

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **A Dark and Stormy Night**

A lonely pebble swaddled in excelsior: take it home and give it your love. Only \$3.95! The Pet Rock fad lasted only about six months in the mid 1970s but it made Gary Dahl, a California advertising man, a millionaire. What other challenges awaited this man whose arsenal of words had the power to persuade?

Twenty-five years later, like Carl Sandburg on steroids, Dahl penned these lines:

"The heather-encrusted Headlands, veiled in fog as thick as smoke in a crowded pub, hunched precariously over the moors, their rocky elbows slipping off land's end. Their bulbous, craggy noses thrust into the thick foam of the North Sea like bearded old men falling asleep in their pints."

This entry landed him the grand prize in the annual Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, named for the Victorian novelist Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, 1st Baron Lytton (1803 - 1873), whose overblown purple prose often went over the top. Extremely popular in his day, modern readers find his florid style the epitome of bad writing. Thousands of applicants compete each year in crafting an overly embellished opening sentence to the worst possible (imaginary) novel. The contest was inspired by Lord Lytton's words at the beginning of his novel, "Paul Clifford":

"It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents ..."

**THE BULWER-LYTTON  
FICTION CONTEST**  

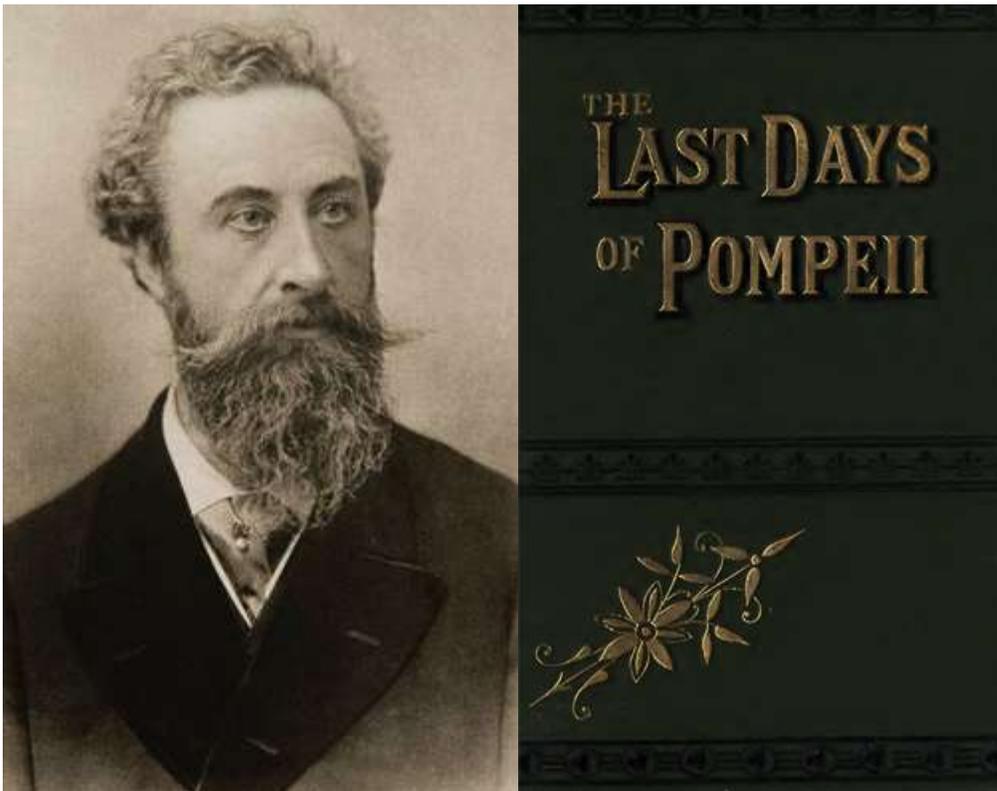
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**WHERE WWW MEANS "WRETCHED WRITERS WELCOME"**

This passage could have described the onset of a hurricane, but a different natural disaster is the basis for the novel for which Baron

Lytton is probably best known. Inspired by a painting, he wrote "The Last Days of Pompeii" about romance and tragedy in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius.

