Jean Laffite and the French Fur Traders
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In the late 18th century, the powerful Chief of the Omahas, Black Bird, could see the advantage of being a friend of the white man and participating in the white man's civilization. Trade of their fur skins for rope, canvas, hatchets, clothing, guns, powder, etc., was welcomed. Other tribes in the Nebraska Territory, the Oto, Missouri, Pawnee, Ponca, and several smaller tribes, were at peace with one another. However, in the Dakotas, the Sioux were constantly at war with those tribes in the Nebraska Territory, having become hostile to the white man after an altercation with soldiers over a stolen cow. Unfortunately, Black Bird's friendship with the white man was the cause of his demise. During a smallpox epidemic in 1800, he contracted this disease and died along with 400 other Omahas. These contagious diseases, intertribal warfare, exhaustion of the women from cleaning hides, all contributed to reduce the size of this tribe to about 1000.

Prior to the Act of Congress in 1854, the land west of the Missouri River, was "Indian Country". Only military personnel, missionaries, scouts for exploring parties, and fur traders were allowed in this area. At this time, there was a big demand for buffalo, bear, and beaver skins in Europe. In England alone, there was a demand for 3,000 beaver skins each year to cover top hats! Fur trading was a very hard, dangerous occupation. There was difficulty in travel, cold winters with little protection, and always the possibility of a fight with hostile Indians that would destroy all the skins collected in a whole season. The French, the St. Louis Fur Company, and the American Fur Company operated in this territory. The fur companies would hire 20 to 50 men for one season. Sometimes this was profitable, at other times a financial disaster. Jean Laffite, in his journal, mentions a few of the fur traders in the Nebraska Territory who made purchases from him -- Manuel Lisa, Lucien Fontenelle, Joseph Robidoux, Gratiot, Papin (Pappan), Chouteau and Lucas. Other noted fur traders were: Andrew Henry, John Calter, Labbadie, William Sublette, and Joshua Pilcher.

Jean Laffite was at the right place at the right time. His warehouse in Donaldsonville, Louisiana operated by Dumay St. Martin, had the merchandise needed by the Indians. The fur traders could purchase these items at a much more reasonable price than at other sources. Furthermore, Laffite would deliver these goods to St. Louis.

One of those traders, Manuel Lisa, (1772-1820) was called Nebraska's first white settler. He came from St. Louis to the Missouri River in 1807 to start a fur trading venture. He built the first Ft. Lisa on the Big Horn in Missouri. He later helped organize the St. Louis Fur Company in 1809 and became one of its directors. In 1812 this company was reorganized and became known as the Missouri Fur Company with Lisa as President. The fur traders generally were helpful to the Indians. They brought trade goods, blankets and other supplies and they distributed garden seeds, including pumpkin, beans, turnips, and potatoes. They loaned them traps and arranged for blacksmith work to be done for them.

Joseph Robidoux III was born in 1783. At the age of 16, young Joseph was already accompanying fur traders up the Missouri River. In 1803, he organized a trading post at Fort Dearborn, II, site of present-day Chicago. In 1809, he established a trading post near the site of present-day Council Bluffs. He married and had six sons and one daughter. In 1822, the American Fur Company bought him out and offered him $1,000.00 a year not to compete with them. Later, in 1826, the American Fur Company hired him to establish a trading post at Blacksnake Hills (St. Joseph, Mo.) at a salary of $1,800.00 a year. Here he prospered, hiring as many as 20 Frenchmen to engage in trading.

In the 1940s, John Andrechyn Laffite, appeared on the scene claiming...
to be the great grandson of Jean Laffite. On May 13, 1947, he gave an affidavit stating that his father was Leon Jean Laffite (March 10, 1865 - April 16, 1898) and his mother was Mary Pauline Fontenelle (August 11, 1868 - April 12, 1932). This writer wanted to find the relationship, if any existed, between Lucien Fontenelle, the fur trader, and Mary Pauline Fontenelle. Through numerous books, library archives, newspaper clippings, and finally descendants of Lucien, I discovered the history of Lucien Fontenelle. Notably, there never was a person by the name of Mary Fontenelle, who was a descendant of Lucien, but this is not surprising. Just prior to this discovery, Jean Epperson, a Laffite Society member, found that John A. Laffite was an impostor. His true name was John Matejka. This was found through his Railroad Retirement records and confirmed by several Nebraska census records. What is surprising is the extent to which John A. went to establish a plausible background connected to people Jean Laffite would have known.

Lucien Fontenelle's grandfather was a Marquis in France. Both parents were killed near New Orleans during a hurricane while Lucien and his sister, Amelia, were still small children. Fortunately, the children were with their Aunt, Madam Merlier, in New Orleans and were safe. Lucien, at the age of 14, traveled to St. Louis and up the Missouri River with Joseph Pilcher. He eventually married Meumbane (Bright Star), daughter of the Omaha Chief, Big Elk. This couple had four sons and a daughter. The oldest son, Logan (Shongaske), born in 1825, married Gixpeaha (New Moon) and they had three daughters. Logan became Chief of the Omaha at the age of 25. He spoke French, English, Omaha, and the Siouan language group. Unfortunately, Logan was killed on July 17, 1855, at the age of 28 years by the Sioux while on a buffalo hunt with the Omaha.

In recognition of the contribution this pioneer Fontenelle family made to Nebraska, there are streets, schools, lakes, a power plant, and a State Park named in their honor.

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Personal Contacts

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