

## The Great Mardi gras Race of 1909

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In 1909, New Orleans was a city trying to regain its position as top a financial power in competition with western cities like Chicago and Detroit; the city fathers hoped to boost the its economy by promoting the Crescent City as a vacation destination. The MardiGras carnival already drew many visitors to the city. Because it usually fell sometime during February, Mardi Gras brought people to New Orleans at a time when the city was at its best.

Horse racing was also popular during the winter months in the South as was the new sport of auto racing. New Orleanians had always enjoyed horse racing and were quick to appreciate the faster automobile. Why not, thought the New Orleans Automobile Club (NOAC) combine the two events, holding an auto carnival featuring the nation's leading drivers on the last days of Mardi gras. The auto enthusiasts could watch thrilling races during the day and dance the night away if they had an invitation to an exclusive Mardi gras ball. This would answer those who said there was little to do in the day, during MardiGras except attend carnival related events.

In 1909, New Orleans had several racetracks; races at the historic Fair Grounds, a one mile oval dirt track, were well attended as were those at the City Park track. However in 1908, the appropriately named Locke Law was passed by the Louisiana legislature and signed by the governor. The people of Louisiana, as well as the Catholic Church, supported this bill which would end racing and betting in New Orleans for 7 years. They had grown tired of the wholesale corruption that permeated the sport. A disgust of race track corruption permeated other states as well at this time. Not realizing racing would soon be banned in New Orleans; the Fair Grounds management bought the grandstand from a St. Louis racetrack which had gone out of business for this reason and re-assembled it at the Fair Grounds. The attractive grandstand including a lovely Palm Court gave the city its largest auditorium to date. In the same year, the French Fete drew 15,000 people to the Fair Grounds and it would be used for many other events before horse racing finally returned to New Orleans.<sup>1</sup>

The NOAC saw the temporary demise of horse racing as a golden opportunity for automobilists. Ardent city promoters, they determined to schedule an automobile carnival during the last three days before MardiGras in 1909. They immediately contacted other AAA clubs to notify them of the carnival and asked them to generate publicity, and wrote to racing notables including well-known starter, Fred Wagner and William K. Vanderbilt for advice and suggestions. They also decided to put together a series of promotional pieces to advertise the carnival.

Before promoting the event, however, they had to decide what kind of races they would hold, which drivers they to invite and how they would prepare the track for auto racing. The last item was the easiest. New Orleans Auto Club President T. C. Campbell decided to forego the purchase of *glutern*, (a mixture of oil and tar often called taroid) which the eastern tracks used to keep down the dust and harden the track surface. At the Fair Grounds, Campbell believed they could instead utilize the refuse

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fairgroundracecourse.com/about-track/history> accessed 7/13/2011.

from Louisiana sugar mills called *bagasse* which consisted of bits of cane stalk left behind in huge moist heaps. For some strange reason Campbell believed this sugar-cane waste could serve exactly the same purpose as glutern although the only characteristic *bagasse* shared with glutern was high moisture content. However it was free for the taking.<sup>2</sup> If it worked as well as he expected, the canny Campbell thought that they could easily develop a market for a useless by-product of the sugar cane industry selling it to keep the dust down at other dirt tracks.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike other race promoters of the time, Campbell and George most wanted most to recruit women drivers who would duel with death on the track as eagerly as male competitors. According to the NOAC they would put together the most notable event ever arranged in auto racing history by adding a race for the women's championship of the United States. The *Picayune* trumpeted, "Ladies to Flirt with Death with Same enthusiasm as Men Drivers World Renowned!"<sup>4</sup> Campbell and George had contacted Fred J. Wagner in New York who knew Joan Newton Cuneo well; he assured them that she was interested. Wagner said he also had been told by Alice Byrd Potter of Elgin Illinois that she would attend.

Cuneo, a socialite and the wife of wealthy New York Banker Andrew Cuneo had already made a name for herself as a daring and speedy driver in a variety of events since 1905. She had also competed with men in a 100 mile race at the Benning track near Washington DC in 1907, finishing second in world-record (for women) time, and held many other women's track records.

