

NINETY-FIVE

Memories of New Orleans

Dear friends in Cardiac Rehab:

I have been writing open letters to you on my birthdays. This one is for age 95. Having come all this way only to find myself in a www dot com world, I am determined to outlive it, but that may take some time. To that end all that I can expect Cardiac Rehab to do for me is to get me to 100. I will take from there..

There comes a time in ones life when there are no times like the time when you were twenty; and for me, that was in New Orleans. As far as I know, all my friends from back there are gone now; so I am fortunate to make new friends here at Cardiac Rehab. I offer an account of New Orleans as I remember it some forty-five years ago; and include a couple of yarns from there that are true, that is, allowing for some elasticity. One of my friends from back there was Joe Morris, a great story teller. He was chairman of Physics at Tulane, while I was chairman of Mathematics. Here I recall his story, *Miss Creevy's Chinaman*.

Yours,

Bill Duren.

NEW ORLEANS, 1920-1955

How to choose your college. Back in Columbus, Miss, where we had lived, there had been a running family stalemate about where I was to go to college, some two years hence. My father offered me the choice of his old college, Millsaps, or the University of Mississippi. At age 15, I did not want either one. I wanted to go to Miss. A&M, now called Miss. State Univ. Millsaps didn't even play football; and, in the only college game I had seen, A&M beat Ole Miss 71 - 0. Besides, my beloved Uncle Jack had gone there. Then, in 1920, it was decided that we would move to New Orleans, and Mother said: "Now you can go to Tulane." "What's Tulane?", I asked, "Never heard of it."

That November we got to New Orleans, and we were riding the rickety little four-wheeled Prytania street car. It was big stuff to me; for I had never seen a street car before. Then a news boy hitched onto the front and, displaying his afternoon newspapers across his chest, he shouted: "States, Item, read all about it!". There in bold letters across his chest the headline read : "Tulane 9, Miss A&M 6.". I said: "Mamma, I'll go to Tulane." So I did.

The bizarre geography of New Orleans. The trouble starts with *bayous*. Why do they have bayous down there and not up here? It turns out that *bayou* is a Choctaw Indian word meaning "little river" . So in Choctaw country bayous are called. bayous. It's that simple. All you have to know is when you cross the Choctaw border.

New Orleans is on the Mississippi River, which flows south to the Gulf, right? Well, at the foot of Canal Street, the central business street, the River flows due north. So North

Claiborne Avenue is down river from there, and South Claiborne is up river. New Orleanians ignore the stupid compass in favor of four directions: uptown (in the direction up the river), downtown (not the business district, but in the direction down the river), riverside (towards the river), and lakeside, (towards Lake Pontchartrain).

And when it rains, which it does in torrents, the water falls down, right? No, it “falls” sidewise, driven by the wind. There are stories of rain being driven through a 12-inch brick wall. It floods the streets, but eventually flows into the River, right? Wrong! The River flows into the Gulf of Mexico some 150 miles downstream. The distance keeps increasing as river-borne mud builds the delta further and further into the Gulf. At New Orleans the river level is normally at 16 feet, or more, above mean Gulf level. The city of New Orleans varies from 6 feet above mean Gulf level to 6 feet below. A high river levee keeps the River where it belongs. I never got used to seeing an ocean-going tanker gliding past up there above me, on its way to the refineries up stream. High speed pumps that act like water fans move the excess rainwater from the streets into Lake Pontchartrain which is at tidal levels of the Gulf.

And the River water is fresh water, right? Only half right! The top levels carry fresh muddy water mainly from the Ohio, Missouri, and Red rivers. But it is over 100 feet deep, and the lower levels are well below the Gulf, and therefore consist of salt water. There is a species of blind shrimp that live down in the salt water, where it is dark because the muddy water above screens out the light. These “river shrimp” are a special local delicacy. New Orleans scoops off the fresh water from the top, runs it through fences to exclude the gars and huge river catfish, then through a series of filters to eliminate smaller creatures and mud. Then they drink the final product. It used to be healthful, if you could acquire a taste for it, but now I hear it contains carcinogens from chemical plants upriver.

