



entertainment LIVING

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In hard times, detective fiction is an everlasting comfort

Three autumns ago, while quarantined with a mild case of COVID-19, I passed a feverish night by scrolling the internet, a decent distraction for someone who couldn't sleep but had little focus for anything else. That's how I came across the story of J.B. Priestley's BBC broadcasts during World War II, which was good medicine for what ailed me.

Priestley was at the top of his game as a British author and journalist when the war began in 1939. The BBC asked him for a weekly segment to help morale, and his radio commentaries later ended up in a couple of books. They were generally serious, as any discussion of the grave challenges facing the world back then had to be.

But what strikes you about Priestley's wartime radio pieces is how often they're relieved by lightness, even humor. In a report from the summer of 1940, he shares the glad news that a pie shop in his native Yorkshire has survived an air raid. This leads to some thoughts about what makes a perfect meat and potato pie, which reminded me of how conversations in Louisiana inevitably unfold. Regardless of the ostensible topic — war, politics, family — talk in our part of the world typically turns to the dinner table.

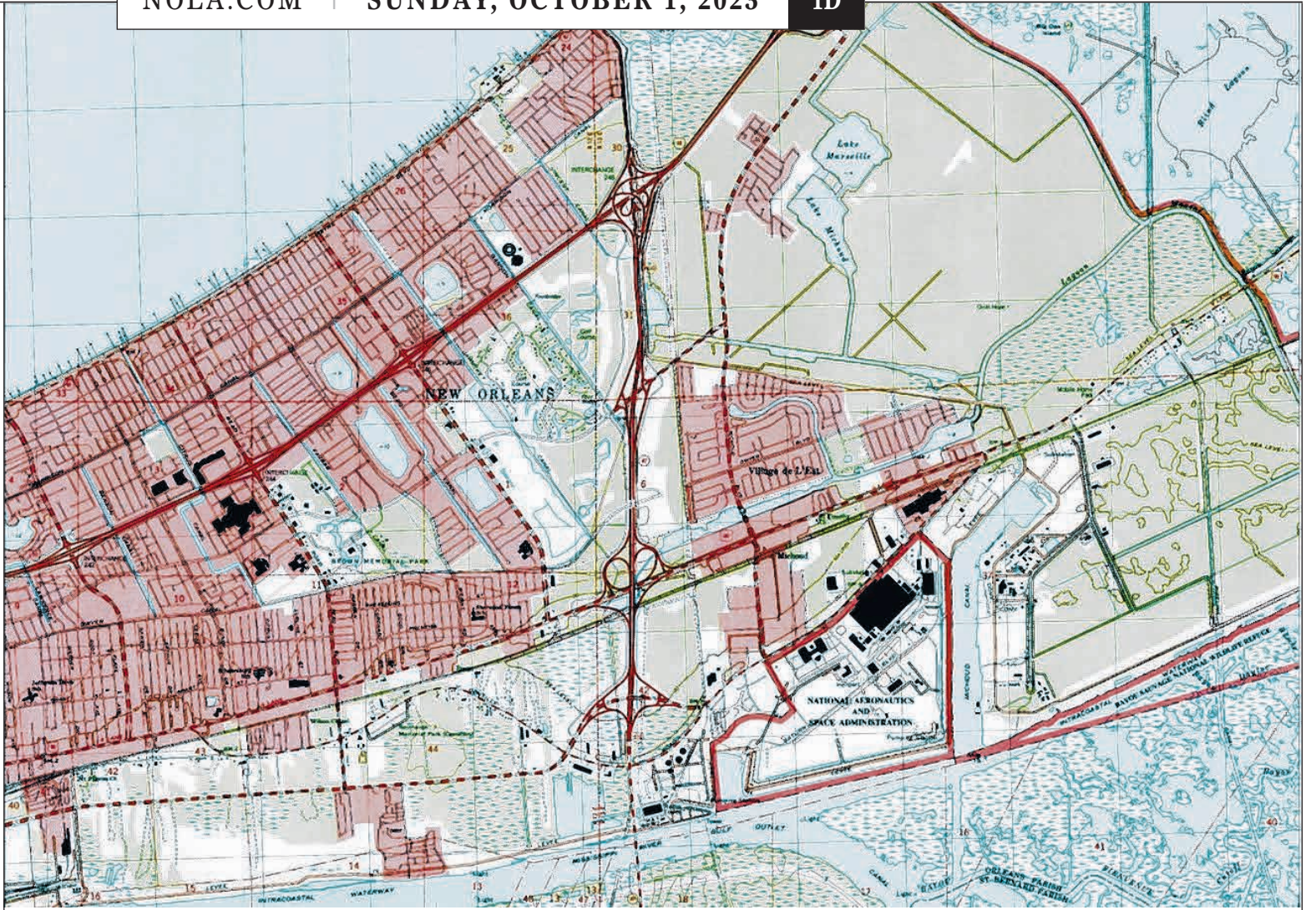
I've written about Priestley a couple of times since he offered me that sickbed company in 2020. I suppose I return to his work because of his abiding interest in the small graces that sustain human resolve — even or especially when times are tough. More of us seem to be seeking that kind of solace given the grimness of the news cycle these days.

