

# CAT ISLAND

By Ray M. Thompson • Photos and Map by Tex Hamill

**O**f the series of islands lying off the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Cat Island, seven miles from the Gulfport Small Craft Harbor to the boat pier near the center of its north shore is neither the largest, the smallest nor the closest—but is by far the most intriguing and has provided the setting for some of the most colorful incidents of Mississippi Gulf Coast history.

It was so named in 1699 by a French exploring party, who had never seen rats before and mistakenly thought the curious creatures peering at them from the trees were cats.

This roughly T-shaped isle is about 6 miles long from east to west and about three miles across the top of the T. It has a shore line of over 21 miles, three miles of beautiful Gulf beach frontage, and an area of about 3,000 acres. Its North Point is one of the most attractive pieces of waterfront property in

spots on the Gulf Coast. Cat Island has always been famous for its shifting hill of shimmering white sand on North Point which, when the light is right can be seen from the mainland and which at one time towered 60 feet high, a miniature mountain of the world's finest silica.

In the two and a half centuries since it was first christened and recorded by d'Iberville's expedition as "Isle aux Chats," it has casually welcomed and "waved" goodbye to pirates, Swiss mercenaries, English redcoats, Seminole Indians, rum runners and hijackers, World War II army dogs with their trainers and friendly Japs, and generations of lumbermen, turpentine workers, fishermen and hunters and trappers. All of them, at one time or another, came and went for various reasons, all leaving the island the still uninhabited natural paradise it is today. Cat Island is now pro-

But to get on with the story:—Cat Island's first officially documented dramatic role was in 1757 when it staged the first mutiny in American history.

## BLOOD ON THE BEACH

Although the mutineers were thoroughly justified, this did not stop the military authorities from expeditiously executing all they caught. In fact, one of them was placed in his own coffin alive and then sawed in half.

It occurred when Kerlerec, the French Governor of Louisiana at New Orleans during the French and Indian War, sent a detachment of Swiss mercenary soldiers to uninhabited Cat Island to establish a lookout post to watch and warn should any British warship try to sneak up unobserved on New Orleans through the tricky passes that led into Lake Borgne. Unfortunately Kerlerec placed in command of these isolated

## Seafood Sightseeing

(Continued from Page 7)

grading and another final in-  
s. the women hand packers go to  
work, rapidly filling the empty cans  
which are fed to them from an overhead  
track, putting into each can the required  
weight of shrimp determined by the  
scale on which each can sets while they  
are filling it. Hot fresh water and a salt  
tablet are added to the uniformly filled  
cans as they move down the conveyor to  
the closing machine that caps and seals  
them.

In this process each can is coded so  
that any customer or dealer anywhere  
in the United States can anytime pick  
up a can of shrimp, oysters or crabmeat  
and by this code trace back not only the  
factory that packed it and the grade  
placed in it, but also the month of the  
year and the day of the month.

The final factory process is the cook-  
ing—in which the cans of shrimp are  
placed in steel baskets and placed in  
pressure cookers where they remain 12  
minutes at 250° fahrenheit.

The next time you see them will be on  
the grocers' shelves of the nation bearing  
the "DeJean" label—a Mississippi Gulf  
Coast trademark with national consumer  
acceptance for well over a quarter of a  
century. ★

## Cat Island

(Continued from Page 5)



As the Couevas family originally discov-  
ered Cat Island's mineral rich grass,  
fresh artesian water and size make an  
excellent combination for raising cattle.

ficer named Duroux.

Captain Duroux, finding himself far  
from the supervision of his superiors,  
began immediately to abuse his author-  
ity by working his men night and day —  
not at their expected soldierly duties,  
but cutting down the trees that covered  
the island to make charcoal in huge  
kilns and producing lime out of the  
abundance of oyster shells—all of  
which he sent to New Orleans on the  
re- supply boat through bribery and  
sc- his own personal profit.

Only did he use them as laborers  
but never paid them their wages as sol-  
diers, and when any complained Duroux  
meted out such gentle punishment as  
ordering them stripped naked and  
spread-eagled under the broiling sun, or  
causing them to be tied to stakes with  
their hands bound behind them and ex-  
posed to the torture of the swarming  
thirsty mosquitoes.

were covered with bloody welts from  
repeated floggings, until they were  
transformed by pain and hate into an  
angry mob of desperate savages.