The River overflow, in long-past years, built up the river side into higher ground, on which the city was originally built. Since the River turned sharply from north back to south there, this edge was in the form of a crescent; hence the name, “Crescent City”. Later, builders of the city imitated this natural levee development to get high ground on which to put avenues. They scooped out a drainage canal and piled the mud up for roadways on either side. The first of these must have given the name, “Canal Street” to the city’s central thoroughfare. Then later, a little at a time, they replaced the canals by huge drain pipes, and covered them over to form a wide central neutral ground on which they ran street cars. Like Canal Street, this is the origin of Saint Charles Avenue, Carrollton Avenue, Claiborne Avenue, Napoleon Avenue, etc. It is all finished now, but the covering-over process was still going on when I was first there.

Finally there are those characteristic cemeteries, with their mausoleums above ground. That is again an adaptation to New Orleans’ low ground. You would not want to thrust the dear departed down into the wet mud. Even if the casket was tightly sealed it could float up and thrust itself through the covering earth. Those above-ground tombs in New Orleans were the only way, until they found ground in Metairie Cemetery that was high enough to permit conventional burial. A famous one that is shown to tourists is surrounded by four large angel statues at each corner. The tomb bears the single name: “Moriarity”. According to local legend those four angels are: Faith, Hope, and Charity, and Mrs. Moriarity.

The Creoles. New Orleans was founded in 1718 by order of the French governor of Louisiana, sieur de Bienville. He named it *La Nouvelle Orleans* in honor of the Duke of Orleans who was the regent of France at the time. During its early years it was peopled by colonists from the cities of southern France. It became Spanish in a benign transfer to Spain in 1764, which brought in more colonists. Napoleon got it back in 1800 and sold it to the U.S. with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The descendants of those early French and Spanish colonists call themselves *Creoles*, a French-Spanish word that means something like *born in this place*. They are entirely separate people from the Cajuns who came into southwest Louisiana later (See below).

In the layout of the original city a central square on the river front below Canal Street was set apart as the *Place d'Armes*. Around it there were public buildings, apartments, and shops. The area around came to be called the *Vieux Carre*, the old square. The Spanish built the *Cabildo*, facing the square, as the seat of Spanish government, and the *Pontalba* apartment buildings on either side of it.

The area around New Orleans is not well adapted either to growing cotton or raising cattle. But in 1794 Etienne de Bore, whose plantation was in the present city limits, found out how to make granulated sugar from the juice of the sugar cane. Thereafter sugar cane rapidly became the main crop of south Louisiana; and the refining and shipping of sugar a major business of New Orleans.

In the War of 1812, or rather two weeks after the end of it, on Jan. 8, 1815 General Andrew Jackson's American army crushed the British invaders in the Battle of New Orleans. Jackson became a New Orleans hero; and the *Place d'Armes* was renamed as *Jackson Square*, with a statue of Jackson in it.

In modern times the Creoles have tried to maintain their French language, with only fair success. But the French influence has remained much stronger than the Spanish. The common language of New Orleans now is English, spoken with an accent that sounds like Brooklyn.

The Cajuns. The Cajuns are not New Orleanians. They are another group of colonists, originally peasants from Normandy in northern France, who had settled in Acadia, in what is now Nova Scotia. The name, Cajun, or Cajin, is a corruption of *Acadian*. When the British took over Canada the Acadians resisted, and were forcibly deported in 1755. One group of them found their way to Louisiana, where the Spanish governor welcomed them, and gave them land on Bayou Teche, some 150 miles west of New Orleans. Their story is the Theme of Longfellow's *Evangeline*. Since then the Cajuns have expanded farther east to Bayou Lafourche, and to the little community of Westwego, just across the river from New Orleans, but not much into New Orleans itself.

They are a colorful people, who have maintained their identity, their music, culture, and language. Many of them have Irish surnames from intermarriage with the Irish workers brought in to build the Southern Pacific railroad. Scholars say that their language preserves the 17th Century French of Normandy more closely than does the French now spoken in Normandy. The Creoles of New Orleans regarded them and their language as inferior. There are thousands of ethnic Cajun yarns, told with an imitation Cajun accent, in which the comical mind of the Cajun is depicted as weak and low. I will spare you a recitation.

Religions and cultures. Since the original French and Spanish settlements there has been a series of immigrations of other ethnic groups into New Orleans. First, of course, after the Louisiana Purchase were English-speaking Americans. Their well-to-do residential center was what is now called “The Garden District” centered on Prytania Street and Washington Avenue, above Canal Street.. Their religion was mainly Protestant: Presbyterian or Anglican. Along with them came Jewish merchantmen. New Orleans has long had a well integrated Jewish community. Judah Benjamin, Secretary of State in the Confederacy, was from New Orleans. And later Paul Tulane, whose gift founded Tulane University, was a Jew. He contributed generously to Christian churches as well as synagogues. There is a canceled check which he wrote “To that damned old Presbyterian Church, again, the sum of \$3,000”. The treasurer of the church was not too proud to so endorse it. In the city today some old families have both Jewish and Christian components.

