Carrollton annexed: ‘Wonders’ begin

By MARJORIE ROEHL

The New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad, connecting the metropolises, now run by steam, giving a well-earned rest to the tired mule. It was pointed out with astonishment that “one man could act as driver and conductor, stopping the car by a brake and starting without any difficulty whatever; as quickly as one could drive a horse.”

But wonders had only began. In February, 1874, the New Orleans and Carrollton became the first railroad in the area to turn to electric power, with its overhead wires. As a newspaper of the day chronicled the event, “At 10 a.m. on Feb. 2, the gay, epic and spwn green cars were drawn up for the trip to the foot of Baronne Street.”

Spectators thronged the streets, ladies came in their carriages, and teachers and students from McDonogh No. 23 School (once the Carrollton courthouse, now Benjamin Franklin High School) on holiday for the great event, cheered happily. The Carrollton paper said with lyric pride that the car began its maiden voyage “as gently as a leaf drifting on a summer river.”

In some quarters, however, there was unease about this newfangled electric device. Less literate citizens referred to elections cars, and regarded them with appropriate suspicion. One agitated lady who had agreed to take the first trip demanded after six blocks that the be removed from this engine of destruction.

At least one international figure later remembered the street railway with special fondness. Sir Thomas Lipton, known as much for his yachting prowess as for his tea, recalled in later years having worked with the “tram car company” while earning his way around the large and wide world—before his English groceries became a load of fortune.

He recalled the lodgings with the wife of the car yard foreman: “I paid $5 a week and her pancakes were just like my mother’s.”

In the late 1800s, the home and barn of dairyman Louis Bordes stood at the corner of Carrollton and Nelson streets. The pecan tree, planted at the corner of the lot by the family, stands today.

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FOLK OF VARYING degrees of affluence now built homes in Carrollton—here and there a plantation-type structure standing with dignity; small row houses, often with some striking architectural plan, the wide white house on Maple Street of Judge Albert Brice, Carrollton’s last mayor, who joined the judiciary when Carrollton joined New Orleans. It was rumored that the judge’s handsome library had been built by a grateful dignitary after a divorce decree.

Citizens remember major amusements at the turn of the century—the striped, come-hither call of the calliope, summoning the theater-minded to showboats at the levee, such as Robinson’s Floating Palace, with its group acts and its marquees; the glowing amusement park, White City, with its giant shoot-the-chutes and ferris wheel, among other attractions, located where the Fontainebleau Motel is today.

But away from the bright lights, citizens carried on with the customary round of life. At the turn of the century—the strident, come-hither call of the calliope, summoning the theater-minded to showboats at the levee, such as Robinson’s Floating Palace, with its group acts and its marquees; the glowing amusement park, White City, with its giant shoot-the-chutes and ferris wheel, among other attractions, located where the Fontainebleau Motel is today.

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John Paul Bordes, born and brought up in the area, remembers it well. His father and his grandfather were long-time dairymen in the area, and in 1900 his father sold part of the family land for $3,000. It was the lot on the corner of Carrollton and Claiborne. At Fontainebleau and Carrollton was the Hucquert dairy, stretching acre on acre. Another enterprising dairy businessman built a Cypress picket fence across Nelson Street so no intruder could disturb his cattle.

“MOST OF THE dairy-keepers were French,” says Bordes, who writes a nostalgia column for the Town of Carrollton News, “and many sold their milk to bar-rooms for use in milk toddies. It went for 25 cents a gallon, but on delivery they often bought a glass of wine for a nickel, so they only realized 20 cents. When sanitary regulations became more stringent, dairymen were forced out of business.”

But in the meantime, the dairies had other uses bussi-ness. Wedding receptions were one. “In our areas usually married on Wednesday and had the cake-cutting party the next Wednesday,” says Bordes. “For the receptions, barns were used until they were torn down and converted into barn-rooms, or long, wide halls with benches. Refreshments were apt to be fried spring chicken with French fries, and along the tables at intervals were ‘Jimmy Johns,’ or gallon jugs of claret, with barrels of beer on the side.”

Sometimes there were dairy dances. “The cows would be put out to pasture. The floor was scrubbed clean and pieces of large candle—milking was still done by candlelight—were scattered all over the floor, which became very slick when danced on. Decorations—red, white, and blue paper chains, and palmetto branches—were nailed over the stalls,” recalls Bordes.

“Ob, yes, we had a square band—a comb played through silk paper, a slide trombone, a guitar, a violin and a bass fiddle. We danced literally till the cows came home, and then had to do the milking before we went to bed.”

(Tomorrow: Growth)