

Change In Exchange: Dilemma In an Alley

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"... We used to be a poor man's club, you know, and now we're a poor woman's club too and they ain't many more rich men's clubs nor women's clubs either — not where you can get ten ounces for a nickle, no sir."

Exchange Alley was born in 1831.

It came into existence as Exchange Passage, a short cut from Canal Street to the Merchants Exchange—a path by which businessmen who dealt in goods and slaves could avoid the petticoat traffic of Chartres or Royal Streets.

For those two cobbled roads were dotted with little shops purveying ribbons, lace, perfume, feminine persiflage—and the slower paced pedestriennes proved an annoyance to businessmen with little time to dally.

SINCE THAT TIME, the street has exchanged its original role for other roles a

number of times, and today a group of business people are seeking still another change in Exchange—to make a showplace out of the narrow segment of the alley between Bienville and Conti.

So far it hasn't been easy.

Oh, there has been extensive (and expensive) restoration in the alley, but there are other problems.

Like the problem of keeping trucks from grumbling through or parking there, and the problem of keeping derelicts (who inhabit bars up around Canal) from sleeping, panhandling or going through the garbage in the alley.

SHORTLY AFTER IT

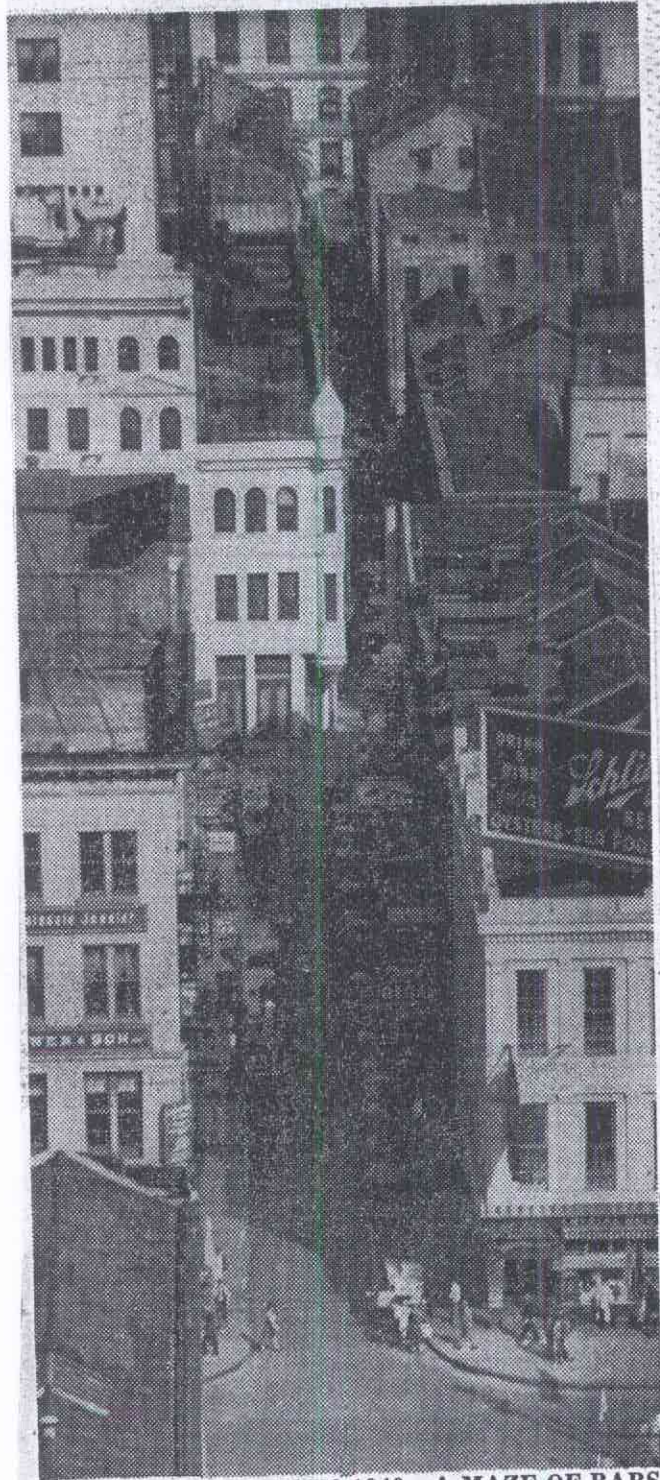
came into existence, the young aristocrats of the Crescent City found their way to the alley to take instructions in the fencing academies there. In the 1830s and for 40 years thereafter it has been claimed that New Orleans saw more duels than any other city of the world.