Alice Byrd Potter was a relative newcomer to the sport, but she had made gained fame at the Harlem track in Chicago the preceding year when she set a new women's record supposedly faster than Cuneo's in a 90 hp racing car.<sup>5</sup> Potter, born to an upper middle class family, had been bored with playing golf and tennis at the country club and took up driving after firing her chauffeur when he arrived to pick her up at the clubhouse intoxicated. Driving her car home herself, she was for a time interested in driving and working on automobiles. Besides her unopposed victory in the Ladies' Championship of the West in Chicago, she established a new record for the drive between Chicago to Boston and back, beating the previous record, established by a man by four hours. She had three female companions with her and took complete care of her Haynes automobile. Unfortunately unlike Mrs. Cuneo, Alice Potter never drove in another race and would not show up at New Orleans to challenge Joan Cuneo.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Track(is) being hardened with preparation instead of Oil," *New Orleans Picayune*, 10 January 1909.

<sup>3</sup> It obviously didn't work as there was discussion about oiling the track for the February 1909 races in an article about the 1910 races. See "Automobile Races will find track here fast," *New Orleans Picayune*, 10 November 1909.

<sup>4</sup> *New Orleans Picayune*, 10 January 1909 and 10 November 1909. "The Fair Grounds track is now in fine shape for auto racing, because of the great quantity of oil put on it last February."

<sup>5</sup> It was more likely the 30 hp Haynes that she drove on her trip to New York and back. "Women to drive racing autos in coming fair grounds meet." *New Orleans Picayune*, 10 January 1909. See also *Auto News*, *New York Daily Tribune*, Sunday July 28, 1908 and "Ladies touring in auto," *Salt Lake City UT Truth*, 8 August, 1908.

<sup>6</sup> According to Linda Rock, Alice Potter, or Birdie as she was called married John Tetzner in 1895. She had been born in Elgin IL in 1875 and was a year older than Joan Cuneo. She and her husband had no children and divorced amicably in 1908. Birdie had many interests and was a talented musician and composer as well as the first woman care salesperson in northern Illinois. She sold Haynes automobiles. Linda Rock, phone interview by Elsa Nystrom 23 July 2011. See also Amber Hart, "Lady Driver" brazenly proves need for speed went soft, <http://www.examiner.com/history-in-Chicago/lady-driver-brazenly-proves-need-for-speed>, accessed 7/19/2011.

Campbell believed that the publicity gained from recruiting these two women, might lure even more female racers of which there were a few, to compete for the women's championship. The club also planned to donate a handsome silver trophy for the event augmented by a floral automobile 7 feet long to honor their female sensibilities. Non-professional male entrants would compete for the amateur championship of America, open only to *gentlemen*. The Klaw-Erlanger theater group had pledged another trophy worth \$500 for the winner of this race.

Getting the word out regarding the MardiGras races was critical and NOAC President T. C. Campbell and Secretary Homer George were determined to follow the lead of the Savannah and Ormond Beach race organizers who advertised all over the country. Largely at their own expense, Campbell and George ordered 100,000 copies of a "handsome six page folder printed on heavy enamel paper and superbly illustrated."<sup>7</sup> The folder was to be distributed to hotels and businesses in thirty cities in the northeast by Secretary George. In addition the club distributed thousands of window cards. They also hoped that newspapers throughout the country would promote the MardiGras auto carnival as eagerly as the *Picayune*.<sup>8</sup>

Articles about the auto carnival began to appear in the *Picayune* in January 1909. Readers were greeted with a barrage of information about the carnival on an almost daily basis. They learned that wealthy Chicago sportsman Arthur W. Greiner had notified the NOAC that he would drive a special racing car in the amateur events. Greiner assured the club that he had secured the entry of Alice Potter who would drive a Haynes in the women's championship against Joan Cuneo and her Knox. Unfortunately the amateur driver would not make good on his promise. The article also promoted Ms Potter's racing experience, saying that "she had competed in many events with it (her Haynes)," when in reality she had only raced once driving unopposed.<sup>9</sup> However, Greiner did enter his National in the MardiGras race carnival and said he had chartered a private railroad car to bring his party to New Orleans.

