

Old NOLA Journal

A Blog History of Old New Orleans

Salaparuta

<http://oldnolajournal.blogspot.com/2009/05/salaparuta.html>



The levees did not break in Salaparuta; the earth did. For this small town in western Sicily, January 26, 1968 was the same as August 29, 2005 for us in New Orleans, the day Hurricane Katrina came. During the night of January 26 a massive earthquake tore through the town and the nearby region. A village that had existed for 900 years was totally destroyed in a matter of 30 seconds. All of the ancient, historic buildings lay in ruins. The 3000 inhabitants of Salaparuta now had to wait on the slopes of a hill for the quake to pass. When the land finally became quiet again, the entire town was left homeless. The people eventually did rebuild their 900 year old town, but not in the same place. Many of the citizens left the town for good, but some returned. Again, in its own way, it was like Katrina.

People had been leaving Salaparuta for a long, long time, however, long before the 1968 catastrophe. In the 1800's people left because of poverty and civil instability. Some went elsewhere in Sicily or Italy or in the Mediterranean region. Others sailed across the Atlantic to America's eastern seaboard and New York City. But some came here to New Orleans.

From some research I did, I recognized some of the last names of families from Salaparuta who came to America since the late 1800's and specifically to New Orleans -- Palumbo, Bruno, Cangialosi, Capo, DiMaggio, Drago, Ippolito, Lupo, Mandina, Navarra, Oliveri, Prima, Russo, Trapani, and Giarraputto. (See www.graffagnino.com/familytree/salaparuta.htm)

Among the multitudes of poor, desperate Sicilian immigrants was a man who, seemingly, had no connection whatsoever to New Orleans and its unique culture of exquisite foods, priceless architecture, and the only truly unique art form ever created in America, namely, Jazz. This impoverished son of Salaparuta was named Girolamo LaRocca who married Vita DeNina, also of Sicily. They immigrated to New Orleans, where many Sicilians faced strong discrimination initially,

and had a son named Dominic, who was called "Nick" for short. And "Nick" LaRocca became one of the most famous and most significant Jazz cornet (trumpet) players and Jazz bandleaders in all of New Orleans history. He became the director of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band which sprang from New Orleans but influenced Jazz across the country in Chicago and New York.

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB) is credited with the first ever recording of a Jazz song, "Livery Stable Blues," which was recorded in 1917 and which made the band internationally famous. The ODJB was also said to be the first Jazz band to tour Europe before a large audience, and this made Jazz extremely popular there to this very day.

Nick LaRocca died in the early 1960's but his son still continues the tradition of New Orleans Jazz with the ODJB. (See <http://www.odjb.com/>) The mayor of New Orleans sent a letter to Salaparuta acknowledging the historic ties between the two cities. Lt. Gov. Kathleen Blanco of Louisiana sent a certificate to the mayor of Salaparuta for honoring New Orleans Jazz music. (Again see www.odjb.com which has copies of the letter and the certificate online.)

In August 2008, three years after Katrina, a Jazz center -- Nick LaRocca Cultural Arts Center -- was established in Salaparuta in honor of Nick LaRocca and his family who helped connect that small town in Sicily, which was destroyed by an earthquake, to a large city in America, New Orleans, which was devastated by a hurricane.

But earthquakes, hurricanes, immigration, exile, poverty, prejudice and every other hardship known to woman or man could not stop the beat of the drum and sound of the cornet and a genuine love for music which exists like no place else on Planet Earth except for New Orleans ... and Salaparuta.

--Adrian

(Note: The ODJB photo above is in public domain from. "Nick" is playing the cornet in the photo, third from the left.

Posted by Adrian McGrath