So the young men of fashion trotted down to the alley to study under such fencing masters as Don Jose "Pepe" Llulla, the popular Negro fencing master Armant Robert Severin, another named Basile Croquere, considered the most remarkable black swordsman in Louisiana, and many others.

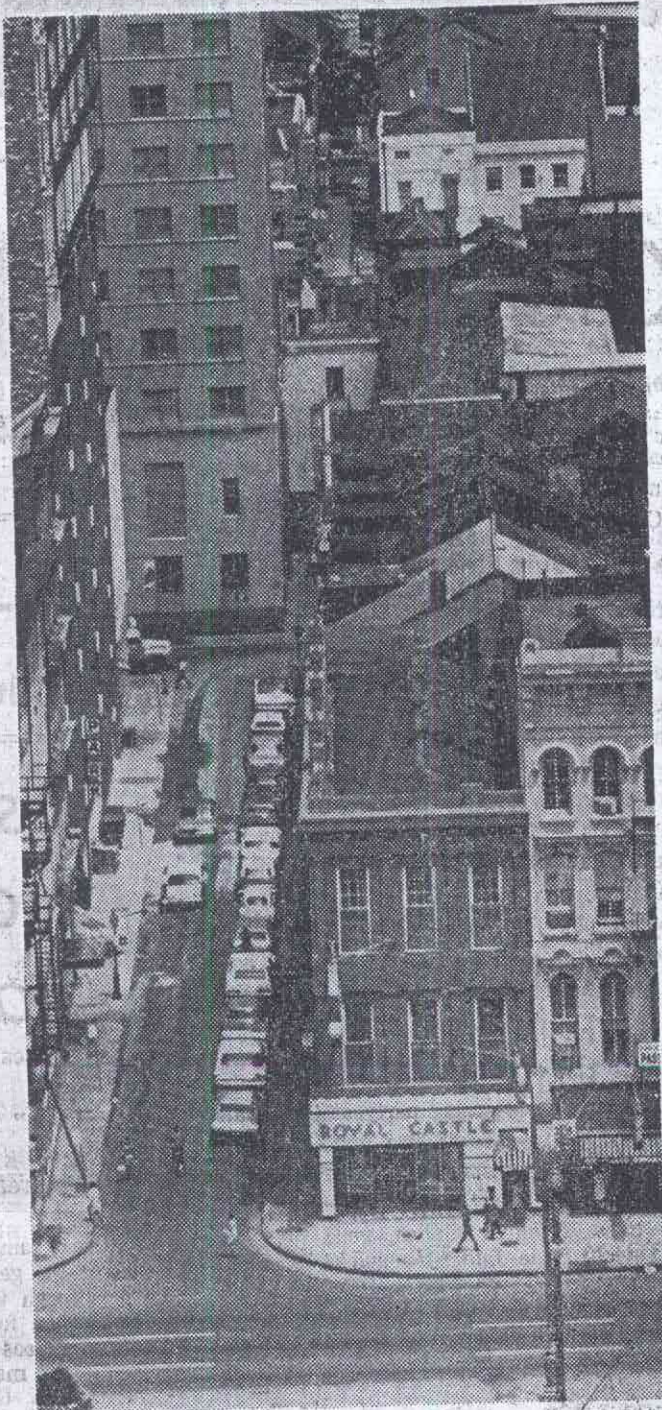
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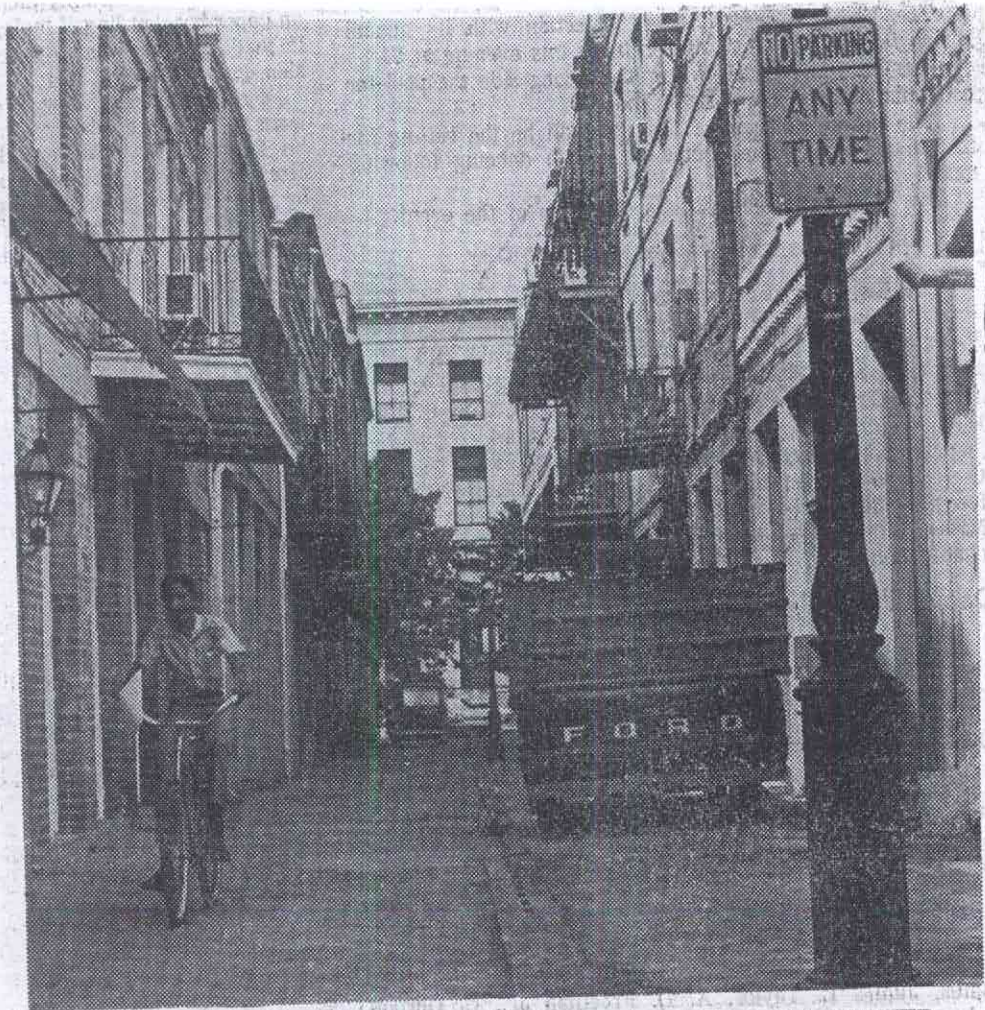
THIRTEEN ★ ★ Saturday, April 25, 1970



EXCHANGE ALLEY IN 1940—A MAZE OF BARS



EXCHANGE ALLEY IN 1970—CHARACTER CHANGE



NARROW 300 BLOCK OF ALLEY—TRUCKS ILLEGALLY PARKED

garde" and "touche" gave way to "Buddy can you spare a dime?" as the elite disappeared from the alley, leaving it to hoboes and seamen on the skids.

AND THEN THE SALOONS began to open. From Royal street, the rear entrances of various establishments began to open onto the alley and other popular saloons sprang up there; one a famous "Ramos" establishment, another taking its name from the alley to become "The Working Man's Exchange."