These groups brought in the Blacks, who now make up a large sector of the New Orleans population. Their beautiful religion is a fusion of their African religions and the Baptist beliefs. The fusion of their African religion with Catholicism was less fortunate. It became Voodoo. During the Nineteenth Century there were two large immigrations of Germans, with their beer, and their Lutheran religion. The religion of New Orleans remains predominantly Roman Catholic, in contrast to the State of Louisiana, in which there is a Protestant majority.

More recently the Italians and the Yugoslavs have taken over the French Market. The Italians now run the produce section and Yugoslavs the oyster and restaurant businesses. Those French Market doughnuts without holes, that you get with coffee at the “Morning Call”, originated in Sofia, I am told..

I once said to President Colgate Darden of the University of Virginia: “I don’t understand the idea of a society based on ringing Jeffersonian rights and freedoms. I come from New Orleans where society is based on a custom of live-and-let-live tolerance.” To my surprise Darden, who was a really serious proponent of Jefferson’s ideals, replied: “That’s better.”

I have not explained how the Methodists got a foothold in New Orleans, but they did. And that was what got me there. The following story illustrates that religion is not always all that serious,

The wedding of Beulah and Harvey. My father was pastor of the church. With our family I attended every service. That was expected of the minister’s family. Beulah and Harvey didn’t have to; but they attended every service too, sitting together. That included weddings, funerals, and baptisms. They had heard our organist, Mr. Chenet, play the wedding march many times, but never for Beulah and Harvey. People in the church noticed of course, and, whispering, wondered if there was something they might do, but in vain. Of course, Beulah was no knockout in looks, and she didn’t have money. But then again Harvey was no great catch either. He was shorter than Beulah, and he had fits.

Finally, after years and years, people in the church got invitations to the wedding of Beulah and Harvey. They wouldn’t have missed it for anything! Everybody was there expectantly.

But nothing happened!

The wedding march didn't get started. People were waiting. One by one worried ladies would get up and go to the back of the church to see if there was something they could do. They came back smiling and passed the word that Beulah was there, but crying, poor girl. Meanwhile they had sent their husbands to the front of the church to see if it was Harvey who had ratted out. But they came back too, saying that Harvey was there all right with his best man, and about to have a fit. The medicine he had taken to avoid a fit during the ceremony was wearing off. And I can vouch for the minister and his family being there! The trouble was Mr. Chenet. He wasn't there. They had not been able to locate him. And obviously there was no way that Beulah could get down that aisle without Mr. Chenet playing: *Here comes the bride*.

Finally Mr. Chenet appeared. As he flustered down the aisle in his street clothes there was spontaneous applause. The applause ignored the loud smell of moonshine beer that wafted along with him in that Methodist church. – Moonshine, because remember it was in the days of Prohibition – Mr. Chenet disappeared briefly, then reappeared in the choir loft with his surplice somewhat askew. He sat down to play a few bars of soft, sweet, loving prologue when a key in the organ got stuck; and Mr. Chenet's love music was drowned out by a loud shrill WHEEEEEEE! It was a note controlled by the organist's foot. So Mr. Chenet dived down to free it; and all we could see was the seat of his pants above the rail of the choir loft. As he shook it the note went WHEE-a-WHEE-a-woo and then stopped. Mr. Chenet reappeared triumphantly and resumed his sweet prologue only to hear that same loud WHEEEEEEE start up again! So he dived down again and again got it stopped. But then when he started his music there was that WHEEEEEEE again.

This time he didn't try to stop it but went directly into the wedding march, playing it very loudly to drown out the WHEEEEEEE. He played it fast too, the fastest you ever heard it. So Beulah came running down the aisle, smiling happily through her tear-stained veil. So far as she was concerned Mr. Chenet didn't play it fast enough. Then the organ stopped and my father began: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God and before these witnesses to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony. If there be any----" So we all witnessed as Beulah and Harvey finally said their vows. It was worth waiting for.

