entertainment

NOLA.COM

SUNDAY, JUNE 4, 2023



Graduation a time to celebrate self-driving children

When my son moved out of state for college four years ago, my wife and I were excited about his plans, although we sometimes wished he'd be closer to home. In 2020, life challenged us, as it often does, by giving us what we'd asked for.

As a pandemic closed campuses across the country, our son came home to study remotely. Our college student was back under our roof, though through circumstances we couldn't have imagined. Amid the suffering of a global health crisis, we felt lucky to be healthy and employed. We were also grateful that online learning gave our son a way to continue his education.

Even so, it was hard to witness the losses imposed on my son and thousands of other college students as COVID-19 spread across the planet. Digital technology was a vital lifeline as classrooms emptied, but it couldn't fully replace hands-on learning experi-

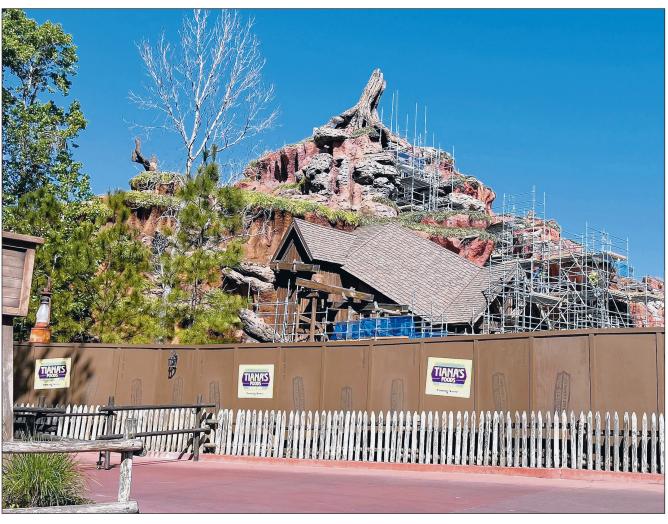
Social distancing forced the closure of the lab where our son, a computer engineering student, was heading a team to program a self-driving vehicle. He worked hard to keep the project moving through online collaborations with team members now scattered across the country. But lack of access to the vehicle itself was an obvious obstacle.

As a volunteer lecturer for a few Zoom classes at LSU during the pandemic, I connected with other college students navigating their own challenges. When each lesson concluded, I'd ask students to share how they were faring as remote learners. None of them expressed self-pity about the hand they'd been dealt.

They seemed resilient, resourceful and resolved to push ahead in spite of a public health emergency that had overturned higher education.

I'm aware of the widespread assumption that today's 20-somethings are fragile and selfabsorbed. For centuries, older people have lamented new generations as too soft for the trials

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PROVIDED PHOTO BY LANIE MARINA

Scaffolding surrounds the closed Splash Mountain attraction at Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom theme park. When it reopens in 2024, it will have become Tiana's Bayou Adventure, a New Orleans-themed attraction inspired by the 2009 animated film 'The Princess and the Frog.'

Disney taps big-name New Orleans musical talent for remade Splash Mountain ride

BY MIKE SCOTT Contributing writer

Both polished their musical chops as children growing up in New Orleans. Both have since won multiple Grammy Awards. Both regularly play to audiences around the world.

Now, Terence Blanchard and P.J. Morton — two of New Orleans' most prominent musical ambassadors have earned their Mickey Mouse ears.

Blanchard and Morton have been tapped by the Walt Disney Co. to write original compositions to play as part of Tiana's Bayou Adventure, the New Orleansflavored retheming of the Splash Mountain attraction at Disneyland in Anaheim, California, and Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom in Orlando, Florida, the company announced Thursday.

➤ See **SPLASH**, page **10D**



PHOTO PROVIDED BY DISNEY

Grammy-winning and Oscar-nominated composer Terence Blanchard stands with Disney's Princess Tiana at Dooky Chase restaurant in New Orleans. Blanchard has been tapped to write the music for the queue area of Tiana's Bayou Adventure, a new attraction set to debut at Disneyland and Walt Disney World in 2024.

Cow towns

Midwestern marketing strategy helped form New Orleans' dairy belt

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA Contributing writer

Historically, most major cities had a "dairy belt," a rural zone far enough away where cows could be raised inexpensively, but close enough so that milk could be delivered fresh.

