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Danny Heitman
AT RANDOM

Even a newshound needs a break from the headlines

It happened a few Fridays ago, as my wife and I marked the end of our workweek at a local Mexican restaurant.

Getting a prime table in a quiet part of the restaurant was our first piece of luck. The only real sound came from an almost muted television that hung from a wall mount above the patrons. Though the volume was low, we didn't really need to hear the story to follow it. The pictures — image after image of trees ablaze — said everything. What we were seeing, quite clearly, was a news report about wildfires sweeping parts of Louisiana.

A young man and his wife entered the dining room with their two small children, taking the table a few feet away. Visibly worried, the father returned to the host's station and gently made a request.

"Is there any way," he asked, "that we could change the channel? Maybe sports, or maybe even just turn the thing off? What's on right now is going to mean a lot of questions from our kids. I'd rather not have to do that."

The young staffer seemed taken off guard, apparently not accustomed to customers who had quibbles about the programming. Possibly because a blank TV seemed out of the question, he switched the channel to a sports show.

For the next hour, as we ate our tacos and fajitas, there were no updates on a world broken by tragedy. Instead, a preview of the next basketball season accompanied our meal.

Meanwhile, the young father worried about something else. "Is what I did," he asked me, "OK with you?"

It occurred to him that maybe the other diners had wanted to catch the news, that he had inconvenienced us by asking for something else.

"I'm glad about what you did," I told him. "I wish that I had made the request myself."

Supporting a break from the news might seem like an odd thing coming from me. I've worked for years as a journalist because I think the world works better when people are well-informed. We can't solve problems by ignoring them, which is why I spend a big part of my day following the headlines. I grieve for those who are suffering.

But news works best when we have time to ponder its meaning. That kind of perspective is most likely to grow while we're grounded in other parts of our lives — in the families we build, the friendships

