

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **When to Wear White**

So many inquiring readers wish to know the history and psychology of when it is appropriate to wear white, especially in New Orleans. The presumably hard-and-fast rule (although it has been broken by some noteworthy characters) is from Easter until Labor Day. Now, this refers to white suits and white bucks on men, as well as white outfits, pumps and dress shoes on women. Exempt are tennis shoes and any gown or shoes worn by a winter bride. That's the consensus in the Crescent City and most of the South. But some etiquette authorities say the traditional guideline of when to wear white is only between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

David A. Bagwell, a lawyer and former U.S. magistrate from Mobile, has written his view on this, stating, "My answer to them is that they have gradually become – apparently unknowingly, I'll charitably grant them that – the pawns and tools of the general Yankee-fication of America." His research confirms that in general, over the South, Easter weekend – and not Memorial Day - was the beginning" since "Easter was the day on which boys got a new white linen coat, if their parents could afford one". For "white shoes" it was the same. "They didn't wait until Memorial Day," he asserted. Also, Memorial Day (formerly known as Decoration Day) was first enacted to honor Union soldiers of the American Civil War. Celebrated on the last Monday of May, it wasn't until after World War I that it was extended to honor those Americans who have died in all wars.

Nowadays, Emily Post's Etiquette, 17th Edition, gives the OK for wearing white after Labor Day (since many people choose to wear white year round, and many designer brands have popular "winter whites" in their lines). Emily Post has been a respected authority on all things prim and proper since 1922; and it was Peggy Post, her great-granddaughter-in-law, who wrote the new ruling.

One reader asked Miss Manners (Judith Martin) about "the prohibition of wearing white or linen between Labor Day and Easter" complaining that the "rule assumes September is always nippy and Easter is always mild, when the reverse can often be true in the United States. The

rule seems even more arbitrary when one lives in the subtropics, where February days routinely top 80 degrees." Miss Manners replied that it "has to do with seasons, not with weather. Easter is a time for bringing out pastel colors and, for those few who care to, straw hats. Memorial Day marks the beginning of summer, when white seems refreshing. However, there are no wardrobe police to enforce this, which makes Miss Manners wonder what all the excitement is about."

Those who have boldly ignored the *fashionistas* and wardrobe police include two famous writers. One of the founders of the New Journalism movement, best-selling author Tom Wolfe adopted the white suit as his trademark back in 1962. His first white suit purchase involved wearing it during the summer in the style of a Southern gentleman, but the suit he bought was too heavy. So he wore it in winter instead, which created somewhat of a sensation. Wolfe has continued to maintain this persona, sometimes accompanying the suit with a matching white tie, white homburg and two-tone shoes. His uniform disarms the people before him, making him, in their eyes, "a man from Mars, the man who didn't know anything and was eager to know."

Years before Wolfe there was Samuel Langhorne Clemens (aka Mark Twain), who described the aristocratic Colonel Grangerford in *Huckleberry Finn*, as a man who "every day of his life he put on a clean shirt and a full suit from head to toe made out of linen so white it hurt your eyes to look at it."

On December 7, 1906, Twain began to dress the very same way. He appeared at a copyright law hearing in Washington, D.C. – in December, mind you – and wore a suit of white wool flannels, not white linen. But the commotion he raised by his wardrobe *faux pas* landed him in articles in the *New York Times*, *Herald*, and *Tribune* the very next morning. Twain remarked, "When a man reaches the advanced age of 71 years as I have, the continual sight of dark clothing is likely to have a depressing effect upon him." And he added, "A group of men in evening clothes looks like a flock of crows, and is just about as inspiring."

In what could be called Mark Twain's "white period," the old gentleman traveled, drank, flirted and danced with society girls. He talked politics with Winston Churchill and became friends with George Bernard Shaw. Twain in the last four years of his life enjoyed international fame, picking arguments with the high and mighty and hobnobbing with celebrities. Returning from a party one night attended by a bunch of Broadway actresses, he was asked how the party went, and he said, "It was a kissing bee." They all loved to kiss him on the cheek.

The Labor Day rule also met with resistance from the highest fashion quarters. As far back as the 1920s, Coco Chanel made white a year-round staple and a permanent part of her wardrobe.

Another dispensation of the Labor Day rule was granted to Ricardo Montalban (as Mr. Roarke) and the diminutive Hervé Villechaize (his sidekick, Tattoo) on *Fantasy Island*. This cordial duo wore their white suits year round on the popular television show airing from 1978 to 1984. When a tropical resort is that far south, different rules apply.

There are two major theories surrounding the Labor Day rule's origin. Before the advent of air conditioning and other modern cooling conveniences, especially in the South, wearing white was simply a way to stay cool in hot summer months. The color white reflected (rather than absorbed) the light and heat, and fabrics like linen became the norm during this period.

Valerie Steele of the *Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology* notes the second theory. Late in the 19th century and the 1950s, more people were entering the middle classes. These upwardly mobile folks were often unaware of the standards of high society, so they were given a specific set of rules to follow in order to fit in. Along with a miscellany of commands about table etiquette, the "when to wear white" dictum provided the so-called upper class with a bulwark against the incursions of the *nouveau-riche*. White was the *de rigueur* color of clothing for Americans well-heeled enough to leave their city dwelling for warmer climes (sometimes for months at a time). For old-money New Englanders, it may have been Florida or Jekyll Island. For wealthy New Orleanians, it was perhaps Ocean Springs or Pass Christian. White, light summer clothing was a pleasant contrast to drab urban life. Similarly, white linen suits and Panama hats at tropical resorts epitomized the look of leisure and wealth. Think of the rich guests' Florida attire in *Some Like It Hot*.

Labor Day (celebrated on the first Monday of September) marked the traditional end of summer. It was when well-to-do vacationers packed away their summer duds and resumed wearing the darker colors of fall. "There used to be a much clearer sense of re-entry," says Steele. "You're back in the city, back at school, back doing whatever you're doing in the fall — and so you have a new wardrobe."

I, your rebellious author, boldly advocate a new rule for New Orleans:

"Wearing white (at least white suits and seersuckers) shall be the norm from the Ides of March until the Ides of October."

That's the 15th of March, when the lion-like weather begins to go out like a lamb. But it's also the day Julius Caesar got bumped off, presumably wearing a white toga. "Beware the Ides of March," he was

told. He should've stuck to the rules.

The Ides corresponds to the 15th of only four months (March, May, July and October), but to the 13th of the other months. It all goes back to Numa Pompilius, the legendary second king of Rome, succeeding Romulus. His reforms set up the Ides, Calends (from which the word calendar comes) and the Nones. This poem in Latin explains it all:

Principium mensis cujusque vocato Kalendas:□

Sex Maius nonas, October, Julius, et Mars;□

Quattuor at reliqui: dabit Idus quidlibet octo.

This means that the first day of the month is called the Calends; six days later is the Nones of May, October, July and March; four days later for the remaining months; and the Ides is eight days after that. Just remember March 15 to October 15, the new longer season.

Break the old rules on wearing white if you dare. Just remember the horrible fate Director John Waters had for Patty Hearst in the movie, *Serial Mom*. The title character, played by Kathleen Turner, beats her to death with a payphone for wearing white shoes after Labor Day.

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