

NFTGA New Orleans Conference Review

July 18-22, 2007

Six members from the Chicago Tour-Guide Professionals Association (CTPA) were invited to write about their experiences at the NFTGA Conference for a recently sent CTPA mailing. Photographs from San Diego and Chicago attendees were included and the following report is an edited-for-national-distribution version of the Chicago account.

In addition to workshops and tours, three CTPA members attended special business sessions before and during the conference and were asked to write in detail about the four primary areas of the conference—speakers, meetings, tours and workshops.

We think you will benefit from their various points of views and gain a more complete picture of this recent national guide conference...perhaps enticing you to attend a future one?

Speakers and More!

By Donna Primas CTG

Attendance

The number of full-program registrants from across the U.S. numbered 31 and a large number of local New Orleans guides—about 50—signed up to attend just the lectures, workshops, and a few other activities and receptions. This geographic mix meant that the out-of-towners often had local experts around to provide history, personal anecdotes and recommendations about eating and exploring the city.

New Orleans Guide Licensing

Madeline Axtman, the current President of The Guide Assn. of Greater New Orleans (TGAGNOI), informed us that the City of New Orleans is requiring that all candidates for a tour guide license now take the tour guide training offered through a local community college before allowing the potential guide to take the tour guide test. She said that this had just started since Katrina, although the guide association has been lobbying for years to have the city do this.

New Orleans Continuing Education Units (CEUs)

In New Orleans, guides are licensed by the Taxi Bureau. The licensing fee covers (among other things) background checks and an official photo ID license which the guide must wear at all times. Pre-Katrina, the New Orleans guide association was working with the City to make 6 hours of Continuing Education Units (credits) mandatory to have a license renewed. While that program has been temporarily shelved, the guide organization does keep attendance and have a recognition program for guides who attend educational events and meetings.

If a guide earns 15 or more (hours) CEUs annually, the guide is given a special pin the first year. For each

additional year of high CEU accrual, a bar is given to add to the pin. Attending all the NFTGA conference lectures could have potentially given each New Orleans guide eight to ten CEU points.



The Opening Ceremony was held under the plane seen above. (D-Day Museum photo from their website.)

Venue for the Opening Session of the Conference

The Opening Session was held at a magnificent museum, The National World War II Museum, formerly known as the National D-Day Museum. This museum is located in the Central Business District of New Orleans. It focuses on the United States contribution to victory in World War II, and the Battle of Normandy in particular. It has been designated by the U.S. Congress as "America's National World War II Museum". It opened June 6, 2000, (the 56th anniversary of D-Day), and more recently added a section about the Pacific theater operations of WWII.

Why was this museum positioned in New Orleans? This city is where the "Higgins Boats" vital to D-Day were designed, built, and tested. The museum gives extensive coverage of the landing craft used in the invasion of Normandy, which were designed by Andrew Higgins of

Louisiana and produced in New Orleans by Higgins Industries and licensees. A plaque in the lobby of the museum notes that Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks helped to raise the 13 million dollars needed to establish this museum after they had worked together on the miniseries, *“The Band of Brothers.”* For more info see: <http://www.nationalww2museum.org/legacy>.

Speakers

Each excellent speaker presented information in an interesting way, which reached and had meaning for both groups of attendees—the New Orleans guides and the other guides from across the U.S. The opening session had two speakers, the Louisiana Lt. Governor and a local FBI agent!

Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu was introduced by Madeline Axtman as the individual who spoke the famous and often quoted words while helping with the evacuation during Katrina: “Get your a** in the boat!”

After this sassy introduction, Landrieu laughed and related “the rest of the story.” After ensuring his family was safe, Landrieu returned to New Orleans to help others. Many people were stranded on their rooftops and he was with a team in a rescue boat. One day while he was assisting, one gentleman did not want to get in the boat. He said he preferred to wait for a helicopter ride...hence the need for the Lt. Governor to use strong language.

The Lt. Governor related other personal anecdotes from the dark post-Katrina days, but he also reinforced what the conference participants would soon see for themselves on a city tour—that New Orleans has suffered horribly, but that she is back on her feet.

