

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Railroad Baron Who Actually Was One

The name *Lorelei* turns up time and again in poetry and popular songs (including those of Stephen Foster, Johnny Mercer and Harry Connick, Jr.). The lyrical name is that of one of the enticing maidens who lured Rhine River boatmen to their dooms with their hypnotizing songs, much as the Sirens of ancient Greece. But there were others that also made travel on the Rhine difficult.

The term "robber baron" (*raubritter* in German) originated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to describe one of a number of feudal lords who controlled the lands through which the Rhine flowed. Among them were archbishops who held fiefs from the Holy Roman Emperor, and they collected abusive tolls from passing cargo vessels to improve their finances. The reader may recall in Longfellow's "The Children's Hour" his reference to "the Bishop of Bingen in his Mouse-Tower on the Rhine". The Mouse-Tower nomenclature has nothing to do with the amusing legend of mice devouring alive the greedy Bishop Hatto for starving his people. The *Maüseturm* was actually built two centuries later by Bishop Siegfried as a tollhouse, for *maus* (or *mauth*) means toll in German.

Years of legends and abusive tolls provided just the right pejorative term for nineteenth century businessmen and bankers in the United States. These capitalists were captains of industry who had amassed huge personal fortunes in railroads, steel and other fields. Many historians believe the gains of these "robber barons" were due to gross political manipulation and unfair business practices. Others argue that these men of vision transformed the United States into a global power by their investments in industrial plants, transportation infrastructure and education. Many were great philanthropists and gained their wealth through free market competition and legitimate economic means.

This elite class of barons included a commodore (Vanderbilt, shipping and railroads) and a colonel (Cyrus K. Holliday, railroads), but one railroad tycoon was an authentic European baron. Baron Frédéric Émile d'Erlanger holds the honor of having named New Orleans' neighboring city, Slidell.

The connection begins with Caroline and Mathilde Deslonde, daughters of sugar planter André Deslonde from St. James Parish. Caroline married Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard and Mathilde married John Slidell, a U.S. Senator from Louisiana. Both men served important roles in the Confederacy, Beauregard the famous general and Slidell the important diplomat.

Slidell was a New York businessman who relocated to New Orleans to practice law. President Polk sent him on a diplomatic mission to Mexico just prior to the Mexican-American War. Commodore Matthew C. Perry (who opened U.S. trade to Japan in 1853) was married to Slidell's sister, Jane. Slidell is mostly remembered as one of the two Confederate diplomats involved in the 1861 *Trent Affair*. They ran the Union blockade and were headed for England and France until their removal by force from the British ship *Trent* by U.S. naval forces. This caused an international incident that almost affected Britain's neutrality.

After resolution of the *Trent Affair*, Slidell made it to Paris where he met and won over Émile Erlanger of the successful German banking family. Émile had set out to establish a Parisian branch of the family business, issuing bonds supporting railroad and government projects and becoming chummy with Emperor Louis Napoléon. Émile Erlanger and Company of Paris is

best known for floating the Erlanger Cotton Loan to the Confederacy and underwriting bonds secured by future cotton. This generated millions of dollars for the CSA toward the war effort. So cordial was this arrangement between Erlanger and Slidell that a marriage took place between Erlanger's son, Frédéric Émile, and Slidell's daughter, Mathilde.

Slidell's son-in-law, Baron Frédéric Émile d'Erlanger, later financed a major new railroad from New Orleans to Meridian, Mississippi, which would continue on to Cincinnati and New York. The Northern and Northeastern Railroad established a building camp on the higher land across Lake Pontchartrain around 1882, and this settlement was chartered as the town of Slidell in 1888. The baron, whose banking syndicate financed the railroad, named the town for his deceased father-in-law. One of Slidell's first streets was an Erlanger Avenue.

Baron Frédéric Émile d'Erlanger died May 22, 1911, at Versailles, France, at 79 years of age. He and his wife, the Baroness Slidell d'Erlanger, were the great grandparents of Mary Caroline d'Erlanger (known as Minnie). Minnie was married to Winston Spencer Churchill, grandson of Britain's wartime prime minister. Grandson Winston's mother was the famous Pamela Beryl Digby, U. S. Ambassador to France. Besides having married Winston's son, Randolph, Pamela was later married to U.S. Ambassador W. Averell Harriman. Among Ambassador Harriman's wives was Marie Norton Whitney, who left her husband (Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney) to marry him.

Harriman, too, was the son of a famous railroad tycoon, Edward Henry Harriman. At the time of his death, he controlled the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific Railroads, the Illinois Central (with its *City of New Orleans* passenger train), the Saint Joseph and Grand Island, the Central of Georgia, the Wells Fargo Express Company and the Pacific Mail Steamship Company.

Seems like these railroad magnates possessed the most fascinating powers of attraction.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"The Railroad Baron Who Actually Was One"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2008