THE SHIPS' COOKS
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Author's note: this article is the second installment of a work involving an offhand comparison of nowadays Cajun, or Creole, boat men with those commanded by Jean Lafitte. My last offering, titled "Lafitte's Men" (see The Lafitte Society Chronicles, Volume I, Number 2, July, 1995), dealt with the privateer's seamen or deck personnel.

This essay concerns a section of the crew that was, although very valuable, continuously overlooked, even scoffed at. A section that surely added some spice to the lives of Lafitte and his men: the cooks.

While sailing alongside some of the modern-day counterparts of such, one word to describe them comes to mind: nosy. But not just nosy; maniacally inquisitive.

And yet, on the other side of the coin, they are the boats' walking data banks. What if something were about to change in the boat's work pattern, or the estimated time of arrival at port or destination? And, say, a seaman wanted simply to know. One would go ask the cook. Forget the captain; if he did know, he was not going to inform you - not correctly, anyway. The mate, who more than likely did not know, would act as though he did and try to gain a bribe. So one would just hope to be on good terms with the person that held sway over his daily nutriment supply, and try there.

Cooks are somewhat like cats. They seem to always just idly hang around, nonchalantly observing the world or the day's happenings. Get in a conversation over an engine room problem with the chief engineer and right around the stairway would be the all-ears cook. Have a guest or office personnel come aboard and the first person gushing forth overwhelming hospitality (spiked with "innocent" questions) would be the cook.

Lafitte's cooks definitely wore other hats, as well: ship's physician, fortune teller, lead rat killer, on-board comedian, and so on.

And one may as well throw in the fire marshal's helmet as well to these other cooks' trades. I've seen present-day chefs fill the galley with plenty of smoke and flame, while using hi-tech cookery with fire-retardant bulkheads. So Lafitte's gastons probably really laughed it up with swing kettles, fires and such, with the main stove, in high seas. And all that wood about the place!

Occasionally, one sees a female holding down the cook's position on present-day oil or cargo vessels in the Gulf. But very rarely: Given Lafitte's knack for being frequently paradoxical, he may have allowed some feisty female Creole hellcat to sail as a cook. Or, instead, given into the ever-present superstition that a woman on board was bad luck, trouble, or both.

A modern-day cook can refuse to cook in rough weather. One would think, however, that many of Lafitte's captains probably frowned on such, especially when just a few spits could be set up to give the boys something to gnaw on, while waiting for the dullard captain of the prize (he who was being chased for days) to finally make a choice of ship's heading that agreed with that of their capitain.

One Cajun cook that I sailed with while hauling construction barges through bayous and about the Gulf held the just-right name of Tattoo. Tattoo epitomized the very image of one of Lafitte's "boys" that had slipped through a time warp.

Jumpy as a cat, with subtle wisp-like moves in the galley and on the deck as well, Tattoo believed that if a person had not ever been in prison-much less jail-then more than likely that person lived in a "#$%&$% closet!" He looked at the world through a huge question mark of a keyhole. Forever interested! Consequently, the Louisiana legal system felt Tattoo should (for the sake of all parties concerned) just stay at sea. Or as much as possible, at least.
Even captains would not play cards with this Tattoo, for his fingers moved just as fast as his playfully benevolent eye. All this wizardry of the "Bicycles", peppered with a "fust" as his playfully benevolent eye's. All this "wizardry of the "Bicycles", peppered with a hard bayou rap.

If Tattoo showed a fondness for a fellow seaman, that could mean anything. But if he thought the person a "punk" (his favorite tag) or "powder puff", than he just did not like the person.

This straight-forward deceitfulness, blended with various levels of spooky or unusual moods, describes the typical Cajun cook.

"You got problems with somebody, you ride dat broom, Wil," Tattoo matter-of-factly stated one night in the galley, as he sat across the table from me.

More than half bored to death by the vessel's slowed work schedule, I looked at him and groaned.

"What are you talking, Tattoo?"

And with that I was given a short and serious lecture on witches, brooms, and how to not waste money on spell-casting booklets down at the "Quarter".

Yet, LaFitte mentions in his Journal about his concern over the spread of voodoo or black magic in the islands; so one would very well wonder as to how much control he bothered to display over its practice within his own commune.

LaFitte's cooks must have had an absolute field day with the various arrivals of captured Epicurean supplies from English and Spanish vessels. This potpourri, tacked onto the reliable flow of LaFitte's teams of hunters, fishermen and what-nots... no, one would not have seen many, if any, of his men walking around hungry.

Yet present-day offshore vessels (for reasons the main office would have considerable trouble explaining) often get down to crackers and canned food and whatever they could catch from the Gulf. For over a week. This could have-would have sent what little morale there was on board overboard.

And such it may have been with the cooks within LaFitte's fleet. One moment moodily stirring the on-board cauldron and the next preparing to come along the prize with knife and meat-ax in hand.

One last note on Tattoo le gaston... He was the only person I have ever seen do a "one-finger" pushup-with the other hand behind his back. And he would do it one time and only one time.

For money.