

## Yazoo, No. Swanee, Yes. Bananas, and How!

We begin our story in the 1950s at 328 Chauncey Street with two beloved "Honeymooners", Brooklyn bus driver Ralph Kramden and his wife Alice. But the pair that truly captured the nation's affection was Ralph and his pal, Ed Norton.

Surely one of the most hilarious episodes (\$99,000 Answer) was the "Name That Tune" parody that has Ralph memorizing song after song (as well as the composers and the year) and practicing countless melodies with Norton on the piano. Norton, however, throws his arms up in the air and plays a bar or two of "*Swanee River*" (aka "*The Old Folks At Home*") right before each and every song (in order to warm up). This drives Ralph nuts.



Ralph Kramden thinks he's well prepared for the \$99,000 Answer.

When the big night finally comes and Ralph appears on the show, extremely confident that he has learned every song ever written, the first question he's asked is to identify the composer of "*Swanee River*". Ralph painfully asks, "*Swanee River*?" When the moderator has a few bars of the song played for him, Ralph goes, "That's *Swanee River*?"

He then stammers with a "humma-da-humma-da" and after a moment replies, "Ed Norton?" He totally overlooked the man known as the "father of American music" and the pre-eminent songwriter in the United States of the 19th century, Stephen Collins Foster.



*Stephen Collins Foster (July 4, 1826 – January 13, 1864),  
"Father of American Music"*

Incidentally, Ralph Kramden wasn't the only Swanee stammerer. In the 2010 film, *The King's Speech*, King-to-be George VI of England, following the advice of his Australian speech therapist, sings to the tune of "Swanee River" the phrases he can't pronounce due to stuttering.

Our story continues by traveling back in time to the 1850s, to New Orleans along with two other "honeymooners". In 1852, newlyweds Stephen Collins Foster and his bride Jane McDowall took a delayed honeymoon, a month-long steamship ride to New Orleans with friends. Although many of his songs are steeped in Southern themes, Foster only visited the Deep South once, on that very riverboat trip down the Mississippi to the Crescent City.



*View of New Orleans from atop St. Patrick's Church, 1852, the year Stephen Foster visited the Crescent City*

The year before, in 1851, Foster wrote "*The Old Folks at Home*", known also by the words of its first line, "*(Way Down Upon the Swanee River*", to be performed by the New York performing troupe Christy's Minstrels. Foster sold Christy the right to be listed on the sheet music as the author of "*Old Folks at Home*", a move Foster would forever regret. Born in 1815 in Philadelphia, Edwin Pearce Christy took to the stage while still a young man. He was a performer who had actually witnessed slavery firsthand in the Deep South, having supervised slaves working at a New Orleans ropewalk. "*The Old Folks at Home*" became a big hit then, and it continues to be popular over a century and a half later.

According to folk mythology, Foster had most of the lyrics but was trying to name the river in the opening line, so he asked his brother

for a suggestion. "*The Yazoo*", replied his brother, but (despite this Mississippi tributary fitting the melody perfectly) Foster said "No." The second offering was "the Pee Dee" of the Carolinas, but Foster said, "I won't have that." After a visit to the atlas, his brother then blurted out "Suwannee!" Foster jotted it down immediately (misspelling it "Swanee" to fit the melody), replying "That's it exactly!" Foster himself never set eyes on the Suwannee River or even visited Florida, but the song's popularity has initiated tourism to the Sunshine State. It has been the official state song of Florida since 1935. In fact, Stephen Foster is the only songwriter to have two of his works chosen as state songs. "*My Old Kentucky Home*" (1853) is the other, so popular each year at "The Run for the Roses".



*View of the "Suwannee" River, not so far, far away*

The name "*Suwannee*" (depending on the source) is a Timucuan Indian word *Suwani* that means "Echo River ... River of Reeds, Deep Water, or Crooked Black Water" or (according to Jerald Milanovich) the name developed through "*San Juan-ee*" from the 17th-century Spanish mission of *San Juan de Guacara*, located on the river known to the Spanish as *Guacara*. Another source says the name "Suwanee" comes from the name of a Cherokee village, *Sawani*. But, by all means,

"*Suwannee*" is not to be confused with the mountaintop town of Sewanee, Tennessee, home of the University of the South. A popular bumper sticker there avers, "Sewanee is not a river".