The second speaker was **James Bernazzini**, the FBI Special Agent In Charge of the area that includes New Orleans. Prior to being transferred to New Orleans, Bernazzini was in a counter-terrorist unit overseas. He said when he first arrived in New Orleans, he evaluated the destination through his counter-terrorist point of view. He found New Orleans to be vulnerable to terrorism in four ways...and the natural disaster named Katrina caused three of the four vulnerabilities to occur at once, causing the well documented devastation.

On a more positive note, Mr. Bernazzini outlined the steps that his agency and the federal government have taken to assist the local police in making New Orleans safer. First, gangs and bad elements have been pushed to about five areas—areas where tourists would never go. Second, he said that even though the New Orleans police take the lead on busts and arrests, they now work in conjunction with the FBI. In this way, the bad guys now are able to be charged with federal offenses that “have teeth”. As he went on to explain, Louisiana



Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu speaking at the Opening Ceremony held at the D-Day Museum (photo by Donna Primas, Chicago)

still has an often-used law on the books that permits a judge to lower bail from a high dollar figure to “personal recognizance”.

Since January 2007, with the new joint task force, and by charging felons with federal rather than local charges, more bad guys are staying locked up. Of 89 charges made this year, 86 individuals are still in federal custody. The bad guys have not been able to use the loopholes of the state laws. The intensity and dedication of Mr. Bernazzini was palpable. He said he has chosen to make New Orleans his last FBI post and that he plans to leave the city in much better order than when he arrived.

On the second day of the conference, two more distinguished speakers presented in a classroom setting at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, the conference venue.



Participants listen attentively to conference speakers in a Ritz-Carlton meeting room (photo by Joyce Bell, San Diego)

Dr. Robert A Thomas is the Director of the Center for Environmental Communications at Loyola University in New Orleans. As such he now focuses on environmental challenges and communication. He began by addressing the history of the world and how the population has exploded since 1800 and told us what we all know—that people like the coastlines—and that the density of population in these areas had effected the surrounding land and water.

He underscored the interconnectivity of man and his environment with the story about the food chain, beginning with a small fish that is native to the waters near New Orleans. He explained how over-fishing the lowly non-edible poagie—to make fish oil, fish meal, fertilizer and cosmetics—impacts the cultural and economic web of all of our lives. He went on to graphically illustrate how the disappearance of the wetlands south of New Orleans, the attempt to harness the Mississippi, the manmade levies and canals, all contributed to the devastation of Katrina. Statistics like, “41% of the water of the continental U.S. exits the continent via the Mississippi,” and “40 square miles of wetlands are lost each year” were sobering!

He outlined nine concepts to consider, and underscored the need for enlightened and capable leadership that brings all parties to the table and reaches across party and country lines. We laughed, as he related how he is still waiting for a politician to run for office based on, say, 10 things—and then do those ten things during his term! But among the laughter there was a message—Thomas told us that only the state of Oregon has a long term plan...and that the rest of the U.S. seems to work in the short term, from one election to the next. For more information about environmental issues, see: <http://www.loyno.edu/lucec/>.

John Royen, an accomplished Jazz pianist, related the history and origins of what we now call Jazz music.

Royen began his jazz history lesson with Ragtime (ragged time) syncopated tunes wonderfully executed on a piano, like those popularized by Scott Joplin. He then interlaced the history of the music played in Storyville, the long gone red light district of New Orleans, with further changes in the popular musical styles. He mentioned the movement north to Chicago in 1915 and the May 15, 1915, *Tom Brown's Band from Dixieland* that opened up at Lamb's Cafe at Clark & Randolph Streets in Chicago.

Royen explained how the music was first called JASS and later modified to JAZZ—to discourage vandals who defaced JASS posters by blackening out the letter “J”. His one hour long talk flew by and was met with a standing ovation. Find out more about him at: www.neworleansjazzpiano.com.

