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Second Annual New Orleans Po-Boy Preservation Festival Scheduled for November 2008
Successful Celebration to be Twice the Size as Previous One

The second annual New Orleans Po-Boy Preservation Festival is slated to be held from noon to 6 p.m. on Sunday, November 23, 2008 on the first six blocks of Oak Street in the New Orleans neighborhood known as Riverbend where St. Charles and Carrollton avenues meet. This festival was founded as a celebration of the storied sandwich and the role it has played in New Orleans' culinary culture.

The Po-Boy Preservation Festival highlights the ongoing revitalization of the Oak Street business corridor. In 2006, Oak Street was designated a National Main Street™ by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and a Louisiana Main Street™ by the Department of Historic Preservation, which authorizes the program. The Main Street™ program, which has been in existence since 1985, has been successfully revitalizing local neighborhood commercial corridors that have suffered from large scale malls and big box stores in the suburbs.

As a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization, the program has been raising funds through events, grants, and corporate sponsorships. As a result, new businesses have been popping back up on Oak Street and longtime shops have been given the chance to revitalize their existing businesses as well as update their store fronts. The Main Street initiative has been steadily gaining steam, and Oak Street has seen a dramatic increase of activity as a result of the program's success.

Proceeds from the New Orleans Po-Boy Preservation Festival go toward the Oak Street Association's work to promote, preserve, and revitalize Carrollton's historic Oak Street neighborhood and commercial corridor. A portion of proceeds also go to support the Abeona House Child Discovery Center. Located in the Riverbend area on Oak Street, Abeona House is a full time, year-round, not for-profit child care center for children ranging in age from 6 weeks to 5 years.

The first annual New Orleans Po-Boy Preservation Festival was held November 18, 2007 and featured po-boy offerings from some of the city's most famous restaurants. Festival judges, including Tom Fitzmorris of "The Food Show," presented the "Golden Loaf Awards" for the best tasting po-boys. This free public street festival had more than 10,000 attendees in 2007 and covered three commercial street blocks of Oak Street in the Riverbend neighborhood. The festival featured two stages with live music, as well as arts and crafts, a silent auction, a children's section with games and prizes, a beer garden with a large screen TV to view the Saints as they played on their game day, and of course, the best po-boys in New Orleans.

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Poor boy sandwiches represent bedrock New Orleans. The sandwich is as diverse as the city it symbolizes. The crisp loaves have served as a culinary crossroads, encasing the most pedestrian and exotic of foods: shrimp, oyster, catfish, soft-shell crabs as well as French fries and ham and cheese.

As with many culinary innovations, the poor boy has attracted many legends regarding its origins. However, documentary evidence confirms stories about one particular restaurant were right. Bennie and Clovis Martin left their Raceland, LA, home in the Acadiana region in the mid-1910s for New Orleans. Both worked as streetcar conductors until they opened Martin Brothers' Coffee Stand and Restaurant in the French Market in 1922. The years they had spent working as streetcar operators and members of the street railway employees' union would eventually lead to their hole-in-the-wall coffee stand becoming the birthplace of the poor boy sandwich.

Following increasingly heated contract negotiations, the streetcar motormen and conductors went on strike July 1, 1929. The survival of the carmen's union and 1,100 jobs was in question. When the company attempted to run the cars on July 5 using "strike breakers," more than 10,000 New Orleanians gathered downtown and watched strike supporters disable and then burn the first car operated by a strike breaker.

The many support letters included one from the Martin Brothers promising, "Our meal is free to any members of Division 194." Their letter concluded: "We are with you till hell freezes, and when it does, we will furnish blankets to keep you warm." In order to maintain their promise, the Martins provided large sandwiches to the strikers. Bennie Martin said, "We fed those men free of charge until the strike ended. Whenever we saw one of the striking men coming, one of us would say, 'Here comes another poor boy.'"

In 1931, the Martin's restaurant relocated to the 2000 block of St. Claude Avenue—just two blocks from Gendusa Bakery. As the Depression worsened, many New Orleanians enjoyed the opportunity to feed themselves or their families using the famously oversized poor boy sandwiches—a culinary tradition that has remained today.