

Saturday
December 28, 1991

Hi, Boze,

"Aida" is filling the room and I thought you might be interested in my introduction to it - and the world of opera.

Mere and Granddaddy had been avid attendants of the French Opera House in New Orleans and had taken their five daughters regularly. I don't know the date of the fire that destroyed the historic building but I heard many references to the great loss to New Orleans. When I was nine or ten years old the first travelling company from the Met was booked into the Tulane Theatre for one week. Granddaddy bought seats for the six evening performances and I was taken to each one - the first being "Aida." "La Boheme," "Madame Butterfly," "Carmen," the dual bill of "Cavaleria Rusticana" and "Pagliacci," and "La Traviata" completed the marathon. Fortunately, I had an ecstatic reaction and each subsequent exposure has been equally fulfilling.

Another musical memory revolves around Christmas. In that era (I imagine it's different now) no "carols" were sung. There were, however, traditional Catholic hymns sung from the choir loft in St. Augustine's Church, one of which was "O Holy Night" -- which, in French was "Minuit Chretien" (Christian Midnight.). Mere had a friend named Mimi Chretien - I was in my teens before I realized the song title was not her name. It sounded like it to me and I figured she must be destined for sainthood as the choir sang about her every Christmas.

Back to opera for a minute: the Texaco broadcast from the Met recently celebrated 50 years on the air. I left New Orleans 54 years ago so I never witnessed Granddaddy's enjoyment of those Saturday afternoon operas but I heard about it and, in a minimal way, I like to think I contributed to it: it was my gentle persistence that finally broke the resistance toward having a radio in the home. I was 12 and all my friends talked about Bing Crosby and the comedy teams (Jack Benny and Mary Livingstone; Fred Allen and his wife, Portland; Burns and Allen). It's amazing to think there was a time when radio was "revolutionary." Like water cracking rock, I dropped hints and pleas for months. Finally, one afternoon when I came home from school, I was told there was a surprise in the dining-room. Lo and behold, on a credenza on the right wall sat the magical box. For a while I was the only one enamored of it - but, slowly, the converts gathered. On Friday evenings Granddaddy and Mere listened to weakly show called "Showboat" with Lanny Ross as the tenor. Oddly, I can't remember other programs or their titles. I do know that I hated radio soaps as much as I hate TV soaps. A reigning favorite was "Helen Trent" introduced by a sonorous announcer in this query: "Can a girl from a small mining town in Virginia find happiness married to a wealthy Earl (or Baron?) living in New York City?" You dam well bet she can!!

These days when news from all over the world is sent by satellite in living pictures on Television, I can remember when momentous occasions were hollered out by the word "Extra" from a roving newsboy. "Extra - Extra - Lindberg lands in Paris." "Extra - Extra - Tunney beats Dempsey." A week, or more, later the event was witnessed in local movie houses on Pathe News. Their logo was a weather vane with a cock crowing while the directional initials N,S,W,E formed into the anagram NEWS. No, Life, Time or Newsweek then.

There were other street cries on an almost daily schedule: the street vendors. The waffle man appeared only on a Sunday, in a white cart pulled by a horse. He blew a bugle to announce his arrival. You watched as he made the waffles on a coal stove then doused them with powdered sugar and gently folded them in wax paper. Another week-end hawker was the "colas" lady, calling out: "colas - hot colas" as she balanced a basket on her head. Colas were rather greasy but delicious rice fritters. She walked the neighborhood until her wares were sold. The vegetable wagon came by six week-days - the freshly picked vegetables lined in boxes on each side of the cart for

inspection. Granddaddy went to the French Market every weekend for fruit and specialties. I remember being surrounded by comforting, approved vendors when Granddaddy left me in the car for 2 minutes to fetch something at the open stall across the street. He was only a few feet away but I bellowed in 45 year old panic. He returned immediately, thanking the two-minute baby sitters who were to me not the real thing. The fruit was first rate but hard to keep as there were only ice boxes then. We had one upstairs and one downstairs. My favorite fruit was (and still is) cherries: Fellow's was bananas - one afternoon, he ate seven as Charlie and I sat in wonderment. Charlie's favorite was strawberries.

Every morning Mere fixed a fruit plate for Granddaddy, which followed the grits and stew (or on Sundays, liver). She arranged the pieces in circles - the outer rim was always peeled grapes, halved and seeded. That was love!

When I was visiting Gina when Benn was about six, she prodded me to tell about ice boxes and the men who delivered the 100 lb. blocks on their shoulders, cushioned with burlap sack. He looked at me askance. " You see, Benn, we didn't have refrigerators." "Did you have V.C.R's?" he asked. "We didn't even have television." I soon realized that I had not held his interest. Who ever heard of a time with no T.V.s!!

The opera' s almost through - and so am I. More anon.

The Creole Chronicler

P.S. I'm sure you want this for my obit special in True Grits.