"UNCLE CHARLIE" CRONEA: THE LAST OF LAFITTE'S PIRATES

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On a hot summer day in 1892, a bewhiskered old sodbuster from High Island, Texas, and a few of his cronies gathered around under the shade trees in front of the United States Barge Office at Galveston, Texas. Among the last of a fast-vanishing breed of Texas Revolutionary veterans, they whiled away the sweltering hours with tales of the Battle of San Jacinto, the Mier Expedition, and the Mexican War. As each oldster reeled off his reminiscences with clock-like dexterity, a newspaper correspondent recorded their experiences.

"Uncle Charlie, ain't you about the last of Jean Lafitte's old buccaneer band that was stationed here on the island?" the old sodbuster was asked.

"At's right!" old Charlie Cronea responded. "Fer as I kin recollect, the lasta them old cutthroats, 'cept me, is long under the grass."

It would prove to be Cronea's last trip to the Island City. At eighty-seven, he knew that life was fast ebning from his aged frame, a fact attested to by his thinning crop of white hair. But his black eyes still beamed brightly, hemmed in as they were by scraggly brows and silvery whiskers. Small of stature, he was wiry and thin, his walk marred only by a slight limp. He worked as hard as his advanced age would permit, and only two days earlier he had helped load the sailing sloop that had brought him and several hundreds of his watermelons to Galveston.

Up and down the lengthy Bolivar Peninsula, the children all knew and adored "Uncle Charlie" and rated him as tops among the tale-spinners. He returned their affection, too, and his face always mirrored an elfish delight as he spun his long yarns of buccaneers, Indians, frontier wars, and buried treasure. As he related his life story to the newspaperman that afternoon, his mind was exceptionally clear, and his bass voice fairly boomed like a tuba. He spiced every detail with exciting embellishment, pausing now and then to release a squirt of tobacco juice or punctuate his stories at intervals with some of the choicest profanity at his command.

"He warn't nuthin' but a pirut, Lafitte wuz!" Uncle Charlie bellowed. "Oh, he tried hard enough to ack respeckable - him, with his law courts, and juries, and sich, but he still never war nuttin' but a goddam pirut!"

Charles Cronea was born in Marseilles, France, on January 14, 1805 - at the height of the Napoleonic Wars. As was then the custom, his father apprenticed him as a seaman in the French Navy, and in 1818 the youth shipped as a cabin boy on a frigate bound for New York. Young Cronea performed his shipboard duties adequately but, as is typical of thirteen-year-olds, he was also amply imbued with a yen for mischief and devilment. When one of his pranks turned sour, resulting in injury to a fellow cabin boy, the captain had Cronea spread-eagled and tied to a grating, while the boatswain administered thirty lashes with a cat-o'-nine tails. Then he splashed sea water on the lad's back, causing excruciating pain which penetrated every nerve, but Cronea always boasted that he bit his lips and bore the pain without squealing. When the frigate docked in New York, the boy took "French leave" (i.e. deserted) one night and signed aboard a merchant ship bound for South Carolina.

Upon arrival at Charleston, the young Frenchman shipped aboard a bark bound for Liverpool. Cronea soon noticed that the bark carried more than forty sailors, more than double the number needed for a crew, but in his own words, he was "green to American ways" and did not question that fact. When his ship reached a point twenty miles offshore, the captain mustered the crewmen on deck and told them that a large Baltimore schooner would soon heave to alongside, in search of about fifteen hands to go on a cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. Always restless for adventure, Cronea volunteered and within an hour, he and fourteen others transferred to the waiting vessel.

Captain Jones of the schooner charted a southerly course to the Straits of Florida, passed through the Keys, and a week later cast anchor opposite Padre Island, near present-day Corpus Christi, Texas.

Captain Jones soon notified Cronea and his shipmates that they would be put ashore with their baggage and a supply of food and fresh water to await the arrival within a day or two of a fast privateer bound for the Spanish Main. The
men expressed their displeasure at being cast ashore on a barren island, but having volunteered for the mission, they left the schooner to await the rendezvous.