► See **AT RANDOM**, page 8D

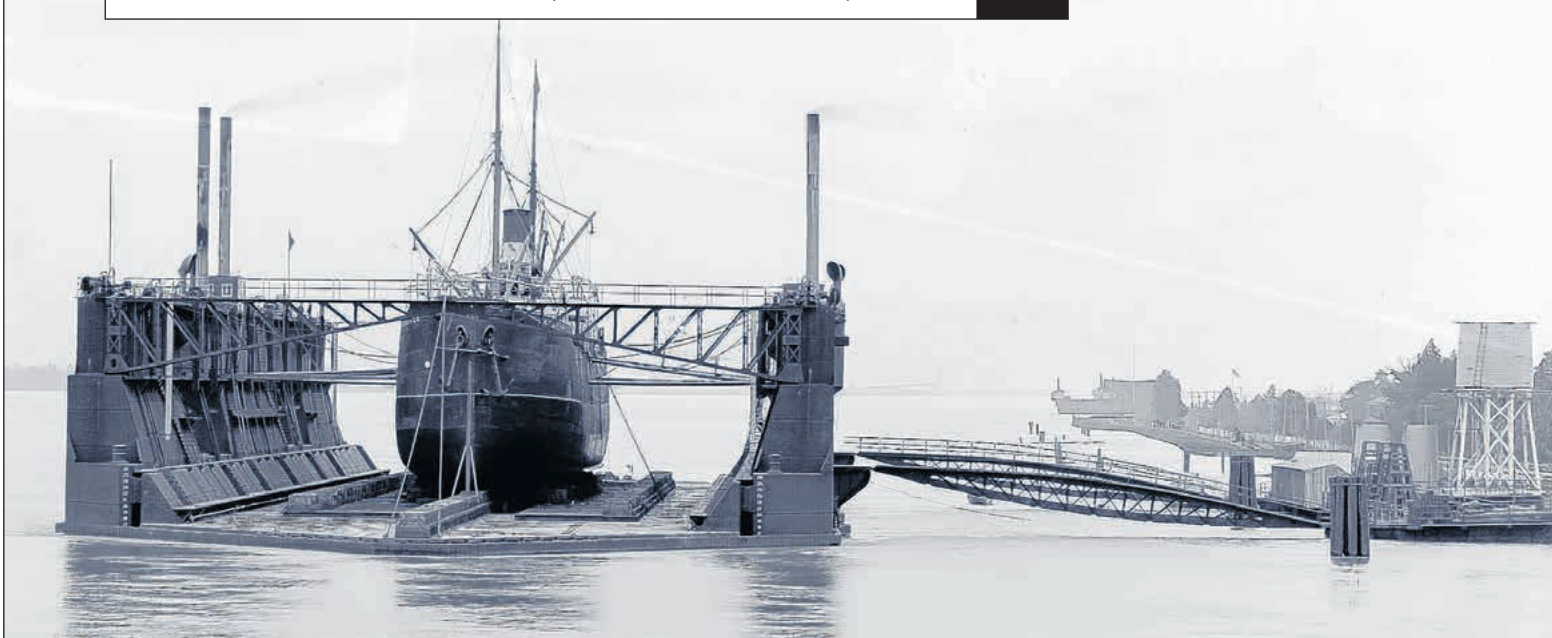


PHOTO COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

ABOVE: The dry dock YFD-2 at the Naval Station in Algiers in 1903

OUT TO SEA

Richard Campanella's
GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW ORLEANS

After two centuries, the sun sets on the West Bank's once bustling ship-building industry

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer

This summer brought news that Bollinger Shipyards will close its two dry docks on the Algiers riverfront to consolidate the company's growing business in coastal Mississippi and the Harvey Canal, as well as other sites throughout southern Louisiana.

The news came a decade after Northrop Grumman made a comparable decision, though on a larger scale, in moving its Avondale Shipyard operations to Pascagoula, Mississippi.

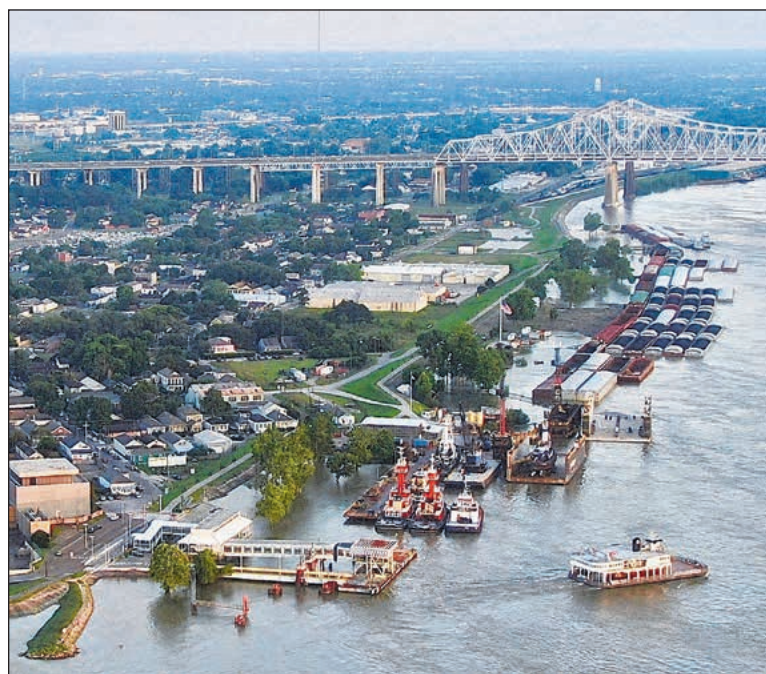
The two departures mark the sunset of one of greater New Orleans' oldest and largest riverfront industries, born of a key economic advantage once held by the West Bank.

Historically, most port activity — that is, the daily loading and unloading of cargo — transpired on East Bank wharves, because it required thousands of laborers, and that's where most people lived.

The West Bank, in contrast, mostly comprised plantations fronted by a few villages, each catalyzed by ferry landings. That left ample riverfront space for other land uses, namely industry. Given the daily cargo-handling across the river, the West Bank became the optimal locale for repairing and constructing vessels.

Building boats for war

Shipbuilding in this region dates to the 1730s, when enslaved workers cut logs from the West Bank backswamp and floated them up



FILE PHOTO BY MARCO RASI

A drone photo shows the Algiers riverfront in 2019, with dry docks at lower center.

a canal to what is now Gretna. Contractor Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil Sr. used the wood to construct 20 vessels for French troops involved in a series of skirmishes known as the Chickasaw War.

