You Say Poor Boy, I Say Po-Boy: New Orleans’ Culinary and Labor History Sandwiched Together

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The decision to order either a poor boy sandwich or a po-boy sandwich in New Orleans transmits a surprising amount of cultural baggage. Most New Orleanians are accustomed to saying po-boy and seeing the French bread sandwich name written in its contracted form on signs and menus. When someone such as local food guru Tom Fitzmorris insists upon saying poor boy, the original term, he invites ridicule for being an elitist.

In a heated exchange during a panel discussion at the 2007 Po-Boy Preservation Festival, food writer Tom Fitzmorris faced off against poor boy expert and cartoonist Bunny Matthews. The latter favours ‘po-boy’, and the two men represent two sides of a generational shift.

Fitzmorris: I have a gut-level aversion to something that started in New Orleans somewhere in the 1970s. It seems to me that something could not possibly be authentic New Orleans unless it were seedy, a little sleazy, a little funky—which strikes me as funny because we have historically been thought of as a cultured city.

. . .whoever uses the term po’ when you mean to use the word poor when you talk about anything else [besides the sandwich]?

Matthews: Everybody in New Orleans does. That’s an absurd thing to say! You don’t tell your kids you’re going to get a poor boy sandwich.

Fitzmorris: Yes I do!

Matthews: Oh, you’re full of shit, boy. Nobody says that.
Fitzmorris: See? This is a perfect example. Here I am trying to make a cogent comment on this, and I’m being accused of being full of bullshit.

Following a few more minutes of argument, Fitzmorris concluded that ‘this is the most ridiculous controversy imaginable’ (Poor Boy Sandwich History Panel Discussion 2007). As depicted in a recent book by food writer Sara Roahen (2008, pp. 99-118), Fitzmorris’ argument seems to end with the idea that the original restaurateurs called it a poor boy and spelled it that way on their menus, so Fitzmorris is going to abide by their wishes. He appears to be a stodgy traditionalist unwilling to account for shifts in language. It might seem that one could not find a less significant debate, even in culinary history. After all, who in the United States orders a submarine sandwich instead of a sub?

Nevertheless, the po-boy/poor boy debate is more than simply an entertaining sideline about quirky New Orleanians. The argument symbolizes the general disappearance of a vibrant working class history from New Orleans’ consciousness as older residents have died off. Fitzmorris is historically correct, and he is not the only one who insists upon the non-contracted form.

Descendants of the baker and restaurant owners who invented the sandwich and older New Orleanians use only the poor boy term. Dwindling numbers of people whose memories stretch far enough back understand the term’s significance. ‘Poor boy’ memorializes the 1,100 street railway workers whose union was broken during a 1929 strike. Oral history interviews I conducted with many who had firsthand knowledge of the strike and the sandwich name reveal that none of these older New Orleanians ever broke from the standard poor boy nomenclature.
My examination of poor boy sandwich origins began as research for a video documentary on New Orleans streetcar history I was producing in the mid-1990s. Delving into sandwich history, I had expected to trace the several different origin stories and, I hoped, substantiate some link to the streetcar strike featured in my documentary. Despite my doubts, archival and oral history evidence revealed that working class New Orleanians had maintained a consistent story that conformed with established facts. The name and remarkable size of the French bread sandwich had sprung directly from the strike. Brothers and former streetcar conductors Bennie and Clovis Martin turned lunch stand operators in the French Market had supported the strikers in 1929 by providing free meals for their former union brothers. Those meals eventually turned into large sandwiches made from especially long loaves of French bread created to fill this need.  

Following the video documentary’s release, reporters often sought my interpretation of poor boy history. Knowing that archived news articles featured the strike origin story, I considered the factual version of its history to be readily available, so I did not plan to publish on the topic. A couple of younger journalists began to refer to the strike story as the most prominent creation myth among several and used qualifiers such as ‘alleged’ and ‘legend’ when writing about the poor boy’s labour history origins.

**Community Versus Culinary History**

Popular interest and confrontations with bad poor boy history finally moved me to write a scholarly article on the sandwich’s history. Even as food writing and culinary history have burgeoned in the last several years, the authors too often end their research after having located one old newspaper article or reference work. Seldom do food writers
look beyond a previously published source. The adventurous ones might rely on interviews, but then they usually stop short of seeking any primary sources or other methods for verifying information conveyed through oral history. While culinary history is fascinating, it’s all just a bunch of legends, they tend to claim; therefore, one should never expect to ferret out the actual origins. Select a story that sounds right and stick with it tends to characterize too much published food history.

This scenario confronted me more than a decade after I had engaged in my earlier research. When one of the journalists I shared my findings with opted to refute the information for no apparent reason, I decided I needed to write about New Orleans food history. In responding to freelance writer Pableaux Johnson’s initial phone call, I explained how, despite my original doubts, I had found that the most popular story about the sandwich’s origins was accurate. As I do with all journalists, I offered to provide copies of my source material, including a letter from the Martin Brothers pledging to feed the strikers free meals. I never heard from Johnson again, but several months later I received a list of excellent questions from a fact checker at the national magazine publishing his piece. I was amazed at how specifically focused her questions were, so I thought that finally I would be able to refer other journalists to a detailed, well-researched synopsis.