Unlike another famous American composer, "Yankee Doodle Dandy" George M. Cohan, Stephen Foster actually *was* "born on the fourth of July". Cohan's baptismal certificate, his only written birth record, states he was born on July 3rd. Foster (on the other hand) was born in Lawrenceville (now part of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) on July 4, 1826, the very day Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died (the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence).

Stephen Foster brought us many popular songs, from spirited minstrel show numbers to beautiful ballads. In 1848 he wrote "*Old Uncle Ned*", and in 1849 he published *Foster's Ethiopian Melodies*, which included the hit song "*Nelly Was a Lady*", made famous by Christy's Minstrels. Other songs included "Oh! Susanna" (the California Gold Rush anthem in 1848-1849 that earned Foster a mere \$100); "*Camptown Races*" (1850); "*Nelly Bly*" (1850); and "*Ring, Ring de Banjo!*" (1851). "*Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair*" was written in 1854 for his wife Jane, and "*Old Black Joe*" was published in 1860. "*Beautiful Dreamer*" was published posthumously in 1864, the year Foster died.

Stephen Foster died on January 13, 1864, at the very young age of 37 with only 38 cents to his name. He had become impoverished while living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. A scrap of paper in his pocket had these enigmatic words: "dear friends and gentle hearts". Two years before (in 1862), minstrel master Edwin P. Christy, struggling with retirement and mental instability, jumped from a second-story window to his death.

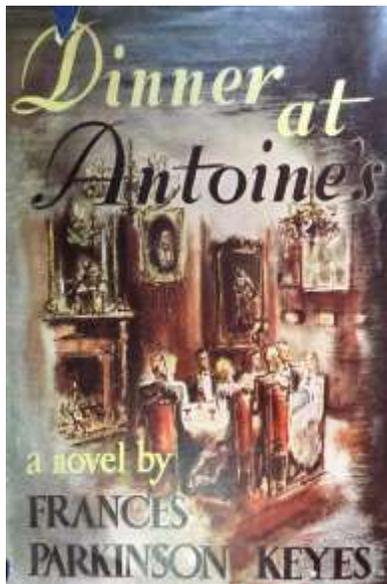
Rather than writing nostalgically of an Old South he never really knew (it was, after all, the present day for him), Stephen Foster sought to humanize the characters in his songs and wanted his compositions to engender compassion. W. C. Handy, Father of the Blues, wrote in 1941, "I suspect that Stephen Foster owed something to this well, this mystery, this sorrow. 'My Old Kentucky Home' makes you think so, at any rate. Something there suggests close acquaintance with my people..."

Our journey continues forward again to 1950s, where another Foster was making the scene in New Orleans. It all happened at Brennan's Restaurant in the French Quarter. Founded in 1946 by Irish-American restaurateur Owen Edward Brennan, the restaurant was originally

operating on Bourbon Street across from the Old Absinthe House, but moved to its present location almost a decade later.

Owen had purchased the business of the Old Absinthe House on Bourbon Street in 1943. A natural promoter, he staged lifelike figures of the notorious pirate Lafitte meeting Andrew Jackson in what he called the "Secret Room". He came up with the idea of having the bar's countless visitors attach their business cards to its inside walls, and pushed the popularity of the *absinthe frappé* (a favorite of Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Dwight D. Eisenhower).

Owen's pal, restaurateur "Count" Arnaud Cazenave, offered a challenge to his friend (who'd pass on numerous restaurant complaints overheard at the bar). Arnaud taunted, "No Irishman could run a restaurant that was more than a hamburger joint" and "If you think you can do better, why don't you open a restaurant?" In July 1946, Owen leased the restaurant directly across the street and did just that, proving "an Irishman can run the finest French restaurant in this town!" He was a master at entertaining movie stars: Gary Cooper, Vivian Leigh, John Wayne and Barbara Stanwyck (to name but a few). And writers like Tennessee Williams, Walter Winchell and Robert Ruark all came, too. Ruark once wrote about Brennan, "If he had a fault, it was his generosity."



