LEGEND OF JOHN McGAFFEY’S GOLD
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There was little or nothing about the Sabine Pass of southeast Texas to attract the attention of the earliest settlers. A five-mile long tidal inlet at the state’s eastern extremity, it was the common boundary between Louisiana and Mexican Texas, a water route which drained 30,000 square miles of land via the Neches, Angelina, and Sabine Rivers. On the western bank, there was an endless expanse of treeless marshes, of value only for cattle grazing. The only boon which might attract the cotton farmer were the two fertile, seven-mile long marsh ridges of high land, but their worth for human habitation was correspondingly reduced by the lack of firewood and building material.

Despite its unattractiveness for settlement, Sabine Pass had long been a crossroads of history dating back to the Attakapas Indians. Due to the abundance of sea food, marsh fowl, and alligators, the stone-age tribesmen spent the summer months encamped on the ridges. Their successors were the pirates of Jean Lafitte, who often sought temporary refuge or fresh water in the Pass, or slave traders such as John, Rezin, and James Bowie, who smuggled their African chattels overland or by sea from Galveston Island to Louisiana. In effect, Sabine was solely a haven for every freebooter afloat or every outlaw astride until 1832, the year that a Yankee adventurer, John McGaffey, settled there.

A fourth generation American of Scot descent, McGaffey was born in Sandwich, New Hampshire, on May 28, 1787, and was the son, grandson, and nephew of several American Revolutionary fighters. After marriage, he settled at Circleville, Ohio, where his wife and 16-year-old daughter died during a smallpox epidemic in 1822. Crushed by their loss, the pioneer left Ohio with a surviving daughter, Lucy Ann, traveling first by steamboat to New Orleans, and later to the Big Woods settlement in present-day Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana. There he met and married in 1825 a young widow, Sarah Garner Murphy, who had an infant son.

The newlyweds were soon under pressure from Sarah McGaffey’s brothers to move on to Mexican Texas. David, Isaac, and Jacob Garner had already settled at Old Jefferson (present-day Bridge City in Orange County) where there were no taxes to pay and the rich prairie and forest lands were awaiting claimants. McGaffey soon joined his brothers-in-law at Jefferson, driving his wife’s small cattle herd overland with them. Eventually, Sarah McGaffey’s parents and siblings all resettled in Texas, where brothers David, Isaac, and Jacob fought at the Battle of San Antonio, brother-in-law Claiborne West signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, and brother-in-law Ben Johnson fought at San Jacinto.

In September 1826, McGaffey and his family were enumerated in one of the earliest censuses, when the alcaldes of Liberty hoped to unite the Atascocita District with Stephen F. Austin’s colony at San Felipe. Copies of McGaffey’s letters to the Father of Texas can still be found among the Stephen F. Austin Papers.

John McGaffey was foresighted enough to realize that Sabine Pass would eventually become the shipping terminus for a vast cotton commerce floated south along the Neches and Sabine waterways. During spare moments he hewed logs, which he then shipped by yawl boat from Jefferson to Sabine Pass, and he soon began construction of a comfortable cabin, chinking the log crevices with moss and clay. His new home on Front, or Shell, Ridge soon completed, he moved his young family and cattle herd there in 1832. His closest neighbor resided twelve miles away at Johnson’s Bayou, Louisiana.

Those were lonely years on Front Ridge for John and Sarah McGaffey. Their cabin was located three miles from the Pass, the only route that a traveler might use, and a visitor bearing news of the outside world was rarely seen. The couple became the parents of seven children, but only two, Neal, born in 1837, and Mary, born in 1840, were destined to reach adulthood.

The family and their two slaves grew patches of corn, sweet potatoes, cotton, and other produce, and McGaffey kept a barnyard filled with chickens, sheep, hogs, milk and prairie cows. Geese, ducks, deer, panthers, and black bears abounded in the neighboring sea cane marshes, where large packs of prairie wolves also roamed. McGaffey spent much of the winter months on the beaches, where he sawed up drift timber into firewood. Uprooted trees floated through the Sabine Pass daily and were quickly washed ashore by the tidal currents. During those earliest years land titles were unavailable, for McGaffey and his relatives had squatted in a forbidden zone, the 20-league border reserve.

