

JEFFERSON PARISH

Yearly Review



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THEIR FACES TELL THE STORY

LYLE SAXON

Internationally Famous Author

Two of Mr. Saxon's works are "Lafitte the Pirate" and "Fabulous New Orleans". The setting for "Lafitte the Pirate" is Jefferson Parish.

To those who have studied Louisiana History, Jefferson Parish is as interesting as any portion of the state. Surely it is more colorful than nearly any other, and it is more varied. It stretches its narrow length from Lake Pontchartrain southward to the sea, and it presents incredible contrasts. One end of the parish is a rich and fashionable suburb with fine residences, huge estates and magnificent gardens; while the other end is as primitive a place as can be found in the United States today. For in the sea marsh of Barataria there lives a strange and polyglot people, men and women who dwell in palmetto thatched houses in isolated places, and who live as simply as their ancestors did a century ago.

Many notable names are connected with Jefferson, names which stand out in any history of the South. Here lived such men as John McDonogh—

Mrs. Gustave Jaud, descendant of the Houma tribe of Indians, whose land south Jefferson used to be, uses the native palmetto in weaving the beautiful baskets for which her people are famous.





Berthoud's Cemetery at Berthoud's Cove, Barataria. This ancient Indian Burying ground has been used for centuries.

too well known to make it necessary to say more than a sentence about him here. But the name is as familiar as any in Louisiana, for McDonogh left a

This "Mamilamán", as he is called by the bayou people, is a shrimper, and lives at Manila Village. The Philippine forbears of these people settled in this section of the country generations ago.





Stefano Tramonte, Italian farmer of Kenner. A great many of the Italian families that immigrated to this country have stayed on the land.

vast fortune to the schools of New Orleans, and thousands of school children still decorate his statue each year. In Jefferson, too, lived the Kenner Brothers whose names are linked with the state history. And in the old days, even longer ago, lived D'Estrehan with his vast plantations, and it was D'Estrehan who in 1737 brought many German families to his estate to dig the Destrehan canal (now called Harvey's canal), Germans who had come to Louisiana at the time of John Law's fantastic "Mississippi Bubble" and who found themselves destitute and starving when Law's scheme collapsed. The Germans had been sent to what is now Arkansas, but they found conditions there with which they could not cope, so they built rafts and floated down the Mississippi to New Orleans. The Colonial governor could not provide for them—it was hard enough to provide for the French people who were sailing across the Atlantic to Louisiana. Accordingly the Germans were given tracts of land along the Mississippi River above New Orleans, and they settled there, wresting a living from the wilderness. There were no farm implements, no plows. They used their bare hands, and the primitive implements which they could make for themselves. These Germans were the prey of marauding Indians, they sickened with fever, they died by scores. But the strong survived, made homes and farms for themselves, and at last they became prosperous. It was because of their sturdiness and their ability to do heavy work that D'Estrehan,

one of the richest of the early Creole planters, brought a group of them to dig the canal.

In 1737, thirty-nine years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, John Baptiste D'Estrehan needed a means of getting wood from the swamps south of his lands, and the lands needed draining. He contracted with a number of German settlers living in Mechanickham, now Gretna, to dig a canal from the Mississippi River to Little Bayou Barataria, a distance of more than five miles. Small tracts of land were given to them for their labor. They dug the canal with wooden spades! The job was completed in 1741.

Destrehan's canal became important as a means of transportation. It not only drained the rich acres of the Creole planter, but it served, too, to carry sea foods, furs, moss, freight and passengers to the city of New Orleans and adjacent territory.

Descendants of those sturdy German pioneers remain; some of them are living today in Gretna. For example there is Mrs. Mary Fried who lives at 227 Huey P. Long Avenue. The name of the street has been changed, and the street has become important commercially, but Mrs. Fried will not move. She was once offered a large sum for her modest home and garden, but she refused it. She was born in that house 83 years ago, and she was the daughter of a German called Meisner. It is the Meisner place, and Mrs. Fried loves it. The vegetable garden has supplied food for the family for

Mrs. Mary Fried, descendant of the early German settlers, proudly displays her stand of corn in her kitchen garden. This garden has supplied the Fried family for over a hundred years, and has never known commercial fertilizers.





