

You Oughta Know

Louisiana Series: Volume 04

HOT COMBS

QUEENS OF THE QUARTERS



"The smell of burning hair
and intense heat scorching the scalp
is a nostalgic experience that many
Black women are familiar with."

-Gabriele A. Williams

Cover Images: (Top) Hot comb; Kim Breyfogle, NCPTT (Bottom) Delores Sturgis and Dorothy Mae Ruffin Lathers, Photo booth photograph; Ruth Laney

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THIS EDITION BROUGHT TO YOU BY



Introduction.....3

The Inventor.....4

Societal Camouflage.....5

Unearthing History.....6

Cherie Quarters.....8

Sources and Citations.....10

INTRODUCTION

The smell of burning hair and intense heat scorching the scalp is a nostalgic experience that many Black women are familiar with. The singeing comb, more commonly known as the "hot comb," is a metal hair styling device that is used to straighten textured hair. It can be heated on a kitchen stove or plugged in and is traditionally used by Black women to flatten their hair.



Madam CJ Walker.
(Getty Images)



Francois Marcel Grateau.
(Getty Images)

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beautiful new 1918 Illustrated Catalog.

THE INVENTOR

The hot comb's history is slightly unclear because many inventors in different areas were creating similar products at the same time. Nonetheless, the creation of the hot comb is credited to Frenchman Francois Marcel Grateau; however, the European Patent Office has Grateau on file for patenting a "hair waving iron" instead of a hot comb ("Sizzle"). This is contrary to the belief that Madam CJ Walker - the first self-made Black American millionaire - created the styling tool. She, instead, used the tool as a part of her "patented pressing system" when styling Black women's hair ("Hot Comb Evolution: Grateau's Start to CJ Walker's Mastery"). The technology that Grateau used is believed to have been eventually brought over to the United States by Elroy J. Duncan who marketed the tool to the public for men's facial hair (DIZZIACK).

Hot combs are important within the Black Community because of their ability to provide Black people - specifically Black women with more opportunities in society. Hot combs, along with more modern hair straightening inventions such as texturizers and relaxers, allow Black women to be able to further assimilate into the mainstream culture that upholds Eurocentric standards. When Black women are able to temporarily alter the texture of their hair, it can help lower the amount of microaggressions and racial discrimination they are forced to deal with.



SCAN FOR AN
INTERVIEW WITH
FORMER CHERIE
QUARTERS
RESIDENT



SOCIETAL CAMOUFLAGE

One particular hot comb was found buried underneath the dirt and gravel of a roadway that runs through an area named Cherie Quarters. Cherie Quarters was originally a housing space for enslaved Africans that lived on Riverlake Plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana.



(Malvina Becnel Pickett)



Found hot comb.
(Kim Breyfogle)

(Left) Ms. Beckie Ruffin leaning out of the window of her house at Cherie Quarters.

UNEARTHING HISTORY

Years later, the descendants of these enslaved people continued to live in the quarters working as tenant farmers. Similar to sharecroppers, tenant farmers are individuals who essentially rent land from a landowner and owe a portion of their earnings to the owner of the land they work on in exchange for providing living necessities. Sadly, little is known about the day to day lives of the inhabitants of the Quarters outside of the writings of famous Louisiana author, Ernest Gaines.

CHERIE QUARTERS

According to "Cherie Quarters" by Ruth Laney, which is a biography on Gaines' life, and the lives of those in Cherie Quarters. Religion played a significant role in the lives of the people of Cherie Quarters. In her book, a man from the quarters mentioned that some church services on Sundays (called "Determination Sundays") were specifically dedicated to people sharing their testimonies. These extensive services could last up to four hours long (Laney, 2023).

It is also noted that children were dressed in their "Sunday best" and the women of the Quarters would wear white to attend church. It is possible that the women of Cherie Quarters utilized the hot comb as a part of their morning routine to get ready for church. It is highly unlikely that the women used the hot comb for styling their hair during the week considering they would be outside and sweat and heat would lead to their hair reverting back to its original texture.



SCAN FOR AN
INTERVIEW ABOUT
CHERIE
QUARTERS



Three residents of
Cherie Quarters.

(David Biben's Collection)



(Jason Church)



SCAN FOR VIEW
OF THE
3D MODEL

(Above) This building once housed enslaved workers at the Riverlake Plantation in Oscar, Louisiana. It was in continuous use by enslaved families followed by tenant farmers until the 1990's. Four dilapidated houses were disassembled and used to reconstruct this one house that is now a part of Magnolia Mound complex in Baton Rouge, LA.



Shug's House Cherie Quarters
May 22, 1999. (Ruth Laney)

WALKER'S WONDERFUL HAIR GROWER

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Fifteen years ago my hair began breaking off and falling out, and I tried everything mentioned to me without any result, until I discovered the preparation that I am now placing on the market. This has proven to be the most wonderful preparation for the growth of the hair ever discovered and is positively guaranteed to grow and stop the hair at once from falling out when used as directed.

There are thousands of persons in the United States using my preparations, all of whom are being benefited in the same way, and there is nothing but words of praise for my goods coming from all sections of the country.

The pictures above show the improvement in my hair after three years' use. These cuts were made from my own personal photographs. The one with short hair was taken before I ever dreamed of my discovery. The one with the hair down shows the improvement after three years' use.

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Glossine, " " "	45 cents
Shampoo, " " "	40 cents

NOTE: A six weeks' trial will be sent to any address on receipt of \$1.00. No reduction will be made when purchased in less than Half Dozen lots. No goods sent C.O.D. Liberal terms to Agents.

AGENTS WANTED EVERYWHERE: Write for Terms

Using the hot comb or any sort of hair straightening device on Black hair can signify that there is a special event coming up - in this case, going to church. This is a tradition that Black American women and girls still practice to this day. Sadly, the reason behind this is not rooted in the acceptance of natural Black hair.

Many Black women and girls are taught from a young age from close friends and family that natural hair is not good enough for special events and must be altered to be

accepted and perceived as beautiful. This leads to many Black women and girls having to learn how to deal with the pain of manipulating their hair instead of being allowed to develop and foster a healthy relationship with their hair no matter what environment they find themselves in. With that being said, not every Black woman who uses straightening tools dislikes her hair. Creations like the hot comb have allowed Black women to be versatile, creative, and explore more options on how to style their hair on a daily basis. Along with going to church, the women of Cherie Quarters enjoyed spending their free time hanging out at juke joints, movies, and fairs.

SOURCES AND CITATIONS

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JUST THINK OF IT!

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50 Cents Per Large Tin at Agents, Drug Stores or by Mail

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MAKERS OF 16 PREPARATIONS



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