The following afternoon, the privateer *Hotspur*, its hull almost invisible beneath a massive spread of billowing canvas, hove in sight and dropped anchor, and the fifteen new crewmen were brought aboard. The master, who introduced himself as "Mr. Carroll," informed Cronea and the others that they were entering the service of Jean Lafitte of Galveston Island and would be engaged in privateering cruises off the coast of Spanish Mexico.

The French lad could not help but admire the graceful vessel that was to become his home for the next ten months. She was a "morphpidite schooner," or schooner brigantine, a type of windjammer that enjoyed great popularity as a privateer during the War of 1812. With exceptionally graceful lines and with cargo space largely sacrificed for speed, she was square-rigged on the foremast as well as schooner-rigged on the fore and main masts, and flew five jibs and topsails. Designed either for warfare, smuggling, or slave-trading, the brigantine could out-sail anything afloat, tack to within two degrees of the wind, and in the salty jargon of that age, bore the appearance of having "all wings and no feet." Flying the colors of New Cartagena (Colombia), the warship fairly bristled with six guns, "a long Tom aft, two cannonades on each side, and a bow chaser on the forecastle."

Shorn of his alias, "Mr. Carroll" proved to be Captain James Campbell who, in a cutthroat camp otherwise filled with conspirators, carried the unsavory distinction of being Lafitte's topmost lieutenant. He was entrusted with the corsair chieftain's innermost secrets and special missions to New Orleans, and often sat as judge of Lafitte's admiralty court. Likewise, he was one of only a few of the pirate's fifty ship captains who willingly abided by the international rules for privateering.

At the opposite pole stood Captain George Brown, a notorious renegade who attacked American merchantmen and Spanish galleons with equal gusto. Following one such affray offshore from Sabine Pass, Texas, the American cutter "Lynx" drove Brown's warship ashore, and in October 1819, after he and his crew traveled overland to return to Galveston, Lafitte, fearing reprisal, watched as the condemned Brown swung from a yardarm in Galveston Bay.

For most of the next eight months, Campbell's swift vessel cruised along the Mexican coast, taking one Spanish prize after another. If a potential victim were not identifiable, the privateer fired a bow shot, which was a signal to heave to for boarding, and then sent a boat and armed crew aboard. If the captured ship were Spanish, the pirates carefully searched for bullion, coins, stores, gunpowder, and especially tobacco, which was always a rare luxury. The Spaniards were taken aboard the privateer and later freed somewhere along the Mexican coast. The prize ship was then usually either scuttled or burned, but occasionally a prize crew sailed the victim to Galveston.

"Sometimes a Spaniard showed fight," Uncle Charlie remarked, "and our gunners soon poured round shot arter round shot aboard till a white flag went up. Man, you shoulda heered thim divils squeal for us to halt the firing. Lotsa folks figgured we used to cut throats and make the captive Spaniards walk the plank, but that'sa lie! I never seed a single man murdered while I was with Campbell!"

When the decks were cleared for action, Cronea's assignment was to bring fresh water topside and fill barrels with sea water in case of fire. One day he was racing across the deck, when he tripped and spilled a bucket of water on Campbell's feet. The pirate captain boxed the cabin boy's ears and sent him below decks. His ego scarred by the reprimand, Cronea decided to desert, and when the privateer sailed into Mermentau River, Louisiana, for fresh water late in November, 1819, the youth ran away. Upon visiting Galveston Island a year later, he found the corsair camp abandoned and burned, and only the wreckage or ashes of a dozen wooden shanties still dotted the beaches.

Charlie Cronea spent two short periods of residence in southwestern Louisiana (where he also married during the 1820's); otherwise he lived in either Chambers or Jefferson County, Texas for the remainder of his life. In the frontier tradition of his day, he and his wife simply notified their sparse neighbors of their intent to marry and began living together as man and wife until the arrival of some missionary priest or circuit rider. Often a minister came only once every one or two years, at which time bond marriage contractors dutifully pledged their vows to one another. In that era, the only alternative to common-law marriage was a 100-mile or more round trip by horseback to Opelousas, the seat of St. Landry Parish, or District of Opelousas, Louisiana, or to a Spanish priest in Nacogdoches, Texas.

