



FEATURED ADVERTISER

## Les Lumieres de la Ville

### The Bevolo family's gas light tradition

by Simonette Berry | photography by Chad Chenier

"You ever heard the story of how it all started?" Andrew Bevolo III, known as Drew, will ask you. "I have heard it probably a million times. When I was little, A. Hays Town used to call the house to speak to my grandfather. I would answer, and he would end up telling me the whole story just about every time he called, whether I wanted to hear it or not! I remember when they gave Mr. Town a Lifetime Achievement Award at the governor's mansion a few years back...he waltzes on stage, pushes past ole Edwin [Edwards], gets up on the mike, and starts talking about how he met my grandfather. He loved telling that story, man."

The story begins with a light on a dark night, a celestial beacon in the shadowy, chthonic streets of post-World War II New Orleans. Renowned Louisiana architect A. Hays Town was roaming the streets of the French Quarter, searching for inspiration. He was working on the designs for what is now the Architecture School at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, but he was running low on funds and ideas, already over budget for the project, and still looking for a lantern design. He dawdled on street corners, sketching in the incandescent pools made by a few electric lights, pausing by the streetlights lit with gas flames, now symbols for the Vieux Carré. He was rounding a corner on Conti Street when he heard the distinctive "tic-tic-tic! tap-a-tap-tap!" of a metal craftsman working late into the night.

Town followed the sound down the darkened street to a little shop that radiated with life and warmth. He popped his head into the shop and said, "Hey, mister, can you make me a light fixture?" The man behind the mallet was shop owner and skilled craftsman Andrew Bevolo Sr., a fearless trendsetter like Town. "If you can draw it, I can make it,"

Bevolo Sr. replied, and a great friendship and partnership began. They worked late into the night designing the light fixture that not only captured the timeless architecture of south Louisiana, but also started a revolution in the gas lighting industry.

At that time, Bevolo Sr. was the go-to man for gas light repair, and he had already been making quiet innovations to every one that he fixed. The old lanterns were soldered together, which created enough of a bond to hold for a while, but did not stand the test of time. The soldering technique was also prohibitive. "It was a historic problem that you just couldn't turn the flame up on these gas lights," says Drew. "It would melt the solder joints, because in order to attach the solder joints, you had to use a flame."

Bevolo Sr. knew from his extensive experience that metal sheets needed more than a little soldering to hold them together under pressure. Before opening his French Quarter shop, the Italian immigrant began his metalworking career at the Ford Motor Company, and later went on to work on a team with the inventor of the helicopter, Igor Sikorsky. His skill in the sheet metal craft eventually brought him to New Orleans, where he worked for Andrew Higgins to build the landing craft used in the D-Day invasions. "They don't solder airplanes together for a reason," Drew remarks wryly. "They rivet them together. And that's what he decided to do with the light fixtures."

The light they designed became a trademark of Mr. Town's homes, built all over Louisiana, and a cornerstone of the Bevolo Metal Crafts business. The new lanterns were an instant success, with a classic look, streamlined design, and improved craftsmanship. Well-balanced and neutral enough to go with almost any architectural style, they recalled the similar design of the Vieux Carré streetlights and became symbolic of the architectural style of the South and the French Quarter, in particular. Bevolo became the place to go if you wanted something made in the traditional 18th- or 19th-century style. Generations later, the Bevolo lights still stand. Their distinctive copper lanterns illuminate the historic buildings in Jackson Square, Maspero's, Brennan's Restaurant, the Omni Royal Orleans and Royal Sonesta Hotels, the homes of famous figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Emeril, Donald Trump, Harry Connick Jr., George Bush Sr., Sandra Bullock, and hundreds of other buildings and hidden courtyards throughout the world.

Once the look was made famous, the technique began to revolutionize the gas lighting industry. Customers could turn the flames up higher on their new lanterns, getting more light for each fixture and not having to worry about the melting solder joints. Every lamp was guaranteed to last, riveted together

to stand the test of the ages. Other companies quickly followed suit, but it is well known that Andrew Bevolo Sr. was the pioneer who made it possible.

Not much has changed over the years as the company was handed down three generations, from Bevolo Sr. to his son Jim Bevolo and again to Drew years later. Now Drew is teaching the tricks of the trade to his son Chris, who is 26 and just starting his own family. The success of the Bevolo family lies in the skillful craftsmanship and faithfulness to tradition.

"Nothing is really automated up here," Drew says. "We make the lights the same way we always have, the long way." It takes about two days for a single fixture from start to finish, and the Bevolo craftsmen are always busy, putting each piece together by hand. The employees undergo an extensive training process and are greatly valued assets to the company. "We only train good people, and it takes a few years for them to really get the hang of it. We try to keep them forever if we can," Drew says.

Bevolo uses a special aging process to give the copper a beautiful burnished radiance. "Our lights look different than anyone else's lights. Others may look good, but ours are better. We have a multistep oxidation process that ages the copper, and the recipe is a closely guarded secret. It is kind of like the difference between Coke and Pepsi."

Bevolo is the oldest, largest copper gas lantern manufacturer in the United States and the second oldest in the world, with work present in all 50 states and 28 other countries. Much of their business comes from out of state, but every piece is still hand-made in the French Quarter workshop or their larger facility nearby. Though they are famous for gas

lights, they carry an expansive line of both gas and electric lights with over 500 designs, from contemporary to traditional to custom. Bevolo never discontinues a model, so whether you're expanding, renovating, or replacing, your lights will always match.

The most exciting new development is the brand new store Drew has just opened on Royal Street. "When I was little, I didn't realize the significance of what my grandfather was doing, the symbolism of building lights for New Orleans. I would come down to the shop to ride the elevator and dream of opening up a shiny, new shop. But the age, the character... that's what gives it its charm!" he laughs. "Now we've just opened up the place at 318 Royal Street, right in the heart of the antiques district, and it is beautiful." Drew and the Bevolo craftsmen have also come out with a new line of furniture, much of it inspired by A. Hays Town. "We've got Italian marble tables, sinker cypress tables, tables with forged iron bases and antique heart pine tops, table lamps, floor lamps, brackets, chandeliers, all handmade with precision and care."

The business has flourished in the past few generations, as Bevolo light fixtures have become an icon of the New Orleans French Quarter style. People come to south Louisiana from all over the world to get ideas from the architecture, and the lights are one thing that they can bring home with them. "The architecture here in New Orleans influences residential home décor all over the world. People want what they call 'the French Quarter look.'" Drew says. "The lights we make are designed specifically for your house, custom made. We will take care of them as long as they are on the house. We make lifetime fixtures." ♦



BEVOLO GAS AND ELECTRIC LIGHTS  
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