Then, one day, while Duroux was ab-  
sent from the island on a fishing trip  
they made their plans. When his skiff  
pulled into shore at sundown their own  
appointed firing squad, lined up on the  
beach, riddled him with bullets and left  
his dead body lie in the crimsoning  
surf.

Knowing full well the penalty for  
killing an officer the whole detachment  
rowed to the mainland and set out  
through the tangle of jungle with the  
hope of deserting to the British in the  
Carolinas and thus save their lives.

Some made it. But most of them  
were betrayed by what they thought  
were friendly Indians and were turned  
over, bound hand and foot to the French  
military authorities who took them back  
to New Orleans for court martial and  
death.

On lonely and lovely Cat Island the  
raccoons again freely foraged, only  
temporarily disturbed by the brief but  
bloody reign of Dictator Duroux. On the  
island to this day can be found faint  
traces of the camp of the Swiss mer-  
cenary mutineers.

### THE HERO OF CAT ISLAND

Over another half century was to  
elapse before Cat Island became the  
backdrop for the man who was to play  
an important role in the winning of the  
Battle of New Orleans on January 8,  
1815 by General Jackson's outnumbered  
and hastily collected army. Here is the  
story.

Couevas Street in Biloxi and a seldom  
visited tomb in Biloxi's old French Cem-  
etery are all that are left to remind us  
of Jean Couevas, who is honored in  
American history as the Gulf Coast's  
Hero of the War of 1812.

Jean Couevas and his family were  
the only inhabitants on Cat Island when  
the British anchored at neighboring Ship  
Island to attack New Orleans with the  
greatest amphibious invasion force ever  
launched by a foreign foe against Amer-  
ican soil. It was Jean's stubborn cour-  
age in a moment of decision that helped  
save us from losing not only the Battle  
of New Orleans, but with it the entire  
half of our present nation, then still  
known as the Louisiana Purchase.

Back in the 1780's Juan de Couevas  
of Biloxi received a Spanish land grant

giving him title to the entire western  
half of Cat Island. When the family took  
possession Jean was about 20 years old.

They began raising cattle on Cat Is-  
land, which thrived on the lush marsh  
grass and soon Couevas beef was in  
demand all along the Coast from New  
Orleans to Mobile. And by the time the  
British arrived at neighboring Ship Is-  
land in December of 1814, the Couevas  
family on Cat Island was one of the  
wealthiest along the Coast and Jean  
was a middle aged habitant with a  
grown family of his own.

The British, of course, with 10,000  
troops to feed soon discovered the near-  
by existence of the Couevas cattle on  
Cat Island and sent a foraging detail  
to commandeer them. Trying to protect  
his property Jean was shot in the leg  
and was taken prisoner.

However, when the British command-  
ing officers discovered the local promi-  
nence of the Couevas family, and the  
possibilities of this Frenchman who un-  
doubtedly owed no allegiance to the new  
United States, they promptly adminis-  
tered to his wound. Then they courte-  
ously offered him his freedom, full com-  
pensation for the cattle and all damage  
done, complete protection for all Coue-  
vas property and future favors when  
their occupation was complete. All he  
had to do—they suavely summarized  
— was instruct their pilots how to nego-  
tiate the safest and shortest water route  
to New Orleans. The unthinkable al-  
ternative—they sweetly insinuated—  
was continuance of the incarceration  
and further confiscation of his cattle  
and property should he be so foolish as  
to refuse.

To the utter astonishment of the as-  
sembled Gold Braid Jean emphatically  
did refuse. And so it was that in the  
crowded cabin of a man-o-war the Brit-  
ish invasion suffered its first defeat to  
a lone enemy who was not even an  
American.

For the personal courage of this Cat  
Island inhabitant in the War of 1812  
definitely delayed the enemy from at-  
tacking New Orleans until they could  
find a competent and willing local guide  
— from suddenly appearing on its out-  
skirts and finding it unprepared and un-  
able to put up that brilliant defense  
nearly two weeks later which decisively  
turned the Battle of New Orleans into  
an overwhelming victory.

