

Angus Lind's New Orleans: Legendary Raconteurs

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John Churchill Chase and Charles "Pie" Dufour left a mark on the city of New Orleans with their storytelling, wit and artistic talents. (Illustration by Mark Andresen)

On a bluebird Sunday not long ago, I was pedaling my trusty Schwinn through Tulane's St. Charles campus, a paradise of tree-filled quadrangles in between the academic stone castles that guard them. Sundays are primo cycling days there because of the relative absence of foot traffic, which allows you to dawdle and look around, daydreaming about college memories ? in my case from long ago.

Believe it or not, that includes academics. Yes, courses and professors. And when I

have those nightmares as many people do about flunking this or that course, being late for an exam or not graduating, I fondly recall my adviser. That would be English professor Harvey Craft, who inherited me after the journalism department folded. He guided a reluctant English major through a minefield of courses I wasn't interested in, and I am eternally grateful.

Although I graduated from Tulane in 1966, the most memorable course I took was one I audited in the '70s. Its catalog name was "New Orleans Up to Now," the history of our city as seen through the eyes of two New Orleans legends who worked hard to keep the heritage, history and customs of New Orleans alive ? Charles L. "Pie" Dufour and John Churchill Chase.

But author-historian-critic-lecturer-columnist-sportswriter Dufour preferred to call it "New Orleans on the Half Shell," a tip of the hat to his gastronomic tendencies as he was a member of the gourmet group La Societe des Escargots Orleanais, known as the "Snails."

The game plan called for cartoonist-author-historian-lecturer-wit Chase to give half the lectures on places in New Orleans with comments from Dufour. Dufour would give half the lectures on people, with Chase interjecting remarks. These two best friends were like two finely tuned boxers who had met before, sparring and jabbing each other with opinions and disagreements over historical events. What this witty point-counterpoint rhetoric did was enthrall and engage the class like no other I'd ever been in.

There was a class in which Chase was describing how a bold move ? a bluff ? by the French colonizer Bienville in 1699 caused the British to turn back in the Mississippi, ultimately causing that point in the river to be named "English Turn." And led to the founding of New Orleans in 1718 by the French.

Then he digressed and flashed his wit: "I'm not supposed to talk about people. Mr. Dufour does that. I'm supposed to talk about places. But people get into places." They did this for 25 years, from 1953â?"1978.

Both were charming, charismatic Renaissance men. Dufour was one of the most unusual Tulane graduates. He enrolled in 1921 but quit to go to work for newspapers. It would be 1953 before he returned to finish up a few courses for his

bachelor's degree. And in 1978, when he retired from his newspaper column, "Pie a la Mode," Tulane gave him an honorary doctorate of humane letters.

At the ceremony he said, "I want to show you that I'm making progress. It took me 32 years to get my first degree and only 25 years to get this one." His fields of interest throughout his career varied widely. His passion for Tulane football and boxing was equaled by his love for opera, classical music and Carnival.

As a colleague of his at the old *States-Item* afternoon newspaper for eight years, I can tell you he was fond of saying, "All my life I've contended that every reporter should be able to interview Jack Dempsey in the morning and Toscanini at night." He was also prone to throw fake body blocks when he walked around the newsroom.

Chase, a graduate of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, was hired by The States, one of two afternoon newspapers in 1947. His chief character was "Mr. New Orleans" or "The Little Man," who was always dressed in a 1890s long coat, top hat, bushy moustache and glasses. He did the first animated cartoons for WDSU-TV from 1964-74. He also created cartoon covers for college football programs, including those of Tulane for 20 years. Last year in its return to playing football on campus, the program covers done by artist Mark Andresen were a tribute to Chase, featuring his mischievous "Little Greenie."

A frequent visitor to Dufour's office at the paper during my time, Chase was fond of saying, "The home team never lost on the cover, I know that."

In 1942, the department store D.H. Holmes was celebrating its centennial and asked Chase to draw a panel on the history of Holmes and New Orleans. His research led him to write the definitive, acclaimed book on street names: *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children*. He lectured frequently on the subject and quipped, "I do not think in the whole history of New Orleans that anyone has ever spoken from the platform more about the same subject without either being elected or defeated in public office."

Chase and Dufour left their marks on this city, making us all the better for their efforts.

Dufour's 20 books, 50 scholarly articles and 9,700 columns are part of Special

Collections of the Tulane Howard-Tilton Memorial Library.

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