

# *New Orleans Nostalgia*

**Ned Hemard's Weekly Column Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions**

## **The Champs-Élysées**

The *Avenue des Champs-Élysées* (with its cinemas, cafés and luxury shopping) is the broadest and most elegant boulevard in Paris. Known as "*la plus belle avenue du monde*", its name in French describes Greek mythology's blessed resting place for the souls of the virtuous and heroic. In English the expression is Elysium, or Elysian Fields. Aeneas visited this underworld realm in Virgil's "Aeneid" as did other literary travelers. Virgil was also Dante's escort through his "Divine Comedy", where Limbo has many of the attributes of classical Elysium. Some Renaissance and later writers upgraded the Elysian Fields to a place synonymous with Christian Heaven.

New Orleans, "a heaven right here on earth", also has its own Elysian Fields. Planned by Bernard de Marigny in 1808, this was to be the major thoroughfare of his eponymous faubourg development. And just as its Parisian counterpart is the broadest in that city, Elysian Fields is wider than Canal Street by over sixteen feet (although Florida Avenue is New Orleans' widest dedicated street with a width of 438 feet below Elysian Fields).

On April 23, 1831, the first railroad west of the Alleghenies was open for business. The Pontchartrain Railroad (with a wheezing engine that came to be known as "Smoky Mary") was the first American railroad to complete its entire trackage running the entire length of Elysian Fields' 4.96 miles. By comparison, the Parisian "*Champs*" runs some 1.25 miles from the *Place de la Concorde* in the east to the *Arc de Triomphe* and *Place Charles de Gaulle* (formerly the *Place d'Étoile*) in the west. The Crescent City's Elysian Fields runs from the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain and what was once known as Milneburg.

Ironically, the lower part of the *Champs-Élysées* in Paris is bordered by the greenery of *Carré Marigny* and by buildings such as the *Théâtre Marigny*. Marigny Square, however, has no connection to Bernard de Marigny but was named for the brother of the king's mistress, Madame de Pompadour. His name was Abel-Francois Poisson, Marquis de Marigny, Director of Buildings for Louis XV (his sister's lover). Most remember the pompadour hairstyle she made famous, sported by everyone from Elvis in his blue suede shoes to Kim Jong-il in his platform footwear.

The *Carré Marigny* is the site of a colorful open-air market for postage stamp vendors and philatelists. It was an important location scene in the movie "Charade" with Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn. In New Orleans, Tennessee Williams chose the Elysian Fields neighborhood as an allegorical "end of the line" where Blanche DuBois resides with Stanley and Stella Kowalski. Looking lost and bewildered upon arrival, Blanche speaks these words:

"They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, transfer to one called Cemetery, and ride six blocks and get off at Elysian Fields!"

Stella's place was much different than the *Place d'Étoile* in Paris, and Elysian Fields did not quite match all of Bernard de Marigny's dreams of grandeur. But there is

much history on both avenues.

The Smoky Mary train stopped running on March 15, 1932, after over one hundred years of service. Many New Orleanians enjoyed weekend trips to Milneburg in those bygone days. Early Jazz performances were a feature, and this produced the famous (but misspelled) "Milenburg Joys". Natives also enjoyed sitting on a pier there and catching some fish.

And, of course, the French word for fish is *poisson* (the same as the surname for Madame de Pompadour and the Marquis de Marigny).

The author must confess that as little boy dining in a French Quarter restaurant, "*Poisson*" appeared in bold letters on the menu. He informed his father that a hasty retreat should be made, as the restaurant was "trying to poison us". This only brought laughter, a French lesson and the author's earliest recollection of a trout amandine that was "out of this world". Perhaps his readers have had a similar epiphany.

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