

# A Journey to Fort Griffin in 1876

*W. L. Evans, in Dallas News, March 7, 1924*

When the writer was in his youth he induced an extensive producing company of the North to bid for patronage from this State, with himself as interventor. And, following the connection, the director of agencies dictated his "once-a-week," in which he suggested: "We hope you may, if it should be considered rational, make your way to Fort Griffin in the West and prevail upon the post trader to look to us for his supplies of our kind."

I began looking for company to make the drive, when friends sought to dissuade me. But I had played hide and seek with the Comanche until my anxiety concerning him was no longer acute.

Having become impatient to be gone, I availed myself of a fleet roadster and, with my best eye open to companionship, I drove to Fort Worth. The second day I drove to Weatherford, where I found several from Griffin and one wanting company for the return. And, with his mount trailing after my buggy, we brove to Jacksboro (old Fort Richardson). The fourth day we made old Fort Belknap, banished when Griffin came, leaving an isolated family to comfort the traveler who would find Griffin.

On the fifth day we covered fifty miles of wilderness over roadways strewn with carcasses of the buffalo, a slaughter by the professional hunter for the hide, leaving the sweet-flavored beef in the desert.

I found the post trader most amiable and, having partaken of his exceptional entertainment which included the serving of buffalo sirlions for three days, he told me: "You are the only drummer and a boy, who has ventured to a discovery of me or Griffin—to where the Indian will have crossed your trail before it is cold, and your coming will not have been in vain."

I became interested in the two seasons' supply of the buffalo hides taken from the hunter for supplies to the approximate value of \$200,000. Fifty thousand and sun-dried skins were in vast piles for transport. I was ready for com-

pany for 100 miles homeward journey when a young man showed up whose favorite horse had strayed, and which he hoped to find near Belknap. And, with his dapple tracking my roadster, we made the drive to within five miles of the old fort where he mounted Dapple to find his horse, saying he would join me for the night. I had our suppers delayed, but he never came.

The cock was crowing with the dawn of a risen day when there came two men saying that my companion was a sacrifice to the red skins, while mine had been a close call. The two had witnessed the attack with my buggy a mile distant.

Following the trip to Griffin, I visited a climate where furs were in demand. I advised furriers of the accumulation I had seen in the South, secured in winter when the bison had drifted, and the post trader was relieved of his abundance, the greatest of which there was a record, and without precedent from the South. A train of wagons, each driver with his carbine, was sent for bison product.

When back at old Dallas, each of the boys who would have dissuaded me from my venture to the land of the red man and the bison, on hearing of my narrow evasion of a savage contact, was provoked to observe: "I told you so." The drive to Griffin was in 1876.

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# Vindication of Jean Lafitte

*John Warren Hunter, in Hunter's Magazine, 1911*

As the name of Lafitte is inseparably connected with the early history of Texas, and as our historians have persisted in holding him up to the public gaze as a pirate on the high seas; in justice to truth, and in refutation to the slanders that have been heaped upon a man who, in time of the Nation's greatest peril, proved himself a soldier and a patriot, and by his loyalty and sacrifice won the friendship and admiration of the hero of New Orleans—General Andrew Jackson—this chapter is offered the intelligent reader. It will distress the average Texas youth to learn that Jean Lafitte was not a pirate in any sense of the word. He was not even a sailor, but a French blacksmith who emigrated from Bordeaux, France, to New Orleans, at which latter place there were people living as late as 1866 who remembered seeing him plying the useful hammer in his shop at the corner of Bourbon and St. Phillip streets. He did not know enough of the art of navigation to manage a sail boat and was never at sea but twice in his life—once when he came from France, and again, when flying from the odious name of pirate, he and all his possessions went down in the Gulf of Mexico.

At the beginning of the last century, when the signal success of the American Revolution, aided by the subsequent prosperity and orderly government of the young republic, had set half the world revolutionizing, the American colonies of Spain were deep in the great business of "throwing off the yoke." As one mode of warring against the mother country, letters of marque were granted to the new government to adventure of every nation. In the long wars between France and Spain and between France and England privateering commissions were sold by the French, and granted by the English, to all applicants. And thus it was that, during the greater part of the first fifteen years of the nineteenth century, the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea and adjacent waters swarmed with privateers waging a comparatively safe

and most lucrative war on the the industries of mankind.

