

NOSTALGIA AND NEW ORLEANS IN THE TWENTIES

(Originally published June 1977)

Remembering days gone by seems to be a tolerated preoccupation during these uncertain times, possibly because the completed past is always invested with more stability and romance than it deserves. The nostalgia bit has affected even the 20- and 30-year-olds who dwell on the glorious times of the Fifties with a longing indecently misplaced.

We don't recall that there was so much nostalgia for the good old days evident among the adult population fifty years ago. The past was interesting to our parents and grandparents, but the horse and buggy, whalebone corset, gas-light and out-house era was something they had all experienced and didn't find very appealing. With new improvements in motor cars, electrical gadgetry, and the promise of radio, talking pictures, and flying machines to stimulate them, they were content to live in the present. America was confident and growing, things were changing for the better, and the future looked more exciting than the past.

But there is an enchantment to remembering, and particularly as one grows older, the early years seem to become more vivid. Although they weren't all that glorious or even comfortable, they were simpler years when energy was unlimited, time passed more slowly, hills were higher, valleys deeper, and distances much, much longer.

We still retain our childhood picture of New Orleans in the early Twenties, and now is as good a time as any to get it down on paper, before it gets distorted by some following generation which will have never known it. Our recollections are kaleidoscopic and disconnected, limited by individual experience and observation, starting and ending nowhere in particular.

The New Orleans of that time was a lazy, hemmed-in metropolis huddled behind a protective crescent of levee banks along the Mississippi River's winding course through Louisiana marshlands toward the Gulf. It was a cosmopolitan melting pot of whites, blacks and all shades between, which, in spite of its Spanish and French origins, contained greater concentrations of German, Irish, Italian, Greek, Chinese, African and Yankee carpetbagger families than any other Southern city of comparable size. It was a city of towering shaggy palms, crepe myrtles, oleanders, magnolias, sycamores, camphor trees and, along its avenues and its parks, majestic, gnarled live oaks, which hung with Spanish moss, under which the pungent odor of wet, rotting leaves and acorns lingered everlastingly; a city that—smothered in dripping humidity during the spring, summer, and early fall—shivered in penetrating, wet cold during the winter.

A few of its newer houses had central heating with coal or oil-burning basement furnaces, but the majority still depended on grate fireplaces, coal scuttles and pokers for warmth during the cold spells; in the hot months there were creaky ceiling-fans, noisy oscillating electric fans on floors and tables, and the ever present hand-held palmetto or stick and cardboard fans with advertising on them. The characteristic outdoor smell of

evening was a combination of burning Chinese punk-sticks and of citronella to ward off attacking hordes of mosquitoes. In the houses, ceilings were high, and in every room at least one gas-pipe outlet jutted from a wall or baseboard for use during the frequent electrical power failures in tropical storms. There were glass-front bookcases, armoires, side-boards, corner cabinets filled with bric-a-brac, wardrobes, chaise longues, mostly heavy and dark mahogany-colored carryovers from mid-Victorian times. The chamber-pots still had not completely disappeared from under the beds, whose pillows were stuffed into bolsters and whose bed-posts were still draped in folds of mosquito-netting.

The downtown New Orleans streets and the main avenues were paved (some with brick or cobblestone, some with wooden block topped with asphalt), but most of the neighborhood streets were still “graveled” in New Orleans style with the crushed white shells of oyster and fresh-water clam. Some of the city’s complex network of drainage canals had been covered over and converted into wide boulevards with “neutral grounds” dividing the sparse, one-way flows of traffic, but many still remained with grassy weed-overgrown banks sloping down to central wood-lined troughs. The canals were crossed by wooden bridges every two or three blocks and the shallow slow-moving water that flowed beneath them wasn’t very enticing (except to small boys) and always littered with debris, tin cans, palm fronds, paper boxes, oil slick and even raw sewage. During the heavy rains, the streets flooded and the canals filled to the brims with angry, muddy waters racing toward the pumping stations. Old fashioned carbon-arc lights hung from wires strung between tall poles at street intersections sputtered a blue-white (or yellow as they petered out) illumination. The sidewalks, universally called “banquettes,” were ribbons of concrete paving always sagging, cracked, and sinking unevenly into the soft ground.

There were still many horse- and mule-drawn vehicles on the streets—the open garbage wagons, ice wagons, the vegetable man’s wagon, the rag man, the waffle man—but by that time most well-to-do families had a car, and the fire engines, ambulances and police wagons had all become motorized. The automobiles were universally dark blue or black in color, some with self-starters, but all still equipped with cranks just in case. They all had narrow tires (the “balloon” tires, along with “four-wheel brakes,” did not appear in New Orleans until the mid-twenties) and wooden-spoke wheels, and the open touring car with its canvas and isinglass curtains was the popular model. Some rich old ladies still drove around in their boxy, black electric models, but the Prestige car among the wealthy or nouveau riche was the Pierce-Arrow with headlights built into the front fenders.