The published article portrayed the strike story as ‘apocryphal’ (Johnson 2005) and argued that the sandwich had been named in the 1800s—long before the 1929 streetcar strike. New Orleans’ alternative weekly newspaper praised the article for disproving some myths (Price 2005).^5^ Ironically, the journalist had sold the article to a national publication by claiming to set the record straight about the history of the
Considering that I had missed some essential evidence that Johnson had uncovered, I set out to write my account by contacting the author and asking about his research material. He had consulted one source, John Mariani’s *Encyclopedia of American Food and Drink* (1999). After first relating the Martin Brothers’ strike account, Mariani added, ‘Another story says the term is related to the French for a gratuity, *pourboire*. Nonetheless, the term ‘poor boy’ for a sandwich goes back to 1875’ (p. 246).

I then exchanged emails with Mariani, who told me that he had found the citation in the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (1999), which reports the term first being used between 1875 and 1880. This is where the correcting of an ‘apocryphal’ legend dead-ends. Much more detailed treatments are found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) and the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (1985), and both cite 1931 as the first published use. As of yet, no menus, restaurant signage or other evidence has been found to support the term poor boy being used to describe French bread sandwiches before the strike. The historical method had lost out to one book with ‘Encyclopedia’ in its title and one dictionary reference.

A sense of pride in my own work certainly motivated my decision to write down a history ignored by scholars and given short shrift by foodies; however, I also recollected the voices of many deceased New Orleanians who had related the poor boy sandwich origins when I had videotaped interviews during the mid-1990s. The term ‘apocryphal’ resonated as I thought of one such voice, the former New Orleans Fire Department...
Superintendent Bill McCrossen, who responded with, ‘You could get a sandwich anywhere, but you could only get a poor boy at Martin Brothers’ (1995).

Every voice I recorded spoke with a working class dialect. Most were quite distinct while a few reflected a smoother, lilting quality. Interestingly, the voices of those who write about the sandwich, including my own, tend to reflect no such inborn connection to the New Orleans culture we profess to comprehend. The voices of the living grandchildren of the families who developed the sandwich are just as adamant in defending the use of poor boy; these descendants, whom we celebrate during the Po-Boy Festival as the ‘founding families of the Poor Boy’, are three and four generations removed from the originators, yet their voices also sound with authentic New Orleans dialects. Attempts to negate their family and community history incensed some of the descendants. They transmit an oral history that my research confirmed and enhanced using documentary evidence as well as interviews.

Pursuing sandwich history may seem laughable to traditional history scholars and many others. A graduate student responded to news of my work with comic disbelief. Nevertheless, food history is often so elusive and generally poorly researched that when essential elements about origins can be understood, one should attempt to tell the story as fully as possible. However, a scholarly article alone would not amend the record because most academics continue to have little impact upon the general public. A 1950 linguist’s scholarly account of the poor boy sandwich origins floats around the Internet with scarcely any attention paid to it (Cohen 1950: 67-69). The best way to reconnect the public to its own history would be via a much more substantial and lively medium.
Public History and the Poor Boy

I engaged in my first poor boy public history experience during a 2004 event welcoming the return of streetcar service to the city’s main thoroughfare, Canal Street, and marking the 75th anniversary of the poor boy streetcar strike. A farmer’s market sponsored a poor boy tasting to accompany the history. The poor boy shop owner near the market site had reopened a famous restaurant known as the Parkway Bakery because long ago it had baked its own loaves. He decorated his restaurant with nostalgic icons of local history as well as sandwich artefacts; therefore, he had developed a reputation as an authoritative source on the sandwich’s history.

This poor boy shop owner is a great restaurateur, and nobody quarrels with his expertise in the kitchen. While few historians would consider themselves prepared to step into a commercial kitchen and begin serving food, this restaurant owner feels no such qualms. Like me, he, too, drew upon oral history to back up his stories. However, he had no inclination to examine the stories he had been told.

The owner of the Parkway Bakery had told the farmer’s market staff an old story about the first poor boy sandwiches having been made with fried potatoes. The market folk loved the legend and produced signs and press materials proclaiming that everyone could taste the original poor boy served to the strikers. The media and others remarked upon how they had never known that the first poor boy had been the French-fried one, and they assumed that my research had revealed this information. A few wanted to know exactly how I had discovered that it was the first one. While answering their questions in advance of the main presentation, I debated whether to discuss this aspect at all before making brief comments and distributing a short handout describing the history of the
sandwich. I know that most public historians have encountered those moments when one treads the line between correcting a well-loved story and appearing to be an anal-retentive killjoy.

This French-fry tale appeals to many because it melds poverty with one of its hallmark foods: potatoes. Few hearing this story in a twenty-first century city infamous for its impoverished residents would consider how insulting such an action would have been in the context of 1929. Early twentieth century New Orleans was still a union labour stronghold, so to offer former union brothers a meal of fried potatoes instead of a more substantial sandwich with meat would have been disrespectful. The restaurateurs promised a ‘free meal’ to the strikers.

