WHAT'S COOKING: An airborne oyster adventure offers a view on a changing obsession, **2D**

entertainment
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"The road (was) practically an impassable swamp and lay through a country of luxuriant southern foliage, where splendid live oak trees and hanging Spanish moss formed an archway overhead."

A MOTOR WORLD JOURNALIST IN 1910, about Chef Mentuer Highway

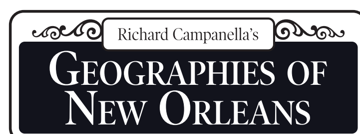
CENTURIES IN THE MAKING

PROVIDED PHOTO FROM THE COLLECTION OF RICHARD CAMPANELLA

Motor courts along Chef Menteur Highway, circa 1955

How Chef Menteur Highway began as a prehistoric path and became New Orleans' main eastern access

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer



Chef Menteur Highway stands apart from the thoroughfares of greater New Orleans.

It's the longest nonfederal artery in the city, extending more than 25 miles along a prehistoric pathway and reaching to St. Tammany Parish.

It crosses two shipping channels that played key roles in colonial history, each now flanked by the oldest surviving structures in the vicinity.

Chef Highway also transects two very different urban conditions — one ringed with levees, drained dry and blanketed with subdivisions; the other open to tidal waters and sprinkled with raised camps typical of coastal parishes.

The region now traversed by Chef originated some 4,500 years ago, when the Mississippi River lunged eastward and deposited sediment upon a sandy barrier island created by the Pearl River. Natives of the Tchefuncte culture built a series of middens (shell heaps) upon these alluvial soils, among them Big Oak and Little Oak Island, located two miles off Chef.

After the Mississippi established its current channel, an effluent (outflow) of the river continued to discharge eastward, shoring up a curving ridge that would become today's Metairie Road, City Park Avenue, Gentilly Boulevard and Old Gentilly Road. Natives used this ridge system to traverse the lands that would become greater New Orleans.

Around 1700, the effluent broke off from the Mississippi, leaving behind an abandoned distributary that endures today as Bayou Sauvage, so named by the French for its wild marshes.

French colonials also described the area's salinity-stunted scrub forests as petit bois (little woods, now a neighborhood name), and for reasons unknown, dubbed the entire eastern region chef menteur, meaning lying chief.

After the founding of New Or-

➤ See **CHEF MENTEUR,** page **3D**

PHOTO PROVIDED BY APPLE

'To me, it's not so much about an action movie or a rom-com or a kitchen sink drama,' New Orleans actress Hong Chau said about her approach to roles.

N.O.'s Hong Chau adds action to arsenal

BY MIKE SCOTT
Contributing writer

Hong Chau was wearing her junket smile, that polite expression assumed by Hollywood actors as they endure the same questions over and again from a string of eager if unimaginative entertainment journalists, in this case in support of her latest film, the Boston-set action-comedy "The Instigators."

Then she heard the magic words and, like any good New Orleanian, she lit up.

"The Times-Picayune! I feel so much more at ease now," she said, her smile broadening. "You're my people! I've been talking about Boston all day! Let's talk about New Orleans!"

Chau's desire to discuss her hometown is understandable. For starters, few topics of conversation flame the passions of New Orleanians as much as New Orleans does. But also, after growing up in the Crescent City (Eleanor McMain and Ben Franklin high schools) and getting her showbiz start in earnest on the locally set, locally shot HBO series "Tremé," things have been happening pretty darn quickly for her.

The only time she gets to visit home, in fact, is when work brings her back, most recently for this past summer's intriguingly absurdist dramatic triptych "Kinds of Kindness."

"I'm always asking people to please shoot a movie in New Orleans, because I would love to keep going back there and getting to eat and see my friends and listen to good music," she said.

As busy as she has been, she's not complaining. Since her first feature film role, a small but memorable turn in 2014's "Inherent Vice," she has appeared in 11 films — a tally most serious actors would trade their Ozempic for.

A 2023 Oscar nomination for her supporting performance in "The Whale" has been an undeniable high point of her past decade. But almost as impressive is the list of heavyweight directors with whom she has worked in that time: Paul Thomas Anderson, Alexander Payne, Kenneth Branagh, Darren Aronofsky,

➤ See **HONG CHAU,** page **8D**

Was the first working helicopter invented in Alexandria?

In 1922, Paul Leo Ortego created the first working helicopter in Alexandria and tested it on the corner of the city's Bolton and Rapides avenues.

PROVIDED PHOTO BY CAMMIE HENRY RESEARCH CENTER/NORTHWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY

BY ROBIN MILLER
Staff writer

Paul Leo Ortego never said his version of the helicopter was fancy.

It wasn't.

But that didn't prevent the Alexandria resident's machine from flying with a pilot onboard.

