

Born in the Bayou



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It was 1865, the Civil War just ended, Reconstruction (reconstructing very little) just beginning when 50 year-old Edmund McIlhenny, destitute, but not quite defeated, saw his future.

Among the weeds and debris of the once prosperous plantation on Avery Island (140 miles west of New Orleans), just outside New Iberia, one of the most successful in antebellum Louisiana, a precious handful of pepper plants were defiantly challenging the fate of a defeated Confederacy. These deep green plants were full of life, but more important, their vibrant blood-red, perfectly shaped fruit was full of hope! Surely, this was a sign beyond normal circumstances.

Much about Edmund McIlhenny is a tapestry of interwoven legend and truth. The challenge is determining which is which. For this story, I will concentrate on that which I find most interesting and let the reader sort it out. As the story goes, McIlhenny, in the early months of the Civil War, met Friend Gleason, a Confederate soldier just returned from the Tabasco

region of México¹ with a gift of Mexican hot peppers. Why Mr. Gleason wasn't returning from the battlefields of this most unfortunate conflict, is most likely the subject of another story or, at least, an unpleasant discovery while painstakingly creating the Family Tree.

McIlhenny was intrigued by the juicy, red fruit, planting their seeds in the rich plantation soil prior to his world being turned upside down. Union Flag Officer David Glasgow Farragut had captured New Orleans on April 29, 1862 followed approximately a year later with General Nathaniel Prentice Banks' troops marching through New Iberia wreaking havoc on Avery Island, in their effort to subdue Louisiana and control the Mississippi River. It was time for Southern sympathizer Edmund McIlhenny and family to skedaddle. And in 1863, skedaddle they did, to the relative safety of Brenham, Texas.

Brenham is located in east-central Texas, about half way between Houston and Austin. It is the county seat of Washington County, best known as the "Birthplace of Texas," proudly boasting the signing of the Texas Declaration of Independence on March 2, 1836 in Washington-on-the-Brazos.

Brenham is the home of Blue Bell Creameries, at one time the fourth largest ice cream manufacturer in the United States. Unfortunately, it is most recently known for a company-wide recall of all its products in 2015 because of a Listeriosis outbreak in a number of its manufacturing facilities. One can imagine the business challenges this created. One can also admire how they addressed those challenges, are slowly rebuilding the brand and making a remarkable comeback.

With the Civil War over, at least on the battlefields, the McIlhenny family returned to a home and life that wasn't, and never would be, the same. How would they survive? Could this fascinating pepper that had not only survived, but thrived the onslaught of Union occupation, be the answer? One can picture the once prosperous McIlhenny, disparately plucking a few of

these newly discovered jewels of the earth....chopping, mashing, squeezing, adding this and that ingredient, trying different recipes, the mad scientist practically begging each trial to reveal a truth that would alter the course of his seemingly dismal future.

The fingers of fate came from the black hands of his former slaves, still living on Avery Island. They were familiar with preparing foods with hot peppers from their native African and Caribbean homes. Listening to their advice, most likely a custom newly acquired, McIlhenny eventually created a pepper mash, seasoned with vinegar and salt. He let it age. He strained it. He tasted it. IT WAS GOOD!



His friends agreed. A business was born. Now that he had a product, McIlhenny needed more peppers, planting his first commercial crop in 1868. In 1869 E. McIlhenny Tabasco Pepper Sauce was poured into 658 cologne bottles with narrow necks and sprinkler fitments. They were sold to Gulf Coast grocers for one dollar each. McIlhenny was a master salesman. By the late 1870s his “Cajun Ketchup” was selling throughout the United

States and Europe.

Celebrating 150 years in business, TABASCO® Sauce is ubiquitous. Nary a restaurant table or home cupboard is without it. Estimated sales are approximately \$200 million, selling in over 185 countries, labeled in 22 languages and dialects. TABASCO® Sauce is synonymous with a very “hot” category, with U.S. hot sauce sales projected at \$1.65 billion dollars by 2022.