(Continued on Page 12)



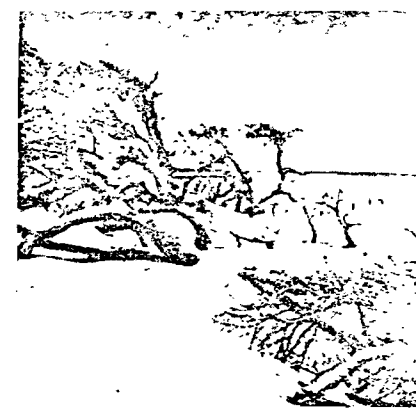
The small fry and the not so small can enjoy themselves on the children's playground



He was training dogs on Cat Island during World War II, as seen from the air. In the central cleared area were the 400 dogs, with the operational buildings housing the military dog trainers and staff at the top of the picture.



Road through the heart of Cat Island—actually there is no spot on the island that the caretaker cannot reach in his sturdy Jeep.



One of the dunes of shimmering white sand on Cat Island's East Beach which are constantly shifting their shape, height and location.



Where she is pointing are the still visible handmade brick remains of the historic camp of the Swiss Mercenaries, perhaps a baking oven.



This swamp area, with high ground on both sides, indicates how Cat Island is corrugated from east to west with its ridges and lowlands.

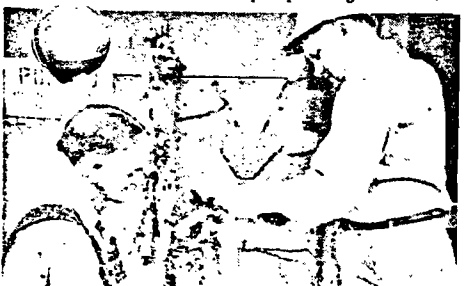
# Cat Island

(Continued on Page 10)

When the British—shattered and beaten—came back to their base at Ship Island they released Jean Couevas before sailing home, obviously not realizing how his one man resistance had contributed to their defeat.

Jean, of course, went back to his family and his beloved Cat Island to live to the ripe old age of 87. As was proper the Couevas clan continued to prosper and multiply. As late as 1844 there were accounts of the huge feasts the Couevas family used to prepare for their mainland friends—when whole beeves, hogs, deer, wild turkeys, ducks and geese, were barbecued by the dozen in the great brick pits—when food bent the table and wine flowed freely and relays of musicians played for continuous dancing that often lasted for three

Owner Nathan Boddie and intrepid Mrs. Browning, caretaker with her husband of Cat Island for 35 years, inspect a raccoon that she is preparing to skin.



days or more. Jean Couevas in his latter years (1837) sold the island to Judah P. Benjamin, who later was Attorney General of the Confederate Government, with the stipulation that he and his wife be allowed to remain and reside on Cat Island for the remainder of his lifetime.

Today, all that is left of the Couevas era on Cat Island is the clearing where once stood the old Couevas homestead built around 1812 and which survived for well over a century before it accidentally burned down in the 1930's.

## SMUGGLERS COVE

Then there were the pirates! This generation growing up has been thrilled by the revival of the movie "The Buccaneer" depicting the exploits of Jean Lafitte and his Baratarian smugglers, privateers or pirates (take your choice—they were called all three) who looted ships and laughed at the law for ten long years between 1804 and the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.

They were finally pardoned for all their previous crimes of piracy, actual or accused, by a grateful U. S. government in recognition of their patriotism and fighting prowess in that famous battle.

But while they were at the height of their piratical fame under the able leadership of Lafitte, they had depots for the disposal of their contraband and slaves all along the Coast from New Orleans to Pensacola.

One of these depots was the still standing Pirate House at Waveland just

by a New Orleans businessman to cloak his activities as financial backer and fence for Lafitte. There is a secret tunnel and slave cell in the house that once connected with the waterfront where a skiff would carry Lafitte to or from nearby Cat Island, the western end of which is almost opposite Bay St. Louis.

Smugglers Cove (see map) was so named for the boats of Lafitte that often lay hidden there while contraband or slaves were being transferred or Jean was doing business with his Coast agent. Ever since the days of Lafitte there have been reports of buried treasure on Cat Island and optimistic persons have now and then hopefully dug for it.

## SEMINOLE INDIANS

Around the middle of the last century an Alabama contractor made an agreement with the U. S. government to transport the Indians from the Alabama-Georgia area to the Territory of Oklahoma.

In order to do this with the least expense he hit upon the idea of carrying them by barge down the rivers of Alabama into the Gulf and on into Lake Pontchartrain. There they were marched from the Lake to the Mississippi River, and again transported upstream to Scotts Bluff or some other Arkansas landing place and from there marched on foot to Oklahoma territory.