"And here Napoleon was buried by Jean Lafitte". Mrs. Mary Perrin, 73, who was born and has lived her life in Lafitte, tells tall tales of the unmarked graves in Perrin cemetery.

more than a hundred years. Commercial fertilizer has never been used in it. In the picture that accompanies this article you will see Mrs. Fried in her garden standing beside the corn stalks. It is difficult to believe that she is really 83 years old, for she is strong and vigorous. She is proud of the fact that her father was one of the organizers of the David Crockett Fire Company which is said to be the oldest active volunteer fire company in the United States. Mrs. Fried likes to talk about that. Sometimes in the late afternoon you will find her tending her garden. She likes to talk about old times, and she likes to remember that she springs from an honest, sturdy stock. She belongs to the land, and the land belongs to her.

But Mrs. Fried is but one type. Take the case of Mrs. Perrin for example. Mrs. Perrin lives where the Bayou of the Geese meets Bayou Barataria. And her greatest pride is in the Perrin cemetery which lies beside the slow flowing stream. Mrs. Perrin is the oracle of the countryside. She is the keeper of legends as well as keeper of the cemetery. One of her most extraordinary legends concerns Napoleon, John Paul Jones and Jean Lafitte.

Historians are all wrong, Mrs. Perrin will tell you. All that business about the death of the Little Corporal on St. Helena—all nonsense. Napoleon was saved by his kinsman Jean Lafitte, kidnapped. A double was buried in his place. Lafitte was bringing him to Louisiana, and he was accompanied by none other than John Paul Jones. But Napoleon died. So Lafitte brought him secretly to the little cemetery beside the Bayou and buried him there. Later he brought the body of John Paul Jones there too, and buried him



80 years have left Horace Perrin strong and fit to paddle his pirogue and run his trapping lines.

secretly. And finally Lafitte came home to die, and he lies there too. Mrs Perrin knows all about it. Those unmarked graves could tell tall tales if they wanted to! And Mrs. Perrin sees to it that passers-by hear the stories. She keeps that cemetery as clean as a pin. The tombs are whitewashed each year, and the tombs of her ancestors are repaired from time to time. And as for those others, those legendary graves, why Mrs. Perrin guards them with her life. Here you see her standing in the cemetery, pointing to the grave of Napoleon Bonaparte. And if you don't believe me, why you can ask Mrs. Perrin! In fact Mrs. Perrin will tell you that she knows what she knows, and that Manuel Perrin, the first of her family to settle in Louisiana, was a first cousin of Jean Lafitte's, and often accompanied the corsair on his expeditions. Oh those stories! How Mrs. Perrin likes to tell them. There are ghosts in the cemetery too, but she pays no attention to them. "They don't do me nothin'" she says, "When I go up to them, they just walk into the bayou, or melt away like swamp fog."

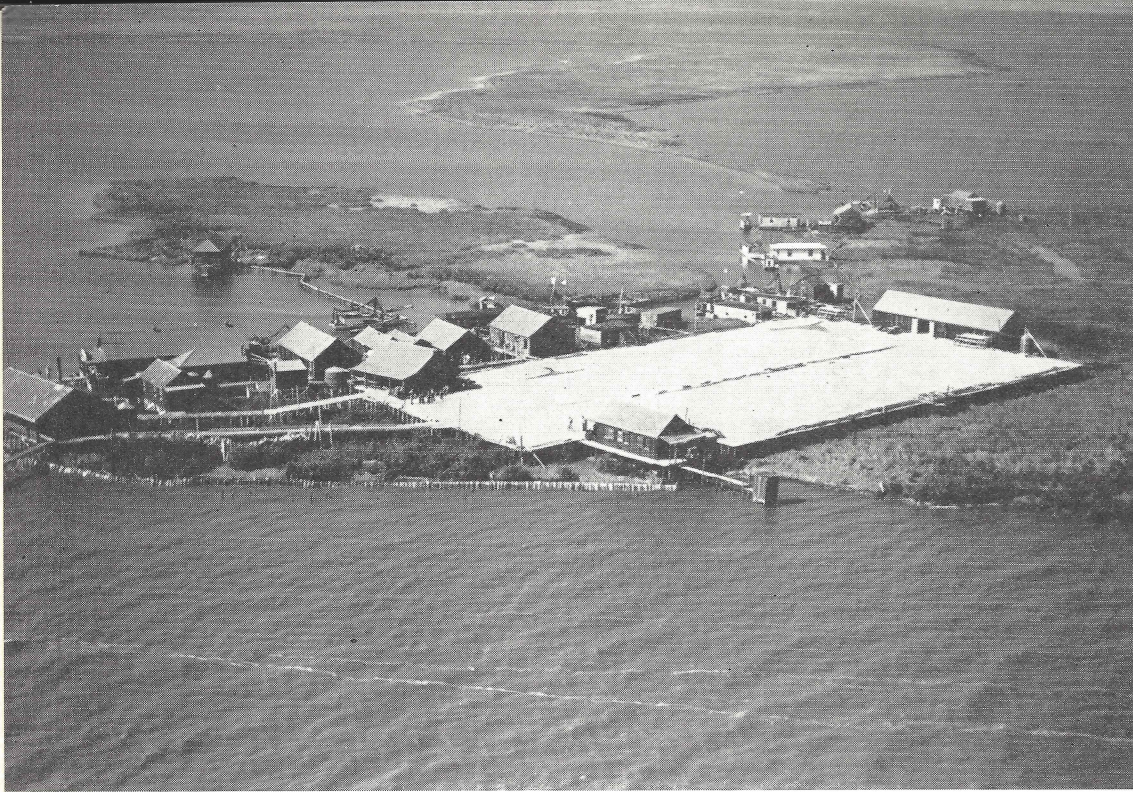
As the traveler goes deeper and deeper into the Barataria region he meets stranger types. For instance, look now at the picture of the native oysterman. It is just sunrise and he is making ready for his day of toil. Notice the long oyster rakes, and observe too that the sun is just rising above the horizon. The day is beginning, and our Barataria oysterman is off to his work. The mark of the country is upon him, and his face tells his story. He is a native, and proud of it. He is a man and there is no foolishness about him. He can earn his living as well as anyone, and nothing scares him.

