

PIRATE LAFITTE REALLY NAMED BOUTTE , SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA MAN?

By Vera LaFleur and Ethel Chachere (The Daily Advertiser, Lafayette, LA, September 23, 1956). Some small changes made to the original article.

Were the legendary Lafitte brothers and their partner in piracy, Dominique You, really Bouttes?

This is the opinion of J. Herman Guillory, attorney for the heirs of Francois Zenon Boutte, who yesterday was at the courtroom of the Lafayette City Hall, interviewing Boutte's heirs and distributing oil and gas lease checks.



Jean Lafitte and his brother Pierre commanded a band of pirates that operated in the Gulf of Mexico over 100 years ago. They had a hideout on Barataria Island in Jefferson Parish where they lay low when indignant American and foreign shippers got too close for comfort.

Now, there is a question as to the real identity of the Lafitte's and their Number One pirate, Dominique You. Perhaps they were not a trio of Frenchmen who came to Louisiana by way of the West Indies. There's a strong chance that they were really a trio comprised of Southwest Louisiana Acadians named Francois Zenon Routtee and two of his brothers, hundreds of whose heirs live in the French-speaking parishes of the Evangeline area.

Barataria Island is at tip of Grand Isle
(Google Map)

Guillory said he had come to believe in the course of his research that the Lafitte brothers and Dominique You were in reality the Boutte brothers. The Boutte heirs are now dividing the profits of what may be the largest distribution of mineral lease payments in the history of the oil industry. The heirs, numbering 3,287 at the last count, represent eight generations.



Ulysses Pierrottie gives an oil bonus check to W. J. Judice.

Checks were being given yesterday to members of the Lafayette, St. Martin, and Iberia branches of the family tree, including such names as Judice, Vincent and Pellerin.

Some 400 checks were given out yesterday, and eventually Guillory, a Ville Platte attorney, expects to distribute approximately 800 more in this area. Most of the heirs have been found in the parishes of Lafayette, St. Martin, Iberia, St. Landry, Evangeline, Jefferson, Lafourche, and Calcasieu, but some heirs have been discovered as far away as Canada and Australia.

About 100 heirs and representatives of others crowded the courtroom at 8 o'clock yesterday morning, when the distribution began.



L to R: John W. Roy, Ulysses Pierrottie, Herman Guillory, Miss Edith Steckler

Presiding over the thick sheaf of legal forms referred to as the family tree was Miss Edith Steckler, St. Martinville. Miss Steckler has been working with Ulysses Pierrottie of Mamou, himself an heir, and the man who has spearheaded the search for heirs for about 20 years. (Pierrottie is a great-great-great-great-grand nephew of Zenon.) As each heir was called forward, there was a general stirring and looking about. The heirs passed through the crew of clerks and lawyers sitting inside the courtroom railing.

First step toward getting a check was the identification of the heirs. Most of them had been previously notified of yesterday's distribution and were ready with certificates of birth or baptism. Some also held powers of attorney for other members of their families

2c to \$400

After the identification was made, the heir had to execute the lease. In some cases this required several signatures and addresses. Finally the heirs reached the final step in the process, and were handed their checks. Guillory said that checks distributed in the Lafayette area yesterday ranged from two cents to about \$400. Pierrottie, Miss Steckler, Mrs. Dan Robichaux, Guillory's daughter, and Mrs. Fred E. Builliard, were among those assisting with the distribution. Guillory himself has been hospitalized for a heart condition and was accompanied to yesterday's gathering by a nurse. The attorney left shortly after the proceedings began.

8 Generations

Many have worked on the staggering job of tracing and contacting the over 3,000 heirs of the Boutte estate, but the man who has been heir hunting for the most extensive length of time is Pierrottie who has been working on the case for some 20 years. The search has taken Pierrottie in every court house and every Catholic church in Louisiana, painstakingly looking through old records and files in an attempt to trace the various branches of the family tree through the eight generations.

Pierrottie, who is himself an heir, received help in his 20-year search from his first cousin, John W. Roy of Opelousas. Roy assisted in contacting and tracing the heirs after they were discovered and securing their signatures on the leases.

At one time during the twenty-year search, Pierrottie's funds became completely depleted and his only recourse was to mortgage his personal property. Seeking the advice of a Ville Platte judge, he explained the facts of the case to him. Do you play poker? the judge wanted to know. When Pierrottie looked quizzically at him the judge continued, "You have what could be likened to a straight flush, so you can hardly lose." Pierrottie took the advice of the judge and

mortgaged his property. That was in 1945, he said. Later had to sell half of it to redeem the other half. He will only be completely reimbursed when the case is officially cleared up. Pierrottie has retained Guillory to continue work on the legal ramifications of the case. Besides Guillory, other attorneys who have represented the heirs are A. H. Reed, Corwin B. Reed, Floyd J. Reed, Jack Voyles, Nilas J. Young, Dale, Richardson & Dale, and E. Leland Richardson.

Complicated History

Pierrottie was the coordinator of the activities yesterday, calling forth the heirs in turn, assisting with the execution of the leases, and periodically switching from English to French as he explained the complicated history of the Boutte family and their island property.

