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PROVIDED PHOTO FROM MARY ANN JACOBS

The Jacobs' handmade king-sized quilt was stitched together from T-shirts commemorating special concerts and favorite musical artists.

Volunteers plead for help finding memento

BY ANNETTE SISCO
Staff writer

Mary Ann and John Jacobs were the best kind of visitors to New Orleans. Beginning in the 1980s, the Tucson residents made the Crescent City a regular getaway, the city they "loved to visit and hated to leave," as Mary Ann says. They got to know the neighborhoods, the restaurants, the music clubs. In 2014, they bought a shotgun double in the Lower 9th Ward and leaned into doing volunteer work with lowernine.org, a nonprofit that has rebuilt scores of flood-wrecked homes since Hurricane Katrina.

Every time they went back to Arizona, they felt like they'd left a little piece of themselves behind. That became true in a literal sense when Mary Ann, now 90 years old, and John, 78, encountered health issues and had to sell their New Orleans home after the COVID pandemic.

For the long-distance move, friends packed the home and sent the couple's belongings out West. Many items were donated to Goodwill. And in all the sorting and sifting, a precious memento of the Jacobs' life in New Orleans was accidentally donated to the thrift store.

It was a simple T-shirt quilt, stitched together from shirts collected at New Orleans concerts and clubs. Each square was a treasured memory, gathered over the years. And it was gone.

"We only discovered it recently," said Mary Ann, speaking by phone from her home in Tucson. "It will be two years ago in August that we discovered that we lost it. … We specified (the destination of) most things but not all things, but realized we didn't specify that the quilt was to be sent back to us."

Looking to get involved

Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing flood discouraged many visitors. Not Mary Ann and John Jacobs.

In 2011, looking for ways to get involved in the rebuilding, the pair attended a meet and greet at Morton's Steakhouse. There, they met Laura Paul, executive

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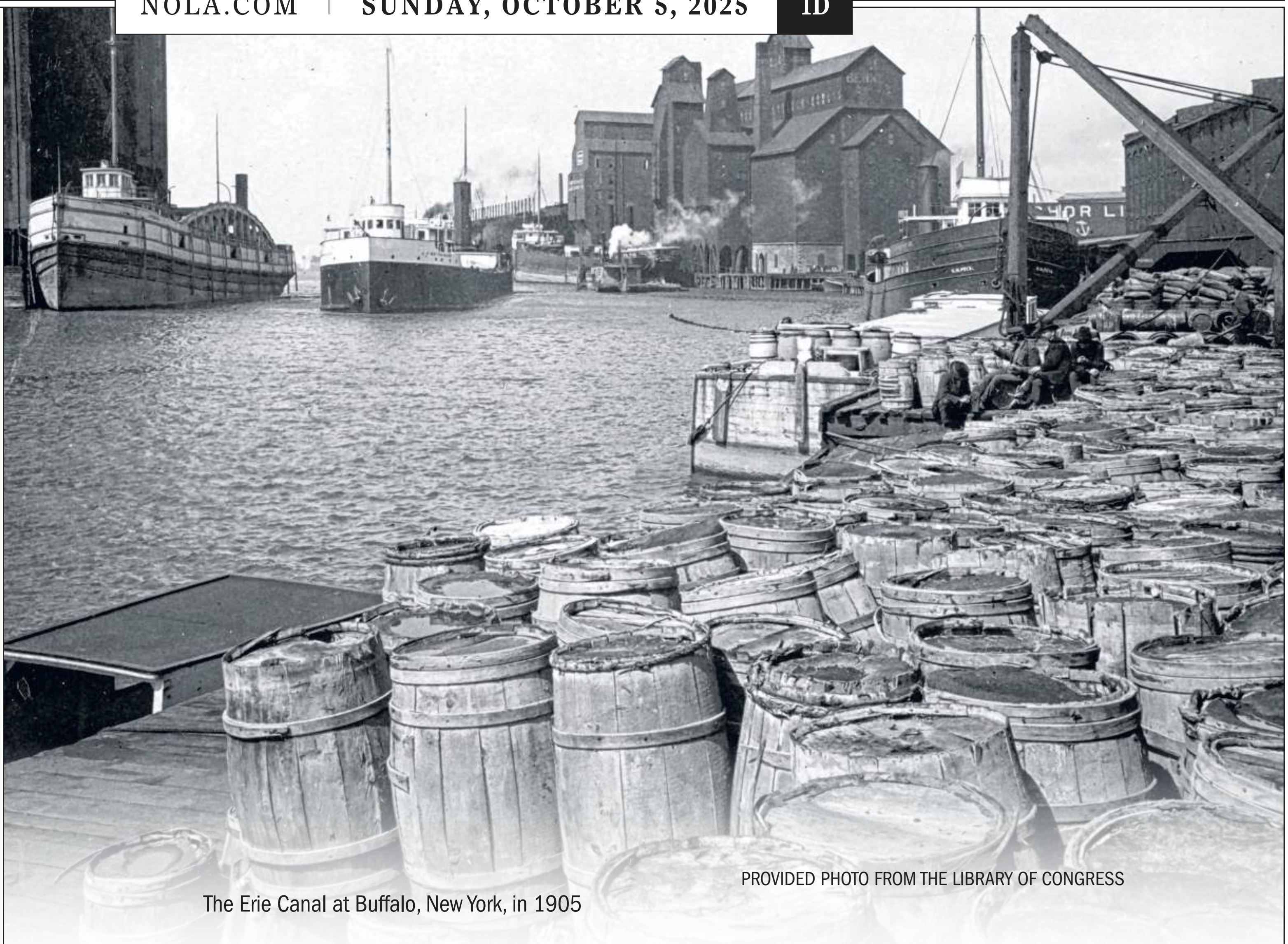