The third day of the conference, **Peggy Scott Laborde**, a senior producer for the New Orleans PBS station, spoke about Thomas Lanier “Tennessee” Williams (1911-1983) and his associations with New Orleans. She spoke of Williams’ famous plays/films—Pulitzer Prize winning *Street Car Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, as well as *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Night of the Iguana* and lesser know tales. She outlined his family life, where he lived in New Orleans and how his adopted city influenced and appeared in his works. Even if you had never heard of Tennessee Williams, Ms. Laborde made you want to read his work—especially after visiting the sultry summer streets of New Orleans French Quarter—so that you could experience them again through the wit and affection of Tennessee Williams.

The final day of the conference, the spouse of the previous day’s speaker was at the podium. Local publisher **Errol Laborde** spoke of Katrina and New Orleans and his talk received rave reviews.

Tour Notes & Impressions

By Lijana Baehr CTG

A Confession: I went for the Tours!

When I initially registered for the conference (BEFORE I knew I would be a Chicago delegate) it was in great part for the tours and other programming: The World War II Museum, a motorcoach city highlights tour, a second line parade, a walking tour of the French Quarter, dinner and a river boat cruise, New Orleans Cooking School, a walking tour of the Garden District plus visits to two plantations!

The learning and the adventures of this trip would be in the company of colleagues and peers from all corners of

the U.S. Our hosts succeeded in transmitting the challenges ahead, while remaining positive and true to the spirit of New Orleans.

The current NFTGA President, Bobby Gattuso, had at once a delicate and Herculean challenge: Showcasing one’s city to particular guiding professionals is a daunting task. She made many excellent choices and deserves credit for the overall quality of the conference. Selecting the host hotel and getting a good rate at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel amplified the experience in no small measure and was also a coup.

A Comprehensive City Tour

What the working guides of post-Katrina New Orleans include, in order to tell a more complete and



Early morning. The Mississippi River and looking toward the French Quarter from the Ritz (photo Donna Primas, Chicago)

authentic story, is commentary and routing about The Other New Orleans, the most devastated parts of the city that the working poor and the simply poor called home. It will be two full years this August 28th since the disastrous flooding, and some neighborhoods are still barely clear of debris.

Informative and excellent, Madeline Axtman, our City Tour guide, was comprehensive. In the assessment of some, the depressingly hard hit periphery communities may never completely re-form, but in this most wonderfully spirited and tolerant city, we never got this impression from any of our guides. The sight of sparsely occupied homes in the most affected neighborhoods, of still vacant ones on too many of the streets, the high “settled” water marks on the exterior walls, the explanation of the specific building markings used by the rescuers...all tell an underlying, unspoken story.

Even having personally viewed these effected areas, one still finds it impossible to imagine the experience of the surging flood, and even less, the devastation and chaos once the flood waters receded. Yet so many people want to and are returning, undaunted and willing to rebuild their homes in their old neighborhoods.

Fortunately, there is still a great stock of wonderful sights to behold – the five-mile stretch of St. Charles Avenue in the Garden District, not affected by the breach of the levees, was a particularly impressive and welcome respite as were other postcard sights and “touristy” areas of town.

And we were always returning to our beds at the ever luxurious Ritz on Canal Street (never a canal), at the edge of the French Quarter that was similarly spared.

Lunch at a Cooking School

Despite what tough and discriminating customers we guides can be, Kevin Belton, of the New Orleans Cooking School can, and did cook. He demonstrated the ways and means of his native cuisine with confidence,

panache and wit. Some who watch *The Food Network* knew his work. For the rest of us, he was a revelation. What a wonderful story of a Louisiana childhood he told, peppered with humor and wisdom, some undoubtedly inherited, the rest acquired in his grandmother’s home and kitchen.

I know just who will wear the apron Kevin signed, when we prepare the best and freshest pralines, pronounced the French way “down in New Orleans:” prahhlines. Just say ahhh!

French Quarter Walking Tour / Cemetery Clean-Up

In guiding, as in life, all the logistics can be in place, yet things can still “go South.” Only a skilled guide can change course and recover his or her tour.

The famous St. Louis No. 1 cemetery was mistakenly locked after the first NFTGA group of visitors had gone through! Imagine the pressure, combined with the oppressive heat and humidity of the afternoon walking tour of the Vieux Carre, when the second guide approached locked cemetery gates.

