

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

It was announced this month (April 2016) that, after 23 years as the *Zephyrs*, the New Orleans-based minor league baseball team would be changing its name. A contest is in the works for a new name, and fans can visit zephyrsbaseball.com to submit what might be the winning entry. The lucky winner will be awarded 2-4 full season tickets for 2017, a game in a luxury suite and a ceremonial first pitch, among other prizes.

Attendance has been lagging for the *Zephyrs* for some time, and Lou Schwechheimer (as manager and controller of a company that has bought 50 percent of the franchise) has promised that *Zephyr* Field "will come alive" and that "We're about building a dream factory." He also promised to "strive to bring a new energy and electricity to the ballpark every single day," and he thinks that one of the ways "to create magic for generations to come" is by giving the fans "a voice through the name-the-team contest."

Seems as if the team's old appellation doesn't carry the same enthusiasm it once did, or perhaps the fans don't quite understand the full history behind the *Zephyr* name. Most think it's just a coincidence that the beloved bygone Pontchartrain Beach roller coaster and the minor league team share the same name ... but it really isn't. Below the reader will learn the history of the *Zephyr* name and its connection to city, as described in an article I penned back in 2007.

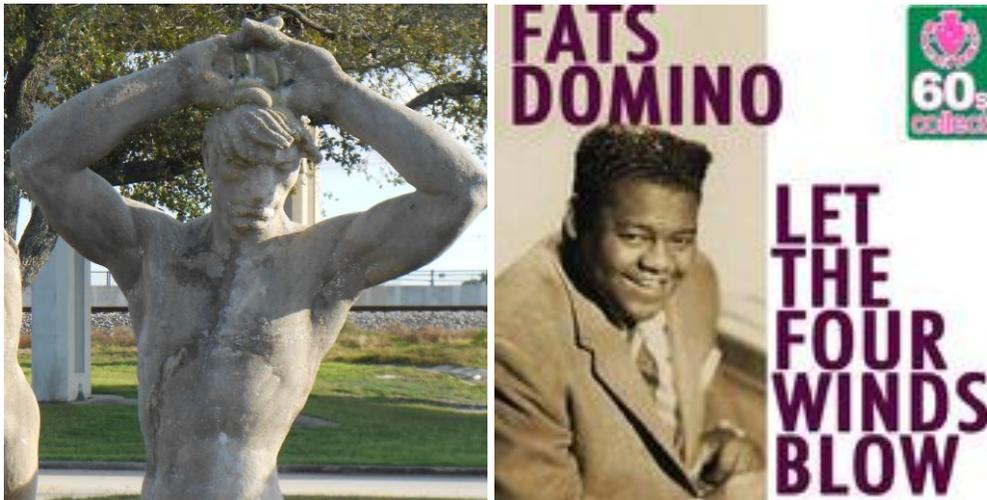
Let The Four Winds Blow

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).



Enrique Alférez statue and Fats Domino, both from the waist up

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”.



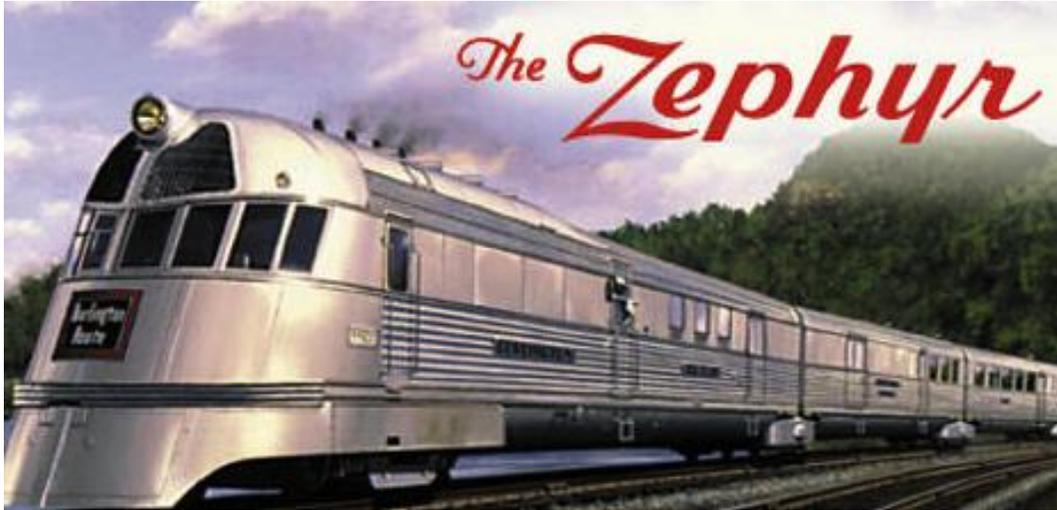
Tower of the Winds, Athens Tower's Zephyrus on Greek stamp

