

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

He Worked For Peanuts

As the years go on, Pelican Stadium is becoming a faint memory for many New Orleanians. First known as Heinemann Park, it was home to the New Orleans Pelicans baseball team from 1915 through 1957. Demolished in 1957 to build "The Fabulous" Fontainebleau Motor Hotel (4000 Tulane Avenue, Phone: Hunter 6-6111), it was the location of the 1967 Jesuit Senior Prom ten years later.

On January, 17, 2006, Mayor C. Ray Nagin created a stir when he delivered his message about "a chocolate New Orleans". The reader may therefore find it curious that prior to its use as a sports stadium, Pelican stadium was the site of an amusement park known as "White City". Promoter Charles C. Mathews advertised the park's opening on May 4, 1907. The name, however, had nothing to do with race.

There were several by that name in those days in or near other cities around the country, such as Chicago, Cleveland and Trenton (New Jersey). They were brightly lit with broad walkways, designed more in the Beaux Arts style of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago's Jackson Park. Chicago's "White City" Amusement Park opened on May 26, 1905, and eventually introduced the world to the Goodyear Blimp. Situated on the south side of Chicago, it modeled itself after the 1893 exhibition's buildings of "chalky white" plaster of Paris.

The Crescent City's "White City" opened with a performance of "Kismet" by the Olympia Opera Company, and the grounds were illuminated by fifteen hundred electric lights. Attractions included the "Katzenjammer Castle", the "Japanese Ball Game" and the "Figure 8", or one could ride the "Flying Horses" (which natives call a carousel to this very day). The fun only lasted seven short years.

But let's get back to baseball (and the city's Minor League professional baseball team, the Pelicans). The Cincinnati Red Stockings played five games in New Orleans in April of 1870, and soon the city wanted a

team of their own. Charles Abner Powell came to town in 1887 to play with the newly formed New Orleans Pelicans, which joined the two-year-old Southern League. The Pelicans captured the pennant in their first season, and Powell became their manager. He invented the "rain check", introduced "Ladies Day" and came up with the idea of covering the diamond with tarpaulin to prevent the field from flooding during rainstorms. The team played at Sportsman's Park, located at City Park Avenue near what is now the Pontchartrain Expressway (across from Greenwood Cemetery).

In 1901 the Pelicans played at Athletic Park, then at the corner of Tulane Avenue between South Carrollton and South Pierce. The team's first pennant of the new century came in 1905 (despite the city being quarantined for a yellow fever epidemic). Many of the team's home games had to be played on the road. In 1908, the Pelicans' new home "Pelican Park" (bound by South Carrollton, Palmyra, Banks and Scott) was the scene of Theo Breitenstein's 1909 no-hitter and "Shoeless Joe" Jackson's unforgettable 1910 season. Joe bested all league players with a .354 batting average. He got his moniker for having played in the Carolinas in his bare feet. Instead of playing for the Pelicans, Joe is most remembered for moving on to the Chicago White Sox and his implication in fixing the 1919 World Series.

In 1914, when the team left their home at "Pelican Park" (Jesuit didn't move across the street until 1926) for Tulane and South Carrollton, absentee-owner Charles Somers named Alexander Julius Heinemann the Pelicans president and named the ballpark Heinemann Park. It kept his name until 1938. Spanning 458 by 610 feet, it was one of the largest fields in the country. How this all came to be is the story of a man who was willing to work for peanuts.

Heinemann was born in New Orleans and attended college at Spring Hill in Mobile. He worked for a while at Dwyer Brothers on Magazine, but left that position for a job selling popcorn, soft drinks, candy and peanuts in the stands at the Old Sportsman's Park. He eventually saved enough cash to purchase the ballpark concession and worked himself up through the ranks rapidly. He became secretary of the Pelicans in 1904 and vice-president by 1912. And just a couple of years later the park bore his name.

Johnny Dobbs became manager that year and the club won another pennant. August 8, 1916, saw the Southern Association's only unassisted triple play by Pel second baseman Cotton Knaupp. In 1918, another pennant was added. Under Heinemann's tenure another three pennants were won with Larry Gilbert as manager in 1923, 1926 and 1927. Joe Sewell, Dazzy Vance, Jim Bagby, Hank DeBerry and Joe Martina were other Pelicans that moved on to the Major League under Heinemann.

Despite Heine's astute management of the franchise, he was not a favorite with the fans. His peculiar personality fostered the misconception that he was a tightwad full of bluster who liked to shout out orders. In truth he was an honest businessman known for his just dealings and was most generous in giving to various charities, (but he kept these donations secret). Heinemann would parade up and down the stands in a shabby alpaca jacket and tattered straw boater, sporting a giant grin punctuated by a big fat cigar. Fans would razz him, yelling insults and calling him "Cheapskate"! Larry Gilbert revealed years later that it was always Heine's idea to direct the bad attention away from the manager and the players.

Heine had numerous sayings painted on placards around the club, such as: "I hereby agree not to lend money. The Bank agrees not to run the ballclub." He ordered his sign painter to paint a sign saying "This Way Out". When "Exit" was suggested as shorter, Heinemann stubbornly adamantly wanted it his way.

But in 1929, things did not go his way. He lost heavily in the stock market and had been suffering from severe attacks of rheumatism. Affected both mentally and physically by this (and by the fact that Larry Gilbert had followed his poor financial advice), Alexander Julius Heinemann took his own life on January 8, 1930. A single pistol shot in his office hall at Heinemann Park brought to an end the life of one of New Orleans' most eccentric baseball personalities.

His funeral had visitors in the hundreds, His many fans and players did not forget him, nor did the batboys or soda pop kids he employed. Beneath his buffoonish behavior, this miser had a heart of gold.

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