

THE THRILL OF THE HUNT

Sally Asher tracks down clues about a nineteenth-century New Orleans newspaper.

Story and photo by Ruth Laney



CARROLTON CARVING.

An Extended Investigation into the Mysterious Affair. Nelson Admits His Cowardice while Baker Pleads Innocence. Some Strange Facts which have Not Yet Been Made Public.



The Old Man Loved Kisses.



THE TWO LAWS
One For The Rich And One For The Poor.

It wasn't like Sally Asher needed another project. She works full time as a public relations photographer for Tulane University and is studying for a master's in history there. (She already has an M.A. in English.)

She sells photos and silkscreens at two arts markets, does PR for the Big Easy Rollergirls skate team, skates in the Muse parade at Mardi Gras, and generally embraces the wacky joie de vivre of the Crescent City. And she blogs about all this and more.

A transplant from Washington state, Asher attended boarding school in Colorado, where she roomed with a New Orleans native. A couple of post-graduation visits convinced her to pull up stakes and relocate. "Luckily I didn't visit in the summer, or I never would have moved here," she says, half joking.

While earning her B.A. at Loyola University, Asher studied photography and built her own darkroom. "About a year later, everything went digital," she says wryly. She graduated in 1999 and worked as a freelance photographer until Tulane hired her in 2008.

While studying for her first master's degree, Asher read the lavishly illustrated book *Storyville* by Al Rose. In it she discovered a nineteenth-century newspaper called the *Mascot*. "I thought the art was amazing," she says of the elaborately detailed prints reproduced in the book.

At the New Orleans Public Library, she found ten years' worth of the *Mascot* on microfilm. "As I skimmed through them I thought the illustrations would make great silkscreens," says Asher. She selected the image of a woman in long skirts riding a bicycle and copied it on the library's printer. She took the 11 x 17 copy home, scanned it, uploaded it onto her computer, and Photoshopped it. Then she silkscreened the image onto various media, including tea towels, pieces of hemp, and small boards. The pieces were snapped up at the arts markets.

But Asher was still curious about the *Mascot*. "It was kind of *National Enquirer* looking, almost like a magazine," she says. "It was an eight-page newspaper published every Saturday from 1882 until 1897. It was the largest illustrated journal in the South."

The *Mascot* skewered political bigwigs and ordinary citizens with satire and caricature. Sometimes just the facts were enough. In December 1894, it noted: "James Edwards wants a divorce from his wife, whose maiden name was Eliza Alleck, on account of her having deserted him and since then living in adultery with George Stepney."

"I loved the sex scandals and crime stories," says Asher. "I wanted to write about social scandals in New Orleans. But as I learned more, I realized how political the *Mascot* was, and I really wanted to write

about that. I pitched the idea to the professor in my English class.

"As I was working on that independent project, it just clicked," she says. "I jumped in very deep. I decided: The second I finish this master's in English, I'm gonna turn around and get another one in history. It shocked me how deeply I fell in love with it. After I turned in the paper, I kept going."

For background, she read *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women* by Tulane legal-history scholar Judith Schafer. "She referenced a lot of legal documents," says Asher. "I went to her office and interviewed her, and she told me how to do legal research in the local archives. When I started working on my master's in history, her class was the first one I signed up for."

Asher needed all the legal background she could muster, because the *Mascot* inspired lawsuits—and violence—from the get-go. Dueling was a rite of passage among New Orleans men, who defended their honor with pistols, knives, and fists. "You took your life in your hands every time you printed something," says Asher, who so far has uncovered three deaths associated with the newspaper. To get the nitty-gritty details, she had to read the court cases. Back to the library she went, and before long she was knee deep in legalese.

The *Mascot* debuted in February 1882 and wasted little time offending the powerful. In April 1882 it published an article about Watson Van Benthuyzen, president of the Crescent City Railroad. The paper accused him of manipulating the city council to renew his streetcar franchise. He was caricatured as a giant puppeteer yanking the strings of city councilmen.