Cronea related the incident of his first
voting experience in 1828, the year that Andrew Jackson was first elected President. The election judge at Bayou Plaquemine Brule asked if he were a taxpayer, and Charlie replied affirmatively and tossed a 25-cent coin on the table for a poll tax fee. When interrogated further as to where his property was, he in turn queried the election judge, "And how be it that you pay taxes? Your property's all in your wife's name, ain't it?" Faced with an embarrassing question, the man relented and allowed Cronea to vote.

Cronea was living at Old Jefferson (present-day Bridge City, Texas), seat of the Mexican Municipality of Jefferson, when the Texas Revolution erupted during the fall of 1835. On October 5, he joined Captain David Garner's company of frontier farmers and, armed with old Kentucky flintlocks, musket shotguns and Bowie knives, the small band set out for San Antonio. On December 4, Garner and his men were re­mustered into the companies of Captains James Chesser and Willis Landrum, and led by Colonel Ben Milam, were soon participating in the storming of old San Antonio de Bexar as well as the "Grass Fight," as reported by The San Felipe Telegraph and Texas Register on December 26, 1835.

Three months later he re-enlisted and was nearby, guarding the baggage train, when the Battle of San Jacinto was fought. The following day he was present in the Texas camp when a member of his company captured and marched General Antonio Lopez de Santa Ana into camp.

Uncle Charlie was especially noted for his hatred of Mexico, and when war broke out again in 1846, he joined the United States Army and served under General Zachary Taylor. Many years later, he was awarded a pension for his U. S. Army service. He was also given bounty land by the Republic of Texas, and in January 1885, during his old age, was awarded Bexar Donation Warrant No. 1,153 for 1,280 acres of public land as a "surviving soldier of the Texas Revolution."

Charlie Cronea once recounted a gruesome story of the 640 Mexicans who fell at San Jacinto and whose bodies were left to putrefy on the field. He added that a neighbor lady, who owned the battlefield site, petitioned Gen. Sam Houston for the burial of the dead Mexicans, but the general did not respond to her request. Their bones were left to bleach on the prairie.

Except for the Mexican War, frontier derring-do was absent from the Frenchman's life after 1836. In 1837 his name appeared on the first roster of qualified jurors for Jefferson County. In the decennial censuses of 1850, 1860, and 1870, he was enumerated as a farmer at Sabine Pass, Texas. During those years he married twice and reared a large family. As parent and provider, he experienced dawn to dusk labor in his effort to establish himself on the harsh and unfriendly frontier. As one by one his children married and settled in the High Island and Bolivar Peninsula areas, the old veteran followed them and spent his last years growing watermelons and other produce for the Galveston market. During the 1880's, his wife died, and Uncle Charlie then divided up his more than 2,000 acres of property among his children, stipulating that he would spend short periods of each year living with each of them. He drove a horse and gig about the countryside as he traveled during his visits.

In July 1892, following his last visit to Galveston, Cronea returned to Rollover, Bolivar Peninsula, to live with his daughter, Mrs. John Stowe. The old veteran was active until the following January, when he contracted pneumonia. During his month-long bout with death, Uncle Charlie wavered, sometimes better, sometimes worse, but sapped of his limited strength he called a son to his bedside on March 4 and said, "Jim, it's all up with me this time." Then he quietly rolled over on his side and died.

Two days later, ninety-four of his descendants and hundreds of friends followed the funeral procession as the young pirate who had become an old soldier arrived at his last resting place in the High Island cemetery. In his long obituary of March 6, the Galveston News noted that:

"In the death of Charles Cronea, the last of Lafitte's band, so far as is known, has passed away. Few besides him, who took part in the Battle of San Jacinto, are alive today. Comparatively few of the Mexican War veterans are now alive. As a character, Charles Cronea was unique, childlike and lovable. With his death Lafitte becomes a thing of the past."