The Houma Indians and Jean Laffite

By Janel Curry

The Houma Indians have inhabited the coastal marshes of the Mississippi River delta since about 1800. (1) Their occupation of this area, which ranges from Bayou DuLarge in Terrebonne Parish to as far east as St. Bernard Parish, accounts for a great deal of the tribe’s oral history and folklore about Jean Laffite and his men. In fact, the Barataria region is at the center of Houma territory and until recently was a major hunting, fishing and trapping ground for the tribe.

According to the Houma oral history, two of Laffite’s men married into the tribe during the late 1700’s or early 1800’s. The first of these, named Solet, accounts for the present-day Houma family of the same name. The other, Jean Naquin, was said to have arrived at Isle de Jean Charles, the most isolated Houma settlement, "from the south, up through the swamp," implying a connection with Laffite’s Baratarians.

The Houma folklore that has survived to the present day can be divided into two general categories: treasure stories and the Houma relationship to Jean Laffite. The treasure stories are very typical and are of a genre by no means peculiar to coastal Louisiana; they contain two almost universally repeated elements. The first is that the person who volunteers to guard a treasure is killed and buried with it. The second is that while a treasure is being dug up, silence cannot be broken or the treasure will sink back into the ground. Whitney Billiot related the following concerning the first practice:

"They buried money like that. When they came to bury money, they asked who wanted to take care of the money. Whoever said they wanted to take care of the money, they’d kill him and bury him with it. They would bury him there. That’s why they say a 'spirit has money' -- I don’t know. That person knew that he was going to be killed I guess. Laffite and his gang; it was them who buried the money. They stole and buried is what I heard." (2)

Many of the Houma claim to have participated in treasure hunts, almost all of which ended with the silence broken and the treasure returning to the earth. In one such instance several people used a divining rod to locate a treasure. As they started to dig, they heard and felt a spirit move toward them through the tall grass as the wind fell silent. Soon their shovels struck something hard -- but fear overtook one of the party, who broke the silence, whereupon the treasure sank back into the ground and the spirit dissipated. They continued to dig several feet deeper, but found nothing.
The oral history concerning the relationship of Laffite to the Houma tribe is not as extensive as the treasure lore; several of the stories are in fact quite unique. One such story related that Laffite came into Houma country looking for Indian treasure. Another tells the tale of Laffite and his Houma bride and how they named the bayous of Terrebonne Parish:

"Jean Laffite was married to an Indian, and her name was Marie. And when they had their first child, they asked, 'What are we going to call our son?' She said she didn't know. 'Well,' he said, 'We're going to call him Terrebonne.' He passed here [Terrebonne Parish], and he was a pirate. He stole money and killed people. Then the Indians went there to Caillou [stone], and they found a stone, a small stone. This place, they [Marie and Laffite] said, 'we will call Caillou.' And they said, 'We will call this Grand Caillou.' Then, they went to Bayou Dularge and found a bayou larger than the ones here. So they called it Bayou Dularge. And all these are in the parish of Terrebonne. That's why they gave those names; it was the Indians who went from place to place and gave the names to the places. And Dulac was between two lakes, so they named it Dulac." (3)

These stories are but a sampling of the many kinds of Laffite stories that are preserved in the folklore of the Houma, some of which are typical of the Gulf region and others with a unique Houma flavor.

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[Ed. note. Ms. Curry has been researching the culture history and folklore of the Houma tribe since 1977, including a year's fieldwork at Dulac, La., under the auspices of the Mennonite Central Committee. She is currently a graduate student in geography at the University of Minnesota, and is author of "A History of the Houma Indians and Their Story of Federal Nonrecognition" in American Indian Journal, vol. V, no. 2 (February, 1979), 8-28.]