

CRESCENT CITY BOUND

Since the beginning of recorded history, inhabitants of the Gulf Coast have endured the onslaughts of tropical hurricanes and storms that have wreaked havoc on civilized infrastructure, including all modes of transportation. Last August's Hurricane Katrina, however, was the first Category 4 storm to have plowed directly into the lower Mississippi River delta surrounding New Orleans. This zone, encompassing hundreds of square miles of low alluvial plains, represents one of the nation's most vulnerable locations for human habitation and is most certainly the worst possible choice for a 21st-century metropolitan development.

It is natural to wonder why this region grew in such a perilous location. Of course, the simple answer is water, which provided the Crescent City with its early impetus for growth. But the larger answer involves railroads, which in the 19th century put the city in touch with the vast territories of the West, opened the Arkansas and Red River valleys to cultivation, and linked Appalachia's landlocked hills to the sea. Railroads, in short, forged New Orleans into the steel-spoked transportation hub of the South.

Minutes out of New Orleans, the *Argonaut* poses on the west end of the Huey P. Long Bridge, which spans the Mississippi River, around 1957. The train is headed by a pair of 2,000-horsepower Alco PA-1s.

Southern Pacific photo, Don Munger Collection

