

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Hidden Desires

Probably the most iconic mode of transportation in American literary history is New Orleans' "Streetcar Named Desire", immortalized by Tennessee Williams. The play debuted on Broadway on December 3, 1947, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in '48 and closed on December 17, 1949. It was both a critical and box office smash. Elia Kazan directed both the Broadway play and the 1951 movie, which landed Vivien Leigh the Best Actress Oscar for the role of Blanche Dubois. Born in Darjeeling, India, to a British stockbroker and his Irish wife, Vivien Leigh won Oscars twice portraying Southern women (each of whom visited New Orleans). Scarlet made her visit with Rhett.

The streetcars of New Orleans were chameleons in the sense that a "Canal" streetcar could become a "Desire" streetcar or a "St. Charles" streetcar simply by turning a roller full of street names above the center window of the car. Whatever route that car was assigned to on any particular day, that would be the name that was rolled into place. Then "A Streetcar Named Desire" became part of history in 1947, just a year before most of the New Orleans streetcars gave way to buses.

Desire's major distinction was operating its entire length in mixed traffic, as opposed to traveling along the city's neutral grounds (that's medians to out-of-towners). Its route ran through the French Quarter (serving the bars and nightclubs on Bourbon and the shops on Royal) on its way through the Faubourg Marigny and Bywater section of the city. The Desire streetcar's last ride was May 30, 1948, only to be replaced by a bus of the same name.

But where did such a passionate street name originate? Some have written that it was a "misspelled homage" to Napoleon's love interest, Desirée Clary (the daughter of a Marseille silk merchant who would go on to marry Marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, later King of Sweden). All of this happened, but Desirée Clary is not the namesake of Desire

Street. It was another Desirée. And her folks lived in the Bywater.

Desirée's father was Robert Gautier de Montreuil, and her mother was Marie Marthe de Macarty. Papa named the streets that were cut through his property after his two daughters, Desirée and Elmire. A mishandled English translation transformed Desirée into Desire Street. Desirée went on to marry her heart's desire, Francois Pascalis de LaBarre, for whom Labarre Road in Metairie is named. Elmire Street was later changed to Gallier Street in 1923. The Galliers, father and son, were famous New Orleans architects. And 1923 was quite a year.

Ferdinand Joseph Lamothe, better known as "Jelly Roll" Morton, was one of New Orleans' best-regarded Storyville pianists in the early twentieth century and the first serious composer of jazz. After playing the sporting houses of the Crescent City's red light district, he toured the country and began recording with his band in 1923. These recordings, as well as those of King Oliver (beginning April 6, 1923), were historic in the annals of jazz. Louis Armstrong made his first recording that year as a member of Oliver's ensemble.

It was in 1923 that the Industrial Canal first opened, and J. Ray McDermott and his son won a contract to build 50 wooden drilling rigs for an East Texas wildcatter. 1923 and the following year also saw the arrival of seventy-three identical streetcars of the "900-class", built by the Perley Thomas Company of High Point, North Carolina. Many of these cars, designed by Perley A. Thomas, still make their daily journey along New Orleans' beautiful St. Charles Avenue.

Each with 54 seats of Honduran mahogany, the cars went into service on most of the two dozen lines operating in pre-war New Orleans (Desire included). 235 miles of tracks once laced covered the city's map. Some streetcars made way for buses and were shipped off to other locales. Car No. 952 was eventually shifted to service on the Canal Street line, but that ended in 1964 when only the St. Charles line remained.

Some of the surplus cars found new homes:

"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."
- Blanche Dubois

No. 952 went off to a hotel complex in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and No. 913 traveled to the Orange Empire Railway Museum in Riverside, California. In 1984, No. 952 was reacquired by the city, painted red for its Riverfront line and retired in 1997 when new replica cars were built for the line.

No. 850 is today on display at the Shore Line Trolley Museum in East Haven, Connecticut, the country's oldest operating trolley museum.

No. 966 is near the Bush family at the Seashore Trolley Museum of Kennebunkport, Maine.

André Previn made "Streetcar" into an opera, which was presented by the San Francisco Opera in the late 1990s. This prompted Frisco's Market Street Railway to acquire Car No. 952 (repainted in its traditional olive livery) in a lease deal between Mayors Willie Brown and Marc Morial in 1998. It was an immediate hit with the Frisco public on its popular F-line. It runs mostly, with the exception of charter runs for birthday parties and the like, on the Embarcadero shuttle between Fisherman's Wharf and the switchback at Mission Street. The San Francisco Municipal Railway Improvement Corporation ("Muni") bought Orange Empire Railway Museum's No. 913 in 2005, which arrived there the same day as Hurricane Katrina. So today there are two New Orleans streetcars happily at home in the city of cable cars.

Back in New Orleans there was a "desire" for the good old days, when the Canal Street line was still in operation. In the spring of 2004, streetcar service was jubilantly restored to Canal Street after a 40-year absence. An additional spur line along North Carrollton connected the line to City Park at Beauregard Circle and the entrance to the New Orleans Museum of Art. This author and his son made the entire early morning round-trip maiden voyage along with a handful of enthusiastic travelers. One of the few that "went all the way" was Jack Stewart, historian with a Ph.D. in political science and founding member of the New Leviathan Oriental Fox-Trot Orchestra. He wore the exact same white linen suit he sported forty years before when he rode the very last run of the Canal Street line in 1964. The Mayer Israel label was still inside his jacket, making the suit ancient when he wore it the first time. The store operated on Canal Street from 1906 until the late 50s.

It is only appropriate that Jack is the owner of the boyhood home of "Jelly Roll" Morton, who first recorded Jazz when the Perley Thomas streetcars first rolled in New Orleans.

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