THE ROAD TO KLOTZVILLE
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Readers of the previous issue of The Laffite Society Chronicles shared, via print, in the scheduled activities of the Society's special event of June 1996, the "Plantation Tour". This article describes an experience during that trip which affected a small subset of its participants, an experience which did not figure into the planned itinerary, but one which nevertheless bore a not insignificant similarity to our quest for the facts of the life of Jean Laffite.

On Thursday, June 13, 1996, our group was scheduled to meet for dinner at Laffite's Landing Restaurant on the Viala Plantation, some miles southeast of Donaldsonville, Louisiana. Since nearly all of us were unfamiliar with the area's geography except for that superficial knowledge which a map can provide, and since the journey each way would be of a duration of one half-hour or more, most participants elected to car-pool in groups to the dinner from the plantation bed-and-breakfasts at which they were lodging, Nottoway and Oak Alley. A couple from Galveston graciously offered to provide transportation in their vehicle for my wife and I and a third couple, and we gratefully accepted.

With spirits elevated in anticipation of the extended weekend's activities just begun that morning, our group struck out for the restaurant from White Castle, Louisiana, some fourteen miles to the northwest. A quick glance at a road atlas, unfortunately - and tellingly - left behind at our lodgings, had provided us with the confidence that the eatery would be easily located. We motored south on Louisiana State Highway I in the still-daylight, chatting animatedly all the while, and arrived at the restaurant in due course.

A wonderful, leisurely meal, coupled with an interesting talk by restaurant management about the history of the locale, contributed to an evening of congenial fellowship. As the night advanced, groups of participants intermittently drifted off in different vehicles toward their night's hosteries.

And so too, eventually, did we six. Although darkness had long since cloaked the Cajun countryside, we had encountered no difficulty finding Laffite's Landing, and thus anticipated none on the return trip. Contentedly discussing the activities of that day and evening, and those anticipated to be enjoyed come the morrow, our sextet headed back in the direction of Donaldsonville - or so we thought.

After some ten minutes of driving, we arrived at a four-way stop intersection. The road crossing the one on which we were traveling was marked "LA 1", and we turned onto it in the direction we assumed was north.

Soon, however, we began to feel misgivings about our choice of route. Even after taking into account the difference in appearance that an unfamiliar road can exhibit in darkness versus in daylight, no landmarks seemed familiar.

More disconcertingly, town names on the intermittent road signs were not those of any village through which we had passed on the trip to the restaurant several hours earlier. Two of these names, "Paint Coutiville" and "Napoleonville", at least seemed to mesh with our environs - French names in Louisiana Cajun country. But one seemed singularly incongruous: "Klotzville", a German name, a name which conjured visions of a Pennsylvania Dutch settlement arising from its rightful place among the Mid-Atlantic states, starting to wander, becoming lost, and eventually plopping itself down 1,500 miles southwest of its true place in United States geography.

After some short minutes of discussion, our group decided to turn back toward whence we had come.

Secure in the knowledge that we had traveled on LA 1 from White Castle to Donaldsonville, we surmised that we had lost our senses of direction in the dark land of the bayou and turned toward the south originally at the four-way crossroads, instead of toward the north. Thus, when we again reached the intersection, we continued straight on across, remaining on LA 1.

However, this route soon seemed just as unfamiliar as did our previous one, and after traveling four or five miles, we again turned around and retraced our path to the crossroads, now beginning to lament having left our map at Nottoway.

Until this time in our trek, the group had been joking about our misadventure. Indeed, our driver elicited a collective, hearty guffaw from the other riders when he mentioned that, although he felt embarrassed to admit it, he had been a licensed navigator during a long career in the military.

But the charm of our meandering now started to wane. The clock was ticking along toward midnight, we were traversing a rural area miles from the interstate highway in a vehicle...
conspicuous for its out-of-state license plates, and the experience was beginning to mimic an episode of Rod Serling's "The Twilight Zone".

Once again at the crossroads, we tried the third of its four possible directional choices, and achieving no better results, returned to try the fourth. Again failing to recognize anything familiar along the route, we regressed to the intersection yet once more and - by this time feeling both decidedly embarrassed as well as increasingly frustrated - tried our first direction anew, hoping in desperation that during our initial foray along it, we had simply not stayed our course long enough to reach recognizable surroundings.

Suffice it to say, due to the intervening travails, our second pass through Klotzville did not possess the charm of our first.

The twists and turns of our study of Jean Laffite often bear a resemblance to those of this road trip through the dark Louisiana countryside. Certain facts provide us our main route - our "Laffite Highway 1" - but we soon find ourselves on detours and in cul-de-sacs, as our research leads us to destinations which we had no idea existed and which we are not certain we wish to visit.

The days of Laffite's Grande Terre stronghold, his hand's participation in the Battle of New Orleans, and his multiple-year sojourn on Galveston island, all are a Laffite Highway 1 of incontrovertible fact. The search for the facts of the place and date of the privateer's birth and his post-Galveston history, however, lead us through many Klotzvilles. Yet our endeavor continues, for every so often, after such an obstacle, our spirals are buoyed as we regain - at least temporarily - the main highway.

And what became of our errant sextet as one day's night edged toward the next day's morning? as we wandered with waning good humor, increasing fatigue, and mounting trepidation through the deserted and dark Louisiana countryside? through small, rural towns with foreign-sounding names, towns that had likely not changed perceptibly for multiple generations, towns shut up as tight as a drum on a warm and humid weekday on the eve of summer?

Our tale ends happily, for the group eventually found its way back to Nottoway Plantation. Despite the late hour, once back in our room my wife and I consulted our map, curious to uncover our navigational errors. Those who are interested in the unscrambling of the puzzle, read on.

Picture three roads forming an asymmetrical triangle, with one corner of the triangle pointing north, the second east, and the third southwest. Next, picture roads passing outward, away from the triangle, through these corners, as extensions of some of the triangle's sides.

On the trip to Laffite's Landing Restaurant, we had come down through Donaldsonville into the north point of the triangle, southbound on LA 1. This highway continued on to form the left side of the triangle and, afterward, became the road extending to the southwest from the figure's southwest corner.

Our vehicle had, however, branched off of LA 1 onto the right side of the triangle - a smaller road than LA 1 - and then out the eastern corner of the figure. The change in direction had been so gradual that it had seemed to us that it was we who had stayed on the major artery, and that it was the lesser thoroughfare that had in fact digressed via a much more pronounced right turn.

After leaving the restaurant for the return trip, we missed this same cut-off back up the right side of the triangle to LA 1 northbound, and continued, unknowingly, westward, along the bottom side of the figure, LA 70. We eventually did meet up with LA 1 again, at the southwest corner of the triangle, but this point lay farther south, by about eight miles, of that at which we had branched off of LA 1 on the trip to the restaurant.

This southwest corner of the triangle was the four-way crossroads now indelibly printed in all of our minds. Readers who consult their maps will find that it lies about 1.5 miles south of Klotzville and about two-thirds of a mile north of Paincourtville, at the intersection of LA 1 and LA 70, some eight miles as the crow flies southwest of Donaldsonville. (Note that Klotzville is a small settlement and is not marked on all maps.)

Thus, although we had indeed turned, correctly, northward at this intersection in our first (and fifth!) attempts to find our way back to Nottoway, the landmarks and town names indeed were unfamiliar. We had been traveling in the proper direction on the proper road, but we had not traveled that particular stretch of it previously.

Jeff Modzelewski has renounced any plans he might once have entertained to start his own business conducting driving tours of Acadiana, and sincerely hopes that he does much least damage in his present role of Editor of Publications for The Laffite Society.