In the 1700s and early 1800s, New Orleans' dairy production, as well as poultry and vegetables, came from nearby farmsteads along the Bayou Road and Metairie and Gentilly ridges, or from nearby planta-

Well into the 1900s, truck farms with dairies operated on the urban outskirts, in places like Kenner, Algiers, Marrero and in St. Bernard

But by then, New Orleans' main dairy belt had shifted to the Florida Parishes across Lake Pontchartrain, specifically Washington, St. Helena, and most of all, Tangipahoa Parish.



What brought dairy to this region was the construction of New Orleans' first interstate railroad, followed by a clever railroad marketing strategy.

In 1851, investors formed the New Orleans, Jackson & Great Northern Railroad, aiming to connect with Mississippi by laying tracks across the Manchac land bridge into what were then Livingston and St. Helena parishes.

Four years later, the N.O. J. &G.N. opened for service, and its stations gave rise to the communities of Ponchatoula, Hammond, Tick-

faw and Tangipahoa Despite damage during the Civil War, the N.O. J. & G.N. proved so



PROVIDED PHOTO

An Amite dairy farm in 1910

effective in peopling this region that it helped justify the creation of Tangipahoa Parish in 1869, carved from lands of the four adjacent

economic perspective was enable shippers to send cargo in a fraction of the time taken by wagons or waterborne transportation. The

What the railroad did from an parishes on either side of Lake Pontchartrain began to integrate into one regional economy.

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Interstate work threatens LSU mural

BY ROBIN MILLER Staff writer

The football player has become a landmark of sorts for drivers exiting Interstate 10 at Dalrymple in Baton Rouge.

They usually turn right for the LSU campus after stopping, so it only made sense that Charles Barbier would paint the player in purple and gold.



Barbier is the artist who painted the football player wearing the No. 9 jersey in 2017. He also painted another character he called "Lord of the Ducks" on a small wall on May Street that cuts in between two of University Lakes, a short walk from where the football player is frozen in mid play at the Dal-

rymple exit.

"And if you're driving on Nicholson, you'll see his paintings on pylons beneath the interstate where the African American Museum is, as well as the pylons near the Pastime Lounge," said Jason Andreasson, executive director of Baton Rouge Gallery, where Barbier was an artist member.

Barbier was a Vietnam veteran who enrolled at LSU later in life to earn his bachelor's degree in fine arts. He was known for his bold colors and distinct artistic style, which sometime resembled street art.

Unfortunately, Barbier died suddenly at age 71 in 2018, which makes Miriam Tiritilli's Curious Louisiana question particularly important.

"Work on I-10 is starting up around the LSU Lakes," wrote Tiritilli, who lives in Baton Rouge. "I want to know if anything will be done to preserve the artwork of the football player at the Dalrymple exit. I'm assuming most people who attend the games know this special LSU football artwork. I believe this is the work of Charles Barbier, who is sadly no longer with us. Also, I believe he did the duck artwork on May Street'

Kelsey Livingston, director of exhibitions at Baton Rouge Gallery, has been looking into this question.

"I've contacted the Department of Transportation and Development, and they said they would get back with me, but I haven't yet heard from them," she said.

"But I have contacted some other agencies in the meantime, and though they don't have definitive answers, they say it doesn't look good."

Meanwhile, Brandi Bordelon, public information officer for the DOTD, provides a definitive answer to Livingston's and Tiritilli's questions.

"The painting on the retaining wall on Dalrymple will be impacted by the new frontage road and will be removed," she said. "We are still in discussions on what will happen to this mural. We do not have a timeline of when it will be removed yet."

Andreassen said some of Barbier's other public artworks around the city have fallen to similar

"He was a rogue painter, meaning he didn't always ask permission before he painted something," Andreassen said. "But that was also the great thing about Charles and why there was joy in seeing one of his works appear, because they weren't commissioned or sanctioned by anyone. They just appeared, and they were so colorful. They really did give us so much joy.'

