



The man who lived in New Orleans before 1860 really had to mind his manners. The smallest breach of etiquette—even though unintentional—could and often did result in a challenge to a duel. The offense might be the merest trifle—an awkward gesture or a careless word.

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CODE DUELLO

by W. Adolphe Roberts

For example, the only son of a prominent family took his sister to a ball one evening. In those days it was customary for the ladies to return at the end of each dance to their places in a row of chairs. The room was jammed, and in order to provide a chair for his sister the young man passed one over the head of a lady already seated. The lady jumped up, clapped her hand to her heart, and gasped in alarm. The young man started to apologize, but at that moment the lady's escort appeared. Icily he remarked that only an ill-mannered fellow would frighten a woman so. The young man, of course, resented the charge. One word led to another, and in the duel that followed the boy was shot dead.

The custom of dueling became established in New Orleans in the eighteenth century, when the French and the Spanish ruled the city. At that time, however, it was not practiced to excess. It was only after the Louisiana Purchase, which brought the city under American rule in 1803, that dueling suddenly grew into a mania.

Most of New Orleans' citizens were Creoles—people of French descent. They resented being governed by Americans, and it was a natural temptation for them to pick quarrels with the newcomers. They took care, of course, to arrange matters so that it was the American who challenged. According to dueling rules, the man who was challenged had the right to choose the weapons. At that time Americans (who were every bit as mad about dueling as the Creoles were) generally used pistols. The Creoles, on the other hand, were expert swordsmen. At the start, many

Americans were killed because they had been maneuvered into fighting with unaccustomed weapons. A later phase of dueling saw Americans taking up swordsmanship and the natives practicing with firearms. Eventually contests were being waged with every type of weapon. Rapiers were considered the most stylish, but sabers, rifles, and shotguns were also used. Dueling ceased to be a matter of nationality and became a New Orleans institution. If you lived in that city you simply took it for granted that sooner or later you would be involved in a duel.

Much has been written about the code that governed these encounters. At first it was very simple. If a man felt that he had been insulted by another, he either challenged him on the spot or sent a friend to do so. There was no such thing as the other party explaining away the offense. He could offer an apology, but this was looked upon as cowardly. Seldom would a man so humiliate himself.

Next, seconds were appointed and they arranged the details of the meeting. On the field it was the seconds' duty to suggest a reconciliation after one of the duelists had been wounded. They could also stop the duel if their man was badly hurt—unless, as was often the case, the agreement was to fight to the death.

Eventually, however, the rules became vastly more complicated. Elaborate codes were drawn up, covering every situation that might possibly arise. Finally they were compiled by José Quintero in a book that became accepted as the last word on the subject. It specified everything from the manner in

which a man should offer a challenge to the kinds of challenges he could and should refuse. (No gentleman, for instance, had to fight a minor, a known coward, a criminal, or a lunatic.) The regulations were sometimes ignored, but generally the standards of honor and courtesy set forth in the code duello were held in highest respect.

In the earlier days, a quarrel was often settled promptly, on the spot where it originated. But as the duel became more formalized, it became fashionable to set a time and place. The Allard plantation became a favorite location. Hotheaded duelists took a particular fancy to a grove of oaks at one end. This developed into the most celebrated dueling ground in America. In the 1830s and '40s, when the mania was at its height, an average of twelve duels a week were fought in the shade of Allard's Oaks. The record for a single day is believed to have been four.

To keep in trim for the challenge that might come at any time, New Orleans men practiced constantly at the numerous fencing

schools. Swordplay was regarded as a sport, and the fencing teachers enjoyed great popularity. In fact, they were the idols of the day, somewhat like modern Hollywood stars. Nor did they merely teach; they were among the most persistent duelists in New Orleans. Perhaps they thought dueling was good publicity for their classes. At any rate, it was one way to thin the ranks of a very crowded profession.

There were of course many people who actively opposed dueling. In 1848 they succeeded in passing a law depriving duelists of their right to vote. No law was ever more completely ignored. There wasn't a clerk in charge of a voting booth who would have dared to enforce it. It was repealed only four years later.

The custom of dueling was so firmly entrenched that it took the vast bloodletting of the Civil War to cause a general reaction against it. Dueling declined rapidly after the great conflict. By 1880 this mania, which had dominated life for almost sixty years, had become downright unfashionable.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. The story of the boy who took his sister to a ball shows that duels were often
 - A fought for no good reason
 - B prevented by onlookers
 - C started by rude persons

2. When New Orleans was ruled by the French, dueling was
 - A almost unknown
 - B practiced occasionally
 - C extremely frequent

3. When the Americans took over New Orleans, most Creoles felt
 - A triumphant
 - B grateful
 - C resentful

4. At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, most Americans were
 - A strongly opposed to dueling
 - B highly skilled at swordplay
 - C Neither A nor B

5. A man who apologized after being challenged to a duel was considered a
 - A gentleman
 - B coward
 - C hero

6. The code duello was a
 - A method for making secret challenges
 - B collection of rules for dueling
 - C person considered unfit to fight

7. Allard's Oaks was a famous
 - A fencing school
 - B dance hall
 - C dueling ground

8. As time went on, the rules and customs surrounding dueling became more
 - A formal
 - B humane
 - C vague

9. Fencing teachers were
 - A popular idols
 - B frequent duelists
 - C Both A and B

10. The event that ended the popularity of dueling was the
 - A Louisiana Purchase
 - B Civil War
 - C New Orleans Voting Act