NEW ORLEANS BAR ASSOCIATION
Serving the needs of the Greater New Orleans legal community.

B. A. C. (Before Air Conditioning)

It would be difficult to imagine New Orleans in the summer without air conditioning, but the "old time" electric fan has only been around since the 1880s. Between 1882 and 1886, Dr. Schuyler Skaats Wheeler developed the two-bladed desk fan and Philip Diehl introduced the electric ceiling fan. Even then, electric fans were most often used in commercial establishments or in wealthy households. How did the residents of the Crescent City cool themselves in the "good old days", notwithstanding the high ceilings, transoms and "fan" windows? (In England, the transom above a door is usually called a "fanlight", since Georgian style transoms were often fan-like in shape.)

Before then there were hand-held fans and mechanical fans. The first recorded mechanical fan was the *punka* (or *punkah*) fan used in India in the early 19th century. It had a canvas-covered frame (or solid wood, palm frond or cloth strip) that was suspended from the ceiling. Servants, known as *punka wallahs,* pulled one or two ropes connected to the frame to move the fan back and forth to provide cooling to the diners and hopefully help to keep flies and other insects off the food below. On March 3, 1856, a civil engineer, George Alfred DePenning of 7 Grant's Lane, Calcutta, petitioned the Indian Government for grant of exclusive privileges for his invention, entitled "An Efficient Punkah Pulling Machine".

The *punka* (from Hindi *pakhá*, from Sanskrit *pakaka*, fan, from *paka*, meaning wing) did not take long to make its way to New Orleans and the Old South. One can view *punkas* at Rosedown Plantation in West Feliciana Parish or at Linden in Natchez. And at Melrose in Natchez, there is a *punka* of solid mahogany. The *punka wallahs* once operating the cooling systems at these stately homes, sad to say, were slaves.

There is a *punka* in operation in the 1938 movie, "Jezebel", where Bette Davis plays the strong-willed New Orleans belle, Julie Marsden. And in 1939's "Gone With the Wind", long-handled peacock fans cool the young ladies at "Twelve Oaks" during naptime.

And Booker T. Washington recalled in his autobiography, “Up from Slavery”:

“When I had grown to sufficient size, I was required to go to the "big house" at meal-times to fan the flies from the table by means of a large set of paper fans operated by a pulley.”

Booker T. Washington went on to become an orator, author, educator and dominant African-American leader, head of the great Tuskegee Institute.

In New Orleans, *punkas* quietly cooled guests at the quadroon balls.

John H. B. Latrobe was a writer, inventor and lawyer (specializing in patents). Son of the architect of the nation's capitol, he caught the spirit of New Orleans and the South in his lively 1834 journal. He commented on the customs of the city he called “a place after its own fashion” - from quadroon balls to oysters dripping in hot sauce.

"The quadroons,” Latrobe wrote, “conducted themselves with equal propriety and modesty. Moreover, they were beautiful to look upon. They were gracefully gowned, their smiles came and went with their talk, and they captivated all who were present.” These aristocratic *gens de couleur libre* put on society balls known as the *Bal de Cordon Bleu*, sponsored by the *Societé Cordon Bleu*, a group of well-to-do quadroon mothers who used the balls as a means of securing for their daughters arrangements with well-born, unwed white Creole men. Only wealthy men were invited to attend, for they would be good protectors in this system known as *plaçage*.

Author Eleanor Early described the scene:

“The patrons for each ball sat on a dais carpeted in crimson beneath a winged fan called a punka, that was suspended from the ceiling, and kept in motion by a slave child who pulled at the string that descended from the wings. Around the room sat the rest of the chaperones, all in evening gowns, and fanning themselves with palmetto fans.”

Men chose dancing partners during the ball. The young belles could tactfully decline any further dances if she was not attracted to a particular gentleman, and relied on her chaperone to assist. Once an agreement was reached, the girl was spoken of as *plaçée*.

One old fan system much-beloved by the people of New Orleans was the belt-operated collection of gears, pulleys and belts once on display at the 1884 Louisiana Cotton Exposition. It moved to Kolb’s (German-Creole) Restaurant on St. Charles, where diners viewed a life-size

lederhosen-clad mechanical Bavarian named Ludwig crank away in the rafters on an intricate belt system connected to the ceiling fans. Though Kolb's is gone (but its façade has been newly renovated), a company named "Fanimation" (founded 100 years after the 1884 Cotton Exposition) has recreated a reproduction of the original Snediker & Carr long belt and pulley system installation at Kolb's. Today's model is called the "Bourbon Street". Good place for a "long belt".

The folding fan was invented in Japan in the eighth century and taken to China in the following century. Christian Europe's earliest fan was the *flabellum* (or ceremonial fan), dating back to the 6th century and used during Communion services to drive insects away from the bread and wine (and priest). Made of feathers, leather, silk, metal or parchment, these fans really date back to ancient Egypt, where one was found in King Tut's tomb. Hand-held fans were reintroduced to Europe by the Crusaders, and Portuguese traders brought fans there from China and Japan in the fifteenth century. They became popular and were even considered elaborate high status gifts to royalty. Fans eventually found their way to New Orleans, fluttering past the faces of "Creole babies with flashing eyes".

Fans made entirely of decorated sticks without leaf spacing were known as *brisé* fans. Rigid paddle fans had handles of wood or other material. These were given out at the 200th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, with an image of Napoleon's death mask.

It has been said that in the European courts (or a least during Victorian times) fans were used as a silent code to circumvent social etiquette. Modern research has proved it to be a much later advertising ploy to sell fans. There are at least thirty-two different secret messages, but these can get a little confusing (*Così fan tutte)*.

An open fan covering the left ear means, "Do not betray our secret." But a fan held over the left ear indicates, "I wish to get rid of you." Placed near the heart, the fan signifies, "You have won my love. In other words, I'm a big fan. You fulfill my fantasies. You're fantastic!"

NED HÉMARD