Which is something Igor Sikorsky couldn't claim when test flying his first helicopter in 1910. Sikorsky is credited with being one of the originators of the helicopter, but his first effort didn't support the weight of a pilot.

Ortego's 1924 machine could.

Which answers Andrew Miller's question about the Alexandria inventor. The 11-year-old Slaughter resident has an interest in cars and airplanes and has recently learned some of the history behind these inventions.

One of those histories is the story he was told about the possibility of a Louisianan who played a part in the helicopter's history.

"Was there a man from our state who invented the helicopter?" he asked.

Well, not exactly. The concept for a helicopter was on the drawing board long before Ortego's birth in 1895. When he wasn't painting the Sistine Chapel's ceiling or creating the mystery behind "The Mona Lisa,"

➤ See **CURIOUS,** page **8D**

An eagle reminds me that big problems can be solved

In 1987, I drove to Slidell to get a glimpse of a bald eagle that had nested near the highway. I arrived in early afternoon, which isn't the best time for birdwatching. I didn't see much — just a dark spot in the distance, like a fleck of ash in the wind. The fringed silhouette was unmistakably an eagle, but other details escaped me.

A long drive for not very much taught me my first real lesson about wild birds, which is that they can't often be seen by appointment. I'd made the trip as part of a story I was writing about eagle populations in Louisiana. After years of decline, eagle numbers across the country

were rebounding. Because DDT and similar pesticides often prevented eagle eggs from hatching, there were only a little more than 400 known nesting pairs of bald eagles in the country by 1963. The federal government banned DDT and related poisons in 1972, and slowly, eagles began recovering.

When I checked with Louisiana wildlife officials in 1987, they had recorded about 30 active eagle nests in the state. Today, there are more than 350.

All of this came to mind last month when the LSU School of Veterinary Medicine in Baton Rouge announced that it was releasing a bald eagle it had treated back to the wild. The female eagle had been brought to the vet school after someone found it sick and alone. "This was a juvenile eagle. She was found down. She was dehydrated and anemic," Dr. Mark Mitchell, a professor of zoological medicine, told me. "It took about 2½ months for her to rehabilitate." Young bald eagles lack the distinctive white cowl they display as they get older, but they're still impressive birds.

When the vet school scheduled a small release ceremony for the eagle on Aug. 9, I knew I had to go. On that bright day, a handful of journalists joined vet school faculty and students to release the eagle in a quiet spot near the Mississippi River levee.

"This is the seventh eagle we've released this year, which is a record number," Mitchell told me. "This means people are encountering them more. There's an increase in the population. We find them all throughout southeast Louisiana."

While waiting in the press gaggle near the release cage, I got another reminder that birds have a mind of their own. After the cage was opened, the eagle refused to come out. Eventually, a student with heavy gloves coaxed her into the open. The eagle landed on the ground in a bouncing blur, then quickly flew away. Within seconds, she was little more than a bit of fine print on the blank page of the morning sky.

Eagles have other challenges these days from habitat loss and avian flu. Even so, it was nice to see an eagle soar and be reminded that decline doesn't have to be inevitable.

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CHEF MENTEUR

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leans in 1718, the eastern ridge gained the name Gentilly, probably for the estate named Chantilly outside of Paris. In time, Gentilly gained the sort of farmsteads and small plantations known as metairie, for which the same ridge out to the west would be known — today's Old Metairie.

Settling along bayou

Farther out along Bayou Sauvage, hunters and fishermen built camps up on stilts, and bands of displaced Natives interacted with maroons, the term used for escaped slaves who sought refuge in swamps and marshes.

In 1763, French royals granted the Chef region to Gilbert Antoine St. Maxent; in 1796, under the Spanish regime, it became the property of Borgnier DeClouet; and in the early American era, it came into the possession of Barthélemy Lafon, followed by Antoine Michoud in 1827.

It was in this era that American officials fortified the two eastern passes with the masonry bastions now known as Fort Macomb and Fort Pike.

The only terrestrial feature linking all of the above was that chemin (road) known interchangeably Chantilly, Gentilly or Chef Menteur.

That started to change in 1831, when the Pontchartrain Railroad provided mechanized access to Gentilly. Eastern access expanded dramatically in 1870, when the New Orleans, Mobile & Texas Railroad began service along the Gentilly Road, and in the 1880s, when the New Orleans & North Eastern opened along the Lake Pontchartrain shore. Stations opened along the tracks, and hamlets formed around the stations.

By the early 1900s, the two railroads carried more than 1.5 million people annually to or through Chef. Their raised track beds, meanwhile, acted as levees, making the eastern marshes ripe for reclamation and drainage.

The pleasant days of the petit bois were coming to an end.