On February 4<sup>th</sup>, the *Picayune* announced that the NOAC had decided against holding a 24 hour race instead focusing on "speed, speed, speed." In reality the track insurers forbade the club from racing at night at a track that had "vast quantities of gasoline and oils laying around in storage."<sup>10</sup> The insurance company had a point, as large quantities of these flammable liquids would be needed to light the track. Campbell concluded correctly that shorter events which featured professionals (drivers), women and amateurs would be more exciting for the spectators. Campbell had given up the idea of using *bagasse*

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<sup>7</sup> "Auto Advertisers," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 18 January 1909.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, The advertising campaign was undoubtedly bankrolled by Campbell and George as they are the only club officers mentioned in the article and they had the most interest in bringing automobile tourists and race fans to New Orleans.

<sup>9</sup> At the Harlem track, the other two female competitors chickened out and Ms Potter set her record by herself. See also "Chicago clubman in MardiGras automobile amateur race. Arthur Grenier to bring big party here and was means of securing woman Entry. Mrs. Cuneo and Miss Porter (sic) to drive. *New Orleans Picayune*, 3 February 1909.

<sup>10</sup> "Speed instead of endurance racing," *New Orleans Picayune*, 4 February 1909.

and stated that workmen had already started preparing the track and would after scraping off vast quantities of sand, pour thousands of gallons of oil on the track.<sup>11</sup>

On February 7<sup>th</sup>, the *Picayune* ran a picture of the Klaw & Erlanger trophy inscribed the *World's Speed King*, flanked by cameo portraits of Fred J. Wagner, the referee and starter, Mrs. Joan Newton Cuneo, T. C. Campbell and Homer George. Although Ms Potter was still mentioned, Mrs. Cuneo was identified as the only woman in the race. The article goes on to list the top three entrants and the cars they would drive including George Robertson, the winner of the Vanderbilt Cup and his Simplex, Lewis Strang, the winner of the Savannah, Briarcliff and Lowell races in his Isotta, and Ralph DePalma, holder of the world's speed records from 1 to 5 miles and his Fiat Cyclone. Then the less distinguished pilots and amateur drivers were listed along with many New Orleans cars and drivers.<sup>12</sup>

The newspaper then tried to develop the story of an ongoing feud between George Robertson and Lewis Strang; Robertson was the "daredevil pilot" and Strang the "brainy and nervy" driver. Both, according to the *Picayune* could lay claim to being the best race car driver in America but might have to give way to the relative newcomer Ralph DePalma. Only Robertson planned to drive an American-built car, the Simplex.

The next day, the newspaper played up the formal entry of Mrs. Joan Newton Cuneo and dropped a bombshell. Mrs. Cuneo had checked not only the women's championship race but every other event on the auto carnival entry form as well. The *Picayune* gushed, "it was hard for even a calloused automobile race follower to realize that a frail woman is possessed of such daring and nerve (and )to undertake to pit her skill and courage against the strong men who are reckoned as the greatest drivers in the world."<sup>13</sup>

Despite her predilection for driving fast cars, Joan Cuneo was a reserved and modest woman and had sent no photos along with her entry. George and Campbell were forced to find their own photos "of the wonderful woman." This was not difficult because many photographers including the famous sports photographer Lazarnick had taken her picture by 1909. The article also went on to mention that Mrs. Cuneo drove because she loved to race and her husband a wealthy New York broker, spent thousands a year on her hobby "...just to gratify her desire to speed along the fast stretches of the road and track and show her skill in making the turns."<sup>14</sup>

The *Picayune* concluded with a story of her success in a long distance race at the Benning track in Washington DC in 1907 where she defeated several male competitors at a very dangerous track. This according to the newspaper was the reason why the AAA began to reject female entrants. But the NOAC had the courage to brave the AAA and add a women's event which would be the premier event of the carnival.<sup>15</sup> Ominously, in a small article printed on February 11, the Savannah auto club, which had

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Obviously no one was concerned about ground pollution in 1909.

<sup>12</sup> "Robertson, Cup Winner in Carnival Auto Meet," New Orleans Picayune, 7 February 1909.