Beggars in this period probably received either plain stale bread or perhaps sections of loaves moistened with roast beef gravy, termed ‘debris’ in New Orleans; the more telling examples of poverty were over-ripe banana French bread sandwiches, often served with mayonnaise. Since New Orleans served as one of the most important entry points for the banana into the US diet, rotten and over-ripe bananas were often available either inexpensively or free. This story, even more interesting than the fried potato one, is scarcely known; children growing up in the slums near the docks, however, were well aware of this meal.

I decided to point out that the potato origin story was just one of the many colourful tales connected to the sandwich history, and I had already prepared a brief historical account on a handout that included my contact information for anyone interested in helping me to preserve similar stories about the poor boy. Following the market presentation, I told the restaurant owner in private that I had a colourfully
illustrated newspaper photo essay from 1949 with an interview of the originator of the sandwich (‘Poor Boy Gets Rich’ c. 1949). Clovis Martin explained that the French-fry poor boy was a post-World War II innovation owing to teenagers not having enough money for a regular sandwich. I let the restaurateur know that I could provide him with a copy of the clipping for display in his restaurant, but this artefact did not appeal to his sense of history.\(^9\)

In 2007, the restaurant owner told a *New Yorker* journalist the same fried potato po-boy story. I learned this when the writer remarked to me how interesting the French fry sandwich story was. He had blogged about this story days earlier, so even though we were supposed to discuss race relations on the streetcars, he asked me to clarify the sandwich origins so he could correct the earlier article (Baum 2007a, 2007b).

**Po-Boy Preservation Festival**

As part of their participation in the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street program, Oak Street Association leaders sought a festival to bring people to the street. Veneration of the poor boy is part of a larger post-Katrina movement that treasures New Orleans cultural history, so the association settled upon the poor boy as a quintessential local food around which to develop a festival, although few of the merchants were connected to the sandwich trade.\(^{10}\) Serendipitously, I was completing a scholarly essay for a New Orleans culinary history collection when a group of merchants from the Carrollton neighbourhood’s business district approached me in 2007 about their developing a po-boy festival. After recent experiences with inaccurate culinary history in print, I was happy to work on the inaugural event.
The Po-Boy Fest provides an artificial celebration of uncommonly good food originally meant for common folk. ‘S.O.S’.—Save Our Sandwich—is a catchphrase adopted by the festival organizers in marketing the festival. The concept of preserving the sandwich against the onslaught of Subway, Quiznos, and other chain fast-food restaurants succeeded from the outset. What many expected to be a small-scale neighbourhood festival brought more than 10,000 people onto three blocks of Oak Street during the first year. The poor boy and the sandwich shops and groceries that had long purveyed the sandwich symbolized small family businesses and local culture, just as Oak Street epitomizes one of the city’s hardscrabble, not completely gentrified commercial districts. Family-owned sandwich shops, and the family-owned bakeries that supplied them with bread, had already declined in number after suffering decades of competition from fast food franchises selling inexpensive hamburger and fried chicken.11

Po-Boy: Racial Epithet, Down-home Southernism, or Both?

No debate over po-boy versus poor boy occurred in deciding the festival name, since the organizers were unfamiliar with the term’s history. So many decades had elapsed since the sandwich name had shortened, that most New Orleanians discern no racial overtones to the po-boy term. However, a recent arrival in the community, food writer Sara Roahen (2008: 104), reports that she initially felt like a white rapper and had to overcome an aversion to the term when ordering the sandwich.

The term ‘po’ has emerged in other mainstream contexts, serving most notably as the name for a regional franchise of restaurants named Po’ Folks. Headquartered in the panhandle of Florida, all but one of its ten locations are in Florida and Alabama. The
corporation’s website depicts the Po’ in its name as symbolic of its down-home, ‘folksy’
nature; nevertheless, this quaint expression does not seem to resonate beyond the
restaurant’s Deep South customer base.

Well before its culinary application, the term had circulated in wide enough use
among Blues musicians early in the twentieth century that a white folklorist included two
songs with ‘Po’ Boy’ in their titles in a 1911 scholarly article (Odum: 270). Langston
Hughes’ poem ‘Po’Boy Blues’ demonstrates that African-American intellectuals were
well aware of the term during the Harlem Renaissance. The term ‘poor boy’ was
commonly used during the early twentieth century to denote schools and orphanages for
children, e.g., ‘The instruction in said school shall be free for poor boys’. Both terms
existed well before the 1929 streetcar strike, but neither one was tied to a sandwich name
beforehand. However, the terms were likely racialized in conversational use from the
outset. White impoverished children probably enjoyed the dignity of being labelled
‘poor’, while black kids, and some of the whites, may have been ‘po’.