For Priestley, who died at 89 in 1984, little things, properly appreciated, could go a long way toward renewing a tired soul. One of his favorite pleasures was reading detective stories in bed, which he found a soothing pathway to sleep. Priestley especially liked how mystery fiction always included a neat solution, though real life seldom does. "After the newspaper headlines," we wrote, "it is refreshing to enter this well-ordered microcosm, like finding one's way into a garden after wandering for days in a jungle."

Priestley came to mind again a couple of weekends ago when my wife and I went to see the new Hercule Poirot movie, "A Haunting in Venice." It's the third outing for Kenneth Branagh as the fictional Poirot, a Belgian detective created by novelist Agatha Christie. Branagh's chief contribution to the part is taking Poirot's signature mustache, which was always big, to a new scale. Now epically expansive on Branagh's face, it looks like a squirrel nesting near his nostrils.

I liked leaving the world behind for a couple of hours as we watched the resolution of a crime slowly fall into place. Priestley was right about murder mysteries as ideal bedtime fare. At some point in the final half of the movie, I fell fast asleep.

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PROVIDED PHOTOS

Early farms were created between channels half a mile apart, big enough for a tractor to work, and small enough for a family, the Journal of Agricultural Research reported in 1913. Sure enough, this 1998 USGS map of New Orleans East shows subdivisions laid out within a series of squares, each roughly a half-mile on the side, bounded by drainage canals, boulevards or both. It's a half-mile from Bullard Avenue to Lucerne Street to Read Boulevard, just as it's a half-mile from Interstate 10 to Morrison Road to the lakeshore.

ON THE GRID

New Orleans East's early days as farmland live on in its geography

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer

Think of New Orleans East today, and what may come to mind is suburban-style subdivisions laid out along the Interstate 10 and Chef Menteur Highway corridors.

A century ago, eastern New Orleans had a very different landscape. The transformation set the stage for the development to come, and without it, we'd have a very different cityscape today.

Unlike those areas abutting the Mississippi River, which had substantial natural levees, eastern New Orleans originally comprised one slender, winding ridge surrounded by swamp and marsh.

Now Old Gentilly Road, the ridge afforded the only terrestrial access to the region, which folks tended to refer to as Chantilly (named for an estate outside Paris), else Chemin de Chantilly, or for points farther east, Chef Menteur (Big Liar), for reasons unknown.

Occupancy of the Chef Menteur region dates back more than 2,000 years, when Tchefuncte natives built shell mounds, some of which still stand. In 1763, French administrators granted the area to Gilbert Antoine St. Maxent, which in 1796 came into the possession of Borgnier DeClouet, followed in the



An advertisement in the New Orleans Item on Aug. 31, 1911, for new farms planned for eastern New Orleans

early 1800s by Barthélemy Lafon and Antoine Michoud.

By then, farmsteads and small plantations stretched along the Gentilly Road, while raised fishing and trapping camps could be found along the shores.

Adjacent swamps and marshes, which were mostly state-owned, remained wild, the refuge of dis-

placed indigenous people and escaped slaves, known as maroons.

Change came in the 1870s and 1880s, when engineers built two raised track beds along the edges of the region.

The New Orleans, Mobile & Texas Railroad ran roughly parallel to

► See **FARMLAND**, page 8D

FARMLAND

Continued from page 1D

the Gentilly Road, while the New Orleans & North Eastern Railroad coursed along the lakeshore toward Slidell.

The two lines brought new eyes to the possibilities of eastern New Orleans. They also inverted the topography of the region, changing it from a single natural ridge flanked by wetlands to two levee-like embankments (the raised track beds) surrounding the wetlands.

This occurred during the era when the city of New Orleans began making great improvements in its water treatment, sewerage and drainage infrastructure. The same pumps and canals being designed to dewater the swamps of Broadmoor, Mid-City, Lakeview and Gentilly could be installed to reclaim (drain) the east.

But because few people lived in the east, the city was not about to make it a public works project. There was, however, potential money to be made from draining the east, if not for urban development, then for food production — and that attracted the private sector.

Truck farming

In 1908, the New Orleans Lake Shore Land Co. acquired vast wetlands in the east, and got the state Legislature to sell it additional state-owned acreage under the condition that it be reclaimed.

The man behind the company was Frank Brevard Hayne, a South Carolinian who had made a fortune in the cotton market.

What Hayne envisioned were not commodity plantations but truck farms, small intensive cultivations of delicate vegetables, fruit and other edibles.

Truck farming had become a major industry in the postbellum South, in which families, including those of emancipated people, worked farmsteads to feed themselves and to sell or exchange their surplus — hence “truck,” from the French *troc*, meaning barter.

As rail systems were extended and refrigerated cars were de-

veloped, truck farming boomed. “About 1,000 gardens and truck farmers (operated) in the parish of Orleans,” reported the Daily Picayune in 1900, “cultivating about four to five city lots up to twenty-five acres each.” Most of the bounty sold locally, while another “twenty to thirty carloads daily” shipped nationwide.

