THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION PRESENTS

A

TURN OF THE CENTURY CHRISTMAS

TRIVIA - CIRCA 1880 - 1900

NEW ORLEANS

Dec. 8th, 1982
The libertine spirit was still alive. In 1880 there were 83 "important" gambling establishments. The nationally famous Louisiana Lottery, known popularly as the "Octopus," was doing a booming business. "Rushing the growler" and "cooling your coopers" was an easy task with 800 saloons from which to choose. Shooting craps in the alley and betting on cock fights were regular pastimes.

Voodoo was outlawed, but very much alive. A damp cross of salt on the front gallery or a gris-gris ball secreted under your pillow still brought shivers to all classes of society.

The turn of the century ushered in the death of Bronze John (Yellow Jack, Saffron Scourge or any of its other aliases). After 112 years of terror and death, a grant from the Federal government and a determined citizenry laid to rest this feared disease.

This was the period of the birth of jazz. Wakes were social events for some segments of society and the sound of the "blues" accompanied the funeral procession to the grave site. Tombs continued to be above the ground and widow's bonnets were still required.

Fashion for the ladies went from the bustle in the 1880's to the hour-glass figure of the 90's, with exaggerated "leg-of-mutton" sleeves. Fabrics ranged from heavy imported brocades and velvets to light cotton and muslin for the warmer months. These daring damsels even sported knee length swimsuits to the fashionable resorts at West End, Milneburg and Spanish Fort. Cloaks had high standing collars which held the head erect and hats with plummage became constantly bigger.

Little girls no longer wore miniature models of their mother's clothes. Styles, for the first time, were designed for children. The most popular was the sailor suit for both girls and boys.
This was the time when the fighting sons of the Confederacy were now the mellowed grandpapas' at the family Christmas gathering. With the scars of the Civil War healing and economic recovery, it was a time for rejoicing and thanksgiving. Cotton was "king" and the port, again bustled with activity. It was an era of prosperity.

Many of the old ways of life remained, such as that of "making market" at the French (more appropriately, the Italian) Market for the Creoles, and at the Poydras for the Anglos. The cry of the street vendors "Bels calas, tout chauds" and the "R-r-r-ramoner la cheminée" of the chimney sweep could still be heard. And, yes, there was lagniappe. A haircut cost 15¢, 25¢ bought the Blue Book (official guide to the tenderloin district, Storyville) and the new movie house at West End charged 5¢ for a six-reel show.

Cycling was a popular fad on the old time "big wheelers" and the posted speed limit of "2:40 on the Shell Road" was for horses, since the horseless carriage was another decade away.

Football was introduced at Tulane by some Yale preppies in 1890. The game ended if the pigskin deflated, since who could afford the luxury of a spare ball at the exorbitant price of $5.00!! New Orleans was considered the ring capital of the world and its fans witnessed the defeat of Mighty Sullivan by Gentleman Jim for the world championship in 1892. This period also gave birth to our famed New Orleans Pelicans.

"Scrubbing the stoop", "sitting on the banquette (or banket)," and standing in line for a nickle handout on Saturday at Simon Gumbel and Co. were familiar sights of the old town at the turn of the century.
In men's fashion, we see the introduction of the ironed crease in the trouser leg by 1895, but styles changed little for men throughout the 19th century.

Mardi Gras achieved its pomp and splendor during this period. Invitations, parades and balls were elaborate, almost overdone. It was a tiring week for the poor mules who worked the garbage trucks by day and pulled the floats by night.

Christmas season was approached with anticipation and much preparation. Homes were lavishly decorated both within and without. Garlands and wreaths were popular outdoor motifs. Holly, pressed autumn leaves, berries, dried flowers, Spanish moss and magnolia leaves were employed for table decorations. Within the house, garlands were wrapped around posts, looped on stairways and stretched from the lighting fixtures to the corners of the room.

The tree was generally trimmed on Christmas eve. In addition to popcorn strings and berry garlands, it was laced with flowers, ribbons, gilded nuts, cornucopias of sweets, ornaments and small gift packages. It was illuminated with tiny candles on Christmas morning; an event which signaled the time for the children to enter.

Although the presentation of gifts varied slightly, generally, Santa Claus brought the smaller gifts on the tree and those in the stocking which was filled with fruit, nuts, sweets and always, a pack of firecrackers. The ones under the tree were understood to be from "Mama and Papa".

Gifts of food and flowers were popular and those gifts made by hand. The "wonder ball" (a yarn ball concealing gifts) was a favorite gift of "Grannie" to her grandchildren. Ladies received doilies, silver
tea balls, photo frames in silver, fabric or metal and jewelry. Men received umbrellas, cigar cases, scarves and jewelry. Little girls enjoyed fans, sachet, stationery and always a baby doll. Boys received tool boxes, boxing gloves, jacknives, pistols and marbles.

Christmas was a time of caring at the turn of the century. Strong religious traditions were interlaced with the festive spirit of the season. In the same spirit, the staff and directors of the Historic New Orleans Collection join in wishing you a "Merieult" Christmas and a Happy New Year.