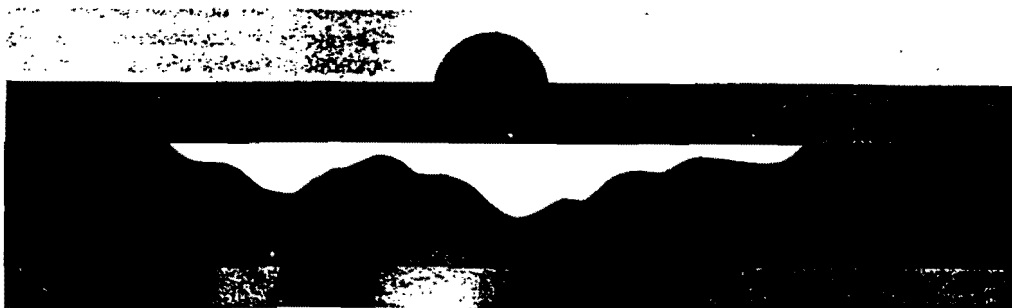


THE UNPARALLELED PAST OF CAT ISLAND

Once a pirate haunt, military experiment station, and battle site, the island promises a future as fascinating as its history.



by James J. Stettler

EVEN AFTER WE BECOME ADULTS, there is still a place reserved in our imaginations for lost islands. Cat Island joggled daydreams in me the first time I saw it on the horizon, ten miles southeast of my new home in Pass Christian.

The town is a quiet fishing village and weekend retreat of many New Orleanians. The harbor bristles with shrimp trawler yacht masts. Wiry brown fishermen haul in shrimp and oysters into strong-smelling trucks that drip ice water. Some of the more historical-minded residents can tell you that the town's namesake, Christian L'Adnier,

migrated from New Orleans to Cat Island in 1745 to raise cattle. But I later found that is only a small part of a past more intriguing than Robert Louis Stevenson could have invented.

From the yacht harbor Cat Island appears to be a blue-green line, some days nullified by shimmering heat so that it seems only minutes away. On other days it disappears altogether in the haze, like a water-bound Brigadoon.

If you sail at a leisurely four knots, it takes a couple of hours to get there. Friends and I would anchor our sailboat in Cat Island's quiet Smugglers Cove, ignorantly and happily trespassing. We

had no idea the island belonged to someone, probably because the two-thousand-acre barrier strip is a popular anchorage, attracting sailors and fishermen from all along the coast.

After a few visits that included saluting the gorgeous sunsets, idle beachcombing, and fishing, I was hooked, and I started reading everything available, learning in the process that Cat Island had belonged to a Coast family for many years.

Nathan V. Boddie was 64 when I spoke with him in the summer of 1984 about his island. He sat across the coffee-shop booth from me with ruddy

cheeks, silver-gray hair, and shrewd eyes behind his bifocals. He eyed me cautiously before he started talking. Boddie told me he had spent a significant part of his life planning the future of Cat Island, which he called "a business investment." Twenty years ago he began dreaming of a Cat Island resort complex and a causeway to the mainland. A marina, clubhouse, airstrip, and condominiums were once envisioned. Although he had offers, Boddie never found anyone with a plan to suit him and the money to make it real.

In April 1985 Nathan Boddie died, leaving his interest in the island to an estate that is not expected to be settled for two or three years, according to the family attorney. At present, Boddie's widow, three children, and sister have no plans to develop the property.

Boddie was well known in the Mississippi State Legislature and in Congress where he did extensive lobbying. In 1971 he helped create the Gulf Islands National Seashore, a federal wildlife preserve, but was careful to insure his island was excluded.

Nathan Boddie and his sister, who lives in Georgia, inherited the property from their grandfather, Nathan V. Boddie, who bought it in 1911 with \$10,000 borrowed from a Jackson banker. Local bankers had refused to finance the island purchase, thinking it foolhardy, but the loan was paid off almost immediately when Boddie leased the island to businessmen who extracted turpentine and wood from the extensive pine forests. During the turpentine operation in 1913, thirty-five men lived and worked on the island, but the loggers and tur-

pentine producers left long ago and the trees have grown back.

