REMEMBERING THE LAffITE STUDY GROUP

Robert C. Vogel

[Society member, Robert C. Vogel, who started the Laffite Study Group agreed to begin the BIO project with an article on the original LSG. His excellent account below along with his previous "A Brief History of the Laffite Study Group, 1975-1990" (The Laffite Society Chronicles, vol. 4, no. 2, August, 1998) gives a good feel for the original group and its modus operandi. The Laffite Society is fortunate to have Robert, and other members of the LSG to bridge the gap between that group and the Society--Editor.]

These anecdotal remarks are directed to what the current editor of The Laffite Society Chronicles has termed the "modus operandi" of the Laffite Study Group [LSG]. In my essay, "A Brief History of the Laffite Study Group, 1975-1990" (The Laffite Society Chronicles, vol. 4, no. 2, August, 1998), I set out to provide little more than a resume of the study group's major accomplishments. Over the years, I have been asked many times about the personalities of the core group of the LSG -- DeGrummond, Howells, Warren, Holmes, Casey, et al.--and about the relations between the members of our little band of pirate-lorists. By preference, I should prefer to let the study group speak for themselves: after all, many of us are still among the living, and in any event the study group's archives contain a small mountain of letters, notes, cards, manuscripts, and various memorabilia. On second thought, however, I am moved to offer the following reminiscences as the first in what may become a series of short sketches of some of the Laffite Study Group's memorable characters and events.

The Laffite Study Group was originally conceived as a kind of dispersed roundtable where researchers could informally circulate their findings and interpretations. Our model was the symposium, the familiar forum for academic intercourse, but we were challenged by the fact that we were so widely dispersed geographically (see below). If the Internet had existed, we would no doubt have simply created a site on the World Wide Web, but in 1975 it was only practical for us to gather the various submitted essays and notes, type them up, and photocopy them for distribution through the mail. The loosely edited "occasional papers" were intended to generate correspondence amongst the researchers and any interested spectators, and we looked forward to sharing as much of this commentary as possible. Being the junior colleague in the original study group, it fell to me to assemble and disseminate the papers. In order to provide the enterprise with some kind of structure, I somewhat pretentiously decided to publish our work under the title of The Life and Times of Jean Laffite, even though I do not think anyone envisioned our little band of Laffitists expanding beyond a dozen or so members.

The story has been told before, but it is probably worth recalling that the original members of the study group were John L. Howells, Jane Lucas DeGrummond, Harris Gaylord Warren, Sue Thompson, and myself. When the group formed in 1975, I had a brand-new B.A. in geography and American history from the University of Minnesota, where I had written a couple of papers on Jean Laffite that had somehow attracted the attention of Louisiana historians. At that time, John Howells was employed as an accountant with the Internal Revenue Service in Houston; Jane DeGrummond was still teaching history at Louisiana State University; Harris Warren was recently retired from university teaching and living in New Mexico; and journalist Sue Thompson was in semi-retirement in Gulfport, Mississippi. Several librarians and archivists, representing institutions as diverse as the Rosenberg Library and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, also had an early interest in the study group's work product.

An avid avocational historian with far-ranging interests, John Howells was married to the former Miss Jean LaFitte of New Orleans, a most charming lady who unfortunately passed away several years ago. When I first met him, John had the Laffite Journals collection on loan from his
friend Bill Simpson, and I was John's house guest in 1974 when I took the overnight Greyhound bus from Houston to Baton Rouge for my initial meeting with Jane DeGrummond. This remarkable woman was then coming to the end of her long teaching career at LSU, where she had received her doctorate in 1941. Her book, *The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans* (first published by the LSU Press in 1961), was then—and remains today—a must-read for students of Laffite and the War of 1812. Dr. DeGrummond took me under her wing and we became fast friends, as only a professor and a student can become when they are at different universities. Over lunch in the faculty dining room one fine spring day, Jane suggested that I contact Harris Gaylord Warren, author of the classic *The Sword Was Their Passport: A History of American Filibustering in the Mexican Revolution* (published by LSU in 1943 and reprinted in 1972) and numerous articles about the Laffite brothers. He had at one time taught at LSU. Dr. Warren had recently retired from the history department chairmanship at Miami of Ohio University but was still very active as a writer and lecturer. His response to my initial letter was enthusiastic and it was he who first broached the idea of a “Laffite round-table or symposium.”

(Here, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the impact Drs. DeGrummond and Warren had on my professional career, to say nothing of my approach to studying Laffite, for it was due in large part to their generosity and encouragement that I abandoned all thoughts of a career in the law and struck out to make my living as an historian. Both were fine scholars and outstanding mentors and each had a vast network of colleagues, former students, contacts, and correspondents, many of whom were eventually drawn into the LSG.)

In the storage room in my home library, I have a banker’s box filled with my correspondence with Sue Thompson (as well as other boxes stuffed with letters received and carbon copies of letters sent to Howells, DeGrummond, and Warren). Ray and Sue Thompson were well-known and respected Gulf Coast journalists, longtime friends of Lyle Saxon and co-authors of the wonderfully illustrated book, *The Land of Laffite the Pirate* (first released in 1943). When I knew them, Ray was too ill to be actively engaged, but Sue was ready, willing and able to join the emerging fight over the authenticity of the Laffite Journal. If memory serves, it was Sue who received the initial contact from a teenager attending junior college in Oklahoma, which brought Pamela Grunewald (Keyes) within the study group’s orbit.

While the Laffite Study Group had officers and annual dues, and *The Life and Times of Jean Laffite* eventually metamorphosed from a collection of occasional papers into a quarterly newsletter with a circulation exceeding one hundred subscribers, there was never a general meeting of the group’s members. This is not to say we were a shy group. For his part, Sir Jack Holmes presided over numerous *ad hoc* LSG gatherings, which were customarily held as after-hours adjuncts to the annual meeting of the Louisiana Historical Association. A particularly memorable gathering of the Laffitists occurred in March, 1982, when the LHA assembled in Lake Charles with an entire session on the program devoted to “Jean Laffite and Contraband Days: Southwestern Louisiana Folklore.” The Laffite paper session, which drew a large audience as well as a surprising amount of media coverage, culminated in a three-days-long Laffite jam session at the home of then LHA president Dr. Tom Watson. For many years, our good friends John Howells in Houston and Bill Hyland in New Orleans served as hosts to a steady stream of itinerant Laffite researchers from the U.S. and overseas. A few hardy souls even made it up the Mississippi River to the Twin Cities. It was not uncommon for small parties of Laffitists to collect for drinks and dinner in New Orleans, St. Louis, New York, Austin, Paris, or Mexico City, and more often than not these little gatherings reverberated for years afterward in private letters and phone conversations.

In closing, it is worth noting that while many of the LSG stalwarts have passed away or moved on to pursue other interests, there are several study group members whose names appear on the rolls of the Laffite Society. It would be a mistake, however, to assume any kind of direct descent from the old LSG. Indeed, the society has much to recommend it over the study group, which from about 1980
onward could hardly claim to be a forum where members got their chief intellectual stimulus from one another. Study groupers were always of various minds as to the purpose and objectives of the LSG, and this uncertainty eventually caused the group's dissolution. Of course, the *Life and Times of Jean Laffite* was a far cry from the consistently well edited, attractively formatted, and punctual *Laffite Society Chronicles*. This publication and the commitment to regular meetings in Galveston, occasional field trips to points along the Gulf, and diversity of membership make the Society a much more cohesive organization in which the members meet freely and easily. The Laffite Study Group is dead and gone--long live the Laffite Society!