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

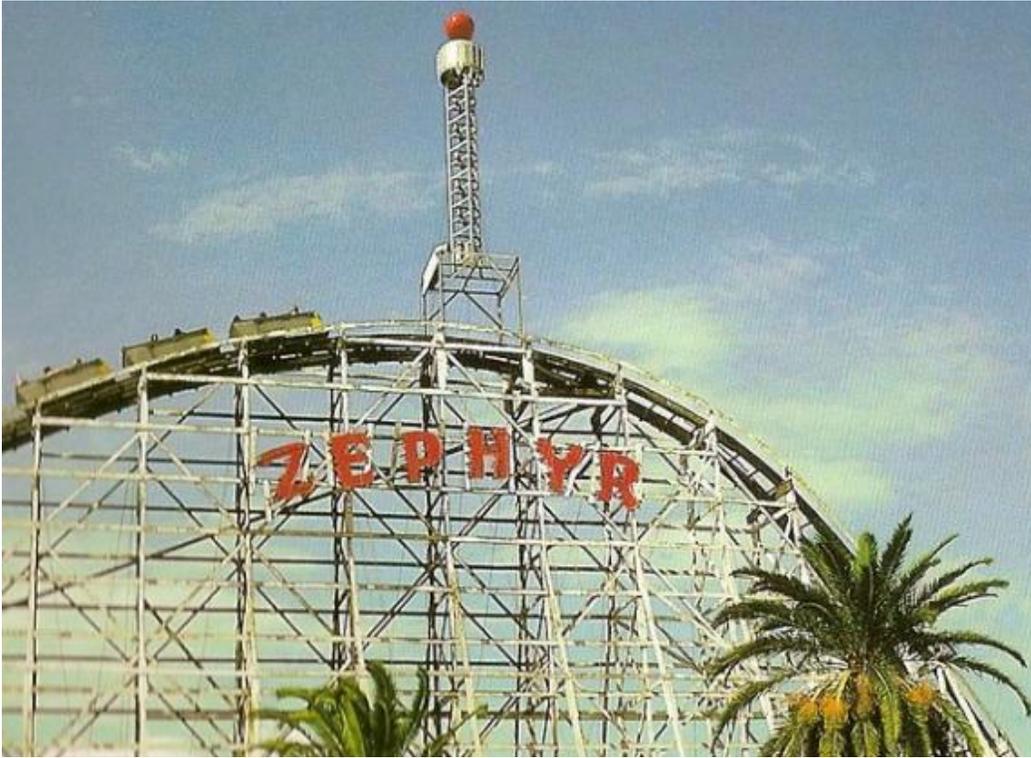
wind. What better name for a swift new western traveling machine than *Zephyr*?



The Burlington 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.



Zephyr at Pontchartrain Beach

Without a baseball team in town 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 (the ride and the team) 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. The Z's won the Triple-A World Series Championship in 1998 and the Pacific Coast League Championship in 1998 and 2001. *Zephyr* Field, which opened in 1997, 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".



New Orleans (Shushan) Airport, as depicted in a 1940s postcard

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