

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Harahan History

Harahan, a suburb of New Orleans, is a community in Jefferson Parish lying along a curve in the Mississippi River between River Ridge to the west and Elmwood to the east. It is home to Colonial Golf and Country Club, Harahan Elementary (opened in 1926 and on the Department of Interior's National Register of Historic Places) and Riverdale High (once all girl Lassies, but now co-ed Scottish Rebels). No longer at 6469 Jefferson Highway, but fondly remembered, is Gold Mine Rare Records Comics & Cards. Harahan's history and its name are forever linked to the (IC) Illinois Central Railroad (sometimes called the "Main Line of Mid-America"), connecting Chicago with New Orleans.

John Luther "Casey" Jones was not just a folk legend immortalized in a song that Carl Sandburg called the "greatest ballad ever written". He was an actual railroad engineer from Jackson, Tennessee, who had earned his nickname after having earlier resided in Cayce, Kentucky. Taking over the Illinois Central No. 1, Engine No. 382, for another engineer who'd called in sick with cramps, Casey died heroically trying to stop his train and save the lives of his passengers. On April 30, 1900, he was the only fatality when his engine collided with a stopped freight train at Vaughan, Mississippi, on a rainy and foggy evening. Train No. 1 was known as "The New Orleans Special", later to become the famed "City of New Orleans". Casey's friend Wallace Saunders, an African-American engine wiper for the IC, wrote the classic song that pays tribute to the world's most famous railroad engineer. He never quite got around to copyrighting his composition, but others have added to it and refined it until it has become an enduring piece of Americana.

The headline in the *Times-Democrat* of New Orleans heralded the deed as a "Terrible Fatality Prevented by Engineer's Loyalty to Duty – A Passenger's Story". Adam Hauser was the passenger and a former member of the *Times-Democrat* telegraph staff. He was in the sleeper and reported that he "was jarred a little" in his bunk, but the "passengers did not suffer, and there was no panic". He went on to

write, "Engineer Jones did a wonderful as well as an heroic piece of work, at the cost of his life." Also on board was Mrs. W. E. Breaux of 1472 Rocheblave Street, New Orleans. She suffered only slight bruises.

James Theodore Harahan at that time was only a vice-president of the Illinois Central Railroad Company, but he is remembered not only as the man for whom Harahan, Louisiana, was named but also as one of the masters of U.S. railroad management and development. During most of his vital career there, Harahan worked under IC president Stuyvesant Fish overseeing many important railroad projects. These included the massive dock complex on the Mississippi River in New Orleans known as the Stuyvesant Docks (extending twelve blocks between Louisiana Avenue almost to Napoleon Avenue). He also developed the big yard just outside New Orleans, in what is now the city of Harahan.

Harahan, a native of Lowell, Massachusetts, started his railroad career in his teens with the United States military during the Civil War. Beginning with the First Massachusetts Infantry, his duties shifted to the rail transportation of troops and supplies around Alexandria, Virginia. Confederate guerillas were very active in the area.

Soon after the war, he entered the employ of the Nashville & Decatur Railroad and (from 1866 to 1870) the Louisville & Nashville Railroad. He advanced through the ranks, becoming roadmaster of the Nashville & Decatur from 1872 to 1879. Two years later he was superintendent of the Memphis and New Orleans divisions of that railroad. That same year he was transferred to the Crescent City to become superintendent of the newly acquired Mobile-New Orleans division. A couple of years later (after having accepted the general superintendency of the Pittsburg division of the B & O Railroad), he resigned to become general manager of the entire Louisville & Nashville Line.

The next feathers in his cap (1888-1890) were assistant general manager of the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railway, Chesapeake and Ohio Railway general manager and general manager of the Louisville, New Orleans & Texas Railway. On November 1, 1890, he became second vice-president of the Illinois Central, and was elected IC president in 1906 in a contentious ouster of Stuyvesant Fish. This led to a court battle that was won by Harahan, but hard feelings brought about a 1907 boardroom brawl where the younger and larger Fish knocked down the smaller Harahan.

On April 19, 1899, Harahan married his second wife, Mary N. Mallory, daughter of long-time friend Captain William Barton Mallory of Memphis. Harahan (with thick moustache and distinguished demeanor) was a member of both the Boston and Pickwick clubs in

New Orleans, as well as other clubs around the country. He served as president of the Illinois Central until his retirement in January 1911.

Back in 1903 while still vice-president of the IC, Harahan and other railroad officials were tossed about in a train accident that the New York Times labeled a "side-wipe" by a passenger train in Carbondale, Illinois. W. K. Vanderbilt and John Jacob Astor were among those shaken but not too badly stirred.

But in the early hours of Monday, January 22, 1912, things were not quite so lucky. Train No. 25, "The New Orleans Express", coach section of the Panama Limited, stopped for water at the junction town of Kinmundy, Illinois. Just a minute or two later, it was rammed by the engine of the No. 3, the 1079. At the rear of the No. 25 was a wooden Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific private car that was telescoped two-thirds of its length upon impact, killing four prominent railroad men instantly.

Killed were Judge Edward B. Pierce and Frank Otis Melcher (both residents of Winnetka, Illinois, and officers of the Rock Island Line); Major Eldridge E. Wright, vice-president of the Memphis Bridge Company, son of Luke E. Wright (U.S. Secretary of War), grandson of Admiral Raphael Semmes of the Confederate Navy and third cousin of New Orleans mayor T. Semmes Walmsley; and James Theodore Harahan, retired president of the IC. They were *en route* to Memphis for a meeting to discuss the building of a railroad bridge over the Mississippi. Harahan's death was big news in the New Orleans newspapers.

As to the previous history of the IC 2012 (the engine pulling Train No. 25 and Harahan's private car), it carried the number 382 when it was delivered to the Illinois Central in 1898. It was a steam driven Rogers Ten Wheeler with six drivers, and the engine Casey Jones called his "Old Girl in High Heel Slippers". Yes, it's the very same engine Casey "rode to glory" that fateful night in 1900. After the disaster at Vaughan, the 382 was taken back to Water Valley, Mississippi, repaired and returned to service as No. 212. In 1907 it was renumbered 2012, and in 1922 renumbered 5012. It was retired in July 1935 (sort of). In 1980, it was moved to the Casey Jones Village in Jackson, Tennessee, with country crooner Roy Acuff singing from the cab. Casey's engine has since been scrapped, but the Village lives on.

The 382 had been in another train accident back in 1903 with Harry A. "Dad" Norton as engineer. Ironically, it was on that Memphis to Canton leg of "The New Orleans Special". The trouble occurred when criminal train wreckers threw a switch into the Florence Pump Works on Mallory Avenue (Harahan's wife's family name) with the lamp wired in a clear position. Norton and the 382 barreled into the switch at high

speed, breaking both legs and almost demolishing the locomotive. He was so badly scalded the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* erroneously reported his wounds as fatal. His fireman, though, did die three days later.

In September of 1905 Norton and the 382 did it again, turning over in the Memphis South Yards. The train was moving slowly this time, and Norton was not injured.

The railroad bridge across the Mississippi did get built in Memphis (July 14, 1916) and was named posthumously for James Theodore Harahan. It also carried vehicular traffic until 1949.

Harahan's son, William Johnson Harahan, was twice president of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, but died of natural causes in 1937, in Clifton Forge, Virginia. His dynamic father left his mark up and down Mid-America all the way to the town nestled in New Orleans' neighboring parish that bears his name.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Harahan History "
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2009