Biography of Jean Laffite Society Member
Gary Fretz

Jean Epperson

Raised in New Orleans, Gary Fretz attended New Orleans Academy and graduated from Tulane in 1976 with a minor in history and a major in Economics (he still hasn't figured out what to do with this degree). His family was into cruising their 40' sailboat frequently around Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf Coast. Gary learned to race sailboats at age seven and has won several District Titles as well as a National Championship (2.4 Meter Class, 2001). Like most New Orleans schoolboys, Gary read Lyle Saxon's *Laffite The Pirate* at an early age. Illusions of discovering Jean Laffite's lost treasure infected Gary's brain. This led him to the Laffite Study Group around 1973. He still has all of that correspondence and Pam Keyes very generously shared a lot of information. Fretz always wanted to know what happened to the Laffites (initially for treasure hunting reasons) and he has enjoyed his membership in the Laffite Society immensely even though he is unable to attend the meetings.

Fretz has cruised and explored the jungles of South America and almost every major island between Grenada and the Bahamas. Two cruises of the Eastern U.S. coast were completed with frequent stops at historical sites. At age 17, Gary's father allowed him and three high school buddies to take the family yacht for a two week cruise over the Christmas holidays. Captain Fretz had read somewhere that Smuggler's Cove on Cat Island (Mississippi) was one of Renato Beluche and Dominique Youx's favorite anchorages. This treasure-hunting voyage was planned over a period of four months with the precision of a commando raid. A primitive Garrett metal detector was obtained. An 1855 nautical chart was studied to determine where the drifting sands would have been in the Laffite era (and where the treasure would be buried). Fretz navigated the yacht to this snug harbor in record time and commenced the search. But all the adventurers found were 1,000,000 mosquitoes, 72 aluminum can pop tops, lovely sand dunes covered in sea oats, a lot of fun drinking beer at night, horseshoe crabs and hungry raccoons (the island was discovered by French explorers who had never seen a raccoon before; hence the name "Cat Island"). Nevertheless Fretz did not lose his interest in treasure hunting. He researched some shipwrecks off the Florida coast and dove the wreck of the 1715 Spanish treasure ship "Nuestra Senora de las Nieves" in 3' visibility waters. Some minor (worthless) objects were recovered and Fretz is probably lucky to be here as this area is near the recent shark attacks that have been in the news.

Trained as a stunt plane and bush pilot, Fretz flew his Citabria 7ECA to the Gulf Coast many times to survey the beautiful islands off Mississippi.

In 1993 Fretz founded what has become the U.S.'s largest sailing yacht brokerage. This is fortunate because he has been diagnosed (by his wife) with a serious mental affliction: an addiction to owning different boats and yachts and he has owned over 35 of them. At this time, the Fretz Fleet includes two motor vessels, 3 sailing boats and one Chapman pirogue (the "Roll-Royce" of pirogues that any Baratarians would guard with his life).

Fretz has read over 5,000 books (all non-fiction with history being the favorite subject) and he writes a monthly column for a local nautical publication (for three years) called "Titillating Trivia". This is a cross between "Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not!"
and "News of the Weird" with a nautical-historical theme.

Fretz is married to the former Mary Elizabeth Blouin of New Orleans and Thibodaux (formerly Marketing Director for Oak Alley Plantation and Jax Brewery) who comes from a long line of sugar cane planters (Nottoway, Catherine Plantation, and Bush Grove Plantation). They reside on the water in Ft. Lauderdale and have a cat named Joey who is Supreme Exalted Ruler of the house.

Other interests/affiliations:

-- Member of Southern Yacht Club (New Orleans since 1970), Lauderdale Yacht Club and the U.S. Naval Institute. Formerly a member of Houston Yacht Club, St. Katherine's Yacht Club (London, England), Chicago Sailing Club, Tulane Flying Club.

-- U.S. Coast Guard 50 ton Captain's license (expired), licensed and bonded Yacht and Ship Broker (Florida) and licensed real estate salesperson/business brokerage in Florida.

-- Owns worldwide license for "Earl the Dead Cat" (www.earlthedeadcat.org) who has been on the Tonight Show twice. Fretz has produced video infomercials and donates 5% of the gross sales of this business to the Louisiana SPCA.

-- Owns a plantation raising teak and rosewood in Costa Rica (the world needs more trees!).

-- Student of Guy Findlay and Vernon Howard.

-- Invented "Top Gun Sprayshield" in use on some racing sailboats.

-- GF and his father founded Ruth's Chris Steak Houses of Florida.

-- Taught Beginning and Intermediate Coastal Cruising at an American Sailing Association accredited school.

-- Has lived and worked in New York City, London, Houston, Chicago and Florida.

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