The Annual Trek to New Orleans

Jeff Modzelewski

From Saturday, January 6, through Tuesday, January 9, 2001, a substantial contingent of Laffitians once more called New Orleans their home-away-from-home, as they have done a number of times during the organization's six-and-one-half-year history. The principal purpose of this journey was to attend the annual banquet of the Louisiana Historical Society. The guest speaker at this year's banquet was William "Jack" Davis, who is currently doing research for a book about Jean and Pierre Laffite.

Laffitians, including your author and his wife Kathy, car-pooling with R. Dale and Diane Olson, began to arrive at our oft-frequented Hotel St. Pierre, located on Burgundy Street in the French Quarter, on Saturday in the mid-afternoon. The first to arrive dutifully took reins in hand and assumed the stewardship duties of the traditional wine-and-cheese party in the St. Pierre's cozy dining area.

Some twelve or fourteen Laffite Society members enjoyed fellowship and refreshments from 3:00 until 6:00 PM, at which time the group save for a few who were not up for a hike through the Vieux Carre that evening, set out to continue socializing in - where else? - Laffite's Blacksmith Shop. Laffite's Blacksmith Shop possesses a very dubious claim to any historical legal ownership by the brothers Laffite, but it dispenses beverages that would surely have enticed our favorite privateer and company as surely as they do twenty-first-century revelers in the Crescent City.

It has been remarked that a single incident in a Laffite Society excursion often provokes the amusement of the group to such an extent that it becomes a catch-phrase presumably for all eternity. One classic example, now frequently recounted, was the comment of former Laffite Society Treasurer Jim Earthman at the New Orleans Country Club on the evening of January 8, 1998, at that year's annual Louisiana Historical Society banquet. After taking a few sips of the traditional - and potent - New Orleans drink, Sazerac, Mr. Earthman exclaimed (and the author here paraphrases), "These Sazeracs are too much. I'm going to have to cut back to Martinis!" The humor of the remark stems, of course, from the comparison of Sazeracs to Martinis as if from a strong drink to a weak one, when in fact - as Martini drinkers will readily acknowledge - the latter cocktail is itself an unforgiving concoction of alcohol untempered by any soft drink, tonic water or soda mixer.

It was in Laffite's Blacksmith Shop where the following incident occurred. I recount it below in what might at first appear to the reader to be a digression from the presumed topic of this article but which, by the tale's end, will prove itself to be an example of the type of event described in the preceding paragraph, one which promises to become a pithy and integral future facet of Laffite Society lore.

To set the stage for those who have not visited Laffite's Blacksmith Shop, the venue is a not very large, but dimly lit, tavern of rustic ambience, set on the northwest corner of Bourbon and St. Philip Streets. In the heart of the French Quarter, and comprising a couple of bars, and a piano and player of same in the back providing live music and inviting audience sing-along participation, Laffite's Blacksmith Shop is a unique watering hole with a feel that is incongruously secluded given its location, perhaps owing to the darkness of its interior.

Our group of ten or twelve Laffitians found a cluster of tables in the center of the tavern, and we seated ourselves and waited for a waiter to attend us. The tables are furnished with the modern type of rounded candleholders - their wide bases resembling the bowls of brandy snifters - that one finds commonly on outdoor patio tables. Noting that two of the
three candles in front of him lacked flame, your author picked up a plastic swizzle stick from the ashtray and set about attempting to light the two extinguished candles from the one already alight.

Shortly our waiter, a strapping young man of smooth appearance, arrived at our tables and began to take drink orders in turn. As he reached me - my eyes still downcast as I strove to ignite the recalcitrant unlit candles, a task more difficult than it sounds due to the swizzle-stick tool I was forced to use - the waiter had the audacity to direct to me these words: "What can I get you, Fire-Boy?"

The lad's words cut me to the quick; his impertinence numbed my innards; his lack of respect would have affronted the sensibilities of a Hun. Nonetheless, I responded in a courteous voice with my beverage order.

Could the young lad not see that he had so cavalierly addressed the current President of The Laffite Society? Was he not awed by the presence of the only two Past Presidents of said Society, who were seated at the same table? Apparently not, for nary a mote of contrition was evident in his voice nor demeanor for the remainder of our stay that evening in his establishment.

At one point, goaded by my wife Kathy, who teasingly berated him for having verbally abused her husband, he replied: "You wouldn't believe the things I see happen in here - people pouring hot wax all over the tables and throwing the candles at each other when they get drunk. Usually we just throw 'em out of here as soon as they start messing with those candles!"

I quietly pointed out that nothing in my behavior had indicated the least probability that my behavior would degenerate to that level, the truth of which statement our waiter did at least acknowledge. However, one could not fail to recognize that the owner of Laffite's Blacksmith Shop has not yet expended the funds to send his employees either to sensitivity training or to a "Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People" course.

Despite this experience within only a few hours of our arrival in New Orleans, the evening progressed happily thereafter, and after some ninety minutes in Laffite's Blacksmith Shop our group departed to trek the few blocks back to the Hotel St. Pierre. When your author arrived for breakfast at the St. Pierre's dining room the following morning, however, he could not help but manage a rueful grin as several of his fellow Laffitians already arrived greeted him with, "Good morning, Fire-Boy!"