The term po-boy in the years before the strike likely may have referred to beggars
seeking leftover bits of food in the French Market. Almost all legends of the sandwich
name attribute its origins to the city’s largest and oldest public market, and a couple of
the stories centre upon the dismissive term ‘boy’ as used to describe African American
men. Some of the most offensive accounts, recorded during the Great Depression,
describe poor African-American youth begging in the French Market. They were
described as moving from stall to stall with loaves of stale bread, acquiring limp lettuce
from one vendor and over-ripe tomatoes from another, and then scraps of meat from
another. One version published in 1937 (Cora and Brown: 187) accepts the Martin
Brothers origin and then states that ‘[t]he story goes that Martin couldn’t resist little negro boys who eyed his snacks wistfully and finally came out with, ‘Mistah, could you all spa’h a sandwich fo’ a po’ boy.’ This tale turns upon both the racially derisive meaning of boy and the surprising generosity of one of the Martins who responds by filling a full loaf of bread with fried oysters, ham and cheese, and other meat. It ends by suggesting that ‘in retelling the Martin story, all New Orleans puts a great deal of pathos and feeling into pronouncing “po” boy’, so the sandwich is better known that way than as a ‘poor boy’. Despite this account, interviews reveal that many white and black New Orleanians assiduously avoided the contracted form.

One local culinary researcher refuses to use ‘po-boy’ because she believes that it originated ‘to mock black dialect’ (Detweiler). Given the sandwich’s origins in the mixed-race working-class French Quarter neighbourhood, however, the term more likely mocked white as well as black speech. Nevertheless, cognizance of a shared dialect seems to have disappeared simultaneously with the movement of white residents from the downtown neighbourhoods and blacks from the French Quarter during the mid-twentieth century. The term carried at least two meanings. As ‘poor boy’, it spoke to the tragedy of union men who faced off against the city utility only to be reduced to the level of beggars relying upon handouts. Applying the term to men who had once been considered to be among the aristocrats of labour provided an ironic twist. As ‘po-boy’, it could conjure up a scene that racists might depict as comical, the sight and sound of black men or boys begging for food or ordering a sandwich. Few twenty-first century New Orleans diners associate the sandwich with racist origins; time also has eroded the sense of what used to
be common knowledge: the sandwich’s connection to a violent labour strike. For most, the sandwich name represents just one of the city’s many culinary hallmarks.14

Careful use of ‘poor boy’ rather than ‘po-boy’ may be somewhat analogous to use of the terms ‘woman’ and ‘lady’ in the Jim Crow South. Either a black or white female could be identified as a woman; however, only white women could be called ‘ladies’. The strikers memorialized by the sandwich were all white.15 Steadfast use of the term poor boy may have indicated that there would be no mistaking these white strikers for the familiar beggars. Adherence to poor boy on most white-owned restaurant menus might represent a distancing from poorly educated white as well as black neighbourhood residents.

Photographs shared by descendants of the Martin family prove to be telling.16 The earliest surviving photograph of Martin Brothers Coffee Stand and Restaurant depicts a takeaway French Market stall located in the French Quarter when it was an integrated slum housing poor African- and Italian-American families. The Martins served black and white workers from the nearby, biracially unionized docks. The commercial photographer’s print features white owners and employees formally posed, but the image includes an African-American customer seated at one of the counters. The restaurant’s move to a much larger location on a main thoroughfare following the strike represented success. The larger restaurant also included a black service window. The move from the waterfront to true public space reveals that the black ‘po-boys’ now endured window service.

Rise of the Po-Boy in Post-Civil Rights New Orleans
Despite early conversational use of the contracted form, ‘poor boy’ rather than ‘po-boy’ predominated on menus and sandwich shop signage more than four decades after the strike. The 1970 edition of *The New Orleans Underground Gourmet* included reviews of several poor boy and ‘working man’ restaurants (Collin 1970). Po-boy does not appear anywhere in the book. The transition to po-boy in print represents several changes. Increased use of the colloquial term symbolizes the familiar radical transformations experienced throughout the U.S. during the late 1960s and early 1970s, refracted through the lens of New Orleans. Tom Fitzmorris hinted at the transition when he argued in the Po-Boy Festival debate that in the last few decades, culture associated with New Orleans needed to be ‘dirty, or funky’.

**Yats and Po-Boys**

The colloquial version of the sandwich name rose to prominence amid a great cultural shift reflected in a slew of jokes made at the expense of white working class residents termed ‘yats’. The relatively recent label stemmed from a popular greeting often heard among white and black working class New Orleanians: ‘Where Y’at’. The alternative media led the way—cartoon renderings of the working class as caricatures appeared in the city’s major underground weekly newspaper, *Figaro*, and other publications.

This generation did not “discover” the working class, obviously. The 1930s Louisiana Federal Writer’s Project, for example, had produced a good number of observations about working class New Orleans in the *New Orleans City Guide*, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, and other publications. One of the most prominent voices belonged to one of the
combatants in the Po-Boy Fest debate. Bunny Matthews’ cartoons featured a New Orleans element long extant but rarely commented upon in print. Matthews’ New Orleans variation of Stan Mack’s ‘Real Life Funnies’ strip in the Village Voice based on conversations heard in New York City also used verbatim conversations. Matthews’ series title was rendered in dialect, ‘f’Sure’. In the 1970s, cultural commentators such as Matthews steeped their work in grotesque caricatures of working class life, attempting to replicate and celebrate in text and illustrations the visceral sensations of New Orleans’ neighbourhood culture. Such awareness became a hallmark of the New Orleans counterculture. One of the most prominent organic food stores in New Orleans featured as its slogan on shopping carts and print material, “Eat Mo’ Bettah.”