This is his country, and that is his dog, and those are his oyster rakes. Let any man try to disturb him or his possessions, or his wife or his family. They will see what they will see. And they will be sorry people, too.

To penetrate the Barataria country the traveler must proceed by boat, first through Harvey's Canal, already mentioned, into Little Bayou Barataria, past Mrs. Perrin and her cemetery and beyond into lakes and other bayous. As the traveler goes Southward, Manila Village comes into sight, a town built upon stilts, where great shrimp drying platforms stretch out, and where the houses are connected by runways above the water. Here live men of many nationalities. It is not unusual to meet a boat manned by Chinamen puffing along the slow-moving waters of Bayou Barataria, although the Chinese live further out in the Gulf on the little island of Bassa-Bassa, an island which is somewhat similar to Manila Village, although the population is smaller. The Chinamen are picturesque with their slanting eyes, and their yellow skins are bronzed by the sun and water. They wear large Chinese straw hats. They are shrimp fishermen, and they catch and dry the shrimp and ship it back to China. For years these Chinese have been in the Barataria section,

A man and his dog. Even among the waterways, men have their pets, and this pup looks lovingly at his oysterman master.



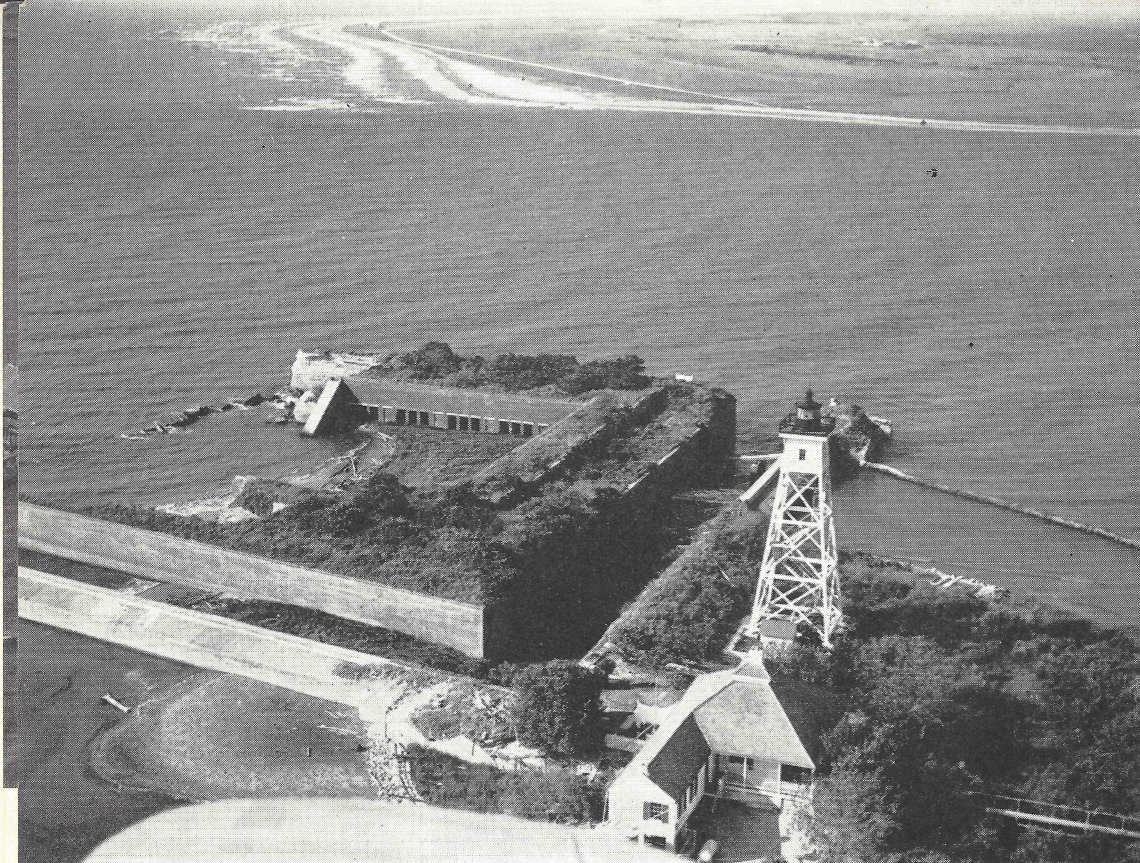


Manila Village from the air, giving a splendid view of the platforms used to sun-dry shrimp during the season.

and there has been a sort of Chinese dynasty, one family owning Bassa-Bassa for several generations. Some of the Chinese have married women native to the Baratania section, and the second and third generations are really Eura-

Some of the many Chinese inhabitants of the bayou country, shown with Senator Jules Fisher, who is himself from Manila Village. These Chinamen were either born in this country, or immigrated here long before our immigration laws forbade entry of the yellow races.





Where the bayous meet the Gulf, at the extreme southern tip of Jefferson Parish. Fort Livingston, on Grand Terre, with Grand Isle in the background.

sians, handsome, exotic people who add an Asiatic touch to the melting pot of the Jefferson Bayou country. The group picture shown is typical.

Bayous open up into lakes, only to narrow again to bayous, and at last, sailing ever southward, the boat enters Barataria Bay. One can smell the sea. The sky is an inverted bowl of gold and blue and it is hard to say where water ends and sky begins. Still the boat goes on through the golden light, and at last a bright archipelago appears—low-lying islands, with masses of green trees and strips of shining sand. Beyond the islands are the blue waters of the Mexican Gulf, and the overtones of sound are the rustling of the palm trees, and the pounding of the surf. Two large islands lie close together: these are Grand Isle and Grande Terre, and on clear days, toward the west, another island is visible—Cheniere Caminada.