<sup>13</sup> "Women Auto Racers," New Orleans Picayune, 8 February 1909.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

organized a series of races in March, rejected the application of Mrs. Cuneo to race in their main event, as "The committee did not wish to establish such an innovation."<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps unaware of this setback, Joan Newton Cuneo arrived in New Orleans by train on the same day, accompanied by her husband, Andrew, and her son Antonio (Sonny). Although Mrs. Cuneo had never visited New Orleans, her husband was well known in the city as he had business interests there and had been a frequent visitor in recent years. As a result, her accomplishments as a daring female driver were already celebrated among New Orleans society.

In an interview with the Cuneo's the *Picayune* printed an intriguing story of how Joan Cuneo got into auto racing. Parts of it are inaccurate; her first car was listed as an electric, but it actually was a small steam powered car, and her second vehicle was not a gasoline powered car but a more powerful White steamer. When his wife complained of being covered with dust as she was constantly passed by faster cars, Andrew Cuneo, who according to the *Picayune*, was an indulgent husband and willing to provide her with any luxury, ordered a *huge machine* for her! However, he was afraid that she wouldn't be able to handle the new vehicle, and secretly hired a chauffeur to maintain and drive the car for her. The chauffeur was undoubtedly Louis Disbrow who would serve as her riding mechanic for at least five years. The Disbrow and Cuneo families were neighbors in Richmond Hill, NY for almost a decade; Louis Disbrow was a partner in the Disbrow Automobile Agency in Jamaica NY which sold White autos and had some mechanical aptitude.

As it turned out, Joan Cuneo did not need a driver and proved more than adept at handling her second car, a 15 hp White. She also learned quite a bit about auto mechanics from Disbrow and would depend on him to accompany her in a number of tours, races and hill climbs especially when her husband was away on business. Louis Disbrow and Joan Cuneo undoubtedly became close friends during the time he was her riding mechanic; in at least one race at New Orleans, he had to hold her in the car when she negotiated sharp, flat turns at speed. Disbrow later drove several of Joan Cuneo's cars in races she was not allowed to enter and gradually gained a reputation as an excellent dirt track racer.<sup>17</sup>

The reporter like many people who saw Joan Newton Cuneo for the first time, was startled by both her size and demeanor. Expecting an Amazon, he met a small female little over 5 ft tall and weighing less than 125 lbs. The impression she gave was of a woman who was more at home at the family fireside and society drawing rooms than participating in a sport "... in which nerve, daring and strength are required to a great degree."<sup>18</sup> The fact that she had brought her young son along and they had enjoyed attending a performance of "Buster Brown" at the Crescent Theater while her husband was entertained by business associates only reinforced this impression. The Cuneos were probably interviewed at the Grunewald Hotel, the finest in New Orleans at the time, where they would stay for over a month.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Women cannot race," *New Orleans Picayune*, 11 February 1909.

<sup>17</sup> "Famous woman automobile driver arrives for Fair Grounds races, Little New York woman, with fine record in motor racing world, comes with seven-year-old son." *New Orleans Picayune*, 12 February 1909.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> The Grunewald was at that time the best and most expensive hotel in New Orleans; it has recently been totally renovated as the Roosevelt.

Most of the drivers shipped their cars to New Orleans in 1909 by boat or train. The race cars of Lewis Strang, Ralph De Palma, Jimmy Ryall and Joan Cuneo were scheduled to arrive on the Morgan Line steamship *El Paso* on the 12<sup>th</sup>. The *El Paso* was owned by the Southern Pacific RR and sailed between New York and New Orleans on a regular basis. Strang and Ryall had also arrived in the city and Burman and De Palma were to arrive shortly.<sup>20</sup>

The *Picayune* continuously promoted the auto carnival which makes it likely that interest in the auto carnival had not been as strong as the NOAC had hoped. The newspaper praised the quality of the entrants saying that “leading drivers of three lands would compete,” although no foreign drivers would actually drive in any of the race carnival events. Ralph De Palma was consistently referred to as “the foreigner” although De Palma’s family had immigrated to the US when he was a boy and De Palma was Italian/American not Italian. Louis Chevrolet was indeed French but although his name was on the entry list, he would not drive in any races. Foreign cars there were, and one particularly good one, De Palma’s Fiat Cyclone, but the carnival would not “bring together the leading drivers of three lands.”<sup>21</sup> Barney Oldfield, the most popular driver of the time, had expressed no interest in racing against his rival, Ralph De Palma in New Orleans.<sup>22</sup> No wonder the NOAC did not waver in allowing Joan Newton Cuneo her big chance to drive against her male rivals when other clubs were turning her down; the *daring female driver* had become their biggest draw.