Our guide valiantly and cheerfully proceeded, and we along with her. A visit to that missed “city of the dead” is on the list for a return to the Crescent City, to find the gravesite of Marie Lavau, of Voodoo fame and Etienne de Bore’s tomb – he who first made granulated sugar, wouldn’t you know?!

Those who could stay the course of the afternoon...only some of us managed and conquered...were richly rewarded—much useful information was dispensed on the casual walk back to the hotel, when individual questions could be addressed by our lovely and knowledgeable guide, Barbara Robicheaux.



After-hours Jazz Clubbing. Joyce Bell (San Diego), Jeff Carter, Holly Jensen, Lyn Baksha, Lijana Baehr, (all of Chicago) and Donna Bair (San Diego)(photo by Joyce Bell, San Diego)



The Dukes of Dixieland aboard the Steamboat Natchez (photo by Joyce Bell, San Diego)

River Boat Cruise with Dinner

That night we would dine on the *Riverboat Natchez* and enjoy a great Jazz band on the upper deck. A special treat was in store when a visiting youth gospel choir belted out two spirited numbers as we cruised.

Garden District Outing

Our guide on the Garden District walking tour was another native, who proudly and enthusiastically showed us his home neighborhood's treasures. The commentary was delivered passionately by this highly intelligent, knowledgeable and energetic young guide, Andy Stevenson. Our guide was "the man," whether you love antebellum residential architecture or if you are just curious about what "Brangelina" (Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) are doing in the Garden District. (Think: investing in real estate and filming locations.)

In this southern city once divided in sectors, the Garden District is the Anglo/American part of town, and was on that afternoon very staid and deserted, in an affluent suburban sort of way. The residents wisely took shelter from the oppressive heat indoors or were gone altogether.

Touring Two Plantations

It was fascinating to learn about the old Creole ways on the shores of the great Mississippi. On the final day, we first visited two plantations. The oldest is Destrehan Plantation, complete with a Louisiana Purchase map and document room. More typical, yet wildly interesting, was the Laura Plantation, whose history is very well documented and which was successfully run by the best heir for the job: a woman.

The Creole plantation owners spent The Mardi Gras/Carnival Season in their vital port city of New Orleans, where they socialized and entertained in their well appointed Vieux Carre residences, pairing up and combining the fortunes accumulated cultivating indigo, and then sugarcane.

The docents made us remember just how good interpretive house tours can be - for authentically displaying and recreating material history, and evoking the spirit of their inhabitants and of another era.



A Destrehan Plantation docent explains life on a former indigo plantation. L to R: Terry Hall (Chicago), Esther Banike (Chicago), Vicky Schwartz (DC), docent, and Joan Pagliuca (Boston). (photo by Joyce Bell, San Diego)

3 Days of NFTGA Board & Delegates Meetings... in 3 minutes or less!

By Esther Banike CTG

You won't be sorry if you take a few minutes to read this section! Some interesting and important things do occur at the business meetings.

Duels were once legal and popular in Louisiana and were conducted the French way, by skill with swords.

The first one to draw blood was the winner. But when "the Americans" took over New Orleans in the early 1800s they arrived with a fondness for solving problems with a gun, and duels got a lot more dangerous. Thank goodness duels are now outlawed, so we just argued our positions and voted to settle differences at the New Orleans NFTGA Conference.

In the past, the NFTGA Nominations Committee followed the rule of slating just one name for each officer position. This process often works very well for local elections but may not be the best method when potential candidates are spread around the country and

largely unknown to the three committee members. I sought another solution: Shouldn't the committee have the option to slate more than one qualified person for each office? After some deliberation, and without one drawn sword or one shot fired, the NFTGA Policy and Procedures were changed to make that possible.