*Dinner at Antoine's*

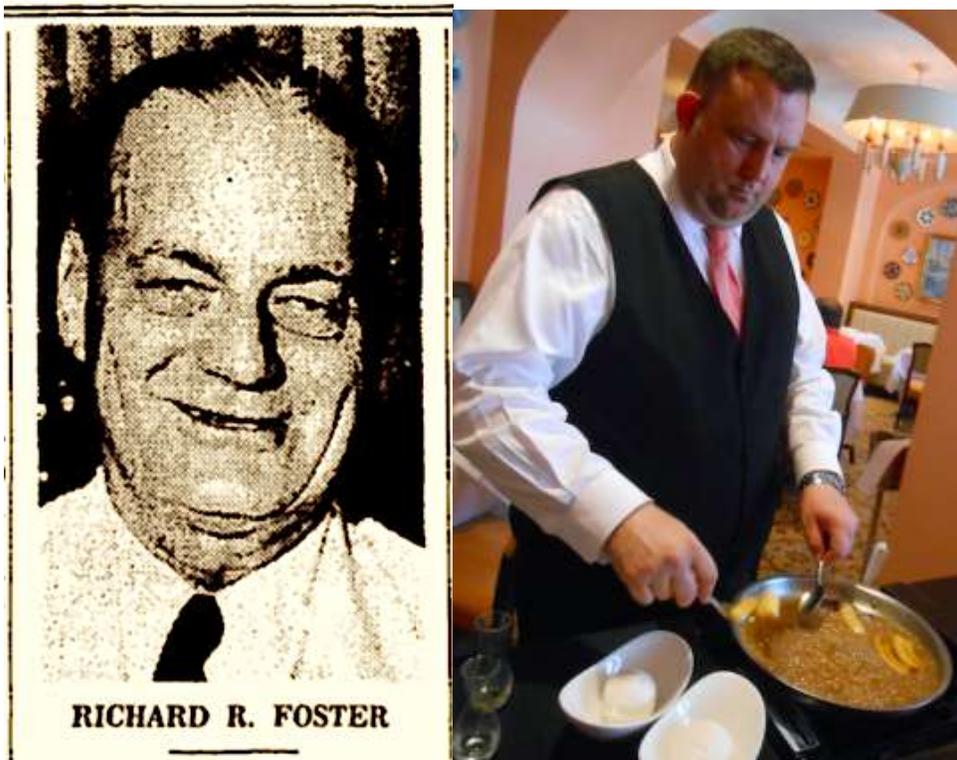


*Breakfast at Brennan's*

After Frances Parkinson Keyes' *Dinner at Antoine's* was published, a most fashionable dining experience was described. Owen conceived a

concept that would bring him international renown. If "Dinner at Antoine's" wowed its audience, then why not "Breakfast at Brennan's"?

Owen saw to it that extraordinary dishes were created for his menu, like Chicken Pontalba (named for the Baroness) and Eggs Hussarde. It has been suggested that Eggs Hussarde (traditionally made with two sauces, hollandaise and *marchand de vin*) may have been named after 15th-century Hungarian mercenary soldiers called hussars, who often wore tomato red uniforms. These two dishes were the work of Paul Blangé, Executive Chef at Brennan's, starting in 1946. Originally from the Netherlands, his full Dutch name was Paulus Lodivicus Blangé. Owen's creative business acumen and Blangé's expertise helped make Brennan's world-famous. In 1951, Blangé would create Brennan's most popular dish, Bananas Foster.



*Richard R. Foster*

*Bananas Foster at Brennan's*

No, the dish was not named for the composer, but a local awning magnate named Richard Foster. It's not often that a gentleman with these career credentials becomes immortalized in gastronomic history, but that's what happened to the owner of the Foster Awning Company. Mr. Foster, who dined regularly at Brennan's and served with Owen on the New Orleans Crime Commission. Back in the 1950s, New Orleans

was the major port of entry for bananas shipped from Central and South America. When *Holiday Magazine* was preparing to run an article on Brennan's and requested a recipe, Owen had Chef Blangé concoct a brilliant combination of bananas, banana liqueur, butter, brown sugar, cinnamon, vanilla ice cream and dark rum (set aflame at one's table), which Brennan then named after his good friend. The execution of Bananas Foster makes a most dramatic display. As of 2011, the Brennan's web site states it goes through 35,000 pounds of bananas each year (Bananas Foster being the most requested item on the restaurant's menu).



