

The City That Sleeps

By James D. Doggette Jr.

Outside of being a romantic and an adventurous city, New Orleans was known as “The City That Care Forgot” during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Life in the “Big Easy” was programmed and steady—slow, but sure—making it a virtual cornucopia of sights, sounds, smells and sensations.

The days began early for some, such as the bread man who delivered bread, hot and fresh from the bakery, at 4 a.m. The old neighborhood corner general stores, like Mr. Louie’s, had wooden bread boxes outside the store. The bread man would unlock it, raise the lid and put Mr. Louie’s order inside. He took a piece of paper off a clip that held Mr. Louie’s order for the next day. Then the bread man closed the lid, locked it and went to his next stop.

By 4:30 a.m., the aroma of fresh bread was all over the neighborhood, and the window fans we used for cooling would bring it into the house. That luscious smell awakened me every morning.

Before I could get up and dressed, I heard the tinkling and clinking as the milkman put the milk bottles and jars of fresh cream on the front porch. By the time I had opened the door and retrieved those bottles, I caught the distinct aroma of fresh dripped coffee and homemade biscuits coming from Grandma’s kitchen, way in the back of my grandparents’ five-room shotgun house.

By daylight, the panorama began as people hustled and bustled, going to work or completing their daily tasks. Mr. Henry, the barber, opened his shop across the street. He turned on the switch to his barber pole that went around and around. He swept the front porch and then went inside to await his customers.

The corner general stores opened for business. Mr. Louie came out, opened his bread box and took the loaves of French bread into the store. Mr. Pellegrine came out of his store and stacked wooden Coke cases in the side alley.

Young men riding motorcycles roared up and down the street every now and then. Kids on homemade wooden scooters buzzed by on the

sidewalks. People were walking up and down the street, stopping only to talk to neighbors. The wagons of the fruit man and the iceman filled the air with their curious song.

Next-door, Mr. Shelby was cutting his grass with his old push mower. Every time he backed up and then pushed, the blade cylinder ground and *whirred* as it spun, sending a shower of emerald green grass cuttings flying. The smell of freshly cut grass on a hot summer day made me long for a slice of ice-cold watermelon.

In those days the threat of nuclear war was real and horrifying, so air-raid sirens were installed on telephone poles at intervals. These sirens were tested every day at midday. For us, rather than the warning they were intended for, these blaring beacons announced that it was high noon—and time for lunch.

No matter what we were doing or where we were, the whole population stopped to dine. And after lunch, we’d head for bed or a secluded spot that was cool. We’d kick off the shoes and lie down.

All of a sudden, it seemed as though the world had put its finger to the lips of the “Big Easy” and said, “Shhhhhh.” The once-busy neighborhood quieted down and slipped into a time of enchantment.

The streets were empty of pedestrians and vehicles. The yards were vacant of populace, and time seemed to stand still. For the first time that day, you could hear the birds tweeting. The subtle *tak-a-tak-a-tak-a* of the big window fan back in the kitchen and the cool breeze it brought into the house put you in peace and harmony with life. The pastoral sounds of children laughing and playing in the distance provided the ambience needed to put you into a twilight state, thinking, *Life is sweet—life is good.*

Somewhere between the scent of sweet olive blooms, the sound of the distant St. Mary’s chimes and the occasional soft boat horn signal way out on the mighty Mississippi River, you drifted off into a special part of the day in the city—the afternoon nap. ❖