In 1819, Barthélémy Duverjé sold a portion of his riverfront land to André Séguin, a Frenchman from the ship-building port of Le Havre. There, in what is now Algiers Point, Séguin built the state's first "marine ways," a slip for vessel repair and construction located at the foot of today's Seguin Street.

Some captains had their ships repaired on the East Bank while dockworkers transferred cargo. But doing so delayed their time in port, which caused congestion and cost the city wharfage fees.

In response, the city in 1829 passed an ordinance making it illegal "to build (or) repair ... any vessel, steam-boats, or other craft of any description whatsoever, in that part of the port, situated on the left (east) bank of the river Mississippi."

► See **WEST BANK**, page 8D



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY HEATHER MCCLELLAND

Evolution of Tiger Stadium's nickname a winding story

BY JACK BARLOW
Staff writer

This week, reader Jim Thompson Jr. from Daphne, Alabama, asks about Tiger Stadium's long-standing nickname.

"When I was coming to Tiger Stadium as a teenager in the early 1970s, it was sometimes nicknamed 'Death Valley' because of the crowd noise," he wrote. "When and why was it



changed to 'Death Valley?'"

The "Death Valley" versus "Death Valley" origin debate has flared up periodically, not to mention passionately, throughout the years. Much of this played out in the column

of The Advocate's own Smiley Anders, who has chronicled Louisiana culture and history for 50 years.

While there are arguments for both being first, the common consensus appears to be that "Deaf Valley" preceded "Death Valley."