Van Benthuyzen and his son stormed the *Mascot* office and held editor George Osmond at gunpoint, demanding to know who had written the article. Osmond refused to say, so Van Benthuyzen sued the *Mascot* for libel.

He then interrupted a city council meeting to demand that the newspaper be stopped. Mayor Joseph Shakspeare, who had been lampooned by the *Mascot* as "Our Mare" and depicted as a stubborn mule, joined the fray. He ordered the police chief to seize and destroy copies of the paper and arrest anyone involved in its publication.

Van Benthuyzen got an injunction preventing the *Mascot* from writing about him, but the paper went right on doing it. A local court found the staff in contempt and sentenced them to ten days in jail.

The *Mascot* hired former governor Francis T. Nicholls, who eventually took the case to the state Supreme Court and had the injunction overturned. The court found it violated the state constitution and opined that no modern court in England or the United States had ever issued a general order to prevent the publication of a newspaper.

"It was a groundbreaking case," says Asher. "It was written up in the *New York Times* and made news all over the country. It made legal history and sparked debates on freedom of the press."

By this time, she had decided to write her thesis on the *Mascot*. "I have a rough outline and three chapters done," says Asher, who gave a talk on her findings at the Cabildo last spring, complete with actors reading from the paper's commentary.

To research court cases, she checks the

library's online database and emails a librarian to pull the file. "Some cases haven't been unwrapped in 125 years," she says. "One case file might be a roll of paper that is three or four table-lengths long. Sometimes they are typed, but 80 to 90 percent of them are handwritten."

Before Asher can handle a document, the librarian has to put it in a dehumidifier. "If they exposed it to the air it could crumble," she says. "Sometimes they leave it in the dehumidifier for several days, depending on how thick it is."

Once the papers are ready, Asher photographs them with her cell phone, often shooting hundreds of images. "I upload them onto my computer and convert them into PDFs so I can read them. I've found many more details from the court cases than from what was published in the newspaper."

She sometimes spends hours tracking down one tiny detail. "I call it the four-hour footnote," she says. "I'll spend four or five hours to do one sentence—describe the prison or say what the street was like where somebody was shot. People think everything is Google-able, but it's absolutely not."

She did use Google to solve one mystery: the source of the newspaper's name. The masthead depicts a woman surrounded by symbols of luck such as horseshoes and four-leaf clovers. At top left, a banner reads, "As soon as she will be with you bad luck will disappear."

"I searched that line on Google and learned that it comes from a nineteenth-century French opera, *La Mascotte*," says Asher. "The biggest high I ever got was discovering where the name came from."

"I found the opera in English at the Tulane library and read it. It had played multiple times in New Orleans, including in October 1881 at the St. Charles Theatre. The *Mascot* began publishing just a few months later, in February 1882."

This month Asher will lecture at the New Orleans Mint. In December, her article on the *Mascot* will appear in *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* magazine. When her research