Mardi Gras and Bourbon Street. I am not the one to tell you about the carnival and its Mardi Gras. For I am out of synch with noisy and riotous revelry in the streets. When our kids were small Mary and I took them to see the carnival parades, and maybe to catch a trinket thrown from the floats. Later we would just get out of town to go bird watching, or something, in the country. You can celebrate Christmas or Thanksgiving in the country, but Mardi Gras is strictly a city affair. But, since I set out to tell you about New Orleans, the carnival must be included. In an effort to understand it, I long ago looked it up. I will tell you what I learned.

The carnival was a custom that originated in Rome and other Italian cities during the Middle Ages. In the early Christian church before the Protestant secession, it was a reaction to the religious requirements of Lent. *Carnival* means something like leaving off (the eating of) meat. Its revelry lasted some days or weeks prior to the Lenten period.. Some of the popes tried to curtail it, with little success. The government of France undertook to limit it by law to the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, and in so doing gave the French name, *Mardi Gras* (meaning

festive Tuesday) to it. I think it is the reason that French name has survived in all languages. The custom died out in Protestant countries, where the requirements of Lent were less rigorous. But in Roman Catholic countries the customs of carnival and Mardi Gras have persisted

The New Orleans carnival is the most prominent one in the United States. It extends from Twelfth Night (January 6) to Lent, with a big blowout on Mardi Gras day when people wear masks and costumes, and dance in the streets. It gives good looking gals a chance to wear scant costumes to show what they have got. And there is the Rex parade led by the King of carnival and his queen. The parade has about a dozen horse-drawn floats designed on vaguely mythological themes. Riding on them the costumed members of his court throw trinket souvenirs to the onlookers, especially to little kids and their mothers.

On each evening of the days before Mardi Gras one of the supposedly secret carnival organizations, such as the "Krewe of Comus" or the "Krewe of Momus", conducts a masked costume ball. Besides the members of the Krewe and their ladies the dancers include invited young men and women in formal dress. Viewers, seated in a balcony, attend by invitation also. Some of these balls are preceded by a lighted night parade of floats designed on carnival themes. And these rather sedate balls serve as coming-out occasions for New Orleans' debutantes.

The carnival organizations are obviously costly, and few college professors, including me, could afford to belong. They have lost any association with the Catholic religion. The members are mostly business men, Catholics and Protestants, but when I was there they still retained their anti-Semitic exclusions. But every Tulane student who has a rented tux is needed to dance with the girls at the balls, after she had danced with her father and his friends. It is the ruin of many a country boy, to say nothing of the damage to academics at Tulane and Newcomb.

The New Orleans Blacks had their own carnival festivities, more uninhibited and more interesting than the White man's, and more of an every-Saturday-night occasion, in their cultural center on South Rampart street. I once met a hotel porter in Chicago who noticed my New Orleans address on my luggage. He was from New Orleans and I asked him if he would like to go back there. He replied (his words, not mine): "Man! I'd rather be a nigger on Rampart street on Saturday night than in my right mind."

As a matter of fact such racial discrimination was a major reason for my decision to leave New Orleans. I had made a motion in the Tulane faculty calling on the Board of Trustees to admit Blacks to Tulane. My weak-kneed colleagues changed my motion to call on the Board to "consider" the admission of Blacks. Shortly the word came back: "We have considered it." I thought it would be a long time, and started looking for a job where they were over that hump. I landed at UVa. Actually Tulane admitted Blacks a lot sooner than I thought it was possible.

Besides Mardi Gras, the other thing that people associate with New Orleans is Bourbon Street, with its topless bars and fabulously sinful behavior. If you want to meet some New Orleanians, don't expect to find them on Bourbon Street.. Like Mardi Gras, Bourbon Street is the product of early Christian thinking which holds that you cannot abolish sin; you can only restrict it to a particular time and place. Then decent people don't have to go there. So good New Orleanians stay away from Bourbon Street. .

Jazz. As is well known, jazz originated in New Orleans. Jazz musicians are Black. Like their religion, their music is part African and part Western. A New Orleans physician, Dr. Edmonde Souchon, was head of a large local hospital. But his passion was jazz music. He had his own Dixieland band. -- White bands that play this music are called Dixieland bands.—He recorded a great deal of original jazz music, and traveled to Africa to record the music that is the first source of American Black music. I believe his recordings are in the Tulane library. According to Dr. Souchon, white musicians cannot match the flexible rhythms or the subtle crescendos of black musicians. As I understand it, New Orleans jazz originated from merging African music with the Bach concerto grosso form, as loosely perceived by Black ears. It allowed each solo instrument in its turn to speak with original inventions under the inspiration of the moment.