To cite just two examples from Anders' column: "It will

► See **CURIOS**, page 8D

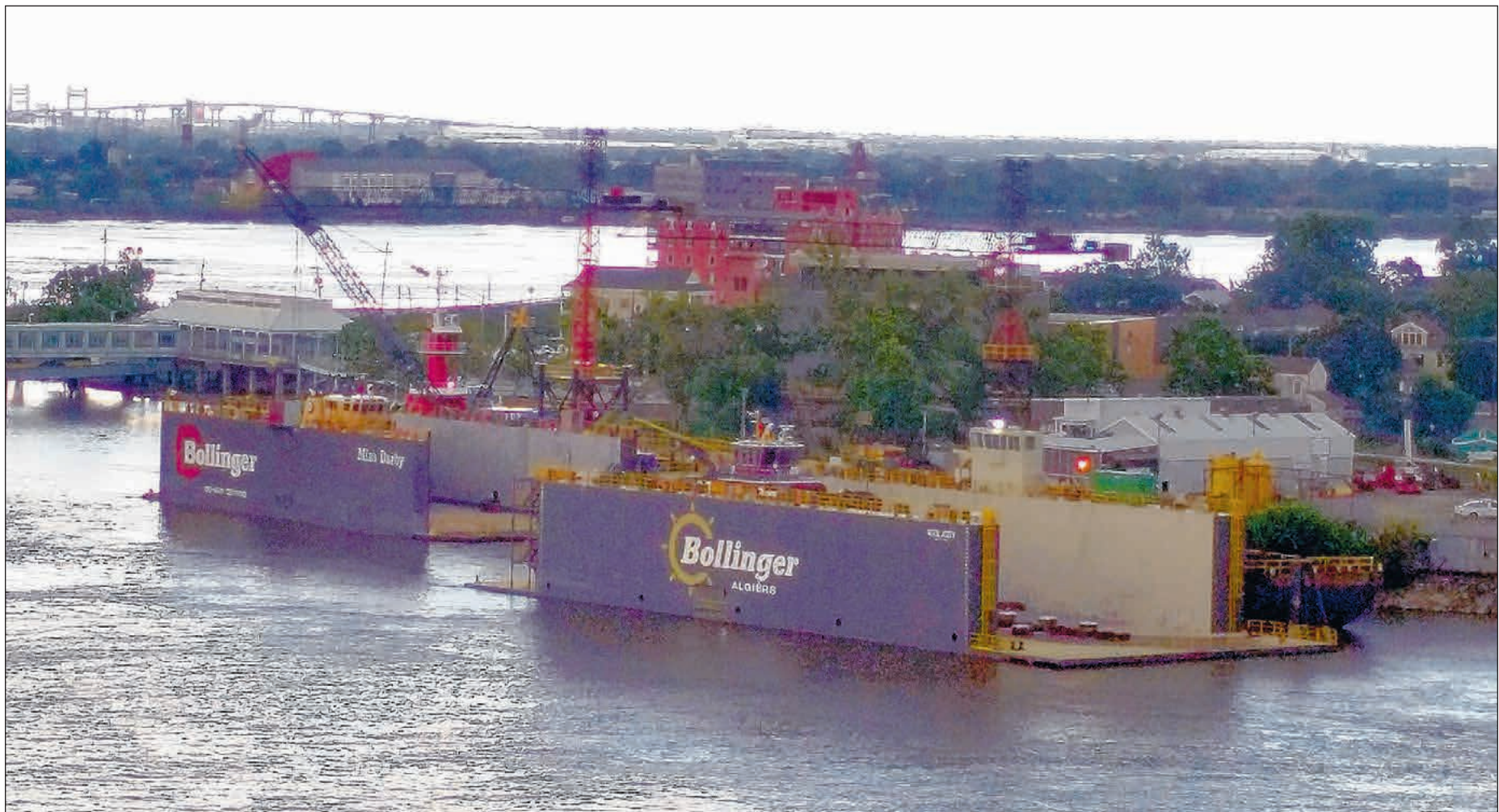


PHOTO BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA

Bollinger Shipyards' announced recently that it will close its two dry docks on the Algiers riverfront.

WEST BANK

Continued from page 1D

That pushed maintenance and repair activity to the “right” (west) bank, which in turn motivated skilled craftsmen to move to Algiers, McDonoghville and later Gretna for the jobs.

Enter the dry dock

In 1837, Séguin's slipway came into the hands of ship carpenter François Vallete, who adapted an old hull into a floating chamber, within which smaller vessels could be repaired — a “dry dock,” similar to the Bollinger operation.

That same year, the New Orleans Floating Dry Dock Company had a specially designed floating chamber brought down from Kentucky and moored on the Algiers riverfront.

The two operations marked the beginning of the West Bank's dry dock industry. Its geography was ideal for five reasons: It had a deep harbor, proximity to the port, access to skilled labor, and ample riverfront space which, lacking the complex marine servitudes of the East Bank, could be privately owned.

The curious contraptions drew journalistic attention. “Taking a stroll ... through the bustling little village of Algiers,” wrote a Picayune reporter in 1838, “we were enabled to examine every part of that admirable contrivance — the Floating Dry Dock.”

Measuring 225 feet long and 60 feet wide, the floating chamber had a gate at one end to admit the damaged vessel, and four steam pumps at the other end to expel the water.

“When we visited the dock, the steamboat *Levant* was resting in it, high and dry, in a perfectly horizontal position, (such that) workmen could get under any part of her.” Impressed, the reporter concluded, “We regard this Floating Dry Dock as one of the most important collateral facilities for carrying on the opera-

tions of our commerce.”

'The great work-shop'

In 1845, a visitor wrote that the Algiers and McDonoghville riverfront was “the great work-shop of New Orleans, for the building and repairing of vessels. It has its dry docks, and other facilities for the most extensive operations. In business times, it ... reminds one of the bustling and enterprise of the North.”

By 1849, the city directory listed 34 ship carpenters, joiners and painters, two ship smiths and three shipbuilders just in Algiers.

By 1857, Algiers had 12 ship-repair operations, among them the Hasam & Anderson's Crescent Dry Dock; Hyde & McKee's; Hughes, Wallete & Co.'s Louisiana Dry Dock; and Mooney & Girard's Gulf Dry Dock. Piniger & Martin's Pelican Dry Dock would rank as the largest in the region for the rest of the nineteenth century, capable of repairing vessels 400 feet long.

By one later estimate, the dry-dock industry provided livelihoods for three-quarters of Algiers households. The community also had a rigorous shipbuilding sector. Among locally registered ships, Algiers had built at least 27 vessels from 1841 to 1860, including three-mast ocean-going barks and enormous paddlewheel riverboats.

The ship industry needed iron — lots of it, for boilers, engines, pistons, and hardware — and once again, the West Bank offered ideal geography. It had affordable riverfront land, access to fresh water, a growing resident workforce, and starting in the 1850s, the New Orleans, Opelousas & Great Western Railroad.