So what does that mean? The Nominating Committee will still have to work very hard to find people willing to serve. But at least no interested and qualified people will be kept off the slate. There were other dueling points but in order to keep to my three minute goal, here are some bullet highlights (pardon the pun) from the NFTGA Board and Delegates Meetings:

- Eight guide associations were represented: Boston, Chicago, Florida, New Orleans, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, San Diego, and Washington DC, plus one dynamic visitor from New York.
- Personal Liability Insurance, our first major accomplishment, is available to members of the NFTGA member associations. All associations may continue to accept new enrollees under certain conditions.
- The neglected NFTGA website information will soon be updated by Donna Primas.
- NFTGA Board Member Art Chesmore of Las Vegas will initiate plans for the NFTGA Conference of 2008. Think Las Vegas, late February or early March. We will study the feasibility of the location and dates before making financial commitments.
- Election of officers for the 2008-2010 term will take place at the 2008 Conference.
- A Nominations Committee will be sought to administer the nominations process for the upcoming election. NFTGA Board Member Esther Banike will query the associations for names of those interested to help with the nominations process.
- NFTGA Board Member Jo Curran's (Seattle, IATM-NA) suggestion for a National Tour Guide Certification Program was not embraced. However, all associations were encouraged to concentrate less on bricks and mortar and more on the "three P's" in their local education programs: **P**resentation skills, **P**eople skills and **P**roblem-Solving skills.
- NFTGA Board Member Kevin Doran of Miami will be responsible for producing the NFTGA newsletter at least biannually. His own association's newsletter includes an advice column written by a psychologist! Perhaps this columnist can help all of us?
- NFTGA dues paid in 2007 will cover us until June 1, 2008. The price works out to \$2.00 or less per person, a small price to pay for membership in an organization that gives us national credentials and benefits.

- In our continuing effort to bring recognition of Tour Guides to a national level, Ellen Gold and Marie Pinho of DC will represent the NFTGA at tourism related government meetings in the nation's capitol. Recently the Senate and House passed measures to establish a national program to promote U.S. tourism overseas. The DC contacts will be helpful as they work to help the newly created Corporation for Travel Promotion become aware of our organization and the importance Tour Guides could play in their program.
- International Delegates to the WFTGA conference in Egypt asked when the USA will bid to host a world conference. The responsibility would be that of one or more USA cities, and the possibility is under consideration - but far from happening.
- The last Board of Directors outlawed Proxies at NFTGA meetings, thereby denying a vote to any association that is not able to attend a meeting. Their concern was that a Delegate might collect the Proxies of several associations and control the workings of the NFTGA. They felt that any association that really cared would send a Delegate.

Do most of us support a policy that refuses a dues-paying member their right to vote?

A compromise was made as time ran short. No proxies will be allowed, but absent associations will be contacted with issues discussed at Delegates Meetings and offered the opportunity to vote. It will be interesting to see how much business can be completed at a meeting when the voting isn't over until everyone has been contacted AFTER the meeting! A quorum *should* be able to complete their business AND give the vote to all associations. Surely there's a better compromise.

Perhaps our problem is a difference in how we approach the **word** "Proxy." The opposition to proxies sees them as a blank check, so maybe we could take a page from recent Louisiana history and just call it something different. There is a prominent casino in downtown NOLA, with people playing the usual games. However, land-based gambling is illegal in New Orleans. So nobody GAMBLES at the casino...instead it's called GAMING.

**A GREAT PLACE...
NO MATTER WHAT YOU CALL IT!**

**New Orleans, NOLA, The Crescent City, The Big Easy,
MSY, the Vieux Carre, the French Quarter,
The Garden District...**

Workshops

By Esther Banike CTG

Four one-hour workshops were scheduled and offered on two dates, allowing most participants the opportunity to attend two workshops.

No workshop descriptions were provided in advance nor were they posted with the sign-up sheets, so sometimes people didn't know what to expect. Someone overheard a local guide guess that the "Group Therapy" workshop conducted by Esther Banike and Donna Primas must be a "touchy-feely kind of thing," when it was actually a problem-solving exercise.

A Tour Guide Search of the Internet

by Marie Pinho of Washington, DC

Marie demonstrated efficient ways to search for information, images and maps on the internet with a personal computer to help with guiding and other life situations.

Sharing Ideas for Improving Your Local Guide Association

by Vicky Schwartz of Washington, DC
Vicky presented time tested methods used by the respected tour guide Guild in DC to keep an association at peak performance.