One would call this tale a romantic quadrangle. Glaucus, an Athenian, loves Ione, as does Arbaces, an evil Egyptian high priest. Nydia, a blind slave girl, also loves Glaucus. Realizing her passion to be futile, she drops off into the sea to allow Glaucus and Ione to be together. "May you sometimes remember Nydia! ... there is no other Elysium for a heart like mine!" she exclaimed. Some did remember Nydia. A sculpture of her is now in Washington's National Gallery of Art. But another enduring memory of her is due to one of the most excellent engineers ever to serve the City of New Orleans.



*Baron Edward Bulwer-Lytton, author of The Last Days of Pompeii*

Albert Baldwin Wood (December 1, 1879 – May 10, 1956) had few loves. One was his engineering profession and the good it did for New Orleans, as well as the world. Another was his alma mater. When not working, his love was sailing the 30-foot gaff-rigged sloop he purchased in 1904. Originally built for John A. Rawlins, Commodore of the Bay-Waveland Yacht Club, the *Nydia* was constructed at Biloxi's Johnson Shipyard, which closed in 1906. Built of cypress and steam-bent oak and named for a slave girl hopelessly in love, the *Nydia* is a unique monument to Wood's beloved pursuits. Between the years 1898 and 1910, the *Nydia* competed in no less than 39 regattas and

races between Mobile and New Orleans, capturing some trophies along the way. Her owner had a winning history, as well.

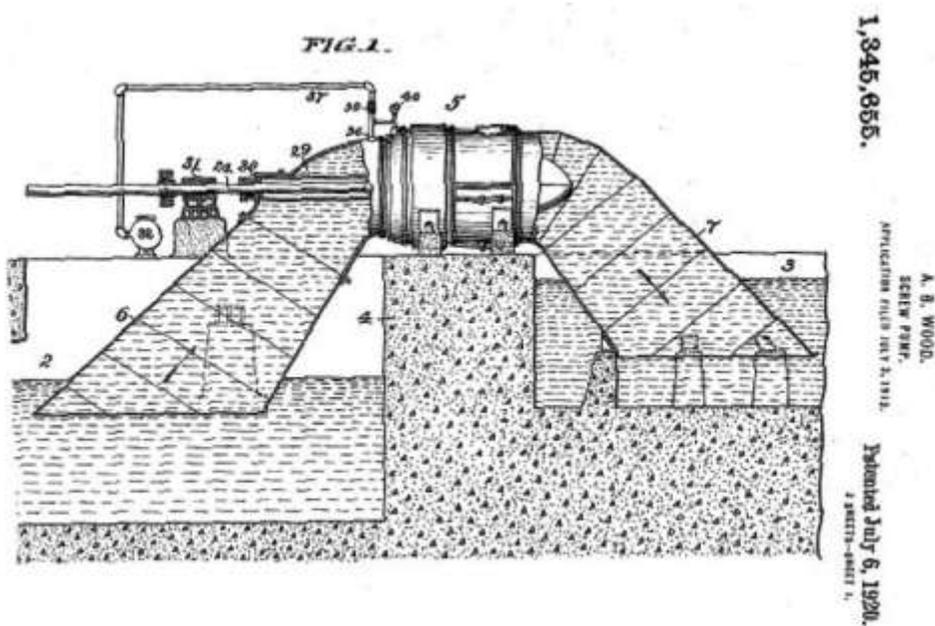
In 1899 Wood graduated from Tulane University and the New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board was formed. Wood started off as assistant manager of drainage that same year. Before then there was no real sewerage system in the city. Refuse went directly into the river and residents drank water from cypress cisterns. Mosquitoes thrived there and so did disease. The year before Wood's birth in 1879, four percent of the city's population succumbed to yellow fever. Conditions were about to change.