Next, an iron works

Accordingly, businessman John P. Whitney launched the Belleville Iron Works in Algiers, and invested additionally in dry docks and shipyards. It was during these years that Algiers built its largest vessel to date, the

steamboat *Baltic*, completed in 1859, which measured 192 feet in length and weighed 604 tons. Whitney Avenue and Belleville Street were named for this key industry.

With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Confederate leaders recognized the West Bank had everything needed to build a Confederate navy. What the rebel government lacked, however, was administrative experience. “New Orleans was equipped to turn out war vessels,” wrote historian James M. Merrill, and it was in Algiers where the Confederate naval flag first flew.

But soon the effort became “a story of miscalculation, mismanagement, of corruption and confusion,” which ended up producing “a patchwork flotilla of needlessly expensive intermediate type vessels.”

All the while, a series of suspicious explosions and fires rocked the West Bank, damaging riverfront infrastructure. The worst destruction, however, was self-inflicted. As the Union fleet steamed past Confederate bombardment at the mouth of the Mississippi in late April 1862, Confederate authorities ordered dry docks and shipyards to be scuttled or burned. Decades of progress were undone in a matter of hours.

Trains and ships

What revived the West Bank ship industry after the war was intermodal transportation.

Shipping magnate Charles Morgan acquired the Great Western Railroad, massively expanded the Algiers train yards, and in the 1870s, built a harbor for his steamships.

According to the Daily Picayune, Morgan offered “steamers and rail connections to points in Texas, New Mexico and California, Havana, Vera Cruz, Cedar Keys and New York,” all from a single spot in Algiers. Morgan's rail hub would later become the Southern Pacific Yards, which turned Algiers into an industrial powerhouse.

Meanwhile, at the upper end of the West Bank, investors found a perfect riverfront spot near Nine Mile Point to build their own railroad terminal. Seeking to advertise its access to Texas and the western frontier, they named it West-We-Go — today's Westwego.

With railroad hubs at both ends and connecting tracks along today's Fourth Street, the West Bank was primed to bring its ship-building industry into the twentieth century.

In 1901, the U.S. Navy built Dry Dock YFD-2 at its new naval station in Algiers, which by World War I was capable of raising vessels with 18,000 tons of displacement.

In 1924, after a spirited rivalry with the Company Canal in Westwego, the Harvey Canal won a bid by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to be enlarged into the Intracoastal Waterway. Soon equipped with a modernized lock, the Harvey Canal landed its share of vessel builders and repairers.

The birth of Avondale

In the late 1930s, following the opening of the Huey P. Long Bridge, investors Harry Koch, Perry Ellis and James Viviant founded Avondale Marine Ways upriver of Westwego.

The outbreak of World War II landed the shipyard numerous contracts for building convoy ships and repairing tugboats, tank barges and other war-related vessels.

Avondale would go on to become the nation's most productive shipyard, winning a steady stream of military and commercial contracts for decades. At one point, over 12,000 people worked at Avondale, making it the state's largest private employer, and marking the apex of the West Bank's centuries-old ship industry.

Its decline in recent decades has generally paralleled national deindustrialization, and while the reasons are many, a few stand out.

Foreign competition, entailing cheap labor and government subsidies, underbid American shipbuilders, which in the early 1980s lost their federal assistance. The oil bust in the same era further undercut demand, as did the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, which triggered massive cuts in military contracts. Those naval contracts that were let tended to be tech-heavy, for which regional shipbuilders were ill-suited.

Cost-cutting follows

Operating costs, meanwhile, soared for American shipyards, and one way to reduce overhead was to consolidate facilities.

That's what Northrop Grumman did in 2013, when it decided to combine its Avondale operations with those in Pascagoula. And that's what Bollinger decided this summer, although the company remains based in Lockport and oversees a growing number of projects at 10 sites throughout southern Louisiana.

Avondale may yet have a promising future in the maritime industry, and vessel construction as well as dry docks remain important activities in the Harvey, Algiers, and Industrial Canals, as well as other regional waterways.

But as a ship-building powerhouse, the West Bank riverfront will probably never regain what the Daily Picayune reported in 1913, where “the hum of the buzz saw and the clanking of the hammer at the shipyards may be heard early and late, (as) there are fewer idle men in Algiers than any town in Louisiana.”

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “The West Bank of Greater New Orleans,” “Draining New Orleans;” “Bienville's Dilemma,” and other books. Campanella may be reached at richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.

