9th Ward Nighthawks

By Jimmy D. Doggette Jr.

New Orleans has been plagued by mosquitoes because of the swamps and woods all around, providing vast breeding areas for them. Although we lived well inside the outskirts of the "Big Easy," no one was spared.

Mosquitoes have many names locally, and when we lived in the Lower 9th Ward, they were dubbed "the 9th Ward Nighthawks." They would hole up in vegetation during the day because of the heat, and then come out at night to hunt us.

In those days we were especially vulnerable, with a large window fan for cooling and old window screens with holes in them. Even today mosquitoes are the bane of local folks, and everyone talks about cures and prevention. I still relate my boyhood experience to those who complain.

One warm spring night in 1953, I was sleeping in the back half-room of my grandparents' five-room shotgun house. Before retiring for the night, Grandma would come and spray around the windows and beds with a hand-pump sprayer filled with Gulf insecticide.

This small back room was next to the bathroom and had windows all down the side. A back door led to the steps outside. The screens on these windows were completely gone. I left the room door and a window open so that the large window fan in the kitchen would suck air from inside and fresh air from outside would come in—along with the 9th Ward Nighthawks.

Those old houses had been built around 1900. They had no insulation and everything came in through knotholes in the wooden floors and cracks and crevices around windows and doors. The insect spray would last only about three or four hours, and then the hunt was on.

I awoke at 2 a.m. one Saturday, burning and itching all over from those 9th Ward Nighthawks. They were buzzing in my ears with their high-pitched whine. I was miserable. I knew that I wouldn't go back to sleep unless I could find relief.

I got up and eased out of my room into the kitchen. No matter how careful I was not to wake up the rest of the house, the old floorboards creaked and groaned when I stepped on them. But experience had taught me how to step lightly around the worst spots.

I made it to the bathroom. It had a large door of planking with leather hinges and a block of wood nailed to the doorjamb that you could turn to keep the door closed.

The lights hung from the 10-foot ceilings, with a pull chain to turn them on. Across from the tub, there was an old table in the corner that held all of the family's medications.

I began to scan the bottles: Black Draught for colds … Freezone for corns … Deep Heet for sore muscles … Mentholatum … then my eyes fell on a bottle of Absorbine Jr. I picked up the dark green bottle and looked at the label.

OK. It's good for insect bites, I said to myself. I opened the cap and rubbed it on all of the bumps, bites and claw marks. Yeah, it burned like fire and stung like bees, but I got the relief I sought. I carefully made my way back to my room, and by that time, I was feeling pretty good. I slid into bed and got comfortable.

I heard the high-pitched whine of a mosquito in my right ear, and in an instant, it was gone. As I lay there, I noticed that none were biting me anymore.

Ha! Absorbine Jr. is a repellent, too, I thought to myself.

Somewhere between noticing how the full moon made everything outside glow and the pattern shining on the wall from the soft orange lights of the tubes on the back of my radio, I drifted off to a blissful sleep.

Never again was I bothered by those pesky 9th Ward Nighthawks. ❖

❖❖❖

From Good Old Days Specials Magazine, May 2006, Vol. 33, No. 3, Copyright © 2006 Good Old Days Specials Magazine