Voice and Drama

by Marta Cooper of New York

Marta, a licensed New York guide, is an ex-Broadway and current cabaret performer with a big voice and great sense of humor. She led workshop participants through posture, breathing and stretching exercises designed to help a tour guide "take the stage," impress and maximize one's vocal abilities.

Group Therapy

by Esther Banike and Donna Primas of Chicago

Participants dived into a Think Tank with Donna and Esther. Attendees learned techniques to get their creative juices flowing and then drew on the collective inspirations of teammates from across the US.

First, teams of similar work experience brainstormed for topics or problems to tackle. Then re-arranged teams used their diverse experience to seek innovative solutions.

The participants were then led through interactive brainstorming sessions that inspired a few laughs, but some serious work was also done in the workshops. One group zeroed in on "Health Insurance for Guides Who Don't Have Insurance" as a major problem for many guides. They and some of the other teams will continue to work on their projects via e-mail, with Esther's guidance.

Other Conference Impressions



A second line parade starts at the Ritz. (photo by Joyce Bell, San Diego)

For me, the "Second Line" parade was a highlight. Behind the lead of a fabulous brass band which joined us just for the occasion, we paraded from our hotel through the French Quarter to a reception near the waterfront, dancing, tossing Mardi Gras beads to the crowds on the



French Quarter Balcony (photo by Lijana Baehr, Chicago)

I certainly enjoyed the city tour on the first day. It was a bit overwhelming since I arrived the same morning. I now know what it's like to be a thrust into a city tour after an early wake up call. As a tour guide, in the future maybe I should hand out some Red Bull to re-energize

my clients!

Another “plus” was the workshop presented by Marta Cooper, past President of the New York City guides and a cabaret singer/performer, She taught us to “take the stage,” by standing strong and tightening your gluteus maximus to project.

This unique city of New Orleans is musical and magical. Other than the conference, my visit was all about the food and the music. My pound of pralines disappeared quickly upon my return home.

As a follow up to my visit I rented the 2006 PBS presentation on New Orleans. It reinforced the information and offered old and new pictures of the Crescent City. **-Holly Jensen**



Guides gather in the steamy French Quarter (photo by Joyce Bell of San Diego)

I thoroughly enjoyed every aspect of the Conference. My only disappointment was that the excessive heat and humidity made it impossible for me to finish two of the walking tours. Since I had taken one of those tours on an earlier trip, I wasn't that upset...and I intend to take and finish the other tour upon my next visit.

I was especially impressed by the speakers. Each presented a topic relevant to the host city, and each

speaker was very well versed and able to communicate his or her thoughts in an entertaining yet scholarly manner. There was not a dull or un-inspirational speaker in the bunch. For a conference lasting four days, to be able to say that speaks to the quality of the conference itself! **-Jeff Carter**



Lijana Baehr & Terry Hall (Chicago) look and smile as Esther Banike (Chicago) poses with Harry Bair (San Diego) and the “second line parade” musicians, The Storyville Stompers. (photo by Joyce Bell, San Diego)

Favorite Meal: The one at The New Orleans School of Cooking after the demo: Gumbo, Crawfish Etoufee with Rice, Pina Colada Bread Pudding washed down with ice cold local beer.

Favorite Speaker: Tough to choose just one, but **James Bernazzini**, the FBI Special Agent had such a “don’t mess with the Feds” way about him. I couldn’t help but think of Elliott Ness and the Untouchables.

Favorite Conference Experience: Camaraderie.

Favorite Special Experience: A toss between being interviewed for a local TV news spot (by a Kankakee-born Cubs Fan) and pleasing the onlookers of the Second Line Parade by tossing them beads.

-Esther Banike CTG

SAVE THE WETLANDS

Souvenirs! I still have the Save American Wetlands white rubber bracelet given to us by a local guide, and I have already found takers for the souvenir T-shirts purchased. One has “Be a New Orleanian Wherever You Are,” not as “cheesy or lame” a message as it may seem at first, IF you follow the advice of one of the speakers and start connecting the dots from Lake Michigan to Lake Ponchartrain (which is not even a lake, but a bay of sorts).

-Lijana Baehr CTG