The Erie Canal at Buffalo, New York, in 1905

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A MISSED OPPORTUNITY OF EPIC PROPORTIONS

Richard Campanella's GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW ORLEANS

200 years ago, the Erie Canal reshaped New Orleans' economy. WE STILL FEEL IT TODAY

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA | Contributing writer

"One of the greatest of its kind in the world," declared an orator at the project's inauguration, "celebrating one of the greatest eras in the history of the State."

"Bold in conception," exhorted the Niles' Register of the project — "the wonder of the world," and the visionary behind it "first among the foremost" of the nation's leaders.

"The greatest work of its age," the Evening Post called it.

The state was New York; the visionary was Gov. De Witt Clinton; the date was October 1825; and the project was the Erie Canal, that $7 million, 365-mile-long navigation channel that took thousands of workers seven years to dig, linking Lake Erie with the Hudson River.

Why does the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Erie Canal warrant coverage in a feature titled "Geographies of New Orleans"? Because the waterway reconfigured our economic geography, and we're still feeling the effects today.

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Did the 1920s' most popular daredevil bring feats to La.?

Alvin 'Shipwreck' Kelly was one of the country's most popular daredevils in the 1920s and '30s. He was known for climbing tall buildings and sitting atop rooftop flagpoles. In 1928, he brought his daredevil show to New Orleans' Jung Hotel.

FILE PHOTO FROM THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION

BY ROBIN MILLER
Staff writer

curious LOUISIANA

Sharon Coldiron is the kind of reader who is interested in a variety of subjects, so when she came across the name of 1920s entertainer Alvin "Shipwreck" Kelly in an old newspaper article, her curiosity got the best of her.

"I know the 1920s are known for early jazz and Vaudeville, but people were really into daredevil stunts at that time, too," Coldiron said. "From what I've read, Shipwreck Kelly was probably the most famous daredevil, and he climbed skyscrapers around the country. Did he ever bring his show to any Louisiana cities?"

Louisiana definitely had its share of tall buildings, and though they may not always be as tall as some in New York or Chicago, they still met Kelly's criteria.

He brought his antics to the Bayou State, specifically to New Orleans, Opelousas and Alexandria, which should pique Coldiron's interest even more. She lives in the central Louisiana community of Deville, meaning Kelly's Alexandria show took place only a few miles from her home.

So, what, exactly, was Kelly's schtick?

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QUILT

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director of lowernine.org, and learned of the recovery work her organization was doing.

"Laura offered to give us a personal tour of the area the next morning," Mary Ann recalled. "She drove us through the streets of the Lower 9th Ward, and what I saw was heartbreaking."