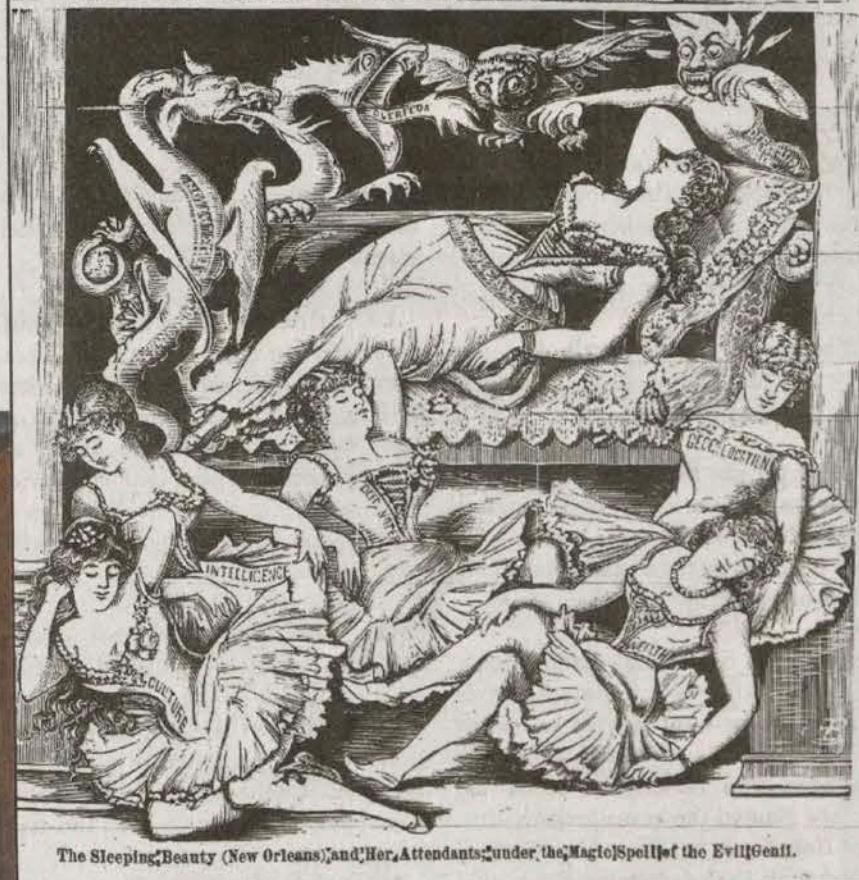
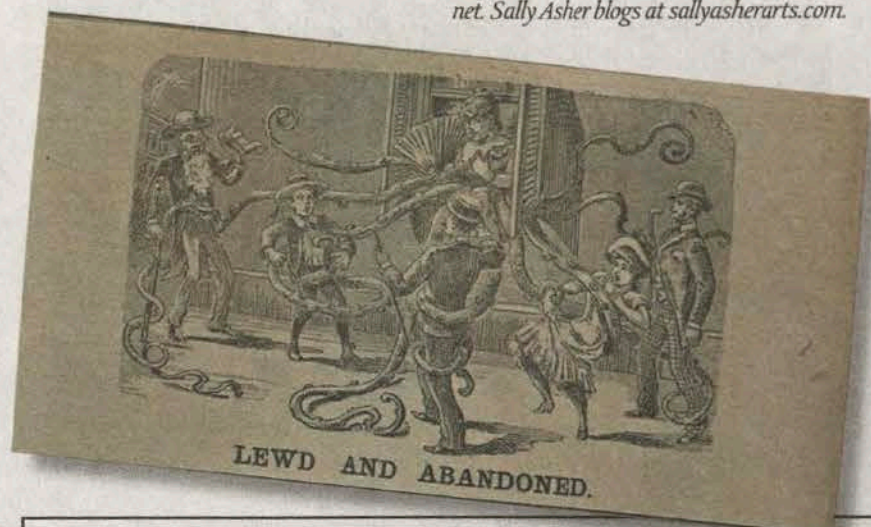
is completed, she hopes to publish a book on the newspaper.

Meanwhile, she keeps on digging, always with a sense that something great could be just around the corner. "Sometimes I think: Omigosh, is it just me who thinks this is interesting?" says Asher. "You can start to lose perspective. But there's been next to nothing written about it, and most of that is half-truths. I've wondered why the *Mas-*

cot wasn't common knowledge. This was such an interesting time period.

"One big question is why it ceased publication. I don't know how the story ends because there's nothing else written about it. I have to discover it for myself. I haven't even scratched the surface. I know there's so much more out there." ♦

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The Sleeping Beauty (New Orleans) and Her Attendants under the Magic Spell of the Evil Genii.



Sally Asher with one of the *Mascot* covers she's unearthed displayed on her iPad.