Being noncommissioned also means they could easily be removed. Barbier was a known artist in Baton Rouge, and some of his work was commissioned as murals

Barbier is no longer around to recreate or restore his work, so once it's lost, it's lost, which could be the fate of the football player wearing No. 9 at the Dalrymple exit. On the other hand, perhaps it will be preserved and find a new home where people can still appreciate the piece.

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SPLASH

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The announcement, as well as the release of new details about the ride, comes a week after a team of Disney Imagineers were in New Orleans for recording sessions with Blanchard and Morton.

Morton, a producer, songwriter and member of the band Maroon 5, will contribute an original theme song that will play during the ride. Additionally, he will record new arrangements of familiar tunes from 2009's "The Princess and the Frog," the New Orleans-set animated musical that inspired it.

Blanchard, a trumpeter and Oscar-nominated composer, will write music to play in the ride's queue area — which, Disney Imagineers said, is really where the experience will begin.

"The ride is the ride, but the line is more story and it is just as much (a part) of the attraction," said Walt Disney Imagineering's Ted Robledo, executive creative director of Tiana's Bayou Adventure. "And we're taking advantage of that to bring more Tiana, more of the story, more New Orleans to our guests."

Crash course in N.O. culture

While here, Robledo and his fellow Imagineers — who have made several research trips to town — used the opportunity to host a gaggle of Disney journalists and content creators on a three-day junket designed to introduce them to some of the realmost the visit doubled as a crash course in New Orleans culture.

On Thursday, the group went on a swamp tour to get up-close and personal with local flora and fauna. That was followed by a visit to the YAYA Arts Center and dinner at Dooky Chase.

Friday, they were treated to a performance at Preservation Hall and paid visits to the Historic New Orleans Collection and the Louisiana Jazz Museum, capped by a reception at Mardi Gras World.

"We're not here to tell our guests a history lesson," Robledo said during the group's Friday stop at Pres Hall, "but we want to give people the feeling that we're feeling, because we want to be armed with that knowledge and that love that people have for the food, the music.'

Continuing the story told in "The Princess and the Frog," the rethemed ride will be set in 1920s New Orleans and will include such touches as the scent of beignets wafting through the ride queue area.

Salt dome invite

the attraction's loading area, moviegoermike@gmail.com.

they will learn more about Tiana and her family, Imagineers have revealed. They'll also hear a period radio program that will interrupt Blanchard's music to inform guests that Tiana needs their help preparing for a massive Mardi Gras party she's planning for the community.

Guests are then invited to meet her at an old salt dome -Disney's explanation for how a 'mountain" found its way to the Louisiana swamps — that she acquired as part of Tiana's Foods, an employee-owned cooperative she founded after the events depicted in the film.

The ride track will remain identical to that used in Splash Mountain, including its famous 52-foot log-flume-style drop. Pretty much everything else will be swapped out.

"Low-hanging Spanish moss and high-reaching aquatic grasses and weeds frame the guest perspective throughout the journey, as well as cypress, oak and magnolia tree canopies, cypress knees jutting out of the water, lily pads, and various other plants and flora of the bayou,' read a Disney-provided descrip-

In addition to new animation featuring the original voice cast from "The Princess and the Frog," the ride will feature dozens of new audio-animatronic figures, as well as a new cast of critters from Tiana's corner of the swamp. Leading the way will be a swarm of ersatz fireflies created by "a unique integration of lighting techniques.'

Those new animal characters - an otter, a rabbit, a raccoon, a life inspiration for the ride. For beaver, an opossum, a group of frogs — will play music out the ride showcasing various south Louisiana musical styles, such as zydeco.

Capturing the spirit

For Morton, who grew up appreciating the music in Disney films, it has been gratifying to witness the Disney team's dedication to capturing the spirit of New Orleans.

"These guvs are being so intentional about making sure that the story is told in an authentic way and that the music is done in an authentic way," Morton said. "Everybody who they're bringing along to be a part of this is very authentic to New Orleans and very real, not trying to make a caricature of what New Orleans is but really just being our

Magic Kingdom's Splash Mountain, inspired by the racially problematic film "The Song of the South," closed in January to begin its refitting. Disneyland's version closed Tuesday.

The retheming of both are expected to be completed in 2024.