In 1969, Hurricane Camille, packing 205 m.p.h. winds and a twenty-four-foot storm surge, swept over the island and into Pass Christian, where it killed sixty-six people. Scars of that storm can still be seen along the Coast highway, including the foundation of an apartment building swept away along with several residents. But on Cat Island a specially reinforced and elevated cabin owned by a local couple weathered the storm with minor damage.

The cabin, a nearby canal Boddie dredged in the 1960s, and a few lot markers are the only significant evidences of man on the island. While maintaining that the island is private property, the family has not yet found it necessary to run off weekend beach visitors or campers, although both are officially discouraged. The military, however, has been allowed to use the island for maneuvers.

The interior of the island is posted, even though caretakers Matt and Cora Browning, who made the island their home from 1927 to 1961, have long since left.

After my early visits to the island and some research, I wanted to tramp over every square foot of the place. With permission to explore, I set sail for Cat Island early one morning with plenty of

water, sandwiches, and camera in hand, landing again at Smugglers Cove at the southeast tip of the island.

The cove is protected from waves and wind in three directions and hidden from view of the mainland. For these reasons Pirate Jean Lafitte may have found it a convenient way point for his ships. Lafitte traded in slaves and contraband all along the Gulf Coast, and especially in New Orleans from 1804 to about 1815. A "pirate house" in the nearby Mississippi Coast town of Waveland was alleged to have been the mainland connection for Lafitte's activities on Cat Island.

Nathan Boddie told me of finding old brick and pottery—evidence of a pirate camp on the island—but although many have looked over the years, no one has announced finding anything more valuable. (Boddie noted that legal action has been taken against some individuals who have disturbed the island.) The real treasure of Cat Island is a wide, crystalline beach that glistens along the north-south branch of the island for three miles. It is nearly perpendicular to the westward-reaching wooded area, and the two joined strips form a rough letter T, with the stem pointing toward New Orleans. The stem includes an additional eighteen miles of shoreline sand, swamp, and grassy marshlands.

Walking north, I encountered battalions of hermit crabs in the short marsh grass, scuttling a hasty retreat before my step. Each raised a heavy, shielding claw in defiance. About fifty yards up from the water line I saw weathered tree stumps spiking out of the sand with



lunes, marsh grass, and forest looming behind them. The stumps represent the tree line that existed years ago. According to Dr. Ervin G. Otvos of the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory in Ocean Springs, the island is migrating west and north because of wind and wave action.

About seven thousand to eight thousand years ago, the area of the barrier islands was a coastal plain that became flooded, Otvos says. The Mississippi barrier islands began emerging from bars and shoals in the flooded area about three thousand to five thousand years ago. Cat Island first grew southward in a parallel series of ridges and low areas visible today. But now the island and much of the Louisiana coast are slowly sinking because of compaction of the underlying layers and a one per-century increase in mean sea level, Otvos says.

At this beach, French explorers paused in their search for the Mississippi River, recording and naming Cat Island on February 27, 1699. D'Iberville and de Bienville left their deepwater ships anchored off Ship Island, a few miles east of Cat Island, and headed westward in longboats with a party of fifty-one men.

"We were provisioned for twenty days and armed with guns, pistols, sabres and a swivel in each long boat, to defend ourselves against any insult which the natives might offer us in the course of our discoveries," wrote the pilot, named Chateau, in his journal. "Soon after starting we were obliged to remain overnight on an island where we killed several chats-aux-huitres (rac-

coons). We called the island Isle aux Chats-aux-huitres. These animals came into our camp at night in great numbers and ate what provisions we had left from our evening meal." In time, the name was contracted by locals to Isle aux Chats or Cat Island.

Midway along the east beach I turned left into the interior of the island and found a narrow, rutted sand and dirt road running along its backbone. Here, where the two portions of the island connect and the road begins, a camp of Swiss mercenary soldiers gave their sweat and blood during the French and Indian War more than two hundred years ago.