Another focus was the trophies that would be awarded to the amateur drivers. In 1909, auto racing still attracted wealthy amateurs like Caleb Bragg, Arthur Greiner, and Foxhall Keene and of course, Joan Cuneo who drove for sport as well as local drivers who wanted to show off their fast cars. These individuals enjoyed winning and displaying silver cups, medals and trophies like the Klaw and Erlanger trophy on their mantels or in their game rooms. However, professional drivers like Strang, Burman, Robertson and De Palma much preferred cash prizes as racing was their job. In a 1909 article about chauffeurs, Frederic J. Hoskin claimed that a talented racing chauffeur could make between \$25000 and \$50000 a year if he was lucky.<sup>23</sup> This seems too optimistic except for the very top drivers. The winner’s purses generally were small although there were more chances to race than there are today. Most meets featured a number of short races with a finale that might be 50 to 100 miles. Nevertheless, the drivers had to keep their cars in repair, buy tires, and pay for travel expenses and their mechanics’ salaries. They might also have to take time off because of injuries suffered in crashes which happened regularly. Auto racing was a blood sport in 1909 and often locals who signed up for the amateur races got cold feet, failing to show up or hiring a professional to drive for them in the race.

Five days before the race, the *Picayune* listed the following participants in an advertisement; George Robertson, Ralph De Palma, Lewis Strang, Bob Burman, Al Denison, Schelfler, (no first name) Arthur W. Greiner, Chevrolet, Ryall (Jimmy), Mrs. Joan N. Cuneo, Miss Alice Potter and other stars. Admission was \$1.00 which included access to the grand stand and tickets would be on sale before the race at

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<sup>20</sup> “Autoists at New Orleans,” *New York Times*, 13 February 1909.

<sup>21</sup> “Auto Carnival her will be a great event, bringing together leading drivers of three lands to compete for world honors.” *New Orleans Picayune*, 14 February 1909.

<sup>22</sup> I checked to see if the auto carnival took place while Barney was suspended but this was not the case.

<sup>23</sup> Frederic J. Hoskin, *The American Chauffeur*, *New Orleans Picayune*, 12 February 1909.

Grunewald's music store.<sup>24</sup> By February 17, most of the professional drivers and some of the amateurs had arrived in New Orleans; they spent time tuning up their cars on the streets of New Orleans and visiting the Fair Grounds track. On February 16<sup>th</sup>, Mrs. Cuneo and a lady passenger in her Knox turned onto Canal Street from the West End road when Jimmy Ryall in his Vanderbilt Cup racer with T.C. Campbell as passenger came up behind her. Ryall expected her to pull over and let him pass but she stepped on the gas challenging him to a race. Ryall immediately let the throttle full out, but although he was able to gain on her, he couldn't pass. When the speeding cars reached Claiborne Avenue, they both let up because of the traffic. Poor Ryall spent a good bit of time afterwards telling everyone how he would have passed Mrs. Cuneo but in fact, he hadn't and this gave her considerable credit among racing fans in New Orleans.<sup>25</sup> The NOAC still hoped for a few more entries as registration would close on the 18<sup>th</sup> but very few New Orleanians with fast cars were willing to race them on the Fair Grounds track.

On the day before the races, Joan Newton Cuneo invited Homer George for a practice ride in her 50 hp Knox Giant. George was nervous about speeding down the road with "a little, frail woman ...with tiny hands and feet handling the controls... she is the nicest-looking woman imaginable. She is so nearly a typically "cute" woman that one wonders at her nerve and ability when it comes to handling automobiles."<sup>26</sup> With Joan Cuneo, appearances were deceiving, especially when she got behind the wheel. She seemed to enjoy taking unsuspecting people for a ride in one of her race cars and had been trying to get George into her Knox for several days. He finally ran out of excuses and they headed out to the Lakeview road which had, at that time, several straight and level two mile stretches built of hard packed shell where the drivers could let their cars out. Poor George clung to the car in fright; the wind whistled past him as the stripped down open car hurtled along the open road. Joan Cuneo however "managed the monster like it was a child and complained because it was impossible to the monster out to its greatest speed."<sup>27</sup> George claimed she got the car up to 90 mph but it was capable of more than 100 and Mrs. Cuneo did her best to get it up there on the straightaway.

