

This document was originally prepared by Frederick Dumas to research and record his family history. The opening page indicates that it has undergone many revisions as he found new documents and made better connections. The only date I can find on it is 1997. Frederick Dumas does not have an email address, but his son may be reached at radumas@servqual.com

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Ferdinand J. Montégut, Jr.

Ferdinand J. Montégut, Jr., my father-in-law, was a noted raconteur. He told many colorful tales of his younger years. We long thought that these colorful stories were exaggerations at best and were probably woven of the whole cloth. Time and verifications by witnesses have proven them to be true. The following biographical sketch has been extracted from the stories he told.

Ferd, as he is affectionately known by family and friends, was born on July 26, 1898, the son of Ferdinand, Sr. and Bertha Leal. He was the eldest of six children. The other five were girls.

Ferdinand, Sr. was a shoemaker and earned enough to provide for his family. He, however, was a week-end alcoholic. All week, according to Ferd, his dad was a dutiful husband and father, but, after being paid on Fridays, he headed straight for the bar and did not return home until all his money was spent. Bertha took in washing to provide food for the family. They were very poor and life was hard.

In 1912, a neighbor advised his mother to go to a judge in the family court who would make Ferdinand, Sr. provide for his family. The judge issued an injunction ordering Ferdinand to provide for his family or go to jail. Ferdinand, Sr. deserted the family and left New Orleans for Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

Shortly thereafter, while Bertha was cooking starch on a furnace, her long skirt brushed against the handle of the pot, causing the thick, hot liquid to spill on both of her feet. While she was in agony, a man knocked on the window and identified himself as an undertaker from Bay St. Louis. He stated that Ferdinand, Sr. had died and asked about the disposition of the body. Ferd, who was fourteen at the time, told the undertaker that they didn't even have food to eat and that they didn't want the body returned; that he should stuff it into a hold face down so that "if the bastard tried to dig himself out of the grave, he would only go deeper."

Ferd's oldest sisters, Bertha and Marguerite took over the washing and ironing until their mother could do so again. Troubles continued to pile up. The following week when Ferd delivered clothes to their best customer on Ursuline Street, she told him that there would be no more work for them. Her husband had put on a freshly laundered shirt and found a pinase (chinch) on the collar. The family was devastated.

Ferd found a job cleaning the dental offices of Dr. Ed Rodriguez and his three sons on Ursuline Street. The dentists paid him five dollars a week. Later, they taught him to extract and fill teeth and soon provided him with his own room and dental chair. His salary remained the same.

When Ferd was fifteen years of age, he attended a dance at the Frans Ami Hall. Because of his poverty, his shoes had holes in the soles. Even then, the Frans Ami Hall was an old building and the floors were splintery. A huge splinter ran into his foot and he could not pull it out. He limped home. His mother was unable to remove the splinter and called a neighbor, who came with pliers and finally was able to dislodge the wood. Home remedies could not heal the wound and he got lockjaw. His mother's friends and neighbors all recommended cures to no avail. Finally one neighbor recommended a poultice made from dried dog feces. Ferd refused this remedy and somehow recovered.

While laid up, he promised himself that he would leave home and get a job so they could live better. As soon as his foot had healed, he got a job as a waiter on the diner of a train, the Sunset Limited, running from New Orleans to Los Angeles. In this way, he managed to earn money to help his family.

The waiters on the train loved to play tricks on each other. One day a new waiter joined the crew. He was a huge man newly discharged from the army. Ferdinand told the man that hoodlums frequently came aboard and tried to steal from the diner and disturbed the sleep of the men in the car. He told him that the newest man in the crew had to watch outside the dining car so the others could sleep. He gave the man a club with which to protect the car.

When the train pulled into Gila Bend, Arizona, the supervisor came aboard to inspect. The new recruit refused him entrance and threatened to club him. The supervisor was about the fire the recruit when the laughter of the group alerted him to the practical joke. Later on in the trip, the new man caught Ferd alone and gave him a shiner.

When the train arrived in Los Angeles, Ferdinand went to a pawn shop and bought some brass knuckles. He caught his assailant unawares and hit him with the brass knuckles, causing his eye to pop out. When the train got back to Gila Bend, the supervisor, Mr. D. H. Lusk, had heard of the incident and told him he was suspended for sixty days in Los Angeles. Ferd stated that he had no home there and could not live without support on Central Avenue so the suspension was changed to Gila Bend so he could sleep on diners on the side tracks. Although he had a place to sleep and could get food from the diners, he had no money to send to his mother.

Even though this was before prohibition, that part of Arizona was dry. Ferd had waiters on trains going through to Los Angeles bring back cases of whiskey which he sold to cowboys and Indians. He made a real profit. One day the sheriff, "Maricopa Slim," sent for him. The sheriff wanted to buy three bottles of whiskey for his wedding anniversary dinner. Ferd pretended that he did not know about the whiskey, but Maricopa Slim told him of each time he had received a shipment. Ferd offered to give the whiskey to the sheriff, but he insisted on paying for it.