The Bay of Barrataria, forty miles below New Orleans, afforded safe anchorage for small vessels and into which large ships could not enter, became the rendezvous, the headquarters, and the grand depository of these privateers, or, in other words, these licensed pirates, as they were called in that day. Thither were brought the rich spoils taken from Spanish argosies, gold and silver taken from Spanish galleons, the cargoes of heavy laden Indiamen, the spoils of all nations. There the wounded privateersmen healed of their gashes and found rest and repose from their toils and battles. Thither resorted the traders of New Orleans and Natchez to buy, at their own price, the costly plunder of the world's commerce, which was conveyed to New Orleans and other points under a show of secrecy, to be sold on a scale of profit that laid the foundations of many a great estate.

Into this trade Jean Lafitte and his two brothers, Pierre and Dominique, were seduced. They removed to Barrataria, where Jean, by his tact, talents and energy, at length became the leading man and ruled the whole body of freebooters with an authority rarely disputed, and when disputed, enforced by the silencing argument of the ready pistol. For the accommodation of the men a number of huts and houses had been erected, which were defended by some rude fortifications and a battery mounting several pieces of cannon. There for some years the Lafittes lived and flourished, enriching the traders of New Orleans, damaging the legitimate merchant, and defrauding the revenue of the United States. We must not judge the deeds of these men by the moral feeling of the present; else it were hardly creditable to the fame of Edward Livingston, the ablest lawyer of the southwest, and one of the ablest men in the Union, that he was long the legal adviser of the Lafittes and aided them essentially at critical times.

It so happened that the very time of

which we are writing, was a very critical one for Jean Lafitte. Either the regular dealers of New Orleans had remonstrated so vigorously against the illegal traffic the government was compelled to take measures for its suppression, or, as many assert, the fabulous wealth that was supposed to be stored at the "Pirate's Home" was a prize they were resolved to seize. Dominique Lafitte had already been arrested and was in irons in a New Orleans prison. Governor Claiborne had offered a reward of \$500 for the arrest of Jean Lafitte, who in turn offered a prize of \$1,500 for the arrest of Governor Claiborne. Commodore Patterson, naval commander of the station, was fitting out an expedition at New Orleans for the purpose of breaking up the settlement at Barrataria and seizing all the goods and persons found there. Jean Lafitte was in sore perplexity. War was raging between Great Britain and the United States. The British held Pensacola and their fleets commanded the Gulf. They were planning the capture of New Orleans and in their attempt to take that city, who could be of more service to the British cause than Jean Lafitte, the so-called Pirate? They would seduce the pirate chief with British gold!

At the moment of his direst perplexity, on the morning of September 3, 1814, Lafitte was aroused on hearing the signal guns of the British sloop-of-war, *Sophia*. Those guns brought the whole settlement, 200 persons or more, to the beach. Lafitte ordered out his boat and proceeded, rowed by four men, to the shallow strait that formed the entrance to the harbor, where he beheld, not without astonishment, an armed vessel showing the British colors. At the same moment a boat with a white signal flying from the bow and the British flag from the stern, darted from the vessel's side and rapidly approached him. It contained three officers in British uniform, who proved to be Captain Lockyer, a lieutenant of the *Sophia* and a captain in the army. Upon coming up, Captain Lockyer called out and asked if Mr. Lafitte was at home. Puzzled at the proceedings, Lafitte replied that that individual could be seen on shore at the settlement, and invited