Cars roll in

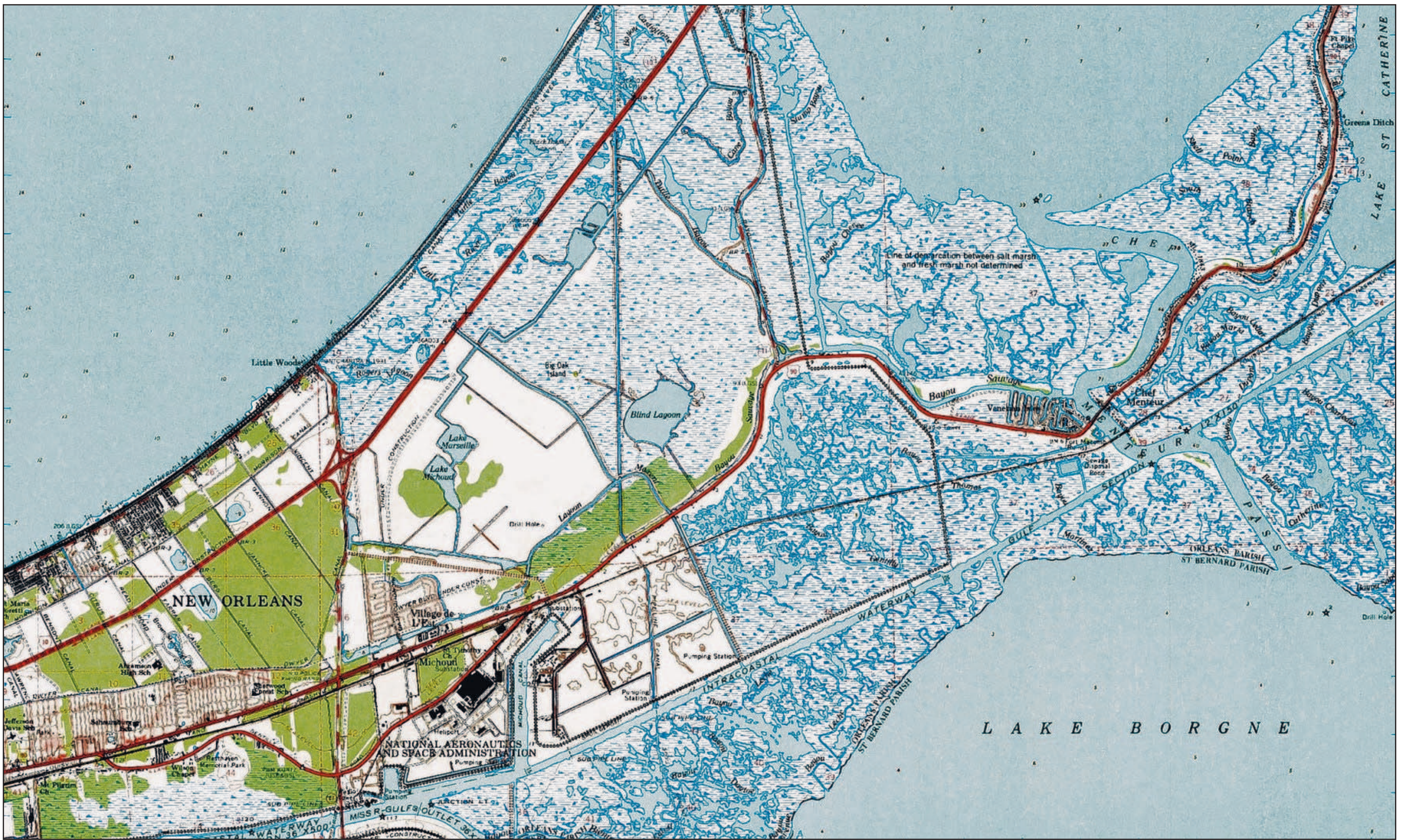
And then came the automobile.

"Horseless carriages" first hit American streets in the late 1880s. Within a decade they were a common sight in New Orleans, and by the 1900s, auto owners formed the Motor League of Louisiana to lobby for improved roads.

Because early motorists tended to be affluent, and because wealthy New Orleanians had a penchant for the eastern hunting and fishing clubs, upgrading Gentilly Road into "Chef Menteur Highway" became the League's flagship project.

It wasn't just about recreation. Many members were big landholders in the Chef, among them Col. R.E.E. De Montluzin, who served as League secretary.

A developer who had launched the Gentilly Terrace subdivision in 1909, De Montluzin would later purchase 35,000 acres farther east, with the aim of creating "Faubourg de Montluzin." Such



PROVIDED IMAGE FROM THE USGS

A map of the Chef Menteur region in 1969 shows Interstate 10 under construction.

visions rested entirely on what one excited Picayune writer called the "Chef Menteur Speedway."

The Motor League won the support of state authorities for the highway, but not for the funding needed for the difficult and costly undertaking.