The sheriff also told Ferd that he would have to arrest him sooner or later, but before he made the arrest he would get word to him. Ferd was to take the next train out of town. A few weeks later the word came and Ferdinand caught the next Sunset Limited to New Orleans.

Once again without work, he sought jobs. One day he and his cousin, Robert Carrere, saw a poster advertising for railroad hands. They went to the employment office and were asked if they had ever laid rails before. They answered affirmatively. The woman asked what tool they would use to tamp ties. Taking a cue from the question they replied that they tamped ties with a tamper. The woman told them they had not laid ties or they would know that ties were tamped with a shovel. She put them out. They stood around outside the office and when the woman left, they returned. This time a man asked the same question. They replied that "anyone knows that you tamp ties with a shovel." They were hired.

That night they were on a ship bound for New York to work on the Delaware and Hudson Railroad. All the other men were former field hands, used to hard work. The foreman was also an ex-field hand. He teased and bullied Ferd until one day "Frenchie," as he was called, picked up a pitcher of molasses and knocked the bully cold. The supervisor, Sam E. Banks, sent for him. "Frenchie," he said, "You've knocked my foreman out. Now you're the foreman." He received a small raise which he augmented by writing letters home for the illiterate workers.

One night, an engine hooked up to their train and moved it away. When it stopped, they became aware that rifle-carrying men walked on top of the cars. In the early dawn, they could also see mobs of men carrying clubs in the nearby streets. They asked where they were and why they had been moved. They were told that they had been brought there to break a strike. Ferd told Mr. Banks that he would not act as a strike-breaker and the other men would follow his stand. The train was brought back to the original station. He then transferred from the track laying detail to the round house at Water Valet near Albany.

One week-end he went to Albany. He checked into a flea-bag hotel and set out to see the city. He walked into an area of wealthy homes and realized that he was lost. He saw a woman in a limousine entering one of the homes and asked her his way. She asked what a nice looking young man was doing staying in such a hotel. When he told her, she directed him to go back to the hotel to get his belongings and to return to her house. He did so and had a pleasant week-end.

At the woman's directions, whenever he came to Albany he stayed with her. She took him to a party where he was the center of attention and was referred to as Mrs. Van Buren's boy-friend. One day his Ingersol watch was broken

and he could not get it repaired. Mrs. Van Buren bought him another watch. Ferd thanked her and said, "You're just like a mother to me." "You dumb bastard," she retorted, "I'm no mother to you. Get out of my house." He later found out that she was Helen Van Buren, the widow of the millionaire Van Buren.

After working for awhile in Cooperstown, N.Y., he returned to New Orleans. He immediately went to visit his girl friend Verena and found her entertaining another young man. Verena's mother gave him five hundred dollars to go to New York to study at Bodie's School of Dentistry in Brooklyn.

While studying mechanical dentistry, he became involved with Marcus Garvey's Universal Association and African Community League on 138th Street near Lennox Avenue. He raised money for the organization's goal of sending Negroes back to Africa. One of the projects was the purchase of two boat loads of whiskey to sell to South American countries just before prohibition went into effect. The liquor was loaded onto the S.S. Phyllis Wheatly and the S.S. Paul Dunbar. Just before midnight, the vessels sailed. Right outside of harbor, the Paul Dunbar sprang a leak and had to return to New York Harbor. The ship was impounded, but later released.

Another adventure occurred in New York. World War I was in progress and a newspaper advertisement offered jobs to mule tenders to help take a shipload of mules to France. Ferd and Robert thought this would be an excellent opportunity to see France. They secured jobs and set sail with a boat load of mules for Le Havre. When the seas got rough, the mules began to fart and mill around. Suddenly they broke loose and all the mules on that deck stampeded onto the outside deck and over the rail. As the mules swam and screeched, the captain and crew fired shots into the panicky beasts. The other two deckloads got safely to France. When the mules had been off-loaded, personnel on board were not permitted ashore. Ferd and Robert sailed back to New York without seeing France.

After graduating from Bodie's School of Dentistry, Ferd returned to New Orleans to find that Verena had married the other guy.

He obtained his dental license. He was in the final group to be certified based upon apprenticeship and without a college background. Ferd opened an office on North Robertson Street near St. Bernard Avenue. He also began an itinerant practice at farms along the Mississippi River between Port Arthur and New Orleans.

In early 1921, he married Anna Cerre. Their only child, Annette, was born on December 13, 1921. Anna, who had been a parochial school teacher, began studying for a degree in pharmacy at Xavier University. Soon after her graduation, she died on July 4, 1930.