the officers to accompany him to Mr. Lafitte's quarters. On the way across the harbor, however, he announced himself as Jean Lafitte, whereupon Capt. Lockyer handed him a package directed to "Mr. Lafitte" which, Capt. Lockyer stated, was an important communication from the British government. Lafitte cautioned them to conceal the object of their mission from the men on shore. These lawless buccaneers, it may be stated, besides being loyal in their way to the United States, had a lively recollection of a dash made upon their settlement by British ships at the beginning of the war, when some of their vessels had been captured and some of their plunder carried off. When, therefore, the uniform of the officers was recognized by the crowd on the beach, a tumult arose and they clamored loudly for their seizure. Lafitte pacified them for the moment and conducted the officers to his quarters. Before proceeding to business Lafitte, who was a man of superior address and exceedingly polite, ordered a repast to be prepared for the guests. The costliest wines of Spain, the daintiest fruits of the West Indies, the fish and the game of the neighborhood, were served to the astonished officers on the finest carved silver plate, and the urbane Lafitte presided at the feast with the courtly grace that belonged to Frenchmen of that day, whether peasants, frontiersmen or nobles. The banquet over, cigars were handed around of a flavor which seldom regales the senses of people who obtain their havanas by the vulgar process of purchase. While these were discussed, the polite and reticent Mr. Lafitte proceeded to open and examine the packet addressed to him. It proved to contain four documents, only one of which we deem relevant to this article, namely, the letter from the British commander, Edward Nichols, at Pensacola and which read thus:

"I have arrived in the Floridas for the purpose of annoying the only enemy Great Britain has in the world, as France and England are now friends. I call on you and your brave followers to enter into the service of Great Britain, in which you shall have the rank of captain; lands will be given to you all in proportion to your respective ranks, on a peace

taking place, and I invite you on the following terms: Your property shall be guaranteed to you and your persons protected; in return for which I ask you to cease all hostilities against Spain or the allies of Great Britain; your ships and vessels to be placed under the order of the commanding officer of this station until the Commander-in-Chief's pleasure is known, but I guarantee their fair value at all events. I herewith enclose you a copy of my proclamation to the inhabitants of Louisiana, which will, I trust, point out to you the honorable intentions of my government. You may be a useful assistant to me, in forwarding them; therefore, if you determine, lose no time. The bearer of this, Captain M'Williams, will satisfy you on any other point you may be anxious to learn, as will Captain Lockyer of the *Sophia*, who brings him to you. We have a powerful reinforcement on its way here, and I hope to cut out some other work for the Americans than oppressing the inhabitants of Louisiana. Be expeditious in your resolves, and rely on the verity of your very humble servant, EDWARD NICHOLS."

As soon as Lafitte had possessed himself of the contents of the package, Captain Lockyer unfolded more fully the plans of the British government and set forth many and brilliant advantages that would accrue to him if he should engage in the British service. Besides the naval capacity, he offered Lafitte a sum of £30,000 equivalent to \$150,000, payable at Pensacola or New Orleans and the command of a war vessel. The war, said Lockyer, was about to be prosecuted with unusual vigor. There could be no doubt of its success. Indeed, they scarcely expected to meet with any opposition in Louisiana, the people of which, being of different manners and temper from the Americans, would receive the expedition with joy. As soon as the British were in possession of New Orleans, they intended to effect a junction with the forces in Canada, when the United States would be at their mercy. From being proscribed and persecuted, his brother in prison and his establishment in danger, he had only to join the English and give them the benefit of his intimate knowledge of the Gulf, and rank, fame and fortune were his own.

What a situation for an ex-blacksmith and wholesale dealer in privateers' plunder! Tempted with offers he would not accept in return for services he would not render!

Like the canny Frenchman that he was, Lafitte seemed to acquiesce in all that Captain Lockyer had advanced, but wishing to gain time for reflection he said he desired to go on board a vessel in the bay to consult with an old comrade in whose judgment he confided. In his absence the Barratarians, who had watched this long conference with suspicious eyes, gathered round the house and began to threaten the officers with seizure. The timely return of the chief quieted the tumult. Lafitte then politely conducted the officers to their boat, telling them on their way that they should hear from him the next morning. He remained on the beach until the officers were safely beyond the little fleet at anchor in the bay and then returned to his quarters. On the following day Lafitte sent on board the *Sophia* the following letter to Captain Lockyer:

"Sir: The confusion which prevailed in our camp yesterday and this morning and of which you have a complete knowledge, has prevented me from answering in a concise manner to the object of your mission, nor even at this moment can I give you all the satisfaction that you desire. However, if you could grant me a fortnight, I would be entirely at your disposal at the end of that time. This delay is indispensable to send away the three persons who, alone, have occasioned all this disturbance. The two who are most troublesome are to leave this place in eight days and the other is to go to town. The remainder of the time is necessary for me to put my affairs in order. You can communicate with me in sending a boat to the eastern point of the pass, where I will be found. You have inspired me with more confidence than the Admiral, your superior officer, could have done himself. With you alone I wish to deal, and from you also I will claim in due time the reward of the service I may render to you. Be so good, sir, as to favor me with an answer, and believe me

Yours, LAFITTE."

A well executed letter for Mr.

Lafitte's purpose. Captain Lockyer replied that he would return in fifteen days and accept his services.

Apart from his vocation, Jean Lafitte was an honorable and feeling man. Without having wavered for one moment in his allegiance to the United States, or having had any other design but to deceive the British officers, he began on that very day, the 4th of September, to take measures for sending an account of what had occurred to the authorities at New Orleans. A packet was promptly prepared, enclosing all the documents left by Captain Cockyer, and two letters from Lafitte, one addressed to M. Blanque, a member of the legislature then in session, and the other to Governor Claiborne. Lafitte's letters do him honor. To M. Blanque, after enumerating the contents of the package, he wrote: "You will see the advantages I might have derived from that kind of association. I may have evaded the payment of duties to the custom house but I have never ceased to be a good citizen, and all the offenses I have committed I was forced to by certain vices in our laws. In short, sir, I make you the depository of the secret on which, perhaps, depends the tranquility of our country; please to make such use of it as your judgment may direct. I might expatiate on this proof of patriotism, but I let the fact speak for itself. I presume, however, to hope that such proceedings may obtain amelioration of the situation of my unhappy brother, with which view I recommend him particularly to your influence. It is in the bosom of a just man, a true American, endowed with all qualities that are honored in society, that I think I am depositing the interests of our common country and what particularly concerns yourself. Our enemies have endeavored to work on me by a motive which few men would have resisted. They represented to me a brother in irons—a brother who is to me very dear—whose deliverer I might become, and I decline the proposal. Well persuaded of his innocence, I am free from apprehension as to the issue of a trial; but he is sick and not in a place where he can receive the attention his state requires. I recommend him to you in the name of humanity."

Lafitte's letter to Governor Claiborne was in a loftier strain:

"In the persuasion that the choice made of you to fill the office of first magistrate of this state was dictated by the esteem of your fellow citizens, and was conferred on merit, I confidently address you on an affair on which may depend the safety of this country. I offer citizens who, perhaps in your eyes, have lost that sacred title. I offer you them, however, such as you could wish to find them, ready to exert their utmost efforts in defense of the country. This point of Louisiana which I occupy is of great importance in the present crisis. I tender my services to defend it; and the only reward I ask that a stop be put to the proscription against me and my adherents by an act of oblivion for all that has been done hitherto. I am the stray sheep wishing to return to the sheepfold. If you were thoroughly acquainted with the nature of my offenses I should appear to you much less guilty and still worthy to discharge the duties of a good citizen. I have never sailed under any flag but that of the republic of Carthage, and my vessels are perfectly regular in that respect. If I could have brought my lawful prizes into the ports of this state I should not have employed the illicit means that have caused me to be proscribed. I decline saying more on this subject until I have the honor of your excellency's answer, which I am persuaded can be dictated only by wisdom. Should your answer not be favorable to my ardent desires, I declare to you that I will instantly leave the country to avoid the imputation of having co-operated toward an invasion on this point which cannot fail to take place, and to rest secure in the acquittal of my own conscience."

Upon receipt of these letters, Governor Claiborne called a council of officers of the army, navy and militia, and laid the documents before them, with the requisite explanation. The letters which gave these sapient counsellors the first definite and reliable information of the impending invasion, produced an effect as far different as possible from that which Lafitte had anticipated. Governor Claiborne asked their opinion on two