This is a country of strange and passionate moods. Nature itself is capricious, changing in a moment from calm to storm. A warm, sweet breeze which seems redolent of orange flowers blows all day from the south; yet in a moment it dies. A blanket of blistering heat falls upon the islands. Not a leaf stirs. The islands wait, silent, inert. And then, suddenly, the sun draws in and a whistling wind comes out of the Gulf; lightning flashes, and a tropical storm breaks with quick fury, lashing the twisted oak trees with salt spray, and bending the tall palms away from the sea. Rain rattles down upon the wide leaves of banana trees, a torrential downpour.

Then, as quickly as it came, the storm passes. The sun shines again with blinding light, and the wet leaves of the banana trees shine like burn-

ished metal. The palms right themselves, dripping like slow-running fountains, and the soft breeze blows again from the Gulf. Once more there comes that mysterious scent of orange blossoms.

And as the land is, so are the dwellers therein.

Look now at another picture in our gallery. Here we have a native shrimper of Grand Isle. His history, and the history of the country is written upon his face. And what a face it is! He knows the caprices of the island weather; he is at home on the Gulf of Mexico. His face is burned from a thousand sun-drenched noons, and toughened by a hundred storms. The salt spray has burned deep into his bronzed skin, and the blazing sun, reflected from the water, has taught him to live with half-closed eyes. But his eyes see to the distant horizon, and his body responds to a boat in much the same way that a rider's body responds to his horse. The sea and the beaches are equally familiar to him. He knows the signs of good and bad

Grand Isle shrimper, burned by a thousand noon-day suns. The history of this country is written in his face.



weather. He is not deceived by clouds or winds. We may think that the day is fair, and that it will continue so, but he knows that there is a squall out yonder and that it may overtake us soon. He knows what he knows and he knows it well. Then too there is a sort of arrogance about the man. Look again at that face. He is not afraid, he can manage. Let the storms come, let the wind blow. He will survive someway. And he knows the way.

Here, then, we see a few of the characteristic people of the Barataria country. They are characteristic of the country itself. In their faces you can read the story of the country, and I believe you will find that story a good one.

