Fort St. Philip

When he visited Fort St. Philip on the Mississippi river in 1803, French Prefect Pierre Clement de Laussat summed it up this way: "Like an island in the midst of marshlands. One is eaten alive by red bugs, mosquitoes and gnats."

Today his description is still apt. But the present owner, a 76-year-old bachelor named John Vela, a retired fishing boat skipper, lives in a house with good screens.

The fort is situated on the east bank of the Mississippi at Pinquevine Bend about 80 miles southeast of New Orleans. Recently, Fort St. Philip and Fort Jackson, across the river, were named national historical landmarks. But Fort St. Philip is inaccessible except by water; except for fishermen and Boy Scouts, its visitors are few.

The isolated Mississippi river stronghold's frame barracks were constructed about the time of the Spanish-American war.

Long-neglected bowling alley is feature of building that once was fort garrison's recreation hall.

Watchtower that looks like smokestack pokes up through trees at Fort St. Philip.
After 175 Years

The fort was ideally located to defend New Orleans against sailing ships, since these vessels lost their wind making the turn at Plaquemines Bend, the first big curve of the river encountered when going upstream.

Brick ruins of the original Spanish strongpoint, Fort San Felipe, are still visible on the site. The Spaniards began construction in 1786, sternly admonished by Gov. Hector Carondelet, “absolutely do not allow any hogs in the fort...for they will damage everything.”

Whether or not any hogs got in, the British and later the Yankees damaged the fort considerably. In January, 1813, during the Battle of New Orleans, the British fleet bombarded the fort for nine days but was repulsed.

Then on the moonless night of April 23-24, 1862, Adm. David Farragut’s Union fleet ran the gauntlet of Fort St. Philip and Fort Jackson in its successful move to capture New Orleans during the Civil war. Charles L. Dufour in his account of the fall of New Orleans, “The Night the War Was Lost,” says that Fort St. Philip fired 1591 shots at the Yankee fleet as it passed. (The fort also fired 75 shots at the Rebel ram Manassas, mistaking her for a Yankee. Every shot missed).

Around the time of the Spanish-American war, the United States government strengthened the fort, building massive concrete gun emplacements along with nine frame structures, including barracks, post office and recreation hall complete with a bowling alley.

At the same time the government built a concrete wall entirely around the fort’s 100 acres. The top of the wall is 12 feet above sea level and salt water has never come over it. Troops stationed at Fort St. Philip during World War I thus were kept free of water—and just about every other possible distraction except bugs.

Capt. Vela, a native of Yugoslavia, bought the fort and the surrounding area from the US in 1929. It then was the site of a shrimp and oyster cannery that employed about 250 people. But the cannery had to close down during the depression of the ’30s and the people left—most of them for New Orleans.

The land today is worth many times the $30,075 that Vela originally paid for it. The reason: oil leases.

But Vela actually is very fond of the place itself. He lives there with a caretaker, Philip Light, Mrs. Light and John Skarica, a nephew from Yugoslavia who is visiting him. Another nephew, Peter Vela, is a student at Louisiana State university in New Orleans.

The old drill field is an orange grove in Vela’s front yard, his house is a former barracks. “They built in those days,” he says. “I don’t know how many hurricanes I’ve ridden out here, but the old house never even shakes.”