In the mid-1750s, Cat Island was manned as an outpost against possible British waterborne attacks on the French settlement at New Orleans. The French governor, Kerelec, was short of troops, so he appointed an unemployed adventurer, Duroux, to head the outpost of French marines and some men of a Swiss regiment of Hawl-wyl. Duroux proved to be a despot, sadist, and crook who misappropriated the rations and pay of his men and forced them into labor to produce charcoal and garden vegetables which were exported to the mainland for profit, according to the writings of Jean Bernard Bossu, who recorded the events in *Travels in the Interior of North America, 1751-1762*.

When two of the Swiss escaped on a supply boat to New Orleans to report their treatment, they were intercepted and arrested by the governor's secretary, du Thiton, who was also Duroux's

covert business partner. Returned to Cat Island as deserters, the men were staked out naked, one exposed to the sun and the other to the vicious woodland insect population.

Whippings and short rations finally provoked the entire garrison to mutiny. One evening when Duroux returned from a fishing outing, his color guard dutifully stood by on the beach to receive him and instead, shot him dead. The mutineers left the island and several escaped to the Carolinas. Others were betrayed to the French by local Indians. Those caught were tried in New Orleans as mutineers, and records show that one Swiss was nailed into a coffin alive and then sawed in half and thrown into the Mississippi.

I walked farther west of the mutiny site where groves of sixty-foot pines gave way to orchards of scrubby, wind-gnarled live oaks draped with long, gray tentacles of Spanish Moss like hunched-over trolls wearing tattered shawls. It is a spooky, sinister-looking wood, and the old, lonely logging road seemed to lead nowhere; all of its destinations have gone to ruin. Deep in the shade of mossy oaks I sat on some remaining timbers of a 1930s sawmill.

Through fans of palmettos and low, dense thickets of yaupon shrubs was one of many quiet, clear ponds. This one was rippled subtly by some long, heavy creature, and I was reminded there are alligators and coral snakes here. A deer walked into the road ahead, stood watching me for a moment, and then crashed off into the brush.

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and not unexpectedly, there has been some wrangling over ownership.

Franklin Cuevas, 83, claims he is the oldest living relative of Juan de Cuevas and thinks Cat Island should belong to Cuevas descendants rather than the Boddies. Franklin Cuevas is proud of his Spanish pioneer heritage, and at his home in Gulfport, he has a four-inch-thick folder of historical and legal documents on Cat Island.

Cuevas allowed me to examine the papers while he explained how the Cuevas clan mounted two major legal efforts to regain title to the island but failed. The last court battle lasted six years and ended in 1968, when a United States District Court judge dismissed a Cuevas class action suit and gave the Boddie family clear title to the island.

But Franklin Cuevas hasn't given up dreaming of Cat Island. "We just want to get it back in the family where it belongs," he said.

In another area overlooking the north beach, I saw evidence of the rooting of wild hogs. According to a twenty-five-year-old map uncovered in the public library, this was the tragic site of an Indian camp plagued with disease, probably smallpox.

With the coming of the white man, the Seminole Indians, like the Cherokees and other tribes, were relocated against their will by the United States government to accommodate white settlers. In the 1850s a contractor for the government moved a tribe of Seminoles from the Alabama-Georgia territory to Oklahoma using Cat Island as a way point along a lengthy water route. The Seminoles became ill while camped at this site on Cat Island and many died. The group refused to go on and returned to Florida, disappearing into the Everglades.

Nathan Boddie had told me he also found relics on the island indicating the first Indian inhabitants lived there more than 2,500 years ago—long before the arrival of the white man. There was also a period in the 1780s when many white settlers fled the mainland because of Indian attacks and lived on Cat Island, Deer Island, and Ship Island.

Heading back down the dirt road west and across the island to the south side, I searched in vain for evidence of one of the most bizarre periods in the island's history: a secret government experiment in 1942. A twenty-five-man platoon of Japanese-Americans from the 100th Infantry Battalion in Hawaii was handpicked and flown secretly to New Orleans in DC-3s. The men were loaded into covered trucks, taken to a pier, and transported overnight to Ship Island, still unaware of the nature of the special project for which they had been chosen.