BARATARIA

There has been much discussion among historians concerning the name Barataria, that former haunt of pirates and smugglers. "It will be remembered," writes Grace King, "that Barataria was the name of the island presented by the frolicsome duchess to Sancho Panza, for his sins, as he learned to consider it. How or when the name came to Louisiana is still to be discovered, whether directly from "Don Quixote," or from the source which supplied LeSage with it, the etymology of the word—**barateur**, meaning cheap, **barato**, cheap things."

Webster's dictionary offers another suggestion in the definition of the word "barratry." The French word is **barraterie**, and the Provençal equivalent is **barataria**, and there are two definitions: first, "The practice of exciting and encouraging lawsuits and quarrels," and, second, "A fraudulent breach of duty or willful act of known illegality on the part of a master of a ship, in his character of master, or of the mariners, to the injury of the owner of the ship or cargo, and without his consent. It includes every breach of trust committed with dishonest purpose, as by running away with the ship, sinking her or deserting her, etc., or by embezzling the cargo."

It is a common belief in Louisiana that the name Barataria was given to that section of the country because of Lafitte and his lusty corsairs who once dwelt there, but the old maps disprove this designation. The section was known by that name for more than half a century before Lafitte set foot there.

For fifty years before Lafitte saw it, men and women, many of them smugglers, had been living on Grand Isle, and there was a cluster of houses half buried in the rank undergrowth. Dwarfed oak-trees, curiously twisted by the wind and their outer leaves scalded by the salt spray, grew in dense groves, their gnarled trunks leaning all in one direction, away from the sea. The houses were hidden beneath these trees, each house with its thicket of shrubs and oleanders which served as a protection from the wind that blew almost ceaselessly from the Gulf.

The houses were small and unpretentious. They contained only one or two rooms. The windows were closed, not with glass, but with heavy batten blinds which served as protection from the sudden storms. Orange groves dotted the island, the golden fruit shining like lanterns among the dark, polished leaves. And flowers grew before the doors of the cottages.

For half a century the smugglers' women had lived there, cooking, sweeping, laughing, crying, giving birth to children. . . . They were quiet, submissive



Manila Village, built, as are all the marsh homes, on stilts, with the fleet in. Note that the pirate flag still flies, but this time as a house flag, and with no sinister connotations.

women who obeyed the men blindly, women who had little thought beyond their men and their children.

Smuggling was only a part of the islanders' lives, for they were also trappers and fishermen. Their luggers made the long journey to the New Orleans market over and over again, carrying loads of fish and shrimp and oysters. They knew these curving bayous as the average city-dweller knows the streets between his home and his office; the reedy labyrinths of Barataria held no mysteries for them. They had learned a hundred hiding places for themselves and their boats in the vicinity of the city, and when their luggers were loaded with contraband goods, rather than with fish, they felt safe from pursuit or attack.

For nearly fifty years, then, they had pursued their dual interests; it was an accepted thing. But the passionate moods of the islands had left their trace upon these men and upon the children born there; and they were as suddenly moved from careless mirth to quick and unreasoning fury as a child is moved from laughter to tears.

Then all was changed. A sterner, rougher group of men invaded the peaceful bayous and made homes for themselves among the islands. These newcomers were, for the greater part, seafaring men. They were men who had sailed under many flags, and war had taught them to hold life cheap. They were outlaws by choice and they had cast their lots upon the sea. Men of many races and many tongues—Spanish, French and Portuguese; men from the West Indian islands, men of mixed blood, Maltese, Catalans, men from God-knows-where who had drifted from near and far to find a haven in the sea-marshes of Barataria.

But there were others, too. We have seen that those thrifty Germans came to the Jefferson section as early as 1737. Some English people settled there too, and there were many French families.

What can one say of such a country? There is this that can be said: It is American. Although the blood of many nationalities flows in these people, they are as much a part of the United States as any other. And they are loyal Americans. I do not believe that you will find that the "fifth column" will make headway there. For the dwellers of Jefferson remember the history of their own Jean Lafitte, who brought his strange and motley crew to the aid of Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. They were loyal then and they are loyal now. They remember their American traditions of more than a century ago.

Yes, you have seen their faces and they are good faces. No foolishness there, no dissatisfaction with the land that is theirs. They are Jeffersonians, and they are Louisianians and they are Americans, and they intend to stay that way.

Sammy Sparks, unofficial vital statistician of Gretna. He knows all about everybody in the town, and it is mighty hard for the ladies not-so-young to drop a few years if Sammy hears about it.