Involvement came quickly. Mary Ann's skills as a QuickBooks consultant were put to use doing lowernine.org's bookkeeping from her home in Tucson. John, a programmer for hospital software companies, contributed technical support and helped with fundraising.

PROVIDED PHOTO FROM MARY ANN JACOBS

Mary Ann and John Jacobs volunteered in New Orleans and owned a home here for a time.

"They are some of the most dedicated supporters we have ever had, and I count them as dear personal friends," Laura Paul said on Thursday.

They found a Dauphine Street double where they could live when they visited, renting out one side and part of their side as well.

They threw themselves into work for lowernine.org, while enjoying second-lines and potlucks with fellow volunteers. They sponsored stages at the French Quarter Festival and Satchmo SummerFest. All in all, it was a thoroughly New Orleans life.

But in January 2020, a routine visit to New Orleans turned disastrous. Both Mary Ann and John became extremely sick, after what they now believe was exposure to COVID-19 during the flight. The illness landed Mary Ann, then 85, in the ICU.

Two years later, they made their last visit to New Orleans. Due to their age and declining health, they realized they could no longer maintain their beloved New Orleans double and put it up for sale.

"We have a real ... it's more than a soft spot in our hearts for New Orleans. It kind of broke our hearts to let the house go. It was tough," John said.

Memories of good times

There were two lowernine.org T-shirts sewn into the quilt, John said. Other shirts recalled Cab Calloway at the 1992 Jazz Fest, Allen Toussaint, WWOZ Piano Night and Ladysmith Black Mambazo. The colors are striking: mostly red, white and black.

The couple called friends back in New Orleans, even called Goodwill, looking for the cozy king-sized quilt that would remind them of good times and good friends. It had seemingly vanished.

"We're thinking there might be somebody in New Orleans that bought it, and recognized that this was somebody else's collection," Mary Ann said.

"It really hurts. It was sent to Goodwill by mistake, along with stuff we did donate from our home in the Lower 9. Perhaps some good soul has it now, and it could be they are wondering how to find me," she said.

"It is a long shot, absolutely," she said. "But who knows?"

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CANAL

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Previously, physical geography had imparted a key advantage to New Orleans in attracting Western produce — that it, all those agricultural surpluses raised west of the Appalachian Mountains that needed to get to market.

Going up the Ohio River was slow and difficult prior to the age of steamboats, and even if you made it to Pittsburgh, you'd still have to haul your bulky cargo over the mountains to reach the big cities of the Eastern Seaboard. Paddling through the Great Lakes to reach the St. Lawrence River was even harder, being extremely circuitous and nearly impossible in winter.

By far the cheapest and easiest route to market was to float with the current of the Mississippi down to New Orleans, a trip into balmy climates that required only a simple raft or flatboat. Upon arriving at the South's largest city, farmers could broker a deal with merchants and return home on a keelboat or later a steamboat.

So cost-effective was the trip down the Mississippi that New Orleans commanded 99% of trans-Appalachian exports from 1810 to 1821, and fully 100% from 1822-1825, according to data compiled by historian Erik Fiso Haites.

Commercial leaders in New Orleans basked in their geographical destiny, as did national leaders once the city became American. Shortly after the Louisiana Purchase, President Thomas Jefferson declared that "New Orleans will be forever, as it is now, the mighty mart of the merchandise brought from more than a thousand rivers(;) no such position for the accumulation and perpetuity of wealth and power (has) ever existed."

Profits flow to new canal

As early as 1826, however, the newly opened Erie Canal began eating New Orleans' lunch — 9.4% of it, to be exact, equating to 20,000 tons of cargo such as corn, beans, wheat and smoked pork. By 1830, it had taken 11.5%, and two years later, 14.3%.

Western farmers and Manhattan brokers now understood it was far faster and cheaper to ship cargo straight east to the Hudson River and New York City, than to go all the way down the Mississippi to New Orleans and back up around the East Coast. Human ingenuity had tricked out the natural advantages on which New Orleans had been founded.

Soon, workers cut another canal to connect the Ohio River with Lake Erie, and a third to link a tributary of the Mississippi to Lake Michigan at Chicago. More canals followed in Pennsylvania, dug faster and cheaper by steam shovels.

