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**JEAN LAFITTE  
AND  
THE KARANKAWA INDIANS**

**DAVID B. GRACY, II**

Galveston Island, lying only a short distance from the Texas mainland, was the scene of one of the least known events of Texas history. There Jean Lafitte, the noted buccaneer, and the Karankawa Indians are supposed to have fought one another over one or more kidnapped Indian women. The conflict occupied two or three days, but which two or three is rather vague since it can be narrowed down only to within a period of some 783 days.

Early in the nineteenth century, the thirty mile long and two mile wide island was still the home of a large number of deer and birds that fed on the thick marsh and prairie grass. The principal landmark was a cluster of trees called the "Three Trees," known today as "Lafitte's Grove." Since "Three Trees" stood in a grove, chronicles do not agree as to how many trees there actually were.<sup>1</sup> These trees were somewhere between the center and the west end of the island on a ridge which stood about twelve feet above the surrounding marshes. As this ridge was not frequented by the many snakes on the island, it was the favorite campground of the Karankawa Indians.<sup>2</sup>

The Karankawas observed the encroachments of white men on their island hunting ground with mixed emotions. Undoubtedly, the red men were not happy to have intruders on their ancestral land, but at the same time, much of the material culture of the foreigners was alluring. The Indians kept "their sharp jet eyes . . . peeled for opportunities to pick up something of value through beggary, barter, or theft."<sup>3</sup>

Jean Lafitte, born in France about 1780, was in New Orleans, Louisiana, with his brother, Pierre, by 1804, and smuggled from Baratavia Island until the United States Government intervened in 1814. In January, 1815, the Baratarians rendered distinguished service to the young Republic at the Battle of New Orleans. With letters of Marque and Reprisal from Venezuela against Spain, Lafitte had landed on Galveston Island by April, 1817, where he set up a government officially loyal to Mexico.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the year, there were some one thousand men and women living in his village of Campeche on the eastern end of the island.<sup>5</sup>

From the beginning Lafitte and his men got along well with the Karankawas and the Indians came to be familiar figures in the town. The buccaneer "observed with curious interest the big greasy red men who loitered about the corsair commune on the lookout for tobacco, rum or other gifts or trades."<sup>6</sup> Noted for his wit, Lafitte enjoyed kidding the Indians around his house, Maison Rouge, but his jests were rarely comprehended by the Indians. The privateer was also acclaimed for his hospitality<sup>7</sup> which probably was a big reason for the amiable relations.

That the natives and the intruders were friendly toward each other is attested by the fact that there were two marriages between the whites and the Indians. In one of these, "Estelle, a griff of French and Negro blood who posed as an Egyptian princess and sorceress and professionally solaced the lonely buccaneers,"<sup>8</sup> was wed to Ka, a shaman with a popular practice in Campeche. Following the Karankawa custom of giving a party for the bride's clan and since nearly all, if not all, of the several hundred white men claimed this woman, the bridegroom gave a party for the whole pirate camp. Although it must have taxed his resourcefulness, Ka's festivity was a success, particularly for the Indians who danced, sang, ate, and drank. The marriage, however, did not last long for Estelle returned to the island after about a month among the Indians—discouraged with them and their diet.<sup>9</sup> The feeling about food was mutual as the red men did not care for highly spiced French cuisine.<sup>10</sup>

The second marriage, somewhat more successful, was contracted between Or-ta (Girl with Long Hair) and Nikolai, a Greek. Although at first neither could speak the other's language, their vows lasted until 1821, when Nikolai sailed away with Lafitte. The Greek later returned, but he never took his wife back.<sup>11</sup>

A final recorded instance of the amiable relations occurred in September of 1818. After a hurricane devastated Campeche, the Indians "contributed a great deal in the way of repairing the damages . . ."<sup>12</sup> For their assistance, Lafitte "exchanged cooking utensils, powder, and muskets with them."<sup>13</sup>

This was not the first time that the French buccaneer had given presents to the Indians. He often did so for the purpose of preserving good will. While the Indians would steal when the opportunity presented itself, "They learned to earn gifts by entertaining the buccaneers with feats of skill and strength."<sup>14</sup> Wrestling matches and displays of bow and arrow marksmanship seem to have been quite popular. As time passed and latent tensions eased, the Karankawas grew more overt in their thievery. Lafitte finally determined to put an end to it, and he ordered the Indians out of his community. Sullenly, they retreated to their camp at "Three Trees."<sup>15</sup>

A day or so later a party of Lafitte's men<sup>16</sup> went out to hunt deer and stumbled upon the Karankawa camp. The whites invited themselves in and committed an act of atrocity that led to the expulsion of Indians from the island. The buccaneers kidnapped either one woman<sup>17</sup> or one woman each.<sup>18</sup> At any rate, the Karankawas were too aroused to quibble over numbers.