This, however, was a long, trying journey—so he decided to make Cat Island a staging area or halfway stop on the route. On one of his trips with the Seminole Indians sickness broke out

Whether he used it as an excuse or was really scared the medicine man said sickness was the anger of the Spirits leaving their homeland. They refused to go to Oklahoma. The best the tractor could do was get them to go to Florida where they disappeared into the impenetrable Everglades, their boats being there still.

## TURPENTINING AND LUMBER DAYS

Just a half century ago, in 1911, Cat and came into the possession of the Boddie family for the first time, marking the beginning of the island's modern era. That was when Nathan V. Boddie (the grandfather of Nathan V. Boddie of Gulfport and his sister, Mrs. Herbert Buffington Jr., of Canton, Georgia, who now own it) shocked the plumb of his Gulfport banker by asking for \$10,000 on an open note to buy Cat Island, every grain of sand of it, from B. M. Harrod and others. The banker considered it a foolish investment, so expressed himself and refused the loan. Whereupon Mr. Boddie received the loan from a Jackson bank by phone. The local banker remarked they ought to appoint a guardian for this old man paying \$10,000 for Cat Island.

However, his conservatism suffered an even greater jolt a few days later when Mr. Boddie walked in and paid off the note with a check for \$10,500 for the turpentine rights he had just leased to Pace and Morgan, a clean profit of \$500 and he still owned the island.

To give you an idea of the timber wealth of Cat Island then, the turpentine operation boxed 85,000 pine trees



*Probably the only picture in existence of the historic Couevas homestead on Cat Island, built in 1812. All that remains now is the site and its view of the mainland.*

and by 1913 there were 35 people living on the island working either for the turpentine outfit or fishing. In 1917 W. B. Lundy leased the timber cutting rights and came in to cut the virgin pine of the island, many of them 60 feet tall, with 25 men and a sawmill with a 1200 feet capacity a day.

Then there occurred the succession of sales during which the island passed out of and back into the Boddie hands twice. First the island was sold to Senator Money who planned a biological laboratory and actually started raising Belgian Hares, neither project of which was successful, and the property reverted back to the Boddies again.

The only trace of the Money period are the huge rabbits frequently flushed

on Cat Island, descendants of the Senator's get-rich-quick scheme.

Then the island was sold again to Governor Lee M. Russell of Mississippi who agreed to a purchase price of \$25,000 in yearly payments of \$3,000, of which he completed three and then allowed the island to default again to the Boddies.

The astonishing feature of the Russell era was that the Governor refused an offer of a million dollars for Cat Island from a man named Fisher, a promoter who later, as second choice, developed Miami Beach.

There are still many sportsmen on the Coast who will remember the Goose Point Tarpon Club on Cat Island that  
(Continued on Page 20)

Boddie and writer Ray Thompson in material which Mr. Boddie is convinced in the foundations of a Spanish settlement during the landing of d'Iberville in 1699.

The never ceasing artesian well which was originally drilled for the Goose Point Tarpon Club, which burned in 1931. It now supplies the Cat Island cattle with a continuous water supply.

In this Cat Island pond can be seen the water disturbance of two alligators and a huge gar—both still present in the frequent fresh water ponds that punctuate the island landscape.



*Owner Nathan Boddie, standing on the three mile long beautiful expansive white sand beach of Cat Island points out Ship Island and Fort Massachusetts in the distance five miles to the east. Barely visible on horizon is Gulfport and Mississippi Gulf Coast seven miles to the north.*



## Cat Island

(Continued from Page 13)

was built in the late Twenties on land leased from the Boddies to enjoy its fabulous hunting and fishing. Goose Point is not only a natural harbor but is the closest sand outside the Louisiana marshes and gets its name from the blue and snow geese that come there every year between November and February to secure sand for their craws, sometimes 10,000 or more at one time.

The Goose Point Tarpon Club—a roomy two story structure with upper and lower galleries, twelve bedrooms with baths, a huge dining room and kitchen and its own electricity—was a private club of about fifty members, among them Bidwell Adam, who was then Lieutenant Governor of Mississippi. Many were the tarpon caught and many the Black Mallards and Blue Geese bagged and bragged about around a feast of fried fish caught a few hours before almost outside the door.