"The road," explained a Motor World journalist in 1910, was "practically an impassable swamp and lay through a country of luxuriant southern foliage, where splendid live oak trees and hanging Spanish moss formed an archway overhead."

In testimony to the wherewithal of the Motor League, members raised the funds themselves, mostly from their own pockets, and secured technical support from the city. As for labor, the League arranged for a low-cost solution.

Convict leasing had been banned in Louisiana, but so long as prisoners were not actually leased out to a contractor, the governor had the power to put state convicts to work on external projects — selected convicts, that is.

"In conjunction with the automobilists," wrote the Motor World journalist, "it was arranged by the state authorities late last fall (1909) to organize camps of twenty-four negroes each for work" on Chef Menteur Highway.

The Motor League operated as a sort of project liaison, overseeing operations and paying for convicts' board and meals, along with the salaries of armed guards, a physician and a project engineer. "The white prisoners," added the journalist nonchalantly, "are used in the commissary."

A difficult, swampy project

Work began on Feb. 21, 1910, and proved as difficult as expected. Soils became saturated with water and organic matter, including buried stumps and trunks. As elevations diminished, embankments had to be built using muck dredged from lateral sources, accounting for some of the roadside ditches and lagoons still visible today.

As work progressed in 1917, Motor World journalist William K. Gibbs called the effort "a monument to modern road engineering," linking "the Carnival City of New Orleans (with) the American Riviera," the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

There were other challenges. Priorities changed when war broke out in Europe in 1914, all the more so when the U.S. joined the conflict in 1917. The next year, excavation began on the Industrial Canal, which forced workers to ferry materials across where Danziger Bridge now stands. Ferries also had to be emplaced at Chef Menteur and Rigolets passes.

If anything could be learned from the building of Chef Menteur Highway—"a bugbear on the city for more than 15 years," according to an Item reporter in 1921 — it was that modern highway construction could not be outsourced to gentlemen amateurs and untrained workers. The city eventually took over the project and completed it in the early 1920s, after which the artery became a state highway.

Later in the 1920s, steel bridges were installed over the two passes, and by the 1930s, Chef Highway got officially designated as Highway 90 to Mississippi and Highway 11 to Slidell. It also gained the honorific "Old Spanish Trail," part of a nationwide autotourism effort paying homage to the Camino Real (Royal Road) of the 1700s.

The road to Biloxi

Chef Highway became New Orleans' sole terrestrial ingress and egress for all points east. It made Biloxi into a popular weekend getaway, and put Slidell, Waveland and even Bay St. Louis within commuting distance. As those communities grew, so did traffic on Chef. Soon, motorists outgrew the 1910s improvements. Newspaper articles from the 1930s reported a litany of wrecks and casualties, thanks to blind curves, grade-level rail crossings and a paucity of lights.

In 1935, federal funding became available for the construction of railroad overpasses, and in 1937, for a five-mile shortcut to be built parallel to the 1870 track bed. Completed around 1940, the new Chef shortcut, which today extends from Knight Drive to just past the Folger's plant, clipped off the old curving route, which got dubbed Old Gentilly Road.

Its roadside economy suffered as a result, but partly recovered when the Higgins Plant opened further east in 1940. It later became NASA Michoud, still a vital source of employment in eastern New Orleans.

For the next three decades, Chef enjoyed a monopoly on eastern access, and its flanks bustled with new subdivisions, auto dealers and "motor courts" — that is, lodges catering to motorists, featuring cottages, diners, lounges and swimming pools. Most served Whites; only two catered to African Americans, according to the 1946 Negro Motorists Green-Book. Fourth of July beachgoers made Chef into one long line of cars, leading Mayor Chep Morrison in 1956 to describe the highway as "New Orleans' gateway to the Gulf Coast."

But all the while, transportation planners contemplated major modernizations to the city's arterial system. With passage of the Interstate Highway Act in 1956, federal funding became available for what would become history's largest highway-building program.

New cultural features?

The plans did not bode well for older highways such as Chef or Airline. Instead, Interstate 10 blazed a path of its own, one designed for regional economic development and high-speed expediency. It opened piecemeal through the metropolis from the late 1950s through the early 1970s.

Just as the Chef shortcut of 1940 killed much of Old Gentilly Road, I-10 steered motorists, cash flow and investment dollars in new directions. Older highways became secondary routes, as did their roadside economies. Chef in particular became rough around the edges: motor lodges became seedy motels; car lots became junk yards; and dumping became an unsightly problem.

But the century-old highway also offered affordable living with convenient city access and managed to attract new cultural features, such as the Sisters of the Holy Family complex, the Vietnamese community and the marina-like Venetian Isles neighborhood.

Farther east, Chef Highway remains a portal to the only part of the City of New Orleans that, with a little imagination, still embodies the delta landscape of centuries ago — the wild marshes, the brackish tides, the aging forts, and the Bayou Sauvage distributary that started it all.

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