Two years later, Ferd married Mildred Veal, the business manager of the *Louisiana Weekly* newspaper, who bore him a son, Ferdinand J. Montegut, III. Together, they weathered the depression years. Ferd closed his office in New Orleans and centered his efforts on his itinerant practice. Often his patients could only pay with farm products. White dentists who had refused to serve black patients before the depression now wanted their trade. Frequently they had the local sheriffs chase Ferd out of town so that blacks would be forced to come to them. Ferd weathered these adversities and continued his practice.

To save on gasoline, he sometimes stayed on the road with friends overnight. On one such occasion, he stayed with the Dubuclets in White Castle. When he went to the outhouse, he selected one which was old and abandoned. As he sat on the hole, the boards gave way and he dropped into the cess-pool below. The Dubuclets had to wash him down with buckets of water until he was able to enter the house to get a bath.

Ferd had been a hunter and fisherman all of his adult life. The black powder from the shotguns gradually caused him to lose his sight in his left eye. He continued to fish at least once a week even though he was over ninety years of age.

In the 1930's, he was hunting alone when he came upon a group of smugglers bringing illicit whiskey into the bayous. They did not see him and he watched as they hid their stash of prohibited refreshment. When they had gone, Ferd confiscated the drop and brought it to New Orleans disguised as embalming fluid. On several subsequent occasions, he found their hiding places and hi-jacked the whiskey. Aware that they were looking for him, he stopped this dangerous game.

Ferd and Mildred purchased a house on London Avenue in 1943 and began to reap the benefits of their labors. This ended when Mildred died on September 12, 1960.

A year later, Ferd married Emily Chase. The marriage was not a happy one and they divorced around 1978.

He continued to live independently, enjoying his fishing although all his contemporaries died, until his own death on 11 Nov 1993, at the age of 95 years.

The children of Ferdinand Montegut merit attention.

Annette Rose Montegut, your mother, grew up in the unsettled times of the early 1920s and the Great Depression. Anna, her mother, provided the stability and calming influence that a young girl needed.

As was common in the post World War I era, Ferdinand's dental office occupied the front room of his residence. The next room was the waiting room and also the family living room. Ferdinand had built an annex to the rear of the property to serve as his laboratory, where he made dentures and crown. At that time, dentists usually did their own laboratory work. It was not until later that dentists found it more profitable to send that phase of the service to independent laboratories.

Ferdinand had a reputation as an outstanding provider of dentures. Most of his patients were referred to him by other satisfied patients.

After Anna's death in 1930, Nettie frequently accompanied her father on his trips to rural places as he provided dental services to plantation workers. Soon she was helping her father by keeping his record and caring for his dental instruments.

Early in life, she developed a love for classical music and learned lyrics for many operatic songs. In her freshman year, at Xavier, she was in the science program. This was done because her father desired that she become a dentist. Nettie did not want to be a dentist and transferred to a liberal arts program.

She participated in all the music programs, especially the operatic and choral events. Sister Letitia urged her to become a music major and to take individual voice lessons to enhance her skills. Knowing the restricted financial conditions of her family, Nettie said nothing to her parents and did nothing to place greater financial burden on them.

When Ferdinand remarried in 1932 to Mildred Veal, he found another mate with the sweet temperament and calming influence of his first wife. Mildred took your mother to her heart with all the love and devotion as if she were her own. In this nurturing environment, your mother developed into a lovely young woman.

Nettie graduated from Xavier in June, 1942, and went to work at the Port of Embarcation. World War II was in progress.

Assignments at the Port of Embarcation were based on examinations with selections being made from the top three on the examination list. Colored applicants were not selected unless all three of the top three on the list were colored. Frequently when that occurred, they declared the list void and gave another examination. Thus Nettie had to take the examination several times before she found herself in a top group of three colored applicants and was selected.

We were married 24 Feb 1943 and started our family. Nettie has been a devoted wife and mother ever since.

After Ferdinand J. Montegut's marriage to Mildred Veal in 1932, they were blessed by the arrival of a son, Ferdinand J. Montegut III. Ferdinand III was such a tiny baby that a friend jokingly called him "Palsy" after a comic strip whale. The name "Palsy" stuck until he went away to medical school and succeeded in changing his nickname to a more appropriate adult name, "Monty."

Monty attended school in New Orleans until he graduated from Xavier University. He then matriculated at Meharry University Medical School. Since the war was in progress, he accepted an Army scholarship which had to be repaid with military service.

After graduation, he was assigned to Korea, since that conflict was in progress. When that tour ended, he returned to the U.S.A. and served in Washington State, where he met and married Margaret Grimm ("Susie").

By that time, he had decided to make a career in the Army and pursued a specialty in thoracic surgery. After serving in Germany, he was assigned to Panama, where he completed his twenty years of service, rising to the rank of Colonel and the title of Chief of Thoracic Surgery.

During those years, Monty and Susie had two sons, Michael and Christian.

After his retirement from the Army, Monty accepted a partnership with a medical group in Connecticut and he and Susie established their home in Orange, Connecticut.