During their outing, she admitted to George that she most wanted to win the amateur championship, and the Klaw and Erlanger trophy, more than the women's championship. She said, "I came here with that ambition uppermost in my mind, and I will not be satisfied if I am not successful. I do not fear any man in the world if I am given a good car, in the Knox Giant I have a wonderful machine and whoever wins the trophy will certainly have to do miles in much less than a minute each if that person is to beat me. I have walked all around the track several times and am thoroughly familiar with it. I think I will be able to not only win this amateur championship but set a new mark for 5 miles amateur racing."<sup>28</sup>

Homer George and Mrs. Cuneo were accompanied on the trip by Louis Disbrow her riding mechanic and young Andrew Cuneo in a second car. 8 year old "Sonny," was very proud of his mother's ability to handle a race car, planned to watch her race, and would be the first to congratulate her if she won. After

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<sup>24</sup> *New Orleans Picayune*, 16 February 1909. Of these, Chevrolet and Potter were no shows.

<sup>25</sup> "Strang and De Palma, famous drivers here," *New Orleans Picayune*, 17 February 1909.

<sup>26</sup> "Ninety Miles an Hour, Woman at the Wheel," *New Orleans Picayune*, 19 February 1909.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

his session in the Knox, George was convinced that Joan Cuneo would win more than one of the races. "She is little short of marvelous," he exclaimed.<sup>29</sup> He would be right.

The first day of racing was bright and sunny and a crowd of 5000 locals and tourists assembled in the grandstands at the Fair Grounds to view the spectacle while dozens of gaily decked cars filled the infield. According to the *Picayune* the presence of Mrs. J Newton Cuneo driving her Knox Giant lent a sensational flavor to the three events (out of 6) in which she participated on the first day. "The men cheered her enthusiastically at all times as she would flash past the stand ...but the women, the pretty girls, as well as the older ladies rooted for DePalma, Strang, Jimmy Ryall or other dare devil fellows...*although they did not always chivalrously slow up when Mrs. Cuneo came within striking distance and tip their hats.*"<sup>30</sup> It seems that most of the New Orleans women didn't approve of Joan Cuneo's exploits on the race track and even the newspaper thought the other drivers ought to respect her femininity. This was the last thing Mrs. Cuneo wanted on the race track although she accepted it as her due everywhere else.

The first event on Saturday was a one mile free-for-all time trial to lower Ralph De Palma's world record for the mile of 51 seconds. It was easily won by De Palma with Ryall coming in second in his Matheson, Robertson 3<sup>rd</sup> in his Simplex and Mrs. Cuneo fourth in her Knox. Time trials might seem odd to today's fans but in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was exciting for the locals when a new world's record was set in their town. Although De Palma didn't break the mile record, he did better Barney Oldfield's record in the 10 mile speed trial while Mrs. Cuneo broke her own record for 5 miles in 5:05. Mrs. Cuneo's best showing was in the 50 mile free for all where she finished second behind De Palma. Only De Palma had started from scratch in this race, all the other drivers were given more than half a minute handicap, with Schelfler clearly outclassed in his Jackson over a minute. While De Palma drove rings around the others, Joan Cuneo hung in there gamely and finished second in 52.40 3/5 to De Palma's 51.37.45, as Robertson had a blowout and Strang withdrew.<sup>31</sup> The 5 mile race for New Orleans cars was postponed as only Anthony Monteleone showed up ready to race with his Thomas. Schelfler won a 5 mile event for stock cars in a walk-over when Bob Burman withdrew his Buick.