As guests make their way to Mike Scott can be reached at

COW

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Other railroads followed suit. The New Orleans & Northeastern opened a line to Slidell and Pearl River in 1883, from which spur lines were built westward to Abita Springs in 1887, to Covington in 1888, to Mandeville in 1892, and to Franklinton in 1907

One could now wake up in New Orleans, board a train at sunrise, spend the day "across the lake," and be home for dinner. Likewise, a farmer could now ship produce over 60 miles and have it arrive fresh at city markets.

That was particularly attractive for local dairy farmers, who could now graze their milk cows on cheaper land further out. They would soon be joined by farmers from the dairy belt of the nation: the Midwest.

Regional lines are taken over

In 1878, the Chicago-based Illinois Central Railroad Company took over the N.O. J. & G.N., part of a national trend in which larger companies subsumed smaller regional lines into their systems.

The Southern Pacific, for example, had recently taken over lines in southwestern Louisiana. Mulling ways to increase business, the company in 1883 began to recruit Midwestern farmers to cultivate rice. What better way to drum up ticket sales than to populate this rural prairie region with future passengers producing future

In 1885, Illinois Central adopted a similar strategy. Looking to invigorate business between its new Southern stations and the Midwest (also called the "Northwest" in this era), the company designated Tangipahoa Parish as a "land point." meaning a destination "to be advertised throughout the Northwest as having some special attractions in the way of good climate, cheap lands, nearness to New Orleans, etc., and to which point home seekers' tickets would be sold monthly from all Illinois Central points

north of the Ohio River." Illinois Central readied its largest station in Tangipahoa Parish for the newcomers, and used an aptly named planning firm to do it. In 1887, company officials persuaded a local landowner to sell property so that the Iowa and Louisiana Land and Lot Company could begin laying out part of

what is now downtown Hammond. For a generation to come, the Illinois Central Passenger Department employed a "general immigration agent" named J.F. Merry, based in Iowa, to work with Tangipahoa Parish, using Hammond as the "land point" in arranging

ticket sales and property deals. Combined with regional resettlement, the strategy helped triple Tangipahoa Parish's population, from 9600 residents in 1880 to nearly 30,000 by 1910.

That Midwestern ambience

The effort imparted Midwestern farming culture into Louisiana's piney woods, as well as a certain Midwestern ambience to the growing city of Hammond.

Farmers found the area to be well situated for dairies—not too close to New Orleans, and not too far. They could also raise strawberries, other fruit, vegetables, corn, oats and poultry for the urban marketplace, all but a couple of hours away by train.

Working alongside locally born farmers as well as immigrants from Sicily and later Hungary, the Midwesterners augmented the agricultural production of the region. The railroad strategy was a

Wrote one contented transplant



A farm and sawmill in Tangipahoa Parish in 1910

from Peoria, Illinois, in a 1903 letter republished in 1989 by C. Howard Nichols, "Nine years ago this fall we moved to Hammond, Louisiana, where I have been engaged in gardening, fruit culture and dairying, receiving reasonable compensation for my efforts. Our climate is second to none ... we like it here; the North has lost its attractions.

"I came from Nebraska to Hammond in 1893," wrote another: "I am engaged in dairying, in which I am doing well ... I can raise more milk than I can sell. With this interest growing and the railroad giving us better facilities, it will be the richest crop that we have."

The railroad sprouted additional station-based communities up and down Tangipahoa Parish. Midwav between Hammond and Tickfaw, for example, arose Natalbany; halfway between Tickfaw and Amite formed Independence; between Amite and Tangipahoa emerged Roseland, Arcola and Fluker; and midway between Tangipahoa and Osyka in Mississippi formed the community of Kentwood.

Hungarian Settlement formed

Just west of Hammond Hungar ian immigrants arrived to work at the sawmill in Albany, many of whom later became farmers, forming today's Hungarian Settlement in Livingston Parish.

Wrote J. F. Merry in 1910, Independence went from a mere "siding in the pine woods" in 1885 to a town of 1,200 people, amid 4,000 acres producing 282 carloads of strawberries per year, thanks to Midwestern transplants and Sicilian immigrants, among others.

Kentwood, "not on the map in 1885, now claims a population of 4,000," with budding potential for "dairying, strawberry growing and truck farming."

