercial* and that is how it gets its name."

A roar of applause and a bedlam of shouts and stamping erupted in the studio. A band struck up the Marine Hymn.

Master of ceremonies, Hal March, almost beside himself, told the smiling McCutchen he was symbolic of the Marine Corps: "I don't know how we'll ever lose any battles."

The show's sponsor chimed in with his speech and then the actual bank check for \$64,000 was flashed on the screen.



Captain McCutchen receives his check for \$64,000

The tall, lean marine, who admitted that as a Boy Scout he failed to pass his second class cooking test, received a bear hug from his wife after the show but refused to pose for kisses. No “public show of our affection,” he told them.

With the human interest and excitement surrounding the show, it is not difficult to see why the “\$64,000 Question” devastated every other program on Tuesday nights in the ratings. Even President Eisenhower didn't want to be disturbed while the show was airing, and the nation's crime rate, restaurant and movie theater patronage fell dramatically while the show was on. It received the #1 rating spot for the 1955 – 1956 television season, soon drawing an 84.8% share, holding the distinction of being the only TV show to oust “I Love Lucy” from #1. This is all the more remarkable when one realizes this was long before the hundreds of channels we have today. Parodies of the show appeared on various comedy series, perhaps “The Honeymooners” take-off being the best. Bus driver Ralph Kramden studies popular music incessantly only to blow it on the fictitious “\$99,000 Answer”.

Back to reality, for the earlier \$32,000 question (taxcut to \$20,090, the papers reported), McCutchen had to identify five tasty desserts and their country of origin. Here are the answers:

Bombe (also known as *bombe glacée*), France, an ice cream dish.

Zabaglione, Italy, made of egg yolks, sugar and wine.

Olykoek (or *olycook* or *olykolk*), Dutch-American, a fried cake, forerunner of the doughnut.

Flummery, originally from Wales, a custard-like dessert with fruit juices.

Peffernuss, Germany, a traditional Christmas cookie, made of four and spices.

\$64,000 Question Contestant Says:

'Eating Should Be a Pleasure, Not a Task'



In the past four weeks, millions have watched Capt. Richard S. McCutchen, USMC, parlay his food knowledge to \$32,000 on CBS-TV's \$64,000 Question. Here, Capt. McCutchen presents his own recipes and tells how he first became interested in cookery.

By CAPT. RICHARD S. McCUTCHEN, USMC
NEXT TO LOVE, a good wife, the Marine Corps and a home, there is nothing in the world like good food. Appreciation of good food is a matter of individual tastes, and they vary from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli.

The \$32,000 prize brought Captain McCutchen's brother to New York. The Baton Rouge *State Times Advocate* reported that Captain McCutchen's brother John and his wife, residents of New Roads, flew up to the Big Apple to witness the \$32K hurdle. Both brothers were Tulane graduates, and there was a sister Jacqueline. Captain McCutchen said his brother John "couldn't stand the excitement" and came up from Louisiana to be with him.

"Question" contestants like McCutchen sometimes became famous overnight, if only for a short time. They were treated to a whirlwind of publicity tours, endorsements, awards and meetings with various dignitaries. The person with the longest enduring celebrity was psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers, who was the second person after McCutchen to successfully complete the \$64,000 round. Her chosen category was boxing. She studied the subject thoroughly and won, then went on to a career providing psychological advice in newspaper columns and TV shows for decades to come.



Not totally in isolation, Dr. Joyce Brothers rejoices

How was McCutchen and others chosen for the show? One would have to say that the producers were looking for average Americans with interesting areas of expertise. The show's first guest was a Staten Island policeman named Redmond O'Hanlon, whose expertise was

Shakespeare. He correctly answered the date of the printing of Shakespeare's first folio and won \$16,000. After making the lecture circuit, the Shakespearean cop even wrote a book on Shakespeare's puns.

As for McCutchen, for a man with a wife and three daughters to support on \$435 a month, the "\$64,000 Question" seemed like a good idea. In June 1955 he wrote a letter to the producers, beginning: "Being endowed with normal mental faculties ..." With that they paid his way to New York, interviewed him and quickly sized him up as a genuinely knowledgeable individual with personal "warmth" and "sparkle". It wasn't long before he'd made his way up to each of the various cash "plateaus" and for his \$16,000 question named the flours and geographical origins of five types of breads. When a contestant answered the \$32,000 question correctly, as he did, he was given a week to decide whether or not to continue on to the final question.

Among the program's imitators were "The Big Surprise," "Tic-Tac-Dough" and "Twenty-One". Some of these shows became involved in the scandals involving TV quiz shows of the day. The 1994 film "Quiz Show" chronicles the story of "Twenty-One," the rise and fall of popular contestant Charles Van Doren (played by Ralph Fiennes) after his rigged victory over Herb Stempel (played by John Turturro), and the subsequent Congressional probe.

Later on, the "\$64,000 Question" and its popular spin-off "\$64,000 Challenge" eventually became embroiled in the scandals, as well. "Question's" sins were not giving contestants the answers but the sponsor's trying to eliminate from the competition those it simply disliked, whether or not the audience liked them or not. Boxing as a category was not enough to eject intended eliminee Joyce Brothers, who managed to outwit the question writers and Revlon all the way to winning the grand prize. When it was revealed in May 1958 that the CBS game show "Dotto" was rigged, ratings for all the quiz shows plummeted. Revson himself was never investigated for his role in the quiz show scandals. He and his brother, Martin, however, both testified before Congress. Charles Revson's cosmetics empire flourished, leaving him a billionaire when he died in 1975, and his charitable foundation has since donated over \$145 million to worthwhile causes.

Numerous newspaper and magazine articles of the day focused on the tax consequences of McCutchen's big gambit: to proceed on to the \$64,000 prize, with the knowledge that Uncle Sam would take such an enormous bite out of a \$435 a month citizen's well-earned serendipity. The October 15, 1955, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* had an article entitled "Taxes Ruin That \$64,000 Question". Most articles suggested the jump from \$32K to \$64K did not merit the benefit. Most calculated that McCutchen would be able to keep about \$35,000

of the total.

Only four years after the big win, *Time Magazine* reported: "Divorced. Richard McCutchen, 32, personable onetime Marine Corps captain, now a Volkswagen district service manager, famed for his \$64,000 winnings on cooking knowledge (he was the first top winner) from TV's now defunct *The \$64,000 Question*; by Betsy Griffen McCutchen, 32; after ten years of marriage, three children; in Delaware, Ohio."

Betsy Griffen McCutchen died in 2010, in Portland, Oregon, but for 34 years was a teacher and an administrator at the Louise S. McGehee School in New Orleans. During that time period she earned an M.Ed. degree from UNO. Her obituary stated, "She was remembered for her wit and her love of English by many McGehee graduates."

Not long after, former husband and quiz show champion, Richard S. "Dick" McCutchen died December 17, 2011, at age 84. He had remarried in 1963, and his second wife died in 1995. Having served in the U.S. Marine Corps as a captain from 1948 to 1956, he later worked as an investigative journalist and a science writer. After that early moment of glory, and through many changes in his life, this bright Marine's inquiring mind continued to be on active duty.

NED HÉMARD

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