LYLE CHAMBERS SAXON, 1891 - 1946

Jeff Modzelewski

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Various facets of Laffite lore, the veracity of which is questionable or the connection of which to Laffite seems peripheral, have nonetheless come to form part of the Laffite saga.

The purported Journal of Jean Laffite is a prime example. Even if this old manuscript, written in French and housed at the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas, is a hoax, as most researchers now believe, and not the memoirs of the privateer which he completed a quarter of a century after retiring from the sea to become a gentleman farmer in Alton, Illinois, the Journal and the effort that went into its creation are noteworthy in themselves and have become inseparable from any in-depth study of Laffite.

Another example of an item with a seemingly superficial connection to Laffite becoming indissolubly entwined with the privateer's story is the writer and bon vivant Lyle Chambers Saxon. To be sure, Saxon in 1930 published a book titled Lafitte the Pirate, and on the surface this would appear to imbed him into Laffite lore for good and direct reason. However, it is perhaps an understatement to say that this work incorporated much novelistic license and the errors of past researchers, and serious Laffite students today almost perceptibly scoff at citations in other works which reference Saxon's Lafitte the Pirate.

Nevertheless, Lafitte the Pirate has come to be used, for better or worse, as a reference by successive generations of authors, and thus forms part of the recommended “must-read” list for those embarking upon their studies of Laffite. This fact, joined with the common bond which Laffite and Saxon share of strong identification with their adopted city of New Orleans, and aided by the undeniable charisma of the author which shines even through second and third-hand accounts over more than half a century, have caused Lyle Saxon to become inextricably cemented into the Laffite story.

In short, since Laffite researchers can scarcely avoid coming upon mention of Lyle Saxon, it is fitting that we learn something more of him.

The man who, by mid-twentieth century, had come to be called “Mr. New Orleans,” was in fact born in Bellingham, Washington, on September 4, 1891, but throughout his life he apparently enjoyed the common misconception that he had been born in the Pelican State and he did nothing to correct it.

Although some questioned his legitimacy, Saxon's parents were married at his birth, but their conjugal union lasted only briefly. Lyle's mother, Katherine "Kittie" Chambers Saxon, while pregnant, had followed his father, Hugh Saxon, west to California and thence to the Pacific Northwest, but within a short time of Lyle's birth mother and baby found themselves back in her hometown of Baton Rouge. Lyle's father Hugh remained for most of his life in the Golden State and died in 1945, about a year before his by-then famous son. Hugh Saxon attained some success in Hollywood as an actor, appearing in a number of films throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Lyle was to bear a lifelong animosity toward his father for having abandoned his mother, and he refused contact with the elder Saxon despite the latter's several attempts over the years to establish such.

Saxon was raised in his maternal grandfather's home in Baton Rouge by his mother and her two maiden sisters, Maude and Elizabeth Chambers. He attended Louisiana State University for several years in the early nineteen-teens. Just as he always allowed others to suppose he was a
native Louisianan, he likewise allowed them to believe that he had received a degree from L.S.U., but this was not fact.

In 1914 Saxon first took up residence in New Orleans, at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three. By the end of his life thirty-two years later, he had become so identified with the Crescent City that tours of the Vieux Carré included his rooms at the St. Charles Hotel. He once commented wryly, "I started out as a writer, and I end as a souvenir."

His professional life lasted little more than thirty years. For approximately half of this time Saxon was employed full-time by either a newspaper or the federal government while also writing on the side. For the other half of these years he enjoyed the independence, but suffered as well the economic uncertainties, of working solely as a free-lance writer.

For nine years, from 1917 until 1926, Saxon worked as a journalist in New Orleans, beginning as a cub reporter for the New Orleans Item and finishing nine years later with the New Orleans Times-Picayune, having been for it reporter, literary critic, and Sunday editor, and having obtained some small fame in his adopted city.

From 1926 until 1930, Saxon worked as a free-lance writer in New York City, producing there four book-length works, including Lafitte the Pirate, and publishing shorter pieces in various periodicals and literary anthologies.

Back in New Orleans, he continued writing independently, but financial strain forced him to accept steady employment once again in the early autumn of 1935, when he became the State Director of the Louisiana Writers' Project for the Works Progress Administration. He retained this position until the project ended in December, 1942, and then once again wrote independently until his death three and one-half years later.

In addition to tens of articles published in the New Orleans Times-Picayune and various periodicals of the day, Saxon's book-length works include:

- Father Mississippi (1927)
- Fabulous New Orleans (1928)
- Old Louisiana (1929)
- Lafitte the Pirate (1930)
- A Walk through the Vieux Carré and a Short History of the St. Charles (1935)
- Children of Strangers (1937)
- New Orleans City Guide (1938)
- Louisiana: A Guide to the State (1941)
- Gumbo Ya-Ya (1945) (co-authored with Edward Dreyer and Robert Tallant)
- The Friends of Joe Gilmore (published posthumously in 1948)

Lyle Chambers Saxon passed away in 1946 at the age of fifty-four.

These are the facts; now something about the man.

By all accounts, Saxon was a charming and captivating personality, to men as well as to women. As Dale Olson remarked to me over lunch one day in late November, 2003, Saxon was a vestige of the Old South, his persona that of the consummate southern gentleman.

Saxon was one of the first to recognize the historic value and potential of the French Quarter in New Orleans and to dare to take up residence there in years when its environment might have been kindly labeled "seedy" but realistically described as "dangerous."