He told the assembled heirs about his years of research and explained that the present lease bonus checks are small. After the land is fully developed, he said, many of the heirs will receive substantial monthly royalties as long as the oil and gas are produced.

He pointed out that the entire tract is still not under lease. About half of it is still undeveloped. "But we've got a good foundation," he said Now we can really roll up our sleeves and get to work. If you are patient, and give me your co - operation, the day will come when we will all have our rightful share.

Heirs present yesterday represented a cross - section of the population. There were teachers, farmers, housewives, attorneys, carpenters.

Typical Hassle

Typical of the legal hassles and missing links involved in the search for heirs is one which came up in the courtroom this morning. Cyrus Provost, Lafayette, is an heir through one Doralice Judice, a niece of Zenon Boutte. Doralice was married to a de la Houssaye, and had one daughter. She later married Ludfroy Provost and had a daughter by him, Cyrus Provosts great - grandmother, Celestine. But the records of this second marriage have been lost, and Cyrus and his family have been assembling the proof of their claim. Their claim will necessitate a re-division of one share of the royalties, and will thus mean another delay in the whole case.

Returning to the background of the island property, Guillory explained that according to historians, Zenon Boutte was a member of the band of pirates led by Jean Lafitte and in fact owned half of Baratavia Island, where the pirates had their hideout.

Guillory says he has come to believe that the Lafitte brothers and Dominique You were in reality three of the Boutte brothers. As Guillory explained it, historians in the past have surmised that the Lafitte brothers came over to Louisiana from France by way of the West Indies. How could these men, strangers to that territory, suddenly know all the intricate and multitudinous turns and twists of the Louisiana bayous?

It is Guillory's presumption that they were the native Bouttes, an idea that he would like to discuss more thoroughly with contemporary historians. When Boutte. sold his half of the 2,000 - acre island near the Gulf of Mexico in Jefferson Parish, a tract of some 800 acres remained in his possession. Zenon died childless in 1863, leaving his seven brothers and sisters as his sole heirs.

Spanish Grant

He was forgotten until 1932, when it was discovered that Barataria Island was rich in oil and gas deposits. Research disclosed that the entire island had been owned by Nonc Zenon [Uncle Zenon], as the family called him, and his uncle, Jean Baptiste Boutte. (The two had been granted the island by the king of Spain.) The research also revealed that when Zenon sold his half of the island, there remained unsold and in his name a strip lying across the island from Bayou Barataria to Bayou Perrot 5 arpents wide by 6 miles long.

At first, the oil operators believed that Zenon's uncle and former co-owner, Jean Baptiste Boutte, was his closest relative. His descendants, numbering some 265, took possession of the strip. But further investigation revealed that Zenon had left brothers and sisters, whose descendants would have inherited instead of those of the uncle, Jean Baptiste.

When oil operators became interested in the forgotten strip of land, an extensive research of heirship was undertaken. It was established that Zenon had actually left seven brothers and sisters at his death. Since Zenon died a widower, the descendants of these brothers and sisters inherited to the exclusion of the more remote collateral relatives, the heirs of Jean Baptiste Boutte, who had taken possession of the strip.

Guillory, the attorney retained by Pierrottie several years ago to continue the "heir - hunt," explained that in 1938 about 1,200 descendants of Zenon's brothers and sisters filed a suit in Jefferson parish against the descendants of Jean Baptiste Boutte in the form of an action to try title to the disputed tract.

After a court struggle of 19 years and three trips to the Supreme Court, the case was resolved with the recognition of the heirs of Zenon Boutte as the rightful owners of the land. In the meantime, Guillory continued, some 800 of the original 1200 who had filed the suit died, leaving large families scattered in many states of the Union and several foreign countries. The problem then was to find the present heirs and their correct names and addresses so that a valid oil and gas lease could be executed and the lands developed.

3,000 Name

"After months of inquiry, a family tree consisting of over 3,000 names representing eight generations was finally constructed containing the correct names and addresses of the present living heirs. And it was to these heirs in the Lafayette, St. Martinville, and New Iberia areas that Guillory made distribution of oil bonus and trapping lease funds yesterday in the city hall, securing their signatures to an oil and gas lease for the California Company, which is presently developing Barataria Island. Distribution began on July 25, upon completion of the family tree, and to date the signatures of approximately 60 per cent of the interests in the oil and gas rights to the land have been secured. Heirs hold portions ranging from .000002 (1-500,000) to 0417 (1-24), the latter being the result of a double - cousin marriage with both sides being heirs. The majority of the checks presently being distributed is small, but it is expected that after the land is fully developed, they will be increased substantially. The entire royalty paid by the oil company will be received by the heirs. A one - eighth over-riding royalty will be paid the attorneys by the oil company itself. Barataria is proving to be a profitable island in more ways than one. Besides the oil production, the island is a rich trapping area, and a substantial stand of cypress timber

exists there. Whether the Lafitte brothers were Bouttes or the Bouttes were Lafittes is a fine puzzle to tickle the fancies of historians of Louisiana's colorful past, but Boutte or Lafitte, the fact remains that their descendants are today beginning to receive shares in a treasure far greater than their pirate ancestors ever imagined.