The broadcast and print media help to date the increasing appropriation of the city’s working class localisms as it moved beyond the alternative culture. Before the mid-1970s, television programming featured professional broadcast voices and advertising jingles that hardly distinguished New Orleans from any other city. One exception was newspaper sports reporter Hap Glaudi, who had migrated from sports print journalism to television with his New Orleans dialect intact. Glaudi also was noted for his neighborly behaviour on camera in an era when news was delivered in a straightforward manner. A beloved weatherman, Nash Roberts, featured a softer version of a New Orleans dialect. Both were employed long term at the same station, WWL, and their presence played an important role in establishing their employer as the city’s leading local news station. Other television anchors and reporters continued to adhere to the industry practice of speaking in standard English.

By the late 1970s, even local television advertising reflected a cultural shift
started among the city’s youth. One of the most prominent ad campaigns during this period was created for a regional convenience store chain. Time-Saver television commercials featured two actresses portraying workers making a mass-produced version of poor boy sandwiches. Two actors performed as caricatures of New Orleans working class women who assembled po-boy sandwiches with a lot of “my-nez” (i.e., mayonnaise rendered in dialect). Their speech underscored the convenience store’s message that these refrigerated sandwiches were just as good as traditional po-boys—despite the fact that they were mass-produced, wrapped in plastic and stored in coolers. In no way could this have replaced a sandwich famed for its fresh French bread and crisp outer crust. These ersatz “yats” were meant to help replace excellent local cuisine with convenience. Unlike some of the more colorful late night commercials that made comic use of more authentic working class business owners as media personalities, these ads featured actors and they aired during prime viewing hours.

The fact that it was no longer acceptable to denigrate African-Americans in mainstream publications and general conversation probably factored into the elevation of what had once been routine denigration of white working class New Orleanians into comic caricatures. Slumming, once a more informal practice among intellectuals and upper middle class New Orleanians, had now been foregrounded. The delayed release of A Confederacy of Dunces also highlights this change. Written during the 1960s, John Kennedy Toole’s novel preserves an intellectual’s satirical interpretation of black and white working class dialect and the working class nature of the city’s dominant culture. Published in 1980 and awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction the following year, Toole’s book is celebrated by many New Orleanians for “getting the New Orleans dialect right.”
The book reached the public at a time when many New Orleanians had already developed an appreciation for the city’s spoken English. Four years later, the yat dialect also attracted two video documentary producers whose 1984 *Yeh You Rite* helped establish their reputations as national documentarians. Their low budget New Orleans program helped them to garner funding for a documentary series on regional dialects.\(^{20}\)

While the former examples may have reflected an intellectual interest in the city’s street culture, the majority of thought given over to yats was intended to ridicule. Much of the humour regarding yats was generated by the working class themselves. However, most was generated by people who viewed themselves as being outside the culture. For two decades, the daily newspaper allowed one staff writer to publish feature articles based on rendering interviews with New Orleans natives in dialect and depicting them in ways more characteristic of minstrel characters than human beings. The headline for one of reporter Bill Grady’s articles conveys the spirit of this exercise: “Yat Carries ‘Hood Close to the Hawt.” Front-page caricatures in the newspaper reflected a region-wide practice of telling jokes about working class men and women—typically in dialect.\(^{21}\) The wide adoption of the ‘po-boy’ term—and the seeming loss of its racial and classist origins—symbolizes this rapid cultural transformation. Mocking working class speech and culture is so widespread that terms such as ‘po-boy’ are typically viewed as having no negative associations.

**Historical Method in Public History Environ**

On the day of the festival, the history venue is the least popular area as people fill the streets to eat the sandwich, drink beer and dance to music rather than study the food
or learn from those who have. However, the online history posted to the festival’s permanent website has already begun to sway people from other versions of poor boy history.22

The Po-Boy Fest has not ossified the historical process, however. Many details about the origins remain to be learned. An audience member sought me out during the history panel discussions at the November 2008 festival with information about yet another origin story. He presented information about his family’s former French Market restaurant and their claims to having created the first poor boy sandwiches. I had heard several mentions of this story before, but never enough to pursue it beforehand. The Battistella family operated a restaurant in the French Market in the early twentieth century, and this family member argues that the Martins became famous for serving large sandwiches created in the Battistella restaurant. What might have seemed antagonistic has developed into a sharing of resources and information: the Battistella family’s story was featured as part of the third annual festival’s panel discussions on lost poor boy restaurants.

Much remains to be clarified about the sandwich origin stories. The French Market birthed a number of New Orleans culinary traditions, including the Muffuletta olive salad sandwich and café au lait stands. Fortunately, the festival provides opportunities for community members to engage in the process of establishing their own history. Expanding the developing scholarly history of the sandwich is exactly the sort of exchange that a festival allows. Scholarship enriched by the public’s memory, which often survives only as family stories and photographs, is the ultimate benefit of public history presented via old and new media.
Rather than having to answer basic questions from travel writers and other journalists confused by the various stories, I can now refer them to the Po-Boy Fest history section. Food journalists often find the web-based history before approaching me. Online debate over sandwich history developed even before the first festival had taken place. The value of posting vetted information on the Internet is plainly apparent, and the festival’s online component has inspired various creative responses to and challenges of local history.