Just during 1835, farmers in Ohio sent nearly 100,000 bushels of wheat, 86,000 barrels of flour, and 2.5 million staves through Buffalo instead of New Orleans to reach eastern markets. Shipping costs dropped nearly tenfold, while shipping time was halved.

Then came the railroads: the New York & Erie, the Baltimore & Ohio, the New York Central, the Pennsylvania. Each line connected Western farms to Eastern cities with ever-increasing speed, capacity, reliability and catchment areas.

Whereas Western commodities had previously moved on a north-to-south axis with a vertex at New Orleans, now they increasingly flowed west-to-east with a vertex at Chicago and a terminus at New York — where they became value exports to foreign markets.

The price of staples drops

In 1840, exports at New York caught up with those of New Orleans, as each port handled $34 million. By 1855, railroads had raised New York's exports to $114 million, whereas New Orleans' had risen to only $55 million.

Meanwhile the price of staples dropped in Northeastern cities, increasing households' disposable income and enabling them to purchase manufactured goods, thus furthering Northern industrialization.

Commercial interests in New Orleans began to grow apprehensive. "We have been accustomed to look to the Mississippi as the protector of our greatness," wrote a Picayune editorialist in 1850. "We have thought that as long as the mighty … Father of Waters continues to roll past our city, our superiority in a commercial point of view, never can be successfully attacked."

But now, "New York has her great Erie Canal, Boston her Western Railroad, Philadelphia her canals and railroads, Baltimore her communications with the Ohio Valley — by all of which a large portion of our legitimate trade is diverted from us. Charleston, Savannah, and even Mobile are now preparing to grasp at a share of the spoil."

By 1855, New Orleans's share of trans-Appalachian produce had dropped to 44% of tonnage, down from 100%, while the Erie Canal handled 39% and railroads another 16%.

The flow of trade reversed

Effectively, "the flow of western trade reversed itself," wrote historians Ronald M. Labbé and Jonathan Lurie of the reversal of fortune; "the economic unit known as the Mississippi Valley had been turned on its head, so that the Mississippi River was flowing north," commercially speaking.

Why didn't New Orleans respond in kind, by reducing its reliance on the river and diversifying in manufacturing or building its own railroads?

Because, as historian Merl E. Reed put it, "the tremendously rapid rate of growth taking place in the agricultural West concealed New Orleans' declining position." In other words, because the size of the pie had grown so dramatically — a 36-fold increase in Mississippi Valley shipments to New Orleans between 1810 and 1860, when over 2,187,000 tons landed — local merchants failed to act on the fact that their slice of the pie had diminishing, from 100% to 44%.

It was a missed opportunity of epic proportions, in that it allowed the cities of today's Midwest, such as Cincinnati, Chicago and St. Louis, to sprint ahead in industry, while the Crescent City remained largely a mercantilist *entrepôt* (transshipment port) dependent on plantation agriculture and its legions of enslaved workers.

Some might describe the failure as the result of myopia, inertia, folly or greed. Writing in 1884, George Washington Cable described it as "intellectual indolence" fostered by "slave-holding and the easy fortunate-getting it afforded," as New Orleanians, both French-speaking and English-speaking, "rejoiced in a blaze of prosperity that blinded both."

Ship builders, factories open

To be fair, some local interests did take action. Investors particularly on the West Bank brought iron-working, ship-building and other industries to the area, while railroad companies in the mid-1850s linked both banks with regional markets otherwise inaccessible to the port. Still others opened factories that added value to cotton lint, sugar products, timber, and other commodities passing through the port.

But it proved too little, too late compared to Midwestern and Northern cities. Having ranked as the third largest city in the nation in 1840, New Orleans dropped to fifth-largest in 1850 and sixth in 1860. Today, New Orleans is around the 60th largest.

Northern advantages proved insurmountable. They included freedom, an abundance of aspirational towns and villages, more capital, more coal, more hydropower, much larger cities, and a growing network of efficient transportation arteries.

In the face of fierce debates over the westward expansion of slavery, South and North grew further apart, and soon the enmity would explode in sectional violence.

Two hundred years later, the story of the Erie Canal teaches three stinging lessons.

Prepare for a rainy day while the sun is still out.

Diversify to guard against overreliance.

And don't assume any fixed destinies, including geography — or else rivals will eat your lunch.

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