

CRAWFISH MIRAGE

Sometimes you find the boil and sometimes the boil finds you

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Melanie Warner Spencer*



▶ **MY HUSBAND MARK AND I HAVE A** knack for happening upon crawfish boils. Every time, there's a little hint of magic in the moment, but never as much as one late afternoon in the spring of 2014.

We were walking in our Uptown New Orleans neighborhood — the sweet scent of jasmine, gardenias and magnolias mingled in the air, the streetcar clack, clack, clacked, grrred and clanged down St. Charles Avenue and the temperatures were mercifully mild. While we chatted about this house or that flowerbed, we each came to a sudden stop.

"Did you see that?" Mark said.

"I think so," I said.

We crept back toward a grand, two-story, gray house we'd passed countless times. The

gate to the driveway, attached to a tall brick wall that obscured everything on the side and back of the house, was always closed. We peered through the now open gate and were spied by a 6-foot-ish young man holding a beer. He stood in the driveway over a long table piled about three-hands high with crawfish plus all of the fixins.

"Hello!" said the young man, who waved with his free hand.

"Looks like you guys are about to have a fun afternoon," Mark said.

The guy laughed and nodded, then to our astonishment, invited us to come in and join the party. Over the next two hours, we consumed spicy crustaceans and frosty beer and got to know our neighbor (a recent Tulane grad) and his parents (who

are from South America). They were so warm and welcoming to us — complete strangers. This was deeply touching, because having moved to Louisiana from Texas that February, we had only lived in New Orleans for a few months and hadn't yet met many people. This would be one of countless times we made friends over food in our new state.

That's the thing about Louisiana. Eating is often a community affair, as evidenced by the sheer number of food festivals around the state. From New Orleans' relatively new Fried Chicken Festival and the Rayne Frog Festival, to the Scott Boudin Festival and the Grillin' for Grads barbecue cook off in Shreveport, there is something for everyone. We're also hard pressed to find a weekend throughout the year when someone isn't holding a gumbo party, oyster happy hour, catfish fry or, of course, a crawfish boil. Once at a Cajun boucherie we got acquainted with a fella named Tom Crosby, while he presided over an ancient cast iron pot of cracklin'. To this day Tom's is the best cracklin' I've ever tasted. He introduced himself as "brother of Big Foot, son of High Ness," and we were glued to our spots for a long time listening to him spin tales.

We've made new friends while breaking boudin in Lafayette, grubbing on gumbo in Baton Rouge and cracking tails all the way from New Orleans' Clesi's to Kim's Seafood in Shreveport. I've come to believe if you can't make friends in Louisiana, you're likely a member of that strange breed of people who views eating as a mere basic need, rather than an enjoyable hobby or sporting event.

Bless their hearts.

As crawfish season comes to a close, we'll mourn its passing until next year and celebrate the friends new and old we've met around the table. Interestingly, we haven't seen the gate to that big, old gray house in Uptown open since that day three years ago. To this day, we're not entirely sure the boil we happened upon really happened. Is there such a thing as a crawfish mirage? ■

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ARDENT SPRITS

Tippling, scribbling and road tripping through the South

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Melanie Warner Spencer*



▶ **SOUTHERNERS, ESPECIALLY SOUTHERN** writers, are passionate about many things including, but not limited to, telling stories, food, football and hooch — and telling stories about food, football and hooch. Some of our most celebrated writers were zealous lusers, using their favorite spirits as fuel, muse and subject matter. For example, consider the life and work of William Faulkner, Hunter S. Thompson, O. Henry, Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote — wait, maybe that's not the best list, given each one of these writers had a certain degree of — shall we say, issues — surrounding their drinking habits. That said, not only did each of them practice the art of consuming aqua vitae (a little too much), but also at one time or another ginned and juiced in Louisiana — specifically, New Orleans.

Now, I don't have any basis in fact for the following assertion, but it seems to me one could build the case that drinking in Louisiana — specifically, New Orleans —

makes you a better writer. I've only lived here a little over three years, but my own prose has improved exponentially. Or, I'm too sauced to know one way or another, but we don't have to figure that out right now. Let's take our time and drink about it. Where was I? Oh, inebriated Southerners, yes. There are a lot of us and we can be found tippling in watering holes, on porches and even on the streets in some cities — specifically, New Orleans. I would say also in the passenger seat of a moving vehicle, but the Louisiana State Legislature closed that loophole in 2004. Now don't you worry, you can still have your drive-through daiquiri and drink it too, but just don't put that straw in it until you get home, ya hear? Ernest Hemingway, who advised, "Write drunk; edit sober," was not a Southerner, but he loved daiquiris and also spent some time drinking in Louisiana — specifically New Orleans. Were Papa alive today, he likely would have relished the days-long festival dedicated to drink, Tales of the Cocktail. It kicks off in New Orleans

on July 18 and draws hospitality industry professionals and intoxicant aficionados from all over the world. It's a lot like the South by Southwest Music Festival held in Austin, Texas each year, but for liquor. Actually, it's just like SXSW, without the music part getting in the way of the drinking.