Still and all, I prefer to think that the appellation, which apparently will now remain with me for an indefinite length of time, is used by my fellow Laffitians in a spirit of commiseration rather than derision. And the circumstance has even given me food for thought as regards the Great American Novel I have been planning to write for two and one-half decades. If my fellow writer from the Empire State, Herman Melville, commenced his great tome "Moby Dick" with the lines "Call me Ishmael," why cannot I commence mine, if it likewise be told in a first-person autobiographical manner, "Call me Fire-Boy"? But now I do, indeed, digress.

That morning, a Sunday, many of the visiting Laffitians attended worship services at St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square. Truly, this historic church is worthy of visit by those of any faith, a beautiful edifice both in interior and exterior, the majestic organ sounding hymns, the altar still impressively decorated for the Christmas season just ended.

No structured group event was planned for the daylight hours, but we were slated to dine at the Pelican Club on Exchange Alley that evening. Laffitians passed the afternoon strolling about and shopping in the French Quarter and socializing at the St. Pierre.

At 5:00 P.M. we convened in the lobby of the St. Pierre to depart for the Pelican Club. The weather was cool and drizzly, so while some walked with umbrellas, others hopped taxis for the short trip to the restaurant.

Joining us for an elegant and leisurely dinner as a guest of The Laffite Society was Jack Davis, who provided us with a preview of the remarks he would make at the Louisiana Historical Society Banquet the following evening.

After dinner the group disbanded to go their separate ways.
The Olsons and Modzelewskis continued walking southwesterly, crossing Canal Street in the direction of the Riverwalk Mall, to the huge Harrah's Casino. We spent several hours there gaming and watching the live shows (including a mini-Mardi Gras parade which winds its way through the casino every few hours, complete with dancing girls, a transvestite on stilts, and a brass band, all of the foregoing throwing beads to the onlookers sitting at slot machines as if at a real outdoors Mardi Gras parade). A short cab ride across Canal Street and back to the St. Pierre concluded our evening at the witching hour.

Monday during the day was spent as was Sunday, with members of the group going their separate ways, exploring the Quarter or relaxing in the hotel as they saw fit. At 6:00 P.M. groups began to disperse by automobile to the Tavern on the Park some three miles distant from the hotel and the site of this year's Louisiana Historical Society banquet.

As with the 1998 banquet, at which The Society's own R. Dale Olson was the featured speaker, the 2001 banquet was a wonderful black-tie affair, of just the right duration and conducted with tongue sufficiently in cheek to ensure enjoyment but preclude stuffiness. Jack Davis addressed the group in an entertaining and informative talk, speaking of the research into the Laffites in which he was involved for a forthcoming book. Among other points, Mr. Davis extolled the virtues of the New Orleans Notarial Archives, the Director of which, friend and Society member Sally K. Reeves, was in attendance at the banquet. Mr. Davis as well noted the wealth of historical information to be found in Cuban archives, a repository still largely to be mined given the continued, but perhaps now abating, estrangement between that land and the United States.

The Louisiana Historical Society annual banquet is normally held at the New Orleans Country Club, but the latter facility was not available for this year's affair, and the banquet's organizing committee was forced to make other arrangements at the Tavern on the Park.

It must be said that, while a respectable establishment, the Tavern on the Park cannot, in this author's opinion, compete with the New Orleans Country Club as a venue for this annual event. The space in the restaurant was a bit inadequate for the number of attendees; it was difficult to mingle and socialize while enjoying pre-dinner cocktails, because so much of the floor space was consumed by the dinner tables and chairs arranged for the evening that, with all attendees standing, there was no room in the aisles to move about.

In addition, the thirty-minute cocktail period preceding the dinner was the cause of some frustration; the bar staff was insufficient in number, causing banquet attendees to wait on line for ten or more minutes to order drinks, and when the allotted half-hour span ended, the open bar was simply declared closed, with no warning given to those still standing on line to order drinks.

And lastly, the charm of the old-moneyed ambience of the New Orleans Country Club simply cannot, of course, be duplicated.

Nonetheless the evening was definitely an overall success - the food was delicious, the wait staff worked hard to serve, and friend and Society member Bill Reeves and his fellow members of the Louisiana Historical Society who organized this year's event are to be commended for arranging an enjoyable affair.

The banquet was the climax of our stay in New Orleans, and the last time we Laffitians were all together on this trip. Beginning early Tuesday morning we began to disperse for our journeys home according to our individual timetables. Your author, his wife, and the Olsons stayed in the Crescent City until mid-afternoon, exploring book and antique shops Uptown and in the Garden District and later lunching.

For those who enjoy browsing in old book stores, as do I, the French Quarter offers a wealth of enjoyment in this regard, for some six or more used bookstores are located within manageable walking distance. I could spend - I have spent - hours in these shops, literally losing track of the
Evidence of the New Orleans trek.

Historian, Jean Epperson
and
Writer, William "Jack" Davis
More Evidence-

Above - President and First Lady
Jeff and Kathy Modzelewski

Below - Reginald Wilson, and
Pam Keyes, members
And still more evidence -

Sally K. Reeves, Society Member and Director,
New Orleans Notarial Archives