The popular Goose Point Tarpon Club burned down in 1931 and with the Depression gaining momentum its members had more vital worries and it was never rebuilt. Today all that is left of those several wonderful years of the camaraderie of rod and gun is the still freely flowing artesian well that was dug for the club and now serves the island cattle.

In 1934 the Boddie family came into full and final possession for the last time and have owned Cat Island ever since. By reason of the various and sundry transfers of title over the nearly two centuries, since the Couevas family received the western half by Spanish land grant, the Cat Island abstract is as thick as the New York phone book. But, paradoxically in spite of the many owners in its career the title is one of the few in the country confirmed by an act of Congress.

### BIVALVES AND BONDED BOOZE

Up until a few years back South Bayou on Cat Island was noted for its oysters, deliciously and distinctively flavored and often as big as saucers, the supply seemingly unlimited. For a hundred years we know South Bayou oysters were famous and plentiful. Back in the Civil War there is an historical note which reports that a raiding fleet of Federal gunboats from Ship Island surprised and captured in 1862 twelve

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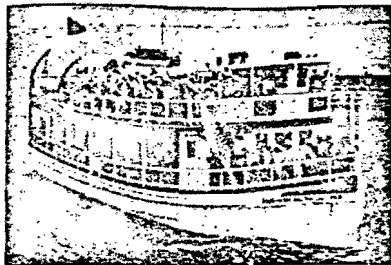


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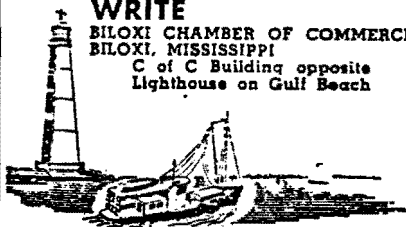
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Gulf Coast sloops and schooners fishing for oysters off Cat Island at the mouth of South Bayou. That was 99 years ago. It was probably the South Bayou oysters that were responsible for the large raccoon population on Cat Island, for they loved nothing better than to eat oysters at low tide opening the shells with their claws. But the oysters were finally killed off by the Conches according to Mr. and Mrs. Matt Browning, who were caretakers for the Boddies on Cat Island for 35 years.

In the Roaring Twenties South Bayou acquired another sort of fame. It seems that not only bivalves but bottles of bonded liquor could be and were frequently found in South Bayou.

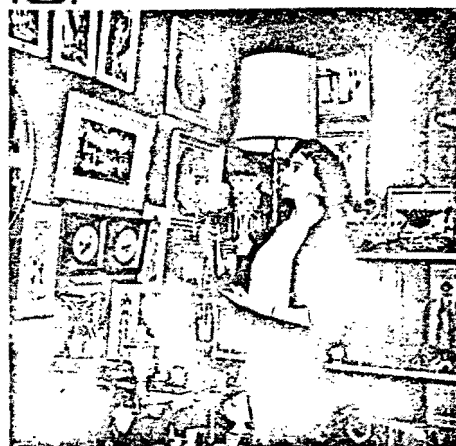
The explanation of course is very simple. South Bayou was, in the Prohibition Days, a very handy halfway hiding place for the speedboats who met the rum runners out in the Gulf. Now and then one of these speedboats, loaded with liquor in gunny sacks, would be chased up the bayou either by a revenue cutter or a hijacker and to save the liquor would dump it overboard. When they returned later they were not always successful in salvaging all of it. Hunter Kimball, the first Mississippi Director of Conservation, told the writer that on one of his trips back around 1933 to Cat Island, he watched one of his men, with an expression of dazed delight, pull out of the water of innocent looking South Bayou an intact quart of bonded Canadian Club.

### RESTORING THE RACCOONS

The above reference to Hunter Kimball, Mississippi's first Director of Conservation back in 1933, recalls the project of that same year of upgrading Mississippi's fast disappearing raccoon population by using this island, where white men first spotted them, as a 3,000 acre fur bearing animal refuge. Arrangements were made between the Game and Fish Commission and the Boddies, the program being to release an exceptionally black coated type of raccoon (about 30 of both sexes) to breed with normal coons on Cat Island, the cross breeding to secure a darker coated animal that would bring a better price to the trappers. The coons were later live trapped and released on the mainland to build up the normal supply of coons for hunting and trapping. The program lasted two years.