After Lorenzo de Zavala acquired the
zone as a land grant, titles to land became available, and in 1835 McGaffey received an authorization to survey his league. That November, while Sarah's brothers, David, Isaac, and Jacob Garner, were en route to the impending Battle of San Antonio, John McGaffey and Dr. John Veatch, a pioneer East Texas surveyor and physician, dragged measurement chains through the marshes to stake out the 7-square mile McGaffey league. But before the Sabine settler could reach Nacogdoches with his surveyor's field notes, the battle was in progress and the Nacogdoches land offices had closed.

In 1838 he was granted a patent by the Republic of Texas, only to have it contested by a Texas veteran's bounty claim located within the league. The claim, however, proved to be one of many counterfeit land certificates which clouded land titles in Southeast Texas for most of a decade, and it was 1845 before McGaffey was finally granted a clear patent, signed by President Anson Jones.

In 1836 the McGaffeys were startled one day by a band of men who had the appearance of pirates, but who were actually part of a slave ship's crew. An Englishman, Captain John Taylor, had sailed the brg "Elizabeth", laden with slaves purchased in Barbados, into the Sabine Pass, where the ship's lookout soon spied smoke rising from the McGaffey chimney. Taylor wanted only fresh water and beef to feed his cargo and crew, and McGaffey quickly rounded up a number of steers which he sold to the slaver captain.

The "Elizabeth" remained anchored at Sabine for three months, during which time her owner moved his chained slave coffles overland to Nacogdoches and San Augustine. When the brg finally sailed, Taylor steered for Galveston Island where he hoped to sell the remainder of his cargo.

During the 1830s, the Sabine pioneer began pooling his marketable cattle herd each year with those of James Taylor White, Christian Hillebrandt, and other southeast Texas ranchers, traveling the lonely and unsung Opelousas Trail to New Orleans. It was a dangerous trip of two months duration, for thirty or more streams had to be forded or swum, with usually a 10% herd loss due to drowning or irretrievable bogging of steers. At first McGaffey drove from 200 to 300 heads annually, which he sold at from $10-$12 each in gold. Gradually the size of his trail herd increased, and by 1848, the year of his death, the cattleman branded 1,500 calves and drove 900 head to market, which he sold for $9,000. Sometimes he made the return journey from New Orleans overland, but if he needed to purchase a sizable quantity of supplies, he would sell his horses and book passage on a cotton schooner bound for the Sabine Pass.

About 1835 a stranger knocked at the McGaffey door one night. He was afoot, dressed in threadbare garb, and asked for food and lodging for the night. Although the stranger wore a pistol, he did not appear to be a man of violence, and with typical rural cordiality, McGaffey offered him the best accommodations that his frontier household afforded. The stranger identified himself as Josiah, or "Josie", Carton, talked freely of his schooner voyage from New Orleans, but offered no explanation for his presence at Sabine, or what his mission or objective was. At daylight he offered to pay for his lodging, but McGaffey refused. Carton then thanked him and left, only to reappear at dusk of the same day, and again at dusk of the following day. By then his hospitality wearing thin, McGaffey was becoming apprehensive, both for his family's safety and because he kept a modest amount of gold hidden in a chest beneath a bed, and a much larger cache buried in the barnyard outside.

Finally in desperation, he accosted the stranger. "Mr. Carton, I don't usually butt into other folks' affairs, but your coming back every night like this worries me for my family's sake."

Even before McGaffey could finish, Carton interrupted with the following explanation, "Sir, I know my strange reappearances at night must concern you considerably, but I've reached the point where I must take you into my confidence anyway. Can we talk alone?" McGaffey sent the other family members to another room while Carton continued.

"Years ago me and two partners owned a pirate ship which operated from Lafittes headquarters on Galveston Island. We had just captured a Spanish plate ship off Vera Cruz after a hard fight, and she was a real prize, loaded with plenty of bullion and coins, both gold and silver, and dozens of kegs of Jamaican rum and Spanish wine. We loaded all of the loot onto our ship and were headed back, when suddenly our boat was trapped by a hurricane that ripped away our sails, masts, and rudder. For weeks we drifted about like a cork until all of our water and food was exhausted."

"We already had lost half of the crew in the sea fight, and when our water was gone, the rest of the crew broke open the kegs of rum and wine. They stayed drunk until some of them
mutinied, and we soon shot them and threw them overboard. Others died or jumped into the sea, and there was left only me and one partner and two others, each more starved than alive, when another storm drove our ship aground about three or four miles west of here.