CURIOS

Continued from page 1D

always be Deaf Valley to me, and to many of the real, old-time Tigers,” Jim Welsh, of St. Francisville, wrote in 2003.

Same goes for Ray Cox of New Roads, writing in 1999. “When I was in LSU Law School in '56-'58, we definitely referred to the stadium as Deaf Valley,” he wrote. “That isn't hard evidence, but everyone's ears would be ringing for a couple of hours after a game.”

Exactly who first coined the term, and when, is unclear. However, several leading sources, including LSU itself and journalist and radio host Jim Engster, point toward former LSU boxing champion Crowe Peele and his gas station on the corner of Highland Road and State Street as the origin of the moniker.

Now a generic Circle K, for years the station was known by the more localized nickname, Deaf Valley Shell — named, apparently, because of the ear-shattering noise that came from nearby Tiger Stadium.

It's fitting that it may be where the “Deaf Valley” term came

from, given its proximity to the stadium and, moreover, the pedigree of the man who ran it for 18 years. For Peele wasn't just any boxing champion.

“Thurman Crowe Peele was the greatest boxer in the 25-year history of the sport at LSU,” Engster wrote upon Peele's death, at the age of 88, last November.

Peele was a leading member of the powerful LSU boxing program, which was a dominant force in college boxing until LSU disbanded it in 1956. He came to LSU as a four-time Golden Gloves champion with a 62-2 pre-college record. In one of his most notable performances, he went the distance with two-time future heavyweight boxing champion Floyd Patterson at the 1951 Golden Gloves tournament in New York City, losing by split decision.

He went undefeated in his 16-match career at LSU, forging a reputation as a knockout artist with no shortage of traditional boxing skills.

“Crowe usually relies on the one big blow rather than an advantage on points to win his bouts,” a staff writer wrote in a 1955 edition of *The Advocate*, “but (he) can, when the need arises, box with the best of the ‘Fancy Dans.’ ”

Peele won SEC and Sugar Bowl championships as a freshman in 1954 before repeating as conference champion the following year. In 1955, he won the individual heavyweight title at the NCAA boxing championship, perhaps his finest achievement in the ring.

After leaving LSU, Peele went on to amass a 16-5 professional record (according to the boxing record site Boxrec), served as a sparring partner for light heavyweight champion Archie Moore ... and, of course, possibly gave Tiger Stadium its early nickname.

Quite aside from Crowe Peele, there's another aspect to the Deaf Valley/Death Valley debate.

Clemson's Memorial Stadium is also known as Death Valley, and many claim the shared name is less than coincidental. As does the SEC's own website, which puts it down to one of LSU's most famous football victories.

“On Jan. 1, 1959, when LSU and Heisman Trophy winner Billy Cannon capped the school's first national title with a 7-0 victory in the Sugar Bowl, some of those fans stole ‘Death,’ when describing the home valley,” it reads. “Why? Because they believed they had earned that right after defeating the team that was al-

ready using the name for its home stadium. Yep, Clemson.”

Cheeky.

As for when and why “Death Valley” became the recognized name, Engster points toward 1982 and the arrival of controversial athletic director Bob Brodhead. “Brodhead emphasized the ‘Death Valley’ term when he was hired in 1982,” Engster wrote. “Brodhead was a former Duke quarterback and familiar with Clemson and the other Death Valley.”

Engster said a branding took hold in the 1982 season with a combination of multiple factors:

- LSU designer Don Bruce's original “Eye of the Tiger” logo
- The band Survivor hit the top of the charts with “Eye of the Tiger”

- LSU beat Alabama for the first time in 12 years
- LSU beat Florida State 55-21 on a foggy night at Tiger Stadium “Brodhead, despite his faults,” said Engster, “was a savvy marketer.”

To submit a question about something in Louisiana that's got you curious, go to theadvocate.com/curiouslouisiana.

AT RANDOM

Continued from page 1D

we keep, the gardens we tend. Maybe one way to strike the right balance is to model it for children, who obviously aren't equipped to deal with life's darker realities.

These sorts of bargains seemed easier to make when there weren't so many televisions in airports, restaurants and public waiting rooms.

But sometimes, as a young parent reminded me, if you need a break from the news, then all you need to do is ask.

HOME DELIVERED EVERY DAY



The Times-Picayune

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