The advent of the festival and its web history exhibit triggered an online discussion (Price and Uzee 2007) among a group of local food journalists days before the street component:

Here is what I don't get. The streetcar strike was actually in 1929, right? Here is the po-boy history [the underlined words are linked to <http://www.poboyfest.com/history>] from the recent festival written by a local historian. I agree that dropping the final consonant is a common feature of local dialect. But does it seem odd that in 1929 the Martin Brothers would coin the term ‘poor boy’ and by 1931 it had become so common and widely spoken that the written form had evolved to ‘po-boy’ (or po boi)? I'm no linguist, but that strikes me as unlikely. It makes me question the 1929 origin of the term. (Price 2007)

No mention of a rapid transition to po-boy in written form is made in the online history.

Later in the thread, the same journalist writes:

My bullshit detector goes off every time I read that the Martin Brothers invented the sandwich and the name. I think part of the problem is that much food history is written by food writers, many of whom are trained neither as journalists nor scholars. Without the background in journalism or scholarship, they're not skeptical enough of their sources. Also, writers tend to like a good story, when they should really distrust every good story. 23

This food writer is stuck in ‘bullshit detector’ mode and unwilling to consider evidence that supports the working class version of its own history. The festival’s online and
pamphlet history states emphatically that ‘your grandparents were right’ because the folk version turned out to be the accurate one. The terms had existed well before the strike; they had not yet been connected to the sandwich. This exchange exemplifies how much simpler it is to argue plausibility or implausibility. Nevertheless, incremental progress is being made: late in 2009 another food writer (McNulty 2009) chose the phrase ‘purported origins’ instead of ‘apocryphal’ when describing the strike story.

The dilemma of this newer generation of food writers suggests that the popular sense of history as a canonized timeline of dates and information continues to affect people’s perspective. The complexity of history is lost, and people look either for the definitive narrative or an account they can define as correct—or incorrect because, in this case, it sounds like too good a story. These particular food writers, all of whom are relatively young and none of whom grew up in New Orleans, exhibit quite a lot of scepticism. However, in dismissing the working class story altogether, they miss the ironic application of the term ‘poor boy’. The Martins did not name the sandwich. They seemed to have picked up upon a new use for an old term and capitalized on their own generosity. If food writers insist on engaging in history, they should spend more time researching and less time on the artifice of writing. A food review can be finessed, but history demands substantial evidence and not just opinion.

The most sensible explanation I have unearthed about the naming process is part of the baker’s family history. John Gendusa remembers a newspaper clipping from the time of the strike that may have recorded a key moment in the sandwich naming process. Because it was posted on a wall in the bakery, he read this article many times through the years. Essentially, someone made a dark joke about the formerly unionized ‘aristocrats of
labour’ seeming to be like ‘poor boys’ begging for food. A reporter repeated the quip in a news article, and the strikers began to use the term to describe themselves. That the media would play a role in capturing a phrase that the strikers and their supporters used ironically makes sense, but it is only a clue. Maybe one day I can locate this article. For now, the genesis of the sandwich name, like the origins of life on Earth, will remain mysterious, in part.

My involvement with the Po-Boy Fest provided an opportunity to reach new audiences by capitalizing on the post-Katrina nostalgia for all things connected to New Orleans culture. As a result, people are delving into poor boy history and even challenging what we now know. An online cooking and food history website has taken elements from the festival website and made them part of its own extensive web exhibit. In another example, a young man built upon the festival’s sandwich focus and posted a video tour of an abandoned bread bakery in a part of the city that once held many family-run French bread bakeries and poor boy shops (Robeson 2009). A few older residents still refer to this area as the ‘po-boy belt’ because of the proliferation of bakeries and poor boy shops that developed in the 7th and 8th Ward downtown neighbourhoods. The first of two video clips began with a synopsis of our festival website’s sandwich history as the title card before the camera navigated the abandoned rooms, brick ovens, and other parts of what the videographer thought was the bakery that 80 years earlier had originated the extra-long French bread loaf tailored for serving poor boy sandwiches.

The minimalist video artistry was created by the owner of the defunct building, which had, until Katrina, been the site of the Angelo Gendusa Bakery—not the John
Gendusa Bakery. However, his video touched upon yet another element in the story of working class New Orleans. This contributor focused upon what many would consider to be an arcane topic. His indirect, creative response may be interpreted as a product of the new media revolution, which seems to have encouraged more assertive responses to historic as well as other topics. This video artist did not feel inclined to notify the festival organizers about his work. I stumbled upon it after viewing a more traditional video response to the festival posted by another attendee.