He was generous to a fault, often living in precarious financial circumstances while aiding other aspiring writers to pay their room and board. He helped to support his maiden maternal aunts in Baton Rouge for his entire working life.

Saxon was an integral member of the literary salons of his day, both in New Orleans and during his four-year sojourn in New York City. His circle of acquaintances and friends included the literary likes of Sherwood Anderson, Heywood Broun, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, Edna Ferber, Ford Madox Ford, Sinclair Lewis, and John Steinbeck.
Yet Lyle Saxon’s life, while outwardly one of ease, was not without its troubles.

He wanted, above else, to be a novelist, yet he produced only one true novel - only one plotted, book-length piece of fiction - in his life: *Children of Strangers*, begun in 1923 but not published until 1937. This disappointment plagued him throughout his life.

From his young adult years on, Saxon suffered a number of sometimes-serious incidents of bad health. In his late 20s he was found to be tubercular and spent six months recuperating. In 1939 he suffered a ruptured appendix and related complications, from which he nearly died and which affected his health for the remaining seven years that he lived.

Some negative health issues he brought upon himself. In his later years he lapsed into sexual promiscuity, sometimes literally prostituting himself, and at least once, in 1932, he contracted syphilis. He talks of being “painfully sick” and of receiving “treatments from a doctor which reduce me to such depths of humiliation that I blush to think of them.”

Just as his treatments for syphilis were ending in late 1932, two thugs broke into his rooms one day and forced him to write a check and then phone the hotel desk to authorize one of the thugs to cash it. While he was doing so, the other thug amused himself by torturing Saxon, burning the soles of his feet with matches. The psychological trauma never left Saxon.

Then there was his alcoholism. By the time he was in his late 30s he had begun to routinely drink alone. A friend visited him in 1937 and found Saxon in such an alcoholic daze that Saxon did not recognize him. A few years later the same friend came upon him in Royal St. Saxon had a girl on his arm and was so inebriated that he could not speak. All that he could do was to lean against the side of the Monteleone Hotel and raise his hand. And by 1944 Saxon confessed that he had become a “fifth-a-day” man.

According to a number of people who knew him well, Lyle Saxon, throughout his life, and despite his outward appearance as a *bon vivant*, was a profoundly lonely man. Despite his charm, he never married. Ever in the midst of vibrant society and gaiety, Saxon at heart lived in isolation.

Yet there was in his life, too, much fun. He was a major proponent of masking at Mardi Gras. He describes his 1940 costume thusly: “I was a white rabbit that year—six feet, two inches tall with a skin tight costume of white imitation rabbit fur, a simpering rabbit face, ears two feet long, standing straight up and lined with pink satin, a large bow of pink ribbon tied around my neck, and a small bushy tail.’ When the time came to enter the streets, Saxon climbed into a baby carriage, and [his manservant] Joe [Gilmore] wheeled the infant bunny through the crowd as Saxon drank from a nursing bottle of whiskey.”

On another occasion the building next door caught fire late at night. He and some friends sat on their French Quarter balcony, calmly sipping cocktails and watching the efforts of the firefighters. Then, when the excitement was done, they sauntered over to the Café du Monde for beignets and café au lait. Despite failing health, during 1946’s Mardi Gras, Saxon felt sufficiently well to broadcast the Rex parade from the balcony of the St. Charles Hotel. Shortly thereafter he left to visit his friend Miss Cammie Henry at Melrose Plantation, fifteen miles south of Natchitoches, a place of refuge for him for nearly a quarter of a century at which he could write and rest. But when he reached Baton Rouge he began to hemorrhage and returned to New Orleans. He was admitted to Baptist Hospital, and this time the diagnosis was cancer. With characteristic stiff upper lip he quipped, “There’s no answer to cancer.” He also told friends, “Don’t grieve for me. I’ve had a wonderful time.” An unsuccessful operation was performed, pneumonia set in, and Lyle Chambers Saxon died on April 9, 1946. He is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Baton Rouge, in a family plot containing the tombs of his mother and her two maiden sisters.

In June, 2003, en route to a Laffite Society field trip to New Orleans, Dale and Diane Olson and my wife Kathy and I stopped at Baton Rouge’s Magnolia Cemetery to find Lyle Saxon’s tomb. Once located, we toasted him with Sazerac cocktails which
we had pre-mixed in Galveston, and left one for Saxon on his grave. His tombstone reads, “For this honorable man we pay not our last respects, but offer instead the everlasting homage for his noble spirit which so enriched all our lives. Author – Writer – Philosopher.” It was an overcast, end-of-spring day, and as we offered our toast, storm clouds threatened and rain began to fall. We sympathized with the sentiments of George Sessions Perry, who proclaimed, in an article on New Orleans from a series titled “The Cities of America,” published in the June 1, 1946 issue of the Saturday Evening Post, that, with the passing of Lyle Saxon, “the heart of old New Orleans had stopped beating.”

Many of Saxon’s works, including Lafitte the Pirate, have been reissued in recent years in inexpensive paperback editions by Pelican Publishing Company in Gretna, Louisiana. For good biographies, and well worth reading, look to The Life and Selected Letters of Lyle Saxon by Chance Harvey, published by Pelican in 2003, and James W. Thomas’s Lyle Saxon: A Critical Biography, volume 3 of the Southern Literary Series, published by Summa Publications in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1991.

Endnotes

2. Ibid, p. 213.
5. Ibid, p. 198.
7. Ibid, p. 188.