Dining and eating in New Orleans. The Creoles were more successful in preserving their cuisine than their language. The Creole restaurants of New Orleans are famous, but I will not attempt to list them or rank them; for my information is out of date. When my Mary and I were young we could not afford to dine at the famous restaurants such as Antoine's and Galatoire's. But it was in the depression, and we could get a five-course dinner at the Vieux Carre, then new, for 75 cents, plus a 25 cent tip. The restaurant had been established by a monsieur Lacoste from France. His sister operated the cash register, and her husband was the Paris-trained chef. He later sold it to Brennan.. Creole cookery consists of relatively few dishes, mostly shrimp, oysters and crab. By contrast a qualified chef in France must be able to prepare hundreds.

Besides these fine Creole restaurants there are three other, more popular, categories of good eating places in New Orleans: the oyster bars, the popular priced neighborhood restaurants, and the lakefront beer and seafood places. The Creole cooking style prevails in these places also. The latter two change from time to time. Some disappear, but new ones come to take their places. If you are going to New Orleans inquire from locals what the current good ones are.

.The Cajuns have their special fine cuisine too. One used to have to go to Lafayette to get it, but I believe it is available in New Orleans now. Cajun cookery features rice and crawfish. Their ecrevisse etouffee (stuffed crawfish) is a specialty. Contrary to outsiders' opinions, neither the Creole nor the Cajun cookery is loaded with hot pepper.

Miss Creevy's Chinaman. This is really Joe Morris's story. He loved to tell it, and unrolled it with a verve that I cannot match. Perhaps the fact that he was the hero of it had something to do with that. Anyway, I presume to tell it here only because Joe has left us now; and I think his story should live after him. I doubt that Joe ever wrote down the story himself. Joe's writing was awkward and somewhat stiff. But he talked literature!

Most churches, especially Presbyterian churches, have a Miss Creevy who rules over the men of the church. Outside the church these men may be leaders of the community, or captains of industry, but inside the church when Miss Creevy commands they respectfully obey. Ten-year-old Joe's father was one of these men. Outside, Mr. Morris was a dominant figure in

ship chandlery for the port of New Orleans, and inside he was a respected elder of the church. But when Miss Creevy summoned he could only say meekly: "Yes, Miss Creevy".

Joe's Miss Creevy had a special calling of her own. She thought of herself as a foreign missionary, converting heathen Chinese to Christianity, Presbyterian style of course. But the circumstances of her life had not permitted her to go abroad. So she did the best she could from her base in the First Presbyterian Church. She undertook to convert the heathen Chinese of New Orleans: the oriental importers, the laundrymen, the cooks in the Chinese restaurants, and the shrimp dryers.

Thus it was that the telephone rang one Saturday night in the Morris home. When Joe heard his father reply wearily, "Yes, Miss Creevy.---Yes, Miss Creevy", he knew that he wanted to go. It turned out that they had locked up one of Miss Creevy's Chinamen in the jail; and would Mr. Morris go down there and get him released. Although the assignment would last past Joe's bed time, he was permitted to go. Mr. Morris needed company.

The police sergeant in charge that night knew Mr. Morris, and everybody knew Miss Creevy. So he was glad to release Miss Creevy's Chinaman, **IF** Mr. Morris would just tell him which one was Miss Creevy's. For he had locked up five Chinamen that night. He brought them all out for Mr. Morris's inspection. They all looked alike. Mr. Morris had not thought to ask the man's name; it would have been useless anyway. So he addressed the five men, asking, "Which one of you called Miss Creevy tonight?" They had been listening to all of this, and perceived that Miss Creevy's name was the key to getting out of jail. So all five said: "I call Miss Creevy, --- I call Miss Creevy." The time for polite discourse was over. So Mr. Morris asked bluntly: "Which one of you is Miss Creevy's Chinaman?" Of course this did not work any better. For they all said: "I Miss Creevy's Chinaman. --- I Miss Creevy's Chinaman." Things had reached an impasse for both the sergeant and Mr. Morris.

At this point young Joe asked: "Let me try, Father." Having no alternative, Mr. Morris agreed. Joe addressed the five men with the question: "What is sin?" Only one Chinaman could recite glibly from the catechism: "Sin is any act, of commission or omission, that is contrary to the laws of God." That was Miss Creevy's Chinaman.

W.L.Duren, Jr, 11-10-00.