

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Let The Four Winds Blow

The winds of change were airborne in 1947 when New Orleans-born Roy Brown wrote and recorded "Good Rockin' Tonight". He would also have a hit with "Let The Four Winds Blow", penned by Fats Domino and Dave Bartholomew. Fats would later record an even more popular rendition, singing:

"Let the Four Winds Blow
Let it blow and a-blow
From the east to the west
I love you the best"

These were the four major winds of classical antiquity, also known as the *Anemoi*. *Zephyrus* was the west wind who delivers light spring and early summer breezes (a "Seals and Crofts" kind of guy). One may recall "The Canterbury Tales" where Chaucer had "Zephyrus eke with his swoote breath". *Eurus* was in command of winds out of the east. *Boreas* was the north wind deity who brought along the cold winter air. *Notus* was the south wind bringing forth the storms of late summer and autumn (not a popular god in New Orleans ... "Not us" would be more appropriate after Katrina and Rita).

Back in 1936-1937 in conjunction with the WPA, Enrique Alférez created his magnificent "Fountain of the Four Winds" at the Lakefront Airport (originally the Shushan Airport). Alférez (1901-1999) was a Mexican born Louisiana artist and sculptor who worked in the art deco style. In his early days he fought under Pancho Villa in the Mexican Revolution, and in the late 1930s his sculpture of one of the four winds was also revolutionary. His composition consisted of a male figure representing the north wind, with three females usurping the realms of the east, west and south wind gods. His male *Boreas*, almost eight feet tall, was the troublemaker. It was so anatomically well-endowed that it created a storm of controversy. The artist found it necessary to guard his sculpture with his rifle so it would not be disfigured. Even Eleanor Roosevelt stepped in to say that the statue should remain as originally conceived. The tempest eventually blew over.

The wind gods of mythology were also the inspiration for the Tower of the Winds in Athens. This unique octagonal structure has architectural elements that have reappeared in Garden District homes and in other areas in the Crescent City. With distinctive Corinthian columns, this famous Athenian tower served as the model for the impressive Luca Vaccaro Memorial in Metairie Cemetery. The winds of war had affected Stefano Vaccaro (born 1831 in Contessa Entellina, Sicily). Another revolutionary (with Garibaldi in Italy), he later came to New Orleans. His sons (Luca, Joseph and Felix) founded Standard Fruit (now Dole) and played a major role in the governments of Honduras and other Central American governments. New Orleans, of course, was command central for managing "banana republics".

The winds have even appeared in the names of New Orleans parks. Lake Vista has a Zephyr Park, as well as a Breeze Park. Neighboring Lake Terrace has its green space known as Boreas Park. Near Lake Terrace is the former site of the city's much-loved amusement park, Pontchartrain Beach. And its signature ride was the exciting roller coaster known as the *Zephyr*.

But this parabolic traveling experience was only indirectly named for the west wind. It actually acquired its moniker (as well as its sleek design) from a high-speed train known as the "Burlington Zephyr". It was a streamlined train built of stainless steel and powered by a

diesel-electric engine. With a rounded shape to reduce drag, the smooth and shiny *Zephyr* had a lower center of gravity than other trains. Built for speed by the E. G. Budd Manufacturing Company, it made its famous dawn-to-dusk run from Denver to Chicago (the longest nonstop train trip the world had witnessed) on May 26, 1934.

Ralph Budd, president of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, had been reading that passage from Chaucer, of journeying pilgrims inspired by the sweet breath of springtime brought by the gentle west wind. What better name for a swift new western traveling machine than *Zephyr*?

Budd made arrangements with Chicago World's Fair officials that the *Zephyr* would travel the just over 1,000 mile run from Denver to Chicago and arrive at its "Century of Progress Exposition" in record time. The *Zephyr* (averaging 77.5 miles per hour and peaking at 112.5 miles per hour) reached Chicago that day in May in thirteen hours and five minutes and arrived at the Fair fifty-nine minutes later. It's no wonder that the Batt family chose *Zephyr* as the name for its glossy new coaster ride at the Beach.

Continuing its passenger run between Chicago and Denver for many years, the "Burlington *Zephyr*" became known as the "Denver *Zephyr*". So it was only natural that in 1985 Denver's minor league baseball team, the Denver Bears since the 1950s, be renamed the *Zephyrs*. But in the early 1990s the *Zephyrs* were being forced to move by the expansion of the Colorado Rockies of the National League.

Without a team since the Pelicans, Rob Couhig negotiated to bring the Denver *Zephyrs* to the New Orleans area and to secure a stadium for the team on Airline Highway in Jefferson Parish. "What an appropriate name!" people thought. "Just like the ride we thrilled to." Very few realized the name for both came from the same source.

The top of the Pontchartrain Beach *Zephyr* has its home today in a park on Williams Blvd. next to Kenner City Hall. *Zephyr* Field opened in 1997 and features outfield berm seating known as "Da Levee", and the team's mascot is an orange-toothed nutria named Boudreaux (whose wife is named Clotile). New pleasures are there to excite the populace, while old ones are "gone with the wind".

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