The Indians determined to get revenge and their woman or women back. The first party of whites that the Indians met were hunting. They waited in ambush and fired upon the hunters.<sup>19</sup> The attack on his men was too much for Lafitte. He mustered about two hundred men, two pieces of artillery, and set out to punish the savages.<sup>20</sup>

The buccaneers met the Indian force, which consisted of some three hundred men,<sup>21</sup> on the ridge of "Three Trees." The Karankawas were soon driven from their position but instead of retreating from the island, they scattered and fought a guerrilla action for two or three more days.

It is claimed that during this time the Indians even communicated between themselves with smoke signals.<sup>22</sup>

The buccaneers finally managed to round up their red foe and hastened their departure from the island by firing volley after volley until the Indians had paddled their canoes safely out of range. The place where the Karankawas had left their canoes and from which they speedily departed is known as "Caronkaway Point."<sup>23</sup> After the victory there was a great celebration in Campeche."<sup>24</sup>

There is no record of what happened to the abducted woman or women.<sup>25</sup>

It is of interest to note that in spite of the diversity of accounts of the battle, most seem to reach some agreement on numbers and losses. Lafitte brought two hundred men into the battle against some three hundred Karankawas. The Indians' loss centers around the number thirty. Some claim thirty killed;<sup>26</sup> some say about thirty killed and wounded;<sup>27</sup> and others propose about thirty killed and about thirty wounded.<sup>28</sup> It is agreed that several of Lafitte's men were wounded, but there is no consensus as to whether or not he suffered any killed.<sup>29</sup> Apparently there was no quarter given.

Joseph O. Dyer, however, in *The Early History of Galveston* denies that there was such a battle and insists that the tales "like the finding of his [Lafitte's] treasure, his acts of piracy, his battles with the Carancahua Indians, and his love affairs" are legends.<sup>30</sup> This author states that the Battle of the Trees was fought by General James Long on February 20, 1821.<sup>31</sup>

Dyer is not alone, however, in stating that the battle occurred in 1821, for the marker erected by the State of Texas at "Lafitte's Grove" on Galveston Island, while crediting the action to Lafitte, also contends that it occurred in February, 1821. Agreement ends here since both Albert S. Gatschet in *The Karankawa Indians* and Jean Lafitte in his *Journal* state definitely that the battle took place in 1818, while Homer S. Thrall in his *History of Texas* claims that the hostilities broke out in 1819.<sup>32</sup>

The Karankawas returned to the island in force only once while Lafitte remained there, but retreated without a fight.<sup>33</sup> This was probably the time that Lafitte went out in search of some of his men missing on a hunting trip. The search party came upon a white man literally running for his life, closely pursued by about fifty Indians. This third party (one previous expedition had never returned) rescued the running man, Juan Perez, the village carpenter. Perez asserted that the Indians were about to make a feast of his comrade and himself when he had escaped. Directed by Perez, Lafitte and his men went to the place and found what they believed to be charred human remains.<sup>34</sup>

On February 25, 1821, not long before Lafitte left Galveston Island under United States orders, he "suggested to all those who were staying on to decorate the graves of those who had died in the battle against the Carancahua Indians. . . . They accepted the proposition I made to reduce two bars of gold into powder and scatter it over the graves."<sup>35</sup>

The hostile affair between Jean Lafitte and the Karankawa Indians

was one in a string of events that led to the extinction of the natives. After their first, and not unpleasant, contact with white men (Cabeza de Vaca in 1528), these coastal Indians, to their mind, were mistreated by the white invaders, but every time the red men resisted, their meagre numbers were reduced. The experience with Lafitte only nourished the Karankawas' hostile attitude so that their relations with the Anglo-American settlers were anything but cordial. The Anglo-Americans hated the Karankawas because of their reported cannibalism, and it was only a matter of time before their complete annihilation.<sup>36</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ed Kilman, *Cannibal Coast* (San Antonio, 1959), 182, says: "three lordly live oaks," while W. E. Hollon and R. L. Butler (eds.), *William Bollaert's Texas* (Norman, 1956), 14, says: "a collection of small trees, eleven in one group and two single ones."

<sup>2</sup>Hollon and Butler (eds.), *Bollaert's Texas*, 14, says the trees were in the center of the island while Harbert Davenport and Joseph K. Wells, "The First Europeans in Texas, 1528-1536," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXII, 138, says the trees were near the west end of the island; other sources for this description of the island are: John H. Brown, *History of Texas from 1685-1892* (2 vols.; St. Louis, 1892), I, 67; William M. Jones, *Texas History Carved in Stone* (Austin, 1958), 73; Joseph O. Dyer, *The Early History of Galveston* (Galveston, 1916), 3.