The second day of racing was Joan Newton Cuneo's best day. She won the amateur championship earning the Klaw and Erlanger trophy despite Jimmy' Ryall's crash into the fence as he was going for the lead.<sup>32</sup> She then won the Klaxon Signal 10 mile race beating a Packard entered by Donnelly whom she had beaten earlier in the amateur championship. By this time, the crowd was with her and cheered her triumph enthusiastically. She then went on to attempt to lower her mile record to under a minute and just missed, driving the mile from a standing start in just over a minute (1:00 1/5). Although she

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> DePalma smashes 10 mile record at Fair Grounds auto races." New Orleans Picayune, 21 February 1909

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. There is no way of knowing if her time was accurate, but she was not afraid to mix it up.

<sup>32</sup> According to the Picayune, Ryall made a slight misjudgment in a turn in the second mile and sent his Matheson skidding towards the rail and he was thrown out of the car. The hospital staff hurried to the scene but there was no caution and the race continued. While rumors circulated that Ryall was badly injured, this was not the case. After he was treated in his rooms at the Grunewald, he and his young wife returned to watch the last day of racing on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. New Orleans Picayune, 22 February 1909.



expressed excitement in bettering her previous record, she must have been disappointed to just miss. Joan Cuneo then stated she would not compete in the last two events (10 miles and 100 miles) as her stock of Fiske tires was low and she wanted to save them for the final day's racing. In the 10 mile race, De Palma won yet again while Bob Burman won the 100 mile race in his Buick in a record time of 1:43:39 2/5 over Robertson in his Simplex.<sup>33</sup>

The good weather of the first two days was replaced by mist, rain and drizzle on Monday. Although attendance was down the crowd was still large despite even though Rex was about to parade before thousands of spectators at the city center. The first race starting at 3 pm was yet another 5 mile exhibition by Mrs. Cuneo who drove unopposed to gain the women's championship record. "The plucky woman driver, her fingers decked with diamonds but dressed plainly on account of the oil and dust lowered the record she had set Saturday by 3 seconds." In the 5 mile race for the T.C. Campbell trophy, she finished third behind Robertson and Burman with Strang finishing fourth. Mrs. Cuneo also won another 5 mile amateur race, again defeating Donnelly's Packard and Schelfler's Jackson. Only in the finale, a 50 mile race won easily by Ralph de Palma did she falter, finishing 10 miles behind De Palma although Strang was 5 miles behind and Robertson 6. Determined as she was, Joan Newton Cuneo did not have the strength to keep up with her male rivals at the end of the day. She had already steered her car around a rough track for more than 30 miles.<sup>34</sup>

Probably the most interesting event of the day was the 5<sup>th</sup> race, a ten mile handicap. Only De Palma started the race at scratch. Mrs. Cuneo, Strang and Burman got a 50 second handicap while Robertson's was '45. De Palma quickly passed everyone but Burman who got a fast start but the cars collided when De Palma moved to pass and Burman's Buick got the worst of it. Mrs. Cuneo by careful driving managed to finish second, ahead of Robertson and Strang who had similar handicaps while Burman was unable to finish.<sup>35</sup>

The comments of the driver at the conclusion of the meet, were revealing: De Palma, "Treated fine here but would have broken more records with smoother track," and Mrs. Cuneo, "Just splendid and enough excitement to last a long time," had to be happy with the results. Robertson, "car was too heavy for the track," and Strang, "Hard luck but no complaints and will drop this losing streak before long," though Bob Burman seemed pleased with his victory in the 100 mile race. Fred Wagner remarked, "One of the best managed meets I've ever attended and some of the greatest driving, all things considered."<sup>36</sup>

On February 25, the NOAC held Automobile Night at the Tulane Theater and the winners of the big races received their awards. The newspaper commented that "The victories of Mrs. Cuneo in the amateur championship race and other events made her the most prominent figure in the automobile world today. She broke a number of world's records in her racing and defeated the most daring of male

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *Auto Carnival's Close: De Palma's Greater Triumphs*, New Orleans Picayune, 23 February 1909.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *"Auto Carnival's Close"*, New Orleans Picayune, 23 February 1909.

contestants in almost every race in which she participated. *Her driving was really the most astonishing feature of the carnival...*"<sup>37</sup>

The Auto Carnival did not turn out to be one of the great track racing events in America as referee Wagner proclaimed at the start of the meet.<sup>38</sup> Only Ralph De Palma and Joan Newton Cuneo came away with heightened reputations. De Palma was on his way to becoming the most successful racer of his era winning every race he entered at New Orleans and setting several speed records. Joan Newton Cuneo won the Amateur Championship and the Klaxon Signal and gave her male rivals a run for their money in the others. However less than a month later all women drivers would be banned by the AAA from sanctioned racing. The MardiGras Auto Carnival was her swan song. She had performed beyond the expectations of many especially since her Knox Giant was not a specially built race car, although it was fast and she drove it well.