His interesting piece conveys the sense of cultural loss the city has suffered over many decades. It is especially noteworthy because few in the city even remark upon the loss of the neighbourhood bakery tradition. The proliferation of fast food restaurants beginning in the 1960s and 70s and the ongoing intrusion of franchise submarine sandwich shops that started in the 1990s continue to damage the city’s culture. The neighbourhood groceries and sandwich shops that had served most poor boys for years declined rapidly following World War II. Likewise, the neighbourhood bakeries that had provided the crucial ingredient of ‘poor boy loaves’ have become even scarcer.

If the sandwiches and sandwich shops are endangered, the small bakeries in the city are nearly extinct. New Orleans once boasted more than one hundred and fifty family-run bread bakeries; a handful remain. Post-Katrina, the French bread trade is now dominated by one large-scale bakery. Meanwhile, the third and fourth generations of the John Gendusa Bakery struggle to regain their market share following flooding devastation and a delayed reopening.²⁸

Scholarly methods alone were insufficient to convey the story via the old media. Assembling an online version of poor boy history featuring interviews with descendants
of those who developed the sandwich has proved to be more convincing than academic credentials. Archival images, family photographs, streaming video excerpted from my documentary, and some of the crucial documents available via the same web site have proven to be most effective. I had long ago uncovered the letter through which the Martin Brothers pledged to feed their former union brothers free of charge, and I had provided photocopies to individual culinary historians and journalists.

However, when presented in its naturally aged sepia tones as a downloadable jpeg, the letter connects much more viscerally with the public. The president of Leidenheimer Baking Company has framed a copy of the letter and hung it among his collection of family business history. Its online presence also has made it much easier to convey how the sandwich is connected to the city’s labour and working class history and is not just part of a hazy past of feeding poor people. More than any other element, this letter seems to have silenced many of the sceptics. A foodie or a culinary historian never would have unearthed it. An interest in labour history led me to discover the letter during my research into the streetcar union’s archival records, territory far removed from foodway resources. The Magna Carta of poor boy history, the Martin Brothers letter, aids in verifying a crucial part of the story.

Preservation is part of the festival’s mission, and it appears to be making progress towards that end. A well-regarded young chef sold sandwiches during the first festival and was moved to develop a gourmet poor boy shop rather than return to a haute cuisine kitchen. One of my favourite moments stemming from the re-emergence of the poor boy origin story resulted from distributing the festival’s history pamphlet through various sandwich shops. Big Shirley’s, a family-run restaurant, now boasts window signage
stating, ‘We serve Poor Boy, not Po-Boy sandwiches’. The African-American owner later
told me that the pamphlet history awakened memories of the way her grandparents had
ordered the sandwich. The pamphlet moved her to make the change.

I personally do not care whether the sandwich is ordered as po-boy or as poor
boy—as long as the customer knows the history. The pathway reconnecting New
Orleanians to their rich labour and working class heritage runs through their
neighbourhood sandwich shop.

Notes

1 Videotape, Poor Boy Sandwich History Panel Discussion, History Venue, 2007 Po-Boy
Preservation Festival, November 18, 2007, Bunny Matthews (Artist & Culinary
Historian); Tom Fitzmorris (WWL-AM Food Show & Culinary Historian); Vance
Vaucresson (Vaucresson’s Sausage Company); Moderator: Michael Mizell-Nelson
(University of New Orleans), author’s personal collection.
2 Sarah Roahen, Gumbo Tales: Finding My Place at the New Orleans Table, W.W.
3 Each videotaped interview I conducted in the early and mid-1990s regarding the 1929
strike included questions regarding the poor boy sandwich origins. The video
documentary, Streetcar Stories, was produced in cooperation with New Orleans PBS
affiliate WYES-TV. It first aired in 1995.
4 For my brief account of the sandwich name origins, please see the Po-boy Preservation
Festival history webpage: <http://www.poboyfest.com/history>. A fuller account,
including citations, is available in my essay ‘French Bread’, in New Orleans Cuisine:
Fourteen Signature Dishes and Their Stories, Susan Tucker, editor, University of
Mississippi Press, 2009. An online version of the essay can be found in the Louisiana
Endowment for the Humanities’ quarterly publication. See ‘Our Daily Bread’, in
Louisiana Cultural Vistas, Summer 2009: 54-65.
5 See Johnson’s article in Saveur Magazine, February 2005, and cited in Todd A. Price,
<www.bestofneworleans.com>, Price noted, ‘In Saveur's February issue, local writer
Pableaux Johnson profiles the oyster po-boy and dispels some myths about its origins’.
6 John Mariani. E-mail to author, July 12, 2007, and Encyclopedia of American Food and
Drink, New York: Lebhar-Friedman, 1999. The citation was in the 2nd edition of the
Random House Dictionary (1999). Only recently available to researchers, an online,
searchable database, America’s Historical Newspaper Database, allows searches of New
Orleans newspapers. As of 2010, the database allows access to articles through the 1930s. No article or advertisement mentions poor boy sandwiches before 1931.

7 The magazine editors also chose wrong on the correct spelling for Po-Boy. They had asked for my opinion on how to punctuate the term. I had noted that po’ boy was grammatically correct, but most New Orleanians and even the daily newspaper used a hyphen instead. The New Yorkers ignored my advice on that question, too.