In 1910, Tangipahoa Parish shipped 2,000 gallons of milk per day to New Orleans, along with a daily average of 1.6 carloads of

strawberries and vegetables. In the decades ahead, greater New Orleans' dairy belt grew in number of dairies, size, and spatial extent, expanding its production area into southern Mississippi and its consumption area from Baton Rouge to Biloxi and beyond. Stations along the IC were equipped with special cooling stations to keep the milk cold on its trek across the swamps.

The industry boomed statewide. Louisiana had 314,000 milk cows in 1940, more than one for every eight people, and most grazed in the dairy belt parishes.

Dairies in decline

In the 1950s, however, the number of Louisiana dairies began to decrease, while their average size increased. By the 1970s, both the number and the total production of Louisiana dairies began to decrease.

Refrigerated trucks travelling cross-country on high-speed interstates now put major national dairies within reach of most metropolitan markets, and regional dairy belts went into decline.

By 1987, Louisiana was down to 1,581 dairy farms and 83,381 milk cows, one for every 52 people.

The decline steepened. Costs

rose, but revenue did not, due in part to federally set prices, while national competition and corporate consolidation put small regional producers at a severe disadvantage. Farmers' children opted for other careers, and Louisiana dairy farms closed by the hundreds.

By 2017, only 132 dairies and 12.328 milk cows remained, one for every 372 Louisianians.

Tangipahoa still has a disproportionate share, with 4,958 milk cows on 45 dairy farms, as does Washington, with 4,618 cows on 34 dairies. Together they earned \$26 million in 2017 — still a multi-million dollar industry, and still comprising a dairy belt, but nothing like it once was.

In testimony to the struggling yet enduring geography of milk production, Brown's Dairy, a major processor to which producers had shipped their raw milk since 1904, closed its downtown New Orleans facilities in 2016.

But Brown's relocated to a familiar place — Hammond, the historic heart of the dairy belt. Inspectors from the State of Louisiana's Milk and Dairy Unit are still mostly based in the vicinity.

Enduring legacy

The circa-1855 railroad corridor that gave rise to the dairy belt, meanwhile, also has an enduring legacy.

Still operated by Illinois Central. its right of way paved the way for Highway 51, and later Interstate 55, to be built in parallel. Each artery has brought economic activity to the old train-station towns, from Ponchatoula to Kentwood

Tangipahoa Parish's shape, too, testifies to the railroad's importance, being elongated in the same orientation of the track bed—a peculiarity among Louisiana's 64 parishes.

Midwestern-influenced agriculture has also affected local traditions. While there is no Dairy Festival in the dairy belt, Ponchatoula celebrates its Strawberry Festival every April, while Independence has a Sicilian Heritage Festival in March, for the many Italian immigrants who became farmers. The Washington Parish Free Fair in October features dairy cows among its many agricultural exhibits.

And remember that similar Southern Pacific strategy to recruit Midwesterners to southwestern Louisiana?

That policy explains why there is a town named Iowa near Lake Charles, why nearby Vinton was named for a city in Iowa, and why many historic structures in Jennings (nicknamed "Iowa Colony") are what the late LSU geographer Fred Kniffen called "I-houses"designs typical of Indiana, Illinois and Iowa.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "Draining New Orleans; "The West Bank of Greater New Orleans," "Bienville's Dilemma," and "Bourbon Street: A History." Campanella may be reached at http://richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.

AT RANDOM

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of life. But the students I encountered during the pandemic revealed a different reality. Their quiet courage inspired me. It still does.

Last month, my son and many other students who'd pursued degrees in the shadow of a plague became college graduates. When we visited campus for the commencement ceremony, my son asked my wife and me to stop by his lab before our lunch date. Then we were invited to join him in his team's self-driving car, which took us to the restaurant as our son sat in the driver's seat with his hands on his lap. All the hard work, slowed but not stopped by a deadly virus, had paid off.

"Thank you," I said after we'd finished our meal. "This is one of the best days of my life."

Self-driving cars are a wonder, but this year's commencement season was an occasion to celebrate the abiding miracle of self-driving children. It's a parent's conceit to think that you're steering them — until the day you see them in cap and gown and realize they're steering themselves.

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