Campbell and George should have been proud of their preparation of the track, as there was only one accident with only minor injuries to the driver. However they had to be disappointed at the response to their extensive publicity; to them it was an indifferent success although they made their expenses. Only four top drivers actually showed up for the races. The size of the purses might have been a factor, as there was less than \$300 at stake in all the events. Even the amateurs who raced for sport didn't flock to New Orleans. Arthur Greiner, the Chicago sportsman whose arrival was touted, was a no-show. Carl G. Fisher did not honor his commitment to enter the amateur races nor did William K. Vanderbilt and his wife respond to their invitation the auto carnival.<sup>39</sup> James Ryall and F.E.Schelfler, amateurs with some experience did compete along with a few less known amateurs .Unfortunately in most of the races only a few drivers actually finished or even showed up. Some of the male amateurs may have been scared off by Mrs. Cuneo's success ; none of them would have wanted to be beaten by a woman. The only driver who consistently outraced Mrs. Cuneo was Ralph De Palma as he won all his races but she managed to come in ahead of Strang, Robertson and Burman at least once and they were considered among the top drivers of the day. The idea that they would cut her some slack and "let" her win is interesting but not likely; her Knox was as fast as any car in New Orleans except for the Fiat Cyclone and she drove it with confidence. They might not be willing to run her off the track but they certainly would not have wanted her to pass them.

Undaunted Campbell and George believed that next year's auto carnival would be better, but were particularly disappointed that the local auto dealers had provided little support. Only Buick and Packard responded to their attempts to fill the stock car races with every make sold in New Orleans .However, even though Buick cars did perform creditably in several events, the Buick company did not send a noted woman driver from Detroit to drive against Joan Cuneo in the woman's race as they had stated in January.<sup>40</sup> Even the "free for all race open to New Orleans drivers" went to Anthony Monteleone by default. He was the only local amateur owner who had his Thomas ready to go at the start of the race.

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<sup>37</sup> "Auto Heroes Night," *New Orleans Picayune*, 25 February, 1909.

<sup>38</sup> "MardiGras automobile races at the Fair Grounds today," *New Orleans Picayune*, 20 February 1909.

<sup>39</sup> "Attitude of Local Agents Regretted, *New Orleans Picayune*, 24 February 1909.

<sup>40</sup> "De Palma's Fiat in Auto Carnival," *New Orleans Picayune*, 24 January 1909 , and "Attitude of Local Agents Regretted," *Picayune* 24 February 1909.

Although the race was initially postponed, starter Wagner decided to award the trophy to Monteleone.<sup>41</sup>

On the 25th, a mass exodus of drivers and officials from New Orleans began, as they headed for the next competition. Most, including Fred Wagner the starter would travel to Daytona. Only Mrs. Cuneo remained in New Orleans bitterly disappointed at the news that women would be banned from racing. Blocked from competition, she had her touring car shipped to New Orleans and spent some time exploring the area around the city with her son while her husband finished his business. No doubt she was thinking hard about where and how she might continue her racing career.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the efforts of Campbell and George, the MardiGras races would not become an annual tradition in New Orleans. The NOAC held two more meets at the Fair Grounds track but only one of these was during MardiGras. The second MardiGras race carnival drew only 3000 spectators and there were many complaints about the small number of events and participants and there were no attempts to schedule another. In 1915, horse racing resumed at the Fair Grounds. New Orleans, despite the heroic efforts of the NOAC leadership, would not become an important site of auto racing in the South.

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Mrs. Cuneo Lingers, New Orleans Picayune, 7 March 1909.