Algiers Development Cited

Growth Linked to War, Miss. River Bridge

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In 1941, an institutional investor paid $200 an acre for a 40-acre tract of land in Algiers between Gen. Meyer Ave. and MacArthur Blvd. In the 1950s, the investor sold the property, located in the vicinity of what is now Hyman Place, for $5,000 an acre.

How do you account for the appreciation of the land value during that period? During that period two major events had taken place which had a stimulating effect on the economy of Algiers — World War II and the completion of the Greater New Orleans Mississippi River Bridge.

Prior to the opening of the bridge, the growth of New Orleans' west bank was stymied. Although for more than 100 years the river contributed much to the section's economy, the dry dock and shipbuilding industry dates back to 1819. The Mississippi also was a great natural barrier. It effectively cut off Algiers from the rest of New Orleans.

As a result, population growth was slow, real estate developments were few. Most of the land, particularly in the lower coast, was devoted to truck and dairy farming. As recently as 1946 Algiers ended at Odan St. and Gen. Meyer Ave., a few hundred yards east of the U.S. Naval Station. Further down Gen. Meyer Ave. at the Normant Plantation sugarcane was the major crop.

My father, who founded Algiers Homestead Association in 1936 and who still serves as its secretary and treasurer, recalls that Algiers' first subdivision, in fact the first subdivision in the city of New Orleans, was Park Boulevard, developed in the early 1920s by Julius Bodenger. Bodenger, a genius of his times, subdivided Bodenger Boulevard around 1926-27 and formed the Elmwood Land Co., which was primarily responsible for the development of the Behrman Highway as a shortcut from Belle Chasse to the Algiers Ferry. When Bodenger came into possession of a strip of land adjacent to the Touro Shakespeare Home on Gen. Meyer Ave., he donated the property for use as the Behrman Memorial Center and was instrumental in getting Behrman Stadium included as part of the memorial.

Also in the early 20s, Judge Nat Bond and his associates developed St. Claire Gardens subdivision near the U.S. Quarantine Station. Other interests developed Behrman Heights, and Dr. C. V. Kraft of the Algiers Land Development Co. developed Nunna, Casa Calvo and Paragon etc.

The Great Depression of the 30s brought virtually all land development to a screeching halt. For almost 10 years there was little activity.

But with the beginning of World War II, Algiers started to emerge from the doldrums. The reactivation of the Naval Station poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the economy. The West Bank's shipbuilding industry mushroomed. Thousands of people moved into the area to take jobs related to the war effort and homes had to be built.

The first wartime real estate development of consequence was Huntley Village where developer Jim Harsh, using what was then a new, revolutionary method of construction, built 200 to 300 homes. Each house was prefabricated in a sheltered construction area then trucked to the home site.

About this same time Victory Village or Victory Park subdivision, sprawled out on Murl and Tita Sts. near the Naval Station. Morris Hyman developed River Park; Shirley Drive, Southlawn and Kabel subdivisions came into existence.

But this activity barely scratched the surface. Algiers' biggest period of growth lay ahead.

For years there had been talk of spanning the Mississippi River with a bridge linking New Orleans' east and west banks. Finally, in the early 1960s the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a permit for the project. On Jan. 25, 1965, the contract was awarded for the four main piers and construction started March 15.

On April 15, 1968, the bridge was opened to traffic and land values spiraled upward. Land that could have been bought for $200 an acre in 1941 skyrocketed to $5,000.

Some years earlier, anticipating the great strides the bridge would make possible, Ernest B. and Robert Norman, Algiers' largest landowners, had started subdividing the Norman Plantation. In the 1940s they developed Aurora Gardens, a 300-home subdivision in the vicinity of Woodland Dr., Gen. Meyer Ave., Carell Rd. and Berkley Dr. Later, on Somerset Dr. and Bristol Pk., they developed New Aurora which won national acclaim for its planning and design.

In the 1950s the Normans sold their remaining land to Aurora Properties, which subsequently developed Walnut Bend and Aurora Extended West.

Tom Lattie continued the development of New Aurora and Dr. Henry LeBoeuf developed Roslyn Park. In this same decade Lakewood Country Club, now part of the $125,000 Greater New Orleans Open Golf Tournament, moved from the East Bank to Aurora Gardens. The most recent subdivisions carved from the original Norman land are Bermuda and Tall Timbers, both on Gen. DeGaulle Dr. east of Lakewood.

Today, less than 12 years after the completion of the Mississippi River bridge, most of the portion southeast of the Intra-County Waterway, has been developed except for the most northerly land.