The McIlhenny Company, a private company, with emphasis on the word “private,” has slightly opened its doors to create an interesting single company *Industrial Theme Park* concept. McIlhenny Company, Highway 329, Avery Island, LA

70513, Telephone: 337-369-6243

TABASCO® Factory Tours

There are guided and self-guided tours covering the TABASCO® Museum, Green House, Mash Warehouses, Blending and Production, Avery Island Conservation, Salt Mine diorama, the TABASCO® Country Store and Restaurant 1868. The self-guided tours are seven days a week from 9:00 am – 4:00 pm. The cost is \$5.50 for General Admission and Free for children under four.

The guided tours run Monday – Friday, at 10:00 am and 2:00 pm, taking approximately one hour. The tour guide is TABASCO® historian, Dr. Shane Bernard. The cost is \$200.00 for up to 20 guests plus \$10.00 for each additional guest.

The TABASCO® Country Store sells a wide variety (very wide!) of TABASCO® branded products. A small sampling includes baseball caps, tumblers, pullovers, wood chips, socks, wrapping paper, guitar picks, t-shirts, oven mitts, spatulas, beanies, mixing bowls, throw blankets, kabob skewers, bottle insulator socks, sippy cups, crawfish boiling sets, tote bags, footballs, flags, beach balls, lunch boxes, baseball bat and ball sets, gumbo bowls, plastic cups, coffee mugs and yes, you can even purchase TABASCO® branded sauces at the TABASCO® Country Store.

If you can't make it to Avery Island, you can purchase these amazing products on-line. You can also sign up for a periodic color printed catalog and e-newsletter, both offering incredible buying opportunities that will keep a TABASCO® collector's head spinning and closets full.

TABASCO® Jungle Gardens

This attraction is definitely unique to the McIlhenny Company. This 170 acre semitropical paradise features seasonal azaleas, camellias, bamboo, alligators, deer and thousands of snowy egrets (saved from extinction by the valiant efforts of the

McIlhenny family) that nest in the specially constructed Bird City. The hours are 9:00 am – 5:00 am, seven days a week. The cost for Jungle Gardens only is \$8.00 for adults and \$5.00 for children. The cost for Jungle Gardens and the TABASCO® Visitors Center is \$12.50 for adults and \$9.50 for children. Seniors and veterans receive a 10% discount. There is special pricing for groups of 25 or more.

Ticketing for all TABASCO® attractions is through etix.

It's an amazing story based on a simple product. Does providence guide us? Or, does providence not? Edmund McIlhenny must have scratched his head and wondered. The original TABASCO® Pepper Sauce is made from three simple ingredients: red peppers (miraculously surviving the devastation of the Civil War), salt (Avery Island is literally a rock salt dome, surrounded by bayous, containing enough high-quality salt to last another 100 years) and distilled-cane vinegar. The time was right and the food was bland. Cajun cooking bland? Someone needed to spice it up. McIlhenny saw his opportunity and developed his product. Edmund McIlhenny is considered the "father of hot sauce." The McIlhenny family the "first family of hot sauce."

You want to get rich? Create a category! McIlhenny did both. Though simple, the product is unique. The peppers used today are now grown in Central and South America. But, the seeds for those peppers are still grown on Avery Island from plants whose ancestry can be traced to the original peppers that greeted Edmund McIlhenny in 1865. The pepper mash is aged for up to three years in oak barrels, to ferment and create that distinct TABASCO® taste.

Congratulations McIlhenny Company for creating a product that has been satisfying palates worldwide for 150 years! A product that could only have been *Born in the Bayou!*

¹Tabasco is located in southeast México, between the Gulf of México and Guatemala. Contrary to popular belief and the credibility of our story, the Tabasco pepper (*capsicum frutescens*) does not grow in this Mexican state. While the origin of the Tabasco pepper is generally assigned to Central and South America, Tabasco state is given credit as the birth place of chocolate, originally developed by the Olmecs, refined by the Mayans and Aztecs.

Sources:

McIlhenny's Gold, How A Louisiana Family Built the Tabasco Empire, Jeffrey Rothfeder

The Civil War, A Narrative, Fort Sumter to Perryville, Shelby Foote

The Civil War, A Narrative, Fredericksburg to Meridian, Shelby Foote

www.history.com/topics/mexico/tabasco

www.tabasco.com