

NEW ORLEANS IN THE THIRTIES

In the *Bulletin* of June 1977, we reminisced about New Orleans in the Twenties and, at the end of the article, threatened one day to write a sequel. A loyal reader, who says he's been waiting patiently for "the other shoe to drop," visited recently and prodded us again. Since the nostalgia persists and another June is here, we might as well get on with it.

The 1930s in New Orleans spanned eventful years for us as we went from high school to college, through medical school and on into an internship at Charity Hospital in the city. Those were the Depression Years and New Orleans, as did most other Southern cities, with the possible exception of Dallas "the Big D," stagnated and changed very little during the entire decade.

In the early Thirties, as the hard times set in, most of the new construction and land development, begun in the late, booming Twenties, came to a standstill. The new Metairie Country Club and golf course, surrounded by some new and elegant homes, struggled unsuccessfully to survive. The haughty New Orleans Country Club, its once filled membership depleted by resignations, went begging for new members. The old, elitist Carnival organizations also felt the pinch. Some had to eliminate their annual parades.

The city, always a "poor" one, found its financial position deteriorating, having been practically cut off from state and federal funds by a vindictive Huey Long, first as Governor since 1928 and later, after he moved to Washington as Senator, by his rubber-stamp, controlled, state legislature. Long was particularly antagonistic to the city, its newspapers, its Old Regular Democratic Party, and the "silk-stocking aristocrats" of Tulane's board of directors, all of whom had bitterly opposed him politically. Any indignity he could think of to make them suffer, he took delight in imposing. To spite Tulane, which had once refused to grant his law degree, he built the L.S.U. medical school, centered it on the state Charity Hospital grounds, and took away most of the university's medical teaching beds. The Long machine bought out the most vitriolic anti-Long paper, the afternoon *Item*, changed its management, and dictated its policies. An amusing result was that the *Item's* excellent editorial cartoonist, Chase, who had always caricatured the Kingfish as a drunken, bulbous nosed, two-bit dictator in comic opera military garb with a prominent double cross fixed across his pot belly, was reduced suddenly to picturing him as a conservatively dressed, handsome benefactor of humanity with only the glowing halo missing above his head. After Long's assassination in 1935, the local vultures of his political machine took over the city's fortunes and began some long-needed municipal projects and improvements, making sure at the same time to double or triple the costs to taxpayers and pocket the loose change. The new Charity Hospital was built, streets began to be paved, the lakefront was developed, and a gleaming new airport appeared on land reclaimed from the brackish Pontchartrain waters. It was only as World War II was brewing, the political scandals exposed, and the inheritors of Huey's empire packed off to the various federal prisons that some reform set in and the city began to prosper.

Meanwhile, in spite of its prolonged poverty and political troubles, New Orleans in the 1930s was an interesting and enjoyable place in which to spend the student years. The

living was easy. Food was cheap; a "po-boy" sandwich—a half loaf of French bread sliced longitudinally, spread with mayonnaise, and packed with hot roast beef and fixings—cost 25 cents. A five- or six-course lunch at Maylie's or Tujague's was 50 cents. In the lake front spots at West End near Bucktown, we could eat our fill of boiled shrimp or crabs or crawfish for almost nothing and wash them down with a nickel glass of beer. Gasoline sold for 12 to 15 cents a gallon; a streetcar ride with transfers to any point in town was 7 cents. Apartments could be rented for 25 to 40 dollars a month. We could buy a second-hand car for less than \$100 and send off to Georgia for a \$4 license tag.

We were only 16 when we entered Tulane, and it took us two years to discover that we didn't have to study as hard as we had been accustomed to under the stern and regimented routine of Captain Perrin's old fashioned high school. The tree-lined, relaxed atmosphere of Tulane's mid-city campus across from Audubon Park was pleasant, and an occasional skipped class didn't seem to make that much difference. The soapbox orators of the Young Communists or the Norman Thomas socialist followers declaimed regularly from the concrete benches outside of Gibson Hall's basement bookstore. The girls at Newcomb, the sister college whose campus backed up to that of Tulane, were pert and attractive and more concerned with dating than liberation. The good-looking ones would rather have been caught dead than "go steady." The fraternity and sorority dances were frequent, and there was always the stag line at the regular Saturday night Country Club dance if we couldn't get a date.