There were practically no two-car families, and most travel about town was by street-car. There were car lines within a three- to five-block walk of almost every neighborhood. The old Dumaine cars, which ran from the French Quarter out to the entrance of City Park (and, in fact, all cars on the minor lines), were stubby Toonerville Trolley types with single sets of wheels, front and back, that rocked and swayed along the narrow streets, sending out sparks along the overhead trolley-wire at every splice point. The big eight-

wheel cars traveled the main streets on the neutral grounds—Canal to Cemeteries, Esplanade to City Park, Tulane to St. Charles, Rampart to St. Claude, Napoleon to Broad—and were, like the smaller ones, all painted a faded olive-green with red trim. There were also a couple of special lines, two-car, electric motor coach affairs; one that ran from Carrollton (always pronounced “Cawlton” in Orleanese) out South Claiborne by the Water-works, to Jefferson Parish and Kenner, and the other, from the cemetery terminal at the end of Canal Street, along the New Basin Canal out to West End and Bucktown on the lake. At the foot of Canal Street, and at the ends of Jackson, Louisiana, Napoleon, Walnut and Carrollton Avenues, Captain Bisso’s paddle-wheel ferries puffed and steamed across the Mississippi to Algiers, Westwego and other small settlements strung out along the west bank River Road.

Downtown, the tallest building was the Hibernia Bank with its pointed spire and lighted cupola on top; a twenty-one-storied engineering marvel and absolutely the highest skyscraper that could ever be built, because the wooden foundation pilings driven into the swampy muck and ooze that lay beneath all of the city could support no greater weight. The Orpheum, the main theater, had just added a movie feature to its regular circuit vaudeville shows. The Strand and the Tudor were the main movie houses, but they were soon to be eclipsed by the new Loew’s State and Sanger theaters, directly opposite one another on the lake-side corners of Rampart and Canal. But there was also the Orpheum-Crescent Arcade, a covered gallery with shops, and the old Crescent Theater, which housed the traveling road show productions and which could be rented for dancing school, piano and elocution class recitals. Chinatown was a tight four- or five-block square of one-storied wooden buildings and shops across from the Arcade entrance where Tulane Avenue ended at South Rampart. The St. Charles, the Gruenwald across from the Orpheum (and soon to become the Roosevelt), and the old Monteleone on Royal were the only major hotels.

Basin Street and the old red-light district, a few blocks from the French Quarter and across Canal on the lake side of the Southern Railroad tracks, had deteriorated and were nearing their last days, but in the French Quarter the two burlesque houses, the Gayety and the Dauphine, as well as the old Anheuser and Roseland ten-cents-a-dance halls were still going strong. The French Quarter itself was still a quiet section, picturesque and still inhabited by many French and Italian families, living above or close by their businesses.

It was a haven also for the avant-garde and the Bohemians who came to paint, sculpt or write in the relaxed, old-fashioned European atmosphere. Bourbon Street was several decades away from becoming the tourist, carnival midway of today; the street car still ran down the middle of Royal Street, inching its way past cars and wagons parked on each side, and the street’s main attraction, apart from the antique dealers and artists’ galleries, was the elegant Patio Royal, a favorite luncheon spot for New Orleans ladies on the site of today’s Brennan’s. Galatoire’s and Antoine’s, still in their same locations, were the established restaurants. There were a few scattered night spots, mostly seedy and run

down, and a few dingy corner bars boasted a piano player, but not much else in the way of entertainment was around. The busy French Market stalls, the nearby docks along the river, the small foreign shops along Chartres and Frenchman across from the market, the bakeries, the breweries, and the coffee factories exuded a mixture of aromas that combined into a distinctive Quarter smell.

Mardi Gras was the only annual affair that ever attracted national attention and a few outlander tourists; in the Twenties it was a celebration enjoyed mostly by the Orleanians themselves. The carnival organizations were few and strictly limited to the old established families, the fading aristocrats, their society page relations and a few of the newly rich social climbers; by the late Twenties only four organizations were putting on parades: Momus, Proteus, Rex and Comus; the pinnacle was to belong to Comus and have a daughter chosen as its queen. Esplanade Avenue, which had been the desirable residential section during the early 1900s still was the home of a few old families, but they were moving out fast into mansions along St. Charles and into the newly fashionable Garden District.

There is, of course, much more to remember—the City Park band concerts; the rows of camps at the end of piers along the marshy lake front; trips “across the lake” to Gulfport, Biloxi and the Pass; the West End Roof Garden, where one of the first New Orleans Jazz Bands played at night, and the wooden pier along the slip behind it where you could fish for alligator gars; the family picnics at Amite and Hammond during the strawberry season; the east bank River Road winding behind the levees up to the plantations; Southport and the gambling casinos and night clubs across the line in Jefferson Parish; baseball at Heineman Park with Larry Gilbert and his New Orleans Pelicans; the football teams of Tulane and Loyola; politics and politicians, the Old Regulars—but the reminiscence has become too long. Maybe the nostalgia urge will strike again and provide a second installment.

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "Doctors' Lounge," Jun 1977, Vol. XXIV No.6, p.19