Controversy Marked 1958 “Buccaneer” Film

From the New Orleans Times-Picayune Dec. 13, 1958 issue, "History Takes Real Walloping in Latest Version of 'Buccaneer'" by Pie Dufour:

History takes an awful beating, all done up in VistaVision and Technicolor, in Cecil B. DeMille's "The Buccaneer," now playing at the Saenger. The picture is visual proof that Mr. Anony-mous was right when he said that "history was something that didn't take place written by a man who wasn't there."

Because, historically speaking, Jean Lafitte was not there on Jan. 8, when Andrew Jackson whipped the British at Chalmette, but he's there in the DeMille version of the Battle of New Orleans and virtually saves the day for Old Hickory.

It may be argued that DeMille-or Henry Wilcoxen, who is the actual producer of the film-was dealing with a romance and a legend and that he should be allowed some freedom in the development of his picture.

Admittedly, if Mr. DeMille wished to take Jean Lafitte and weave things he might have done into the story, that would have been perfectly legitimate if there was no direct and positive evidence that he didn't do these specific things.

But when Mr. DeMille invents marriageable daughters for Governor William C.C. Claiborne and actually has one of them, Annette, falling in love with and becoming engaged to Jean Lafitte, one must say, as Claiborne would have been expected to say, "No, no, Annette!" But Mr. DeMille's Claiborne gave his blessing to this impossible match.

Shortly after Claiborne came to Louisiana in 1803, his young wife, Elizabeth Lewis, and infant daughter died of yellow fever. Claiborne married a second time in 1806, his bride being Clarissa Duralde, who died two years later, leaving an infant boy, W.C.C. Claiborne II. He was the progenitor of the Claiborne family in New Orleans today.

In 1812, Claiborne took a third wife, a Spanish lady named Bosque. Two children came from the union. One of these being Charles Cole, who died without issue, and the other was Sophronia, who would have been, at the most, a year old at the time of the Battle of New Orleans.

And yet, viewers of "The Buccaneer" are told and see it with their very eyes that Gov. Claiborne at one and the same time in 1814 had two marriageable daughters.

As for the presentation of Gov. Claiborne himself, he was made to be a gray-haired, moustached individual, apparently in his late fifties or early sixties. As a matter of fact, Claiborne was clean-shaven, had sparse dark hair and was 39 years old when the British threatened New Orleans. And he died at 42.

Jean Lafitte, according to the DeMille picture, lived in a spendor at Barataria that would have shamed an oriental potentate. It was, as far as I was concerned, Hollywood over-statement at its most extravagant. In the scene in which the British Capt. Lockyear offers Lafitte $30,000 and a captain's rank in the British navy to show the British the back (Cont. on Page 3)
There is some evidence that Jean Lafitte was inside Jackson's Chalmette line about noon Jan. 8, but he wasn't there during the fighting, which started at sunrise and was over by 8:30 a.m. Accordingly, Lafitte's battlefield exploit in the movie is purely imaginary.

But his Baratarians were there, at least some of them, under the leadership of Dominique You, who handled an artillery battery superbly. And, what's more important, Lafitte supplied much needed flints and powder for Jackson's infantry. Jackson, himself, is witness to this, for he wrote of Lafitte's offer to join the Americans:

"I was advised that the Baratarians had flints and some arms, and were willing to surrender themselves and all their supplies on condition of promise of pardon on good conduct. I directed Mr. Livingston, my voluntary aid, to accept them, and give the pledge."

To give an idea of development costs, total cost of improving the JLNHP's Barataria Unit is estimated at $3,926,000 in the park's developmental concept plan. This includes nature trails, canoe put-ins, parking, an amphitheater, picnic areas and bridges.

TRIVIA: In the 1958 movie, "The Buccaneer," who said the following:
"Death! Hah! When it comes... spit in its eye!" (Answer in next issue)