<sup>3</sup>Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 169, 174.

<sup>4</sup>Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 69; Dyer, *History of Galveston*, 6, says Lafitte did not arrive on Galveston until early May; Rupert N. Richardson, *Texas, The Lone Star State* (New York, 1943), 53.

<sup>5</sup>Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 70; Henderson Yoakum, *History of Texas from its First Settlement in 1685 to its Annexation to the United States in 1846* (2 vols.; Austin, 1932), I, 194; Homer S. Thrall, *History of Texas* (St. Louis, 1876), 132.

<sup>6</sup>Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 175.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 176; Thrall, *History of Texas*, 132.

<sup>8</sup>Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 178.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 178-179.

<sup>10</sup>J. O. Dyer in *ibid.*, 261.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 179; J. O. Dyer, *The Lake Charles Atakapas (Cannibals) Period of 1817 to 1820* (Galveston, 1917), 4. In the last named source, Dyer recorded Nikolai's reminiscences of the Karankawa Indians and their habits.

<sup>12</sup>Jean Lafitte, *The Journal of Jean Lafitte* (New York, 1958), 103, 101. Since this journal was written between 1845 and 1850, if the reader holds with the school that says that Lafitte died in Yucatan in 1826, he is forced to doubt the authenticity of the work.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>14</sup>Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 177.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 180-181.

<sup>16</sup>Lyle Saxon, *Lafitte the Pirate* (New York, 1930), 220, gives the number in the party as four.

<sup>17</sup>Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 181; Saxon, *Lafitte*, 220; Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 70.

<sup>18</sup>Stanley C. Arthur, *Jean Lafitte, Gentleman Rover* (New Orleans, 1952), 174. Dyer, *Lake Charles Atakapas*, 5, says, "The Carancahua women were very handsome, and usually the trading trips ended in battles for the possession of the Carancahuan squaws." Roy Bedichek, *Kranakaway Country* (New York, 1950), 4, states that Lafitte's men engaged in the "occasional abduction of Karankawan women."

<sup>19</sup>Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 181, indicates that the Indians were on the island at the time of the kidnapping and that they ambushed a later party of hunters, but inflicted no damage; Arthur, *Jean Lafitte*, 174, and Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 70, both contend that four of the party were killed; and both Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 70, and Yoakum, *History of Texas*, I, 197, insist that the Indians came over from the mainland to ambush the hunting party.

<sup>20</sup>Yoakum, *History of Texas*, I, 197; Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 70; Albert S. Gatschet, *The Karankawa Indians* (Cambridge, 1891), 30; Arthur, *Jean Lafitte*, 174; Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 181.

<sup>21</sup>This number seems excessively high even though all sources agree on it.

<sup>22</sup>Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 182.

<sup>23</sup>Gatschet, *Karankawa Indians*, 30.

<sup>24</sup>Saxon, *Lafitte*, 220; Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 183.

<sup>25</sup>Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 183. This is the only source that mentions this lack of knowledge.

<sup>26</sup>Yoakum, *History of Texas*, I, 197.

<sup>27</sup>Gatschet, *Karankawa Indians*, 30.

<sup>28</sup>Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 71; Saxon, *Lafitte*, 220; Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 182.

<sup>29</sup>Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 182; Saxon, *Lafitte*, 220; Lafitte, *Journal*, 118, all agree that Lafitte had some men killed; Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 71, says that he suffered only some wounded.

<sup>30</sup>Dyer, *History of Galveston*, 8.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>32</sup>Gatschet, *Karankawa Indians*, 30; Lafitte, *Journal*, 118; Thrall, *History of Texas*, 135; Jones, *Texas History Carved in Stone*, 73.

<sup>33</sup>Yoakum, *History of Texas*, I, 197.

<sup>34</sup>Captain Kearney's [the man who delivered the United States order for Lafitte to evacuate Galveston Island] Report in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, July, 1839, in Kilman, *Cannibal Coast*, 183-184. Jesse A. Ziegler, *Wave of the Gulf* (San Antonio, 1938), 17, says that the Karankawas made a meal of some six of Lafitte's men. This is probably an exaggeration because the Karankawas ate only certain portions of human flesh and they did it only for ceremonial reasons.

<sup>35</sup>Lafitte, *Journal*, 118.

<sup>36</sup>W. W. Newcomb, *The Indians of Texas from Prehistoric to Modern Times* (Austin, 1961), 65, 75, 343-345.