My husband Mark and I, frequent imbibers, were both born and raised in Kentucky, which means we are partial to bourbon. It also means we have consumed drinks during interstate moves or while on road trips (not while driving, of course) at bars in every state and commonwealth between the Bluegrass and the Pelican State. As well as in Texas, Arkansas, Georgia and Florida, leaving eight Southern states to go, but we'll settle for conquering those we have left in the Southeastern Conference. Once on a road trip to Shreveport I had a mighty terrible cold and laryngitis. Let me tell you, there is no care and comfort greater than a hot toddy delivered by a compassionate bartender or server when you are traveling in a strange city.

As much as I love having a drink at Sloppy's Downtown in Lake Charles; Flying Heart Brewing in Bossier City; and The Chimes in Baton Rouge, to name a few, one of our favorite places to knock back some cold ones — apart from our own porch — is the Erin Rose in New Orleans' French Quarter. Our first experience there was meeting up with a lawyer friend during a visit to the city before we moved from Texas. I'm not one to do shots, but I can't resist an Irish Car Bomb (a half ounce of Jameson Irish Whiskey and a half ounce of Baileys Irish cream dropped into a half glass of Guinness), which tastes like chocolate milk. We had a couple there with our friend. He's now a seminarian living and studying in Rome and we eventually moved to New Orleans. While I can't say for sure that he turned to the priesthood because of the events of that night at the Erin Rose, there is no doubt in my mind that it contributed to our undeniable desire to move to Louisiana — specifically, New Orleans. ■

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THE TREE FUNERAL

Creative punishments and an outdoorsy childhood shape a young conservationist

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Melanie Warner Spencer*



WE GATHERED IN GLOOMY SILENCE around two shallow pits on the edge of the woods and watched as my 13-year-old cousin lowered each casualty into freshly turned dirt. My 15-year-old brother, other 11-year-old cousin, and my 12-year-old self served simultaneously as supervisors of the punishment's implementation and as mourners. The victims: two saplings. Dad discovered the carnage during a routine walk of the property. The investigation, interrogation, trial and sentencing — which all took place at the scene of the crime — were swift and, as is always the case with my dad, the penalty was both fitting and creative. An avalanche of evidence pointed to my oldest male cousin (whose name is being withheld because he was a juvenile at the time) as the perpetrator. It didn't take long to wrangle out a confession. Dad kept all of us there while the offender grimly dug the graves and buried the young trees, imparting a

lesson that day about the meaningless destruction of nature and other people's property and the consequences to such ill-conceived actions. A childhood steeped in family camping vacations; hiking and fishing trips; countless hours helping my grandparents care for their livestock and land; and those inventive schoolings at my father's knee admittedly made a nature-loving conservationist out of me. Perhaps because of that, time spent at the beach or in the forest is always the quickest way for me to relax and recharge. When a trip to the coast isn't an option, it's not a problem. A bike ride on the Tammany Trace hike and bike trail or a nature walk at the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve serve as quick fixes to the stressors of city life. In fact, a recent 30-minute visit to the alligator habitat at the University of Louisiana did wonders for my disposition. As my husband Mark and I watched alligators gliding through the

water and turtles swimming or sunbathing on logs, my breathing got a little easier and I nearly forgot we were in the middle of downtown Lafayette. In May, Mark and I went to Toledo Bend. At 185,000 acres, Toledo Bend is the largest man-made body of water in the South and fifth largest in the United States. It is breathtaking. We stayed at Cypress Bend Resort, and while we aren't anglers or golfers, gorgeous scenery and light hiking kept us occupied for a few days and nights. The swimming pool and bar helped pass a little time too.

One evening during our stay, we smuggled a bottle of bubbly out to the overlook for a sunset toast. As we navigated the slight inclines of the concrete path, fireflies began to flicker in the trees. We could hear the sound of water lapping against the ground as we approached the steep bluff. I did the honors of popping the cork and pouring our drinks. Looking out at Texas in the distance, the sky ablaze with pink, orange, blue and purple, a light breeze came in off of the reservoir rustling the leaves in the trees and we clinked our cups. Surrounded that night by mature pine and shade trees, I made a mental note to call my dad to tell him about our trip and that it reminded me of that one time he staged the tree funeral. Inevitably when I called the next day, the conversation turned to the time I climbed the birch tree, was overcome by a sudden fear of heights and Dad had to rescue me with an extension ladder. That experience gave me an altogether different interpretation of the term tree hugger. ■

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