To test whether the sodden soils could bear fruit, Hayne leased a demonstration plot in Little Woods to plant corn, beets, bell pepper, lettuce, snap beans, endive and escarole.

According to a 1910 report, the soils were found to be “wonderfully productive,” and the climate ideal. Buoyed by the findings, Hayne hired assistants, including R.H. Downman and M.L. Morrison, and bought up 7,500 acres along 7 miles of lakeshore.

In 1911, the company announced its plan to create 300 10-acre farms on what a New Orleans Item ad said to be “reclaimed prairie land which is admittedly the richest in the world, (for) the best class of industrious farmers,” all just “ten miles from business center of N.O.”

But first, the basin had to be drained of standing water.

For this, Hayne turned to Warren B. Reed, an esteemed engineer who had established the New Orleans Drainage Co.

To test his drainage plan, Reed set up an experimental polder (basin) in Little Woods, where he installed a pump and kept careful records of water budgets.

The results satisfied Reed, who then scaled up his calculations to drain the entire region.

The first step was to seal off the basin by building levees to the east and west, tying into the two levee-like track beds. Next, pumps would be installed along the lakefront, from which would be dug “drainage canals leading to pumping plants,” explained Reed, to “dispose of the rainfall.”

Draining the bowl

Workers proceeded to excavate a lattice of open drainage canals, each flowing into the Morrison Canal, which served as a storage

reservoir to redistribute the water to the outfall canals.

Runoff then flowed gravitationally to the pumps, which raised and ejected it into the lake.

“The spacing of the main channels is ½ mile,” reported the Journal of Agricultural Research in 1913, designed to create farms big enough for a tractor to ply and small enough for a family to work.

Look at a map of New Orleans East today, and you will see exactly that — most subdivisions laid out within a series of squares, each roughly a half-mile on the side, bounded by drainage canals, boulevards, or both.

For example, it’s a half-mile from Bullard Avenue to Lucerne Street to Reed Boulevard, just as it’s a half-mile from Interstate 10 to Morrison Road to the lakeshore.

Speaking of the lakeshore, that’s where Hayne and Reed added a novel element to their dual endeavor: “an excellent speedway,” along “reclaimed land [once] regarded as fit for only duck hunting,” reported the Item in 1911. “The new road is to be known as the ‘Hayne Boulevard.’”

By 1912, about 600 acres around Little Woods had been drained. By late 1913, that figure quadrupled to 2,400 acres, of which 300 acres were under cultivation.

By late 1914, over 5,400 acres were drained, and 1680 acres cultivated. By 1916, over 6,000 acres had been reclaimed, and nearly all planted.

“Usually the land ditched one year,” stated a federal report in 1918, “was cultivated the next.”

Laborers did the farmwork with the help of tractors with iron-rimmed wheels, or horses and mules fitted with special “bog shoes.” Typically, corn was planted first, followed by delicate produce such as lettuce and tomatoes.

More and more acreage went to citrus, including mature orange trees brought in from Florida.

By 1920, the Industrial Canal was under excavation, making eastern New Orleans into a more defined topographic bowl.

The dewatering deepened that bowl, as soils subsided and sunk below sea level. In just over a de-

cade, the wild swamps of eastern New Orleans became an agricultural region.

The farming era did not last long. In 1923, real estate developer Col. R.E.E. De Montluzin purchased thousands of acres in eastern New Orleans, including Reed and Hayne’s drained farmlands.

Billing himself as “an aristocrat of French ancestry,” he named the expanse Faubourg de Montluzin, said to be the largest metropolitan land parcel in the world under one owner.

Drainage had added value to this land, located so near the growing metropolis, and this French aristocrat had no intention of being a farmer.

As for the food production, frosts and soil salinity curtailed vegetable yields, while a blight killed off the orange groves.

In 1933, banana-industry tycoon Samuel Zemurray came into possession of much of the drained lands, and by the 1940s, only a few dozen small orchards and farms remained.

All the while, the private drainage apparatus installed by Reed on Hayne’s land had transferred to the control of the New Orleans Sewerage & Water Board.

‘Suburb within the city’

By the 1950s, with the new Chef Menteur Highway superseding the Old Gentilly Road, former swamp-land-turned-farmland increasingly became viable residential real estate.

In 1954, Zemurray sold his 5,200 acres to a team of real estate developers in what one newspaper described as “the largest sale of land in corporate New Orleans since the Louisiana Purchase.”

The pace of development quickened in the 1960s, with white flight, new jobs at NASA’s Michoud Assembly Facility, and the appeal of what developers billed as “the suburb within the city.”

After Hurricane Betsy in 1965, lateral levees were heightened around the region, which along with the subsequent completion of Interstate 10, unleashed a wave of residential development.

Whereas 23,562 New Orleanians

lived east of the Industrial Canal in 1960, fully 96,363 people lived there by 2000.

The catastrophic deluge of 2005 and disparate nature of the recovery have left New Orleans East with 20% fewer residents and a deficit of new investment.

But the one thing the region does have is land — plenty of green space, along with a well-designed open drainage system featuring scenic lagoons and below-grade canals.

They are enduring legacies of eastern New Orleans’ brief but influential era as reclaimed farmlands.

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