ADDRESS AT THE DEDICATION OF A HISTORICAL MARKER TO CHARLES CRONEA

JOEL KIRKPATRICK

[Editor's note: at 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, March 1, 1997, Laffite Society member Joel Kirkpatrick, a retired reporter for The Galveston Daily News, addressed a sizeable gathering at the High Island Cemetery on Fifth Street in High Island, Texas.]

The occasion of the address was the dedication of a historical marker at the grave of Charles Cronea, who had served as a cabin-boy with Jean Laffite's fleet.

Mr. Kirkpatrick had spearheaded the effort to gain approval for the historical marker, aided by the Galveston County Historical Commission and the Texas State Historical Commission.

The 22-by-42-inch marker of cast aluminum lists the dates of birth (1805) and death (1893) of the old pirate as well as some of his noteworthy exploits.

Cronea was born in Marseilles, France, and died in Rollover Pass (now Gilchrist), Texas. For a fuller description of his interesting life, see the article in the previous issue of The Laffite Society Chronicles by author W.T. Block entitled, "Uncle Charlie Cronea, the Last of Laffite's Pirates."

Some say that history is properly a study of great tides of social and economic change. But I think history is also properly a study of the lives of men and women who are caught up in those tides.

Like Charles Cronea.

We are here today to remember Cronea and to recognize some of his descendants, both living and dead.

You have already heard that Cronea was a teenager on a French Navy frigate. And that he came to Texas to join the band of privateer Jean Laffite. The facts of his life rival any fiction Robert Louis Stevenson ever wrote.

No one has said why Charles Cronea deserted the French frigate on which he served as a cabin-boy. But, years later, Cronea told a Galveston Daily News reporter in an interview that he had played a prank on a fellow crew member, and when the prank turned sour, the captain had him spread-eagled on a grating and given thirty lashes with a cat-o'-nine-tails.

Cronea said that after the whipping they had splashed him with seawater, and although it stung, "I never cried out." He and fourteen others jumped ship in New York not long after that. The French Navy never saw them again.

We have records and affidavits showing that Charles Cronea enlisted twice in the army of revolutionary Texas. Those records show that he fought in several battles, first as an early rebel against Mexico, and later in the Army of the Republic under General Sam Houston. Records also show that he fought in the 1846-1848 Mexican War and collected a pension from the United States Army for so doing.

We have records showing that Cronea, as a surviving veteran of the Texas revolution, was awarded 1,280 acres of land.

We have from Charlie Cronea no journals or manifestoes. We know of no diary nor collection of letters that he might have kept. We have no statements of lofty purpose, no political comment.

We do have statements from Mary Sabinal Campbell that Cronea was a cabin-boy and cannoneer who served with Jean Calliste and "Crazy Ben" Dollivar for two years aboard her husband James Campbell's privateering ship Hotspur.

We have, from three different sources, a story about a mutiny aboard the Hotspur by the fourteen French Navy deserters, led by one of their number, a Lieutenant Gustave Duval. Mrs. Campbell told her biographer that if Duval had not served brandy to the mutineers, they might have succeeded.

But the mutiny was put down by Captain Campbell with saber and shot that splashed blood and brandy all over the decks of the ship. All of the mutineers were killed except Duval, who was saved for hanging by Jean Laffite's court in Galveston. Cronea survived because he did not take part in the mutiny.

Cronea tells in an interview that after Laffite left Galveston (which Laffite called "Campeche"), Cronea returned to the Island to find the Laffite settlement burned.

We have records showing that Cronea voted in Louisiana near Bayou Plaquemine, and later in Texas, at Old Jefferson (now Bridge City). We have records that show he lived, and served on a jury, in Jefferson County.

We have affidavits that Charlie Cronea was near the Battle of San Jacinto guarding two prisoners who were accused of murder, and that it was members of his company who captured
General Antonio López de Santa Ana.

And we do have what amounts to a biography in statements he made in an interview with Galveston Daily News reporter Ben C. Stuart in Galveston, under shade trees in front of the U.S. Barge Office on the waterfront. Cronea had sailed to Galveston, I believe, with his son-in-law, Henry Sullivan, with a schooner-load of watermelons or other produce for sale.

This plaque summarizes some of Cronea's life and a few of the events that shaped it. What is not recorded on the plaque is that Charlie Cronea lived nearly all his life as a farmer in this part of Texas, and that he raised children as well as crops. It is worth noting that the historical events for which we remember him today were only a fraction of his life.

There are almost no written words about the ordinary life of Charles Cronea. But what Charles Cronea did when he was caught up in the tides of history tells us what kind of man he was.

On this eve of Texas Independence Day, we can remember Charles Cronea and know by what he did that he was a Texas patriot who was willing to fight, and perhaps to die, for freedom.