Did You Know?

France's Fourteenth-of-July observance, celebrating the destruction of the Bastille by French revolutionists in 1789, was once also a gala public event in New Orleans. Its first observance here on a large and public scale was in 1881. The Daily Picayune saluted that July 14 with a lengthy editorial and the next morning reported the doings in nearly two columns of small type.

An arch of triumph was erected at Canal and Carondelet streets, an impressive confection of greenery entwined with the flags of France and the United States and holding aloft the words Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. A 21-gun salute the evening before ushered in the celebration. Torrents of rain in the morning threatened a postponement, but by 3 p.m. the sun was shining again. New Orleans proceeded to pour itself into the steam trains to West End, where an exciting program had been prepared. By night 15,000 people, in the Daily Picayune's estimate, had packed themselves into a resort designed for less than half that number.

West End, from the train platform over the water to the dancing pavilion on the other side of the New Basin Canal, was a-flutter with flags and tricolor designs. The French consul presided, in full dress. There were speeches in French and in English, a concert by the West End Band, a racing-sculls regatta, an exhibition of water polo in which every participant was dunked, dancing and a "magnificent" display of fireworks. A 100-gun salute brought the festivities to a close.

It had taken the trains seven hours to put that crowd into West End. Indescribable confusion resulted in the simultaneous rush back. A great many people did not get away from West End until after sunrise. To handle the returning crowds the horsecar companies kept all their services in the city operating through the night, the paper said.

Equally brilliant was the Catorze Juillet celebration of 1885, when a statue of Liberty was erected at Canal and Carondelet streets. Made of papier mâché, this statue stood 18 feet high and was erected upon a 17-foot pedestal. Many masts on Canal Street's neutral ground from Bourbon to Dauphine carried the French and American colors. Many buildings on Canal, Royal and Chartres streets streamed with flags. Again the principal celebration was at West End, under the direction of the French consul. Oratory, artillery fire, fireworks and a ball made the occasion a memorable one.

In this spirit the July 14 celebration entered the present century and continued to be one of the year's notable events until the size of the event diminished in the years following World War I.