*Albert Baldwin Wood*

In 1906 Wood had invented the largest centrifugal pump of its kind in the world. He also invented flap-gates and other hydraulic devices to help the flood-prone city drain more efficiently. His most notable effort was presenting the board the perpetual rights to his twelve-foot Wood Screw Pump in 1913. His "trash" pump came two years later. These were incredibly efficient pumps that had the capacity to move more water than anything in existence - and with little maintenance. A fourteen-foot pump was built by 1929. Each Wood pump can move nearly half a million gallons of water a minute. The blades and pump casings were rounded so that neither rags nor lumber could get caught on them. Previously, engineers had to clean the pumps every eight

hours. By the end of 1915 New Orleans had installed the first eleven of Wood's pumps and was becoming home to one of the world's greatest pumping facilities. And the world took notice.



*Wood's Screw Pump*

While still at work in New Orleans, Wood consulted and designed other pumping, drainage and sewage systems in the United States and all over the world. His projects included Chicago and San Francisco and those in India, Egypt, China and Canada. London wanted to hire him full-time. Holland came calling, too. His work there helped the Netherlands reclaim large areas of land from the Zuider Zee. From all of these cities and foreign capitals soaring salaries were offered. None could lure him away from home, not even to travel. Biloxi was as far as he would go, and that was to sail the *Nydia*. His fame spread far and his patents were numerous (38), but he never collected royalties from the city of New Orleans. After thirty-two years with the Sewerage and Water Board, his salary was a mere \$7,500.

Wood was responsible for reclaiming from swamp much of the land now occupied by the City of New Orleans. It allowed the development of land previously thought to be too low for habitation. Some of the Wood's pumps have been in almost continuous use in New Orleans since they were first constructed, and new ones continue to be fabricated from his designs. Levees were built to surround those areas he helped drain, but ultimately it was the levees that failed.

Albert Baldwin Wood was a direct descendant of Francisco de Boulogne (September 4, 1736 – November 25, 1800), who was a high-ranking official in Spanish Louisiana. The founder of New Iberia, Louisiana, in

1779, Boulogny also served as lieutenant governor under Bernardo de Gálvez and as acting military governor in 1799.



*Early photo of the Nydia*

Albert Baldwin Wood often told friends he hoped he would die aboard the *Nydia*, and on May 10, 1956, his wish came true. On an afternoon sail toward Horn Island, he waved to a captain friend of his and moments later suffered a heart attack. He was seen slumping gradually to the deck, just as the fictional *Nydia* had slipped slowly into the Tyrrhenian Sea. Wood bequeathed Tulane University the *Nydia* with the stipulation that she "and her spars ... be carefully preserved under a shed on land owned by my wife or Tulane University for a period of at least 99 years." His will further stipulated, "Failure to preserve the *Nydia* shall terminate this will as affects Tulane University ..."

Tulane did preserve it for some time, and some may remember its being displayed by the swimming pool in the University Center. But things changed and it seemed as if the *Nydia* was going to be homeless.

Storms may blow and schools may go, but one's love endures (for at least ninety-nine years, or until some dark and stormy night).

P.S., the above article first appeared in 2007, and much as happened since then.

With the condition and housing of the *Nydia* a source of concern, Wood family heirs and friends of the *Nydia*, through much devotion and effort were able to take control of the situation. She was rescued just before Hurricane Katrina and lovingly restored in Biloxi by shipbuilder and Olympic sailor John Dane, III, founder of Trinity Yachts, the nation's largest mega-yacht builder.



*The Nydia, New Orleans' loss, now at home in Biloxi*

After careful and skillful restoration, the *Nydia* is now on exhibit at the Maritime & Seafood Industry Museum in Biloxi, established in 1986 to preserve and interpret the maritime history and heritage of Biloxi and the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

There the *Nydia* sits proudly, some 100 yards from the Back Bay of Biloxi, with a view of the Horn Island Pass and the open waters beyond. No dark and stormy nights on the horizon.



*Nydia's stern*



*The Nydia and the Museum at night*

**NED HÉMARD**

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"A Dark and Stormy Night"  
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