One of the oldest Spanish types of ironwork known in the French Quarter is this balcony at rear of Cabildo, bearing arms and insignia of the Loyal Legion. Note Spanish type cannon, cannon balls and bombs.

Lacy Ironwork 'Trademark' of City, Is Becoming a Lost Art

BY ELISE BEAUCHAMP

Iron lace work, which has almost been the trade mark of New Orleans for most of the years of the city's life, will soon be a lost art. Like many another of the city's graces churned out by time, the march of progress has caught up with and the 'iron lace,' like a good nickel cigar and a ten-cent sandwich, has bowed to high wages, industrialization and speed.

Contrary to the general belief, a large amount of the 'iron lace' in the city is of German or Spanish origin rather than French. The German iron workers went in for the flashy cast iron back in the early days when the Ironworkers Guilds were one of the largest and most powerful guilds in the world, and it was their curlicues, cupids, ornate patterns and delicate tracery which really became synonymous with 'iron lace' in the minds of the rest of the world.

When infant French New Orleans was building her beautiful homes and developing her own type of architecture the lacy grilles, the fancy dubois of the German ironworkers caught her fancy and she made them her own. As a change from the heavy, stern looking ironwork of the Spanish manner, such as the grilled windows of the Calaboso and the ironwork of the Cabildo, the dainty cast iron caught the public imagination immediately.

Although examples of ironwork are all around the city and nearly everyone native to New Orleans has grown up with it, it is amazing how few people know anything about it. There are, of course, two types of ironwork, wrought and cast iron. Wrought iron is hand-hammered on an anvil, the smith working from a pattern either carried in his own head or drawn out on paper. He takes the heavy iron bar and skillfully heats and hammers until it is of the desired length and thickness. By the skill of his hands and talent he can make fairly intricate patterns. It was possible in old times to make a rose with curled leaves, or a coat of arms as delicately wrought as its replica in gold would be, but the skilled smith who could 'draw' the iron out to such an extent is almost a thing of the past.

Cast iron is molten iron poured into a mold. With the advent of mass production of ironwork is greatly speeded up because once the mold had been made hundreds of pieces could be poured, the mold used over and over, and the work went forward much faster than with the loving and lengthy making of each individual piece by hand. As long as the old molds and patterns are used cast iron can be made.

But the pattern makers, artists of the trade, are the ones who have drifted away to other trades, more lucrative and less arduous. It is a rare, almost impossible, thing to get a new pattern nowadays. It is believed that there are still two pattern makers in the city, both of whom are elder brothers and who seldom take on jobs.

Because of this dearth of pattern makers the price of ironwork has been taking a steady rise until it has almost become prohibitive. The ironworkers insist that that is reasonable that the few workers left in the trade have to make a living in the midst of rising costs and machine competition and that the rise in ironwork prices is comparatively

Two patterns on one corner at St. Peter and Royal. Ornate foreground design is French combination of intricate German cast and simple Spanish line, plus a soupcon of Italian and original delicate French tracery. Excessive use of cut lace effect is typical of French.
small. But they wait until the last moment before quoting a price on your ironwork and they keep ammonia handy in case the shock is too great.

The alternative to wrought or cast iron is the stylized band-ironwork which can be obtained today through some of the large mail order houses. Band iron is not only hampered by a small choice of design, but it is so thin that it lacks any real similarity to the genuine article. As a substitute it is fair but it's definitely a substitute.

In the heyday of ironwork it was not unusual for the builder of a home to order a special pattern made and then, when his work was finished, have the pattern or mold destroyed. Today if any one were lucky enough to get an original pattern and mold made he could probably sell it to the ironmaker for a very fancy price indeed.

The skill to cut a pattern for a "corn" fence or the intricate patterns of the makers trades for the years of labor which it takes to make a smith or a mold maker or an ironmonger, aren't interested in apprentices' wages and hard work.

"French" roses is literally "gone with the wind". The young lads who, normally, would have apprenticed themselves to their lads or to the oldsters of the iron.

and they have turned to other and financially greener fields.

Even the acquisition of gas-fired furnaces for the anvils of today and the machinery, to cut and forge the iron by electrically operated saws and cutting machines has not lightened the work enough to make it attractive to the restless younger generation and the hands that operate the new equipment are old and none too steady and the faces above the smiths fires, gas though they be, are wrinkled and time worn. When they go ironmaking in the city will be a lost art indeed and one of its most charming attributes will be forfeited to progress.

One of the few ironmakers in the city has already turned to a sort of last ditch defense and is manufacturing "Fragments of New Orleans," a line of merchandise which can be turned out in large quantities and at not too stunning a price. Candle sticks modeled on the old Creole lights, lamps, containers for flower pots, small tables, house numbers, name plates—all made from the old time honed patterns the grape and vine, the rose, the twined hearts, all of which lend themselves easily to adaption to small objects—are going out with the local firm's trademark to the North and East.

The average tourist, hurried by guides through the Cabildo and the calabozo, seldom has time or knowledge to lift his eyes to the massive grillwork, hand-hammered by some Spanish smithy when the calabozo was new and the iron grille had to be escape proof.