8 In a follow-up article published later the same year, Cohen discovered that Louisiana oil field workers had adopted the sandwich name to describe various aspects of their work. See Cohen, H. (1950). ‘Poor Boy’ as an Old Field Term, American Speech, 25 (3) pp. 233-34.

9 Unearthing this clipping owes to my working with the descendants of the baker responsible for creating the poor boy loaf. The clipping had hung for decades in the John Gendusa Bakery. Sharing their family history and photographs with me had helped to preserve a crucial part of local culinary history. When these materials were lost to Hurricane Katrina’s floodwaters, I was able to give them duplicates made from my copies.

10 More information about the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street program can be found here: <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/>. The 21st century attempts to establish a festival for the sandwich were preceded by one in the early 1980s. Po-boy historian Bunny Matthews staged a festival that featured about 8 food vendors, but did not attract many attendees.

11 Decades earlier, Bunny Matthews researched a perceptive assessment of the role the fast food industry played in endangering the poor boy shop. See Matthews, B. (1981) ‘The making of a po-boy’, (New Orleans) Times-Picayune Dixie Magazine, 29 November. It remains the most detailed newspaper article regarding the sandwich origins. Matthews also noted the rapid demise of the sandwich shops and corner groceries that once provided New Orleanians with the majority of their fast food eaten away from home.


13 Another journalist’s account worth consulting was written in 1970 for the New Orleans Archdioceses’ Clarion Herald newspaper. Mel Leavitt interviewed the surviving Martin brother, Bennie. See vertical files, ‘Po-Boy Sandwiches’, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library.

14 For use of the term poor boy in music and work contexts, see Hennig Cohen, ‘Poor Boy’ as an Old Field Term, American Speech, vol. 25, no. 3, Oct. 1950: 233-234. All references cited in the article date from after the use of the term for the sandwich in New Orleans and are sited in the Gulf South.

15 More complicated than labor history in most southern cities, the New Orleans union actually had admitted black members from 1918-1926. See fn 14 for a citation about the period in which the traditional AFL local included about one-third black membership.

16 A New Orleans chef who grew up in Mid-City in the 1950s and 60s theorizes that white restaurant owners may have resisted changing their menus from poor to po- in part to retain some distinction from their black neighbors amid the changes created by the civil rights movement. This may partly explain why Tom Fitzmorris found the Martin
Brothers’ menu unchanged in the mid-1970s. Many more natives may deny such arguments any validity.


In the 1950s and 60s, the term ‘pit’ was used to distinguish young working class white males from middle class and wealthier white males, who were often described as ‘socs’, an abbreviated reference to their higher social status.


Andrew Kolker and Louis Alvarez created the Center for New American Media in the late 1970s. Their early documentary works produced as members of the New Orleans Video Access Center interpreted Louisiana political and cultural history. These programs catapulted them to national prominence on PBS and helped to relocate their production facilities to Manhattan. See their website for more information about their work as well as a transcript of Yeh You Rite!: http://www.cnam.com/flash/index.html

From the 1980s through 2006, Times Picayune staff writer Bill Grad seemingly enjoyed carte blanche from his editors to render in dialect much of the interviews he conducted with New Orleans working class residents. Not surprisingly, this treatment was largely used for white New Orleanians and not used as often in interviews with black citizens. See “Hollywood Can’t Copy This Cabbie; Yat Carries ‘Hood Close to the Hawt,” Times-Picayune, September 27, 1998, B1.


This also means that food writers will have to become more closely connected to serious study of the topic. It is not in any journalist’s job description to research any topic over long periods of time, so they need to better acquaint themselves with those who do. Years before local food writers dug into history, archivist and historian Susan Tucker had started to lead the careful study of New Orleans culinary history. Unfortunately, her voice is too often backgrounded. New Orleans food writers must begin to consult her considerable research before writing. Much of Tucker’s work remains housed in archival collections. Nevertheless, her efforts are quite visible among food historians. As leader of
the New Orleans Culinary History Group, Tucker has overseen the development of a research bibliography and a collection or research files for New Orleans food history. See Tucker, editor, *New Orleans Cuisine: Fourteen Signature Dishes and Their Histories*, University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

26 See What’s Cooking in America: <http://whatscookingamerica.net/History/HoagieSubmarinePoBoy.htm>.

27 The video was formerly posted to Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pm9yZBHgk9Q>, but the owner removed it. I have a copy of the video in my possession.

28 The footage depicts the former site of the recently closed Angelo Gendusa Bakery on North Rampart Street (which was famous for its bullet-proof, glass enclosed bread delivery system during its last years of operation). The John Gendusa Bakery, located a few blocks away, birthed the poor boy sandwich loaf. A family argument back in the 1920s split the Gendusa Brothers Bakery. Both had flourished for decades until Katrina caused Angelo Gendusa to close permanently.

29 The letter is available via: <http://www.poboyfest.com/files/images/MartinBrothersletter.jpg>.

30 Mahony’s Po-Boy Shop features classic sandwiches and fine ingredients, as well as some innovative additions.