On Cat Island, a huge dog training camp had been constructed, including kennels for four hundred dogs and facilities for two hundred military dog trainers. Each day the Japanese-American soldiers would be taken by boat from their simple, isolated quarters on Ship Island to the Cat Island camp. There they were targets for various species of dogs being trained to locate and attack Japanese, supposedly discriminating by their scent. If the training worked, the United States would use the dogs to smell out and kill Japanese hiding in tunnels and jungles during the American campaign to retake enemy-held islands in the Pacific.

After the war, platoon members Yasuo Takata and Ray Nosaka described the fiasco in their battalion's newsletter. First, scout dogs hunted Takata and his comrades in the jungle and swamps of Cat Island. The men would hide until spotted by a dog, then the trainer would fire a shot and the dogs would be allowed to attack a piece of horsemeat the "Japanese" held at their throats. It started out friendly enough, with the dogs usually licking the faces of the enemy soldiers. But after being whipped to a frenzy, the dogs were trained to attack the men.

During the project a few men were bitten but none seriously. Takata mostly recalled the good times the men had fishing and relaxing on the island.

Not even local and federal authorities were supposed to be aware of the dog project, but one day, two of the soldiers rowed out from the island and bought shrimp from a passing shrimp boat, telling the curious Mississippians they were from Hawaii.

In other times no one would have taken note, but at that time, war hysteria gripped the nation. In California, Japanese-Americans were being placed in concentration camps, and the Mississippi Coast Guard units had been on alert for enemy submarines. Local officials were understandably rattled when the shrimper reported suspicious Japanese-looking people on the islands.

The experiment was eventually terminated as a failure and the camp has been overgrown by brush and swept by storms so that no trace of it remains.

Looking south out through the trees near the old dog camp area, I could see a small bay called South Bayou and a marshy spit called Good Scotch Point. During prohibition in the 1920s, bootleg smugglers used high-powered speedboats between larger rumrunner ships and the mainland. They sometimes hid in this little bay, using a system like that of Al Capone's confederates in Miami. The illegal booze was transported in gunnysacks of straw nicknamed

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CAT ISLAND

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"hams." The sacks would be tossed overboard if the smugglers thought they would be caught by the Coast Guard. Attached to each "ham" was a bag of salt and a red marker buoy. The salt would slowly dissolve, allowing the marker to return to the surface. The rumrunners would return when the coast was clear to pick up their booty, but they inevitably missed some. Years later, an occasional bottle of liquor turned up in the South Bayou shallows, surprising fishermen and giving the nearby point its name.

Continuing west, I finally came out of the thick woods and could see water on both sides of me. The western stem of the island tapers gradually to a sharp point, punctuated by a rusting metal skeleton, all that remains of an old government lighthouse.

The first lighthouse here beckoned to sailors in 1839, twenty-two years before the Civil War. An old newspaper account says the original lighthouse keeper was a Mr. Riley who died of smallpox and was succeeded by Ramon Cuevas, Jr., whose residence was destroyed by the great hurricane of September 15, 1860.

I had come to the end of my trek. I didn't plan on spending the night, although it can be pleasant enough if you are prepared. Summer evenings on Cat Island are moist, warm, and thick with thirsty mosquitoes, but in Smugglers Cove there is usually just enough breeze to keep them away.

Before heading back to my boat, I sat in the clear, shallow water at the end of the island, resting. I wondered what the future would bring here—maybe condominiums, maybe a commercial satellite launching pad like one proposed by a Texas company, maybe oil wells. Drilling is already underway off the shore of Pascagoula to the east. Chevron U.S.A. has leased the state waters around Cat Island, and in January 1986 the Boddie family leased the island itself to Chevron.

Whatever comes, I was glad I had gotten to know this place while its connections with the past are unspoiled.

Although it has been used for everything from a hunt club for wealthy sportsmen to a bombing range for Navy planes, it always seems to return to being just an island floating on the far horizon—a little bit lost and now and again found. For now, the ghosts of Indians and pirates, shipwrecked sailors and settlers can roam undisturbed. Nothing in the peaceful Cuevas clearing interrupts daydreams of the little log homestead and the sounds of eleven children; nothing on the horizon mars visions of tall square-rigged ships. ●