LAFFITE’S MEN

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Being a member of The Laffite Society (somewhere between the “t’s” and “f’s” of it all), and having sailed as an officer in the American Merchant Marine, and having worked a great deal with that ethnic section of the fleet known as Cajuns, I am offering my personal insight into the type of persona Jean Laffite’s crews projected.

Due to publication limitations, this essay will cover a projection of Laffite’s seamen only, thus leaving the officers, cooks, and others for a later date. It should be noted that not all of Laffite’s manpower at sea was Cajun or any other French origin. But, noting the list of captains’ names that has been offered and, knowing first hand of the modern day preference of Cajun crewing, it would suffice to say that Laffite’s force at sea was largely of such heritage.

There is a saying, “The more things change, the more they stay the same”. Just as one of Laffite’s young deckhands may have whiled away the slow days with a squeeze-box, sitting next to a cannon, a present day young Cajun seaman would do the same with a “walk-Man” and a Playboy sitting by the towing winch.

Those who say the Germans can do nothing without music might note that the Huns may have picked this up from their French neighbors. The love of music by the Cajun seamen is deep, perhaps as it may be with others. However, there must have been nothing more soothing or inspiring that the sound of a fiddle’s tune as the shot and wood flew through the sea breeze of a Laffite vessel.

My personal experience with Cajun seamen showed an “off-an on” work attitude. The “on” individuals were those who would give the term “workaholic” a bad name. The “off”, however, were completely hopeless for on-board production and would often get fired from one vessel and re-hired on the next vessel of the same company. The “on” that sailed for Laffite’s captains probably showed a great pride in their work, whether a powder boy or a cannoneer.

I would not think religion was a huge item with the Laffite seamen, being that superstition ruled the day. And, this continues to the present day. The average layperson would not even begin to imagine some of the modern day superstitions. One that still prevails (and very strongly) is that which holds that no intelligent man would set sail with a black sea-bag or suitcase. This is in line with the fact that some vessels carried a coffin (painted black), and that such was all that was needed aboard (be it box or bag) for that particular department.

An even quirkier superstition involved the riding of a broom. This is more of the Mojo thing and normally cooks can fill an interested individual in on that one, it being a rather aggressive type of home-grown curse.

One can generally understand research that showed a concern by Laffite over the alcohol consumption by his boys. With the abrupt unpredictability of a prize popping over the horizon, versus the unsteady hand of a cannoneer, or the foggy brain of a helmsman, one might indeed take note of Laffite’s ploy of smuggling black powder in wine casks as a practical idea.

I offer this last conjecture on Laffite’s deckhands and seamen. Before virtually trapping my company’s home office for a measly trainee-mate’s position (the trailing rung of the officer’s ladder), I worked the deck alongside the Cajuns of contemporary times. I have observed that there is a love, a strong love, of conspiracies. Whether it be as a participant or that
of mere awareness of "goings-on", Cajuns are as readily engrossed in conspiracies as many women (and men) are with gossip. I do believe that Ian Fleming wronged the world when he did not give his main character the name of Jean de'Bon!

If one were to believe that the seamen are bad enough with this thirst for intrigue and midnight moves, imagine walking up into a plunging vessel's wheelhouse, preparing to take the watch and wondering what little surprises are waiting with the silent, brooding Cajun captain at the wheel.

Perhaps my next essay should cover the cooks!!!