In 1936, starting into medical school, we felt fortunate that Tulane's first two years were still in the old Richardson Memorial building on the uptown campus instead of downtown with the juniors and seniors next to Charity Hospital. Away from clinics, and wards and the daily bustle and stress of hospital routines, the basic science years seemed almost a continuation of the undergraduate ones . . . and in the same enjoyable surroundings. Even the medical fraternities, which were active and social then, were clustered around the campus on St. Charles and Broadway. The medical students who didn't live at home or in fraternity houses, boarded with private families, rented a basement apartment near school, or better yet, with one or two others, settled into a French Quarter courtyard or rooftop apartment.

The French Quarter then, even though subdued and at one of its low ebbs, was probably at its best from a student viewpoint. The droves of today's investing tourists were nowhere to be seen. The handful of drug addicts and reefer-smokers kept to themselves and stayed hidden. There was only an occasional honky-tonk or second-rate nightclub along all of Bourbon Street, and we could wander around the whole Quarter in complete safety and innocence and never find trouble unless we deliberately set out to seek it. Balding Sloppy Jim, who ran the alley bar next to the old American Legion Hall on Royal Street, befriended all medical students and regularly loaned them money or extended credit until the next check came from home. Gwelda and Jerry, a couple of ageing girl-friends, played the piano together at the 500 Club and joined in the group singing and the not-so-close drunken harmony. Stevie stomped and played his little piano "Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter" at Victor's, a corner tile- and sawdust-

floored bar on Chartres Street. The gentle Peter Impastato presided behind the bar at the Napoleon House, a quiet drinking spot where only classical records were played. On the other side of Canal Street at the old Bon Ton Cafe, the perpetually stoned and ever smiling Mr. Martin, "Expert Mixologist," fed Norwegian sailors for lunch and supper and made his fabulous rum concoctions for the students at night. And there was always the inexhaustible Mercedes (pronounced "Moysadeez" in Orleans dialect), throwing down the Bourbon shots and banging away at the piano in Pat O'Brien's original cubbyhole. If we wanted a rougher time or more action, we penetrated deeper into the Quarter, maybe starting at La Lune, progressing next to the 5th Ward A.C. or to Lafitte's in the 900 block of Bourbon where the "queers" hung out, and then to the lower class dives off Decatur near the river docks, and ending up at the Dog House to catch the 5:00 A.M. integrated floor show. Most of the old-time Jazz musicians were playing the fraternity and sorority dances in small pick-up groups, or with Piron at the Country Club, or off in New York and Chicago trying to eke out a living. For a more elegant or expensive time, we went to the Blue Room at the Roosevelt for the Sunday afternoon tea dances where we could dance to Phil Harris, listen to the lovely Leah Ray sing and watch a floor show, all with no cover or minimum. On week nights and Saturdays, the St. Charles bar—where a four-piece combo, the Rhythm Airs, played the best music in New Orleans—was a student favorite.

We moved into Charity Hospital in July 1939, along with more than three hundred other interns and residents. We were the first occupants of the new building, as only the staff quarters, a few administrative offices, and a couple of first floor clinics were then finished. The patients, some three thousand of them, were scattered everywhere, often two to a bed or sleeping on floors in the old Miles and Delgado units waiting to be torn down, in decrepit office buildings four or five blocks away or in tar-papered barracks under the huge natural gas tanks behind the hospital. The confusion and the new duties and responsibilities kept us busy for the next year. And we did it all for \$10 a month and a two-week vacation. In June 1940 we left for Cornell and New York City and didn't return again to Charity and New Orleans until 1946, after the war was over.

The city, of course, has changed now. New generations of students still flock to New Orleans and still find the life and the French Quarter there fascinating. But it is a little sad that they'll never know it as it was in the Thirties.

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