*"Da Banana", always popular in New Orleans*

Owen leased 417 Royal Street for its renovation and conversion to the new Brennan's. On November 1, 1955, he invited customers to come to his officially opened bar in the building carriageway. Sadly, three days later the affable host with such energy and marketing ability died of a massive coronary at the young age of forty-five. The city mourned the loss of a creative genius and a "one man Chamber of

Commerce". The tragedy hit Owen's family and friends deeply, but his family still opened his new Royal Street location on schedule. Family members have owned the building since 1984. Richard Foster died in 1966 at 77 years of age.



*Brennan's at 417 Royal Street*

And the Brennan's family has created a dynamic (but divided) dining empire. Owen's siblings included Adelaide, John, Ella, Richard (Dick) and Dorothy (Dottie). Owen and his wife Maude had three sons, Pip, Ted, and Jimmy (who were so determined to keep control of the original Brennan's that the family at large divided over the issue in 1974). Owen Brennan's three sons remain the owners of their father's restaurant on Royal Street. Ella Brennan, her siblings and their children now own and manage Commander's Palace and several other restaurants, such as Ralph Brennan's popular Ralph's on the Park, Red Fish Grill, café B, Heritage Grill and Ralph Brennan's Jazz Kitchen in Disneyland. Dickie has the Palace Café, Bourbon House Seafood and Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse. Cindy Brennan owns and runs Mr. B's Bistro, while Brennan's of Houston is owned by Alex Brennan-Martin. Cousins Ti Martin and Lally Brennan are proprietors of Commander's Palace and Café Adelaide and co-authors of a fun book on mixology, *"In the Land of Cocktails: Recipes and Adventures from the Cocktail Chicks."* And Owen Brennan's in Memphis is a licensee of Brennan's in New Orleans.

The imaginative Chef Blangé died in 1977. When he was buried, placed upon his chest were a knife, fork and a menu from Brennan's Restaurant. It is said that "paranormal psychologists" have identified him as one of the ghosts who haunts the restaurant. Late at night, when the guests have departed and the staff is locking up, Chef Paul will bang doors and pots in the empty kitchen. Perhaps he's searching for some fabulous flambéed Bananas Foster for "the Old Folks at Home".

**DINNER AT BRENNAN'S**

**love that food!**

Hamburger Steak Brennan	<b>2.25</b>
Roast Prime Rib of Beef	<b>3.95</b>
Boned Chicken Scute, Marchand de vin	<b>2.75</b>

*Dinners include hors d'oeuvres or  
soup, vegetables, salad, dessert  
and coffee.*

Come as Late as Midnight!

**Brennan's**  
FRENCH RESTAURANT  
417 ROYAL STREET

*How about those 1956 prices? Ad in the Times-Picayune*

P.S. Since this piece first appeared in 2011, much has happened in the Brennan's family restaurant empire. Ella Brennan, the *grande dame* of New Orleans restaurant royalty and matriarch of Commander's Palace died May 31, 2018, at age 92. Her long and distinguished career was punctuated by helping propel the careers of

renowned chefs such as Paul Prudhomme, Emeril Lagasse and Jamie Shannon, and she was also the recipient of the Beard Foundation's lifetime achievement award in 2009.

Ralph Brennan expanded his restaurant holdings in 2013 by acquiring (in partnership with local businessman Terry White) the original Brennan's Restaurant at 417 Royal Street. After a year-long, \$20 million renovation, Brennan's on Royal Street reopened for business on November 25, 2014. The following year, 2015, Ralph purchased the historic Napoleon House (both building and business) at 500 Chartres Street from Sal Impastato and his four sisters. Joseph Impastato paid a mere \$14,000 back in 1920 for the former home of New Orleans Mayor Nicholas Girod, after having rented the building for the previous six years as a grocery. Pimm's Cups and muffulettas are still in on the menu, since Ralph has been careful to alter the Napoleon House and its traditions as little as possible. After 100 years, the Impastato family feels they have left their family business in good hands.

And, after 15 years in operation, Café Adelaide, the Commander's Family restaurant named for Adelaide Brennan, Ella Brennan's lively sister, closed their doors in August 2018.

As far as the origin story for Bananas Foster, it has been tweaked a little. The late Ella Brennan is now credited as the creator or co-creator with Brennan's chef Paul Blangé. The recipe was developed at her brother Owen's request to create a dessert to honor his friend Richard Foster on the occasion of a dinner in honor of his work as chairman of the New Orleans Crime Commission.

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"Yazoo, No. Swanee, Yes. Bananas, and How!"  
Ned Hémard  
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