Then came prohibition, and the alley died again. The infusion of bathtub gin and near-beer was not enough to sustain the drinking emporiums of the alley.

With the end of the Volstead tippling moratorium, Exchange Alley began coming back and for the first time in its history, women began appearing in force in its bars and taverns.

A REPORTER FOR THE Item-Tribune surveyed the situation in 1934—shortly after prohibition's repeal—and a barkeep proclaimed "We never used to see women until after beer come in; a woman, she was an unusual sight in the alley—everybody used to leave the bar and go out and look at her when one passed."

"But . . . the way it is now, there's proportionately as many women as men come in of nights to take a little quiet glass of beer or something stronger . . . we used to be the poor man's club, you know, and now we're the poor woman's club too and they ain't many more rich men's clubs, nor women's clubs either—not where you can get ten ounces for a nickel, no sir."

A nickel-in-the-slot piano was clinking gaily and a sign on the wall glared down at the reporter, demanding "Gentlemen Must Wear Coats While Dancing."

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER, the character of the alley resumed its skid row appearance, and the Items' John Lester described the first 300-odd-foot stretch of street and sidewalk as clean and uncluttered, and peaceful, when you

consider that the alley boasts "more bars than any place of comparable size in the world."

"The population of the alley was once again mostly unshaven, unhaircutted, unbathed men who spent what coins they could beg on cheap wine and beer—and who didn't eat much, unless it was a salami sandwich bought with the money left over from boozing.

And then there was a common saying that Exchange Alley was so named because a man there "exchanged his future for the present."

TODAY, THE CHARACTER of the alley has changed again. The City Directory lists only one bar on Exchange Place, the Sampan Bar Tavern, one side of the first block is now dominated by the Holiday Inn Motel, and the Monteleone Hotel has expanded to take up the lakeward side of the second, and awkward

sheet metal tunnels jut across that narrow segment of the alley providing storage space and service areas for the hotel.

Today, only the third block, which with the second block is officially named "Exchange Alley"—retains much of the original Vieux Carre character of Exchange Passage days.

The building owners in the 300 block are anxious to exchange the present for the past—the past of the fencing masters when the "Exchange Passage" was fashionable.

They have poured money into the renovations of buildings, and according to Ted Liuzza, who runs an advertising and public relations firms in the block, they are willing to get together and rip out the concrete alley and put cobblestones back in—making the all there a showplace mall.

BUT APPARENTLY, enforcement of parking regulations is lax—trucks come in and park all the time, said Liuzza, and police are less than assiduous about patrolling and keeping derelicts

from sleeping in the alleyway.

H. J. Franklin, an engineering contractor in the block, has hired watchmen for peak tourist times—like Mardi Gras and the Sugar Bowl, and he wishes police would come around more often.

"It's a sign of the times," says Franklin, "but I can't ask women in the office to come down here and work at night because of the vagrant traffic out there—and I moved my operations out of the Ninth Ward because I was in a rough neighborhood."

WINSTON LEONARD, head of another public relations-advertising firm headquartered in the 300 block, said he has done everything, written letters to the mayor, appeared before the City Council, and still the law enforcement has not improved.

"Usually there are vehicles parked at either end of the alley," he said, pointing out the hazards this would create in the event of a fire in the block.

Liuzza pays somebody to clean up the wine bottles and rummaged garbage up every day, and people on the alley dream of sealing it off to vehicular traffic, and planting window boxes.

"IF THEY WOULD JUST let a policeman walk through here on a regular beat, it would do wonders," said Leonard, adding that "Otherwise, all we have done here could eventually go down the drain."

"In New York they got a street something like this here alley, only it's a hell of a lot wider. The name of it's the Boundary," a bum told a Times-Picayune staffer in 1947.

If Leonard, Franklin, Liuzza and friends are successful, people may someday forget that Exchange Alley was ever like New York's Bowery.

Or at least their piece of Exchange.