(Continued on Page 25)

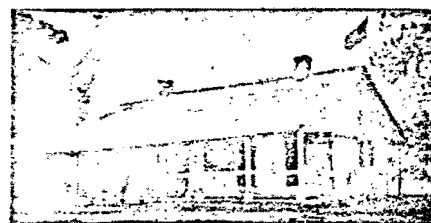
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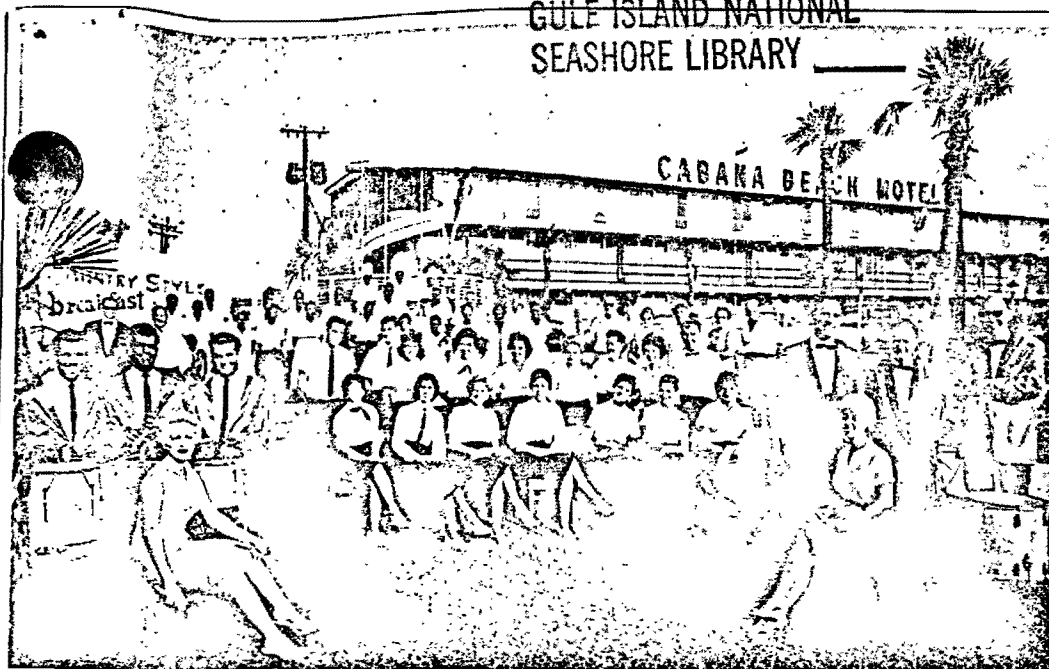
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## Cat Island

(Continued from Page 25)

island but her and Matt.

She resented the blackout regulation of World War II which put a crimp in her floundering, but Matt ingeniously worked out a light that could not be seen above and Cora continued her floundering and fishing.

The Brownings remained on Cat Island during World War II when the government took it over. On the East Beach the Seabees practiced landing craft maneuvers. North Point was a bombing practice range for the Air Force. And the whole island was the training ground of the K-9 corps — 400 dogs and 200 trainers. The attack dogs tracked actual Japs through Cat Island's palmettos and Spanish oak and marsh grass. They were actual Japs padded for the purpose, friendly Japs from Hawaii who were paid and enjoyed the work. The patrol dogs were trained to carry messages to and from certain points no matter how many times the points were changed. Yes, Cat Island became Dog Island for several years until peace came to the nation and tranquility back to the island. There are still the foundations of the dog kennels left on the island, a reminder that when war was over many a fine dog had to be de-

trained — taught not to attack, as he once had been taught to attack. One of these K-9 Corps dogs belonged to the Brownings and is still in their possession.

Which brings us, in the career of Cat Island, almost to the present and to the next untuned page in its continued story — the plans of Nathan Boddie and his associates to transform this bit of sub-tropical beauty into a different and distinctive offshore residential and recreational area.

Two distinctly different methods of development are currently on the drawing boards for Cat Island.

One is a causeway with the interior bayous being opened to provide home sites along the oak and pine ridges, your boat at your door just minutes away from the open Gulf, and a full recreational development of the Gulf beach frontage.

The other is to provide a relaxing place of enjoyment with atmosphere of the late 1800's tempered by modern conveniences. This development would include a paddle wheel ferry boat, a recreational center and a tour of the restored historical spots including the Pirates and Smugglers era, along with an unexcelled nature study showing all types of wild life in their natural environment. ★

**o-Go-Go!**

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KO KO**

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