"It was a week or more before we recovered much strength. We had guns and we soon killed a deer and some alligators in the marsh and found a pond of fresh water. The boat was still fast aground in the surf, but already showed signs of breaking up. For several days we rowed our whale boat out to the wreck and filled logs with gold and silver. Then we dug a large hole back from the beach and halfway between two drift logs. After we got all the treasure ashore and buried, we marked the spot by driving two brass spikes into each log. We then pocketed what gold coins we could carry and set out afoot for Louisiana, where we expected to buy another schooner and come back for the treasure."

"We bought a new boat at New Orleans, but before we could provision it and sail, two of us caught yellow fever and died, and my partner was killed when we were robbed on the waterfront. I was so badly cut up that it was months before I could walk again. I finally got back a few years later. That was before you moved here, but by then the boat wreck had disappeared. There were some drift logs along the beach, but none of them had spikes driven into them. I hunted for the treasure until my supplies ran out, and then I caught a cotton schooner back for Louisiana, where we expected to buy another schooner and come back for the treasure."

After listening to the ex-pirate's story, the Sabine pioneer readily agreed to accept his offer, and for several weeks they labored to uncover drift logs along the beach, many of which Carton helped McGaffey saw up and load into his wagon. Finally they gave up hope of finding anything, and at spring and the rancher's impending cattle drive were approaching, they abandoned the treasure search. But before leaving, Carton gave McGaffey the address of a friend in New York in case the treasure was ever located.

As the years passed, McGaffey looked at intervals for the pirate cache as he hauled firewood from the beach. But eventually he forgot about Carton and the search for gold. McGaffey had certainly found an alternate treasure in his cattle herd, for each year's trail drive left him with plenty of gold for supplies and much to spare.

The winter of 1847-1848 was especially rainy and cold, coupled with numerous offshore tempests and thunderstorms which had dwindled the rancher's fuel reserve rapidly. And an unexpected development occurred when one of Taylor White's riders dropped by to inform McGaffey that the Turtle Bayou cattle baron, White, planned to leave for New Orleans two weeks earlier than usual with 1,800 heads. Rain, cold, or sunshine, the Sabine settler traveled daily to the beach, which had been buffeted by the recent storms, to renew his firewood supply. And one day he came upon two drift logs partially uncovered among the sand dunes, one of which had two brass spikes driven into it. He hurriedly uncovered the buried portions of the other log and there he found the other two spikes which confirmed Carton's tale.

The site was more than a mile from where he and the ex-pirate had previously been searching. At a point equidistant between the logs, McGaffey began digging in the sand, and within minutes his shovel struck the cache of Spanish bullion and coins. He worked feverishly to fill his wagon with as much of the treasure as his mules could pull, covered it with driftwood, and started home. Upon arrival, he dashed through the door of his cabin, eager to share the joyous news with his wife, and bellowed, "Sarah, I've found it! I've found Carton's gold!"

For a few moments, Sarah and John McGaffey fingered the coin and bullion and joyously predicted their future, perhaps in some civilized community such as New Orleans. But a sobering effect quickly enveloped them when they realized that the nearest bank was 100 miles away at Galveston, and the treasure would surely have to return to the ground until such time as they could dispose of their property and herd. And March, the month that the cattle drive was due to begin, was rapidly approaching.

McGaffey had just built four cypress feed troughs for use in his cow barn, and he quickly divided the treasure, filling each trough to the brim and then nailing a cypress lid on each. As night approached, he hurriedly dug four holes, placed a feed trough filled with gold coins in each, and back-filled the holes - one located about two hundred yards to the north, two more in the old cornfield to the east and west, and the fourth in the front marsh to the south. He drove a stake nearby to mark each site.

During succeeding days, McGaffey, his slave Wash, a close friend named Lucar Dubois, and three hired hands began rounding up and penning the trail herd of 900 steers, for in less than two weeks he was scheduled to pool his
cattle with those of Taylor White and Chris Hillebrandt at Taylor's Bayou.

On the night before his departure, McGaffey urged Sarah to accompany him outside so he could show her where each of the feed troughs was buried, but she declined, stating that there would be plenty of time to worry about the gold and their future plans after her husband had returned from New Orleans. John then gave her verbal directions to the sites, but she paid little heed to his words, being otherwise engrossed at that moment with a sick child.

During the week which followed, McGaffey's trail herd linked up with those of White and Hillebrandt, and the three ranchers began the slow, 300 mile trek to New Orleans. With more than 4,000 steers strung out along the route, it was no doubt the largest drive ever witnessed on the Opelousas Trail up until that year. Except for the many river crossings, which were always negotiated with difficulty, it was a routine drive, interrupted only by the nightly stops at the various "stands" along the way. Each stand owner in Louisiana made his living from the drovers, providing cattle pens, forage, and good food and lodging at reasonable rates for the night.

After nearly six weeks on the trail, McGaffey arrived at New Orleans, where he sold his stock for $9,000, paid off the three drovers, and he, Dubois, and Wash began the return journey overland. At dusk of the afternoon of May 13, 1848, the trio had just reached a stand near Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, when McGaffey, still in the saddle, was suddenly stricken with chest pains. He dismounted and sat down on a porch to rest, but soon keeled over, expiring instantly. Dubois buried his friend at the cemetery in St. Martinsville and, displaying a brand of honesty rarely encountered, returned to Sabine Pass with Wash and delivered the $9,000 in gold to Sarah McGaffey.

The loss of her husband left Sarah momentarily grief-stricken, but sheer survival on the frontier allowed little time for bereavement. Sarah soon realized what a mistake it had been to be so inattentive when her husband tried to give her directions to the treasure sites or when he offered to draw her a map.

During the ensuing weeks she and her children booked passage on a steamer to Atchafalaya Bay, Louisiana, where they leased a carriage and traveled overland to St. Martinsville. After visiting her husband's grave, Sarah bought a tombstone and had it erected on the site. Back home at Sabine Pass, she spent many days searching for the stakes that McGaffey had driven in the ground near each spot where he had buried a feed trough filled with gold. But her slave's spring plowing and the spring rains had obliterated all sign of freshly-spaded earth or stakes in the cornfield, and the front marsh was at the moment inundated.

When time permitted, Sarah and her slave continued to probe for the treasure, leaving parts of the neighboring field pockmarked from their fruitless efforts. But as the months and years passed, the search waned and eventually ceased, for the McGaffey cattle herd kept her supplied with more gold than she could possibly spend.

Sarah's children, Neal and Mary, grew up and married, and each reared a large family at Sabine Pass. In 1860 Sarah and her heirs were worth more than $45,000 in land and cattle, exclusive of any gold or other assets she might have on hand, and at the time of her death on July 12, 1871, she was one of the wealthiest women in Jefferson County.

After Sarah's death, her property was parceled out to her children. For decades an intermittent search for John McGaffey's gold continued, at first by her children and grandchildren, and finally by total strangers who brought divining rods, mining compasses, and other strange detecting devices which were used in the pursuit of buried treasure. Bill Longworth was one of those who devoted many years to the search, but never once did his shovel strike the lid of any of the cypress feed troughs filled with gold.

Another legend handed down by the McGaffey descendants related an incident when a ship captain asked John McGaffey for permission to build a brick crypt and inter a body in the family cemetery. The coffin was supposed to contain the remains of the captain's wife, said to have died of cholera aboard ship, but possibly fearing the plague, no one except crew members attended her funeral or knew for certain what the coffin contained. In time, there were widespread rumors that "her" casket actually contained a vast hoard of pirate gold brought ashore under the disguise of death.

In 1936 the legends gained fresh notoriety when a grandson of Sarah's discovered a grisly scene in the ill-kept cemetery. One morning he found that the above-ground brick vault, the name of its occupant long forgotten, had been broken open. The bones of the deceased person were strewn about nearby. Some vandal treasure hunter, no doubt, believed that he had found the hiding place of McGaffey's gold.

If anyone at Sabine Pass still continues the search for the McGaffey treasure today, more
than 135 years after its reputed burial, I am not aware of it. But there are many McGaffey descendants still in this vicinity who will tell you that it's still hidden somewhere out on Shell Ridge, in four different places, awaiting the first shovel that strikes its cypress lids.

There were two previous attempts about sixty years ago to publish the McGaffey legend as handed down by descendants, but each article contained such a volume of historical error as to constitute a different story. One writer attributed the hero's role to one "Neil" McGaffey, supposedly John's brother Neal, who was actually a lawyer and never once made the annual cattle trek eastward. Both accounts credit the hero with being an Irish immigrant, who wanted only to "go back to Ireland and build a castle." It would take two pages of type just to correct the mistakes, and it is the writer's belief that what you have read is the first account that can claim historical accuracy.