GENERAL BANKS
SLEPT AT
BELMONT

By Morris Raphael

It is a historic fact that Union General Nathaniel Banks and his staff made Belmont their headquarters when the Yankees occupied the New Iberia area during mid-April, 1863. Banks, who had replaced General Benjamin Butler in November of 1862 as Commander of the Gulf, including Texas, was successful in his invasion of the bayou country. His victories, which were not easily accomplished, included the gunboat battles along the Teche, the Battle of Bisland, and the Battle of Irish Bend. His troops were responsible for the destruction of the salt works at Avery Island.

According to a deposition claim filed February 28, 1883 by Bernard Suberbielle, against the United States Government, a large quantity of sugar and molasses was confiscated from the John F. Wyche plantation. Statements confirming that Banks stayed at Belmont were made by Joseph O. Segura and Charles Bouligny, who were both sugar planters.

Segura, who lived about a mile from the Wyche plantation, testified that General Banks and his staff occupied Belmont for 8 days, and that he understood from a Mr. Darlet that the Yankees had taken 50 hogsheads of sugar and about 50 barrels of molasses. (A hogshead of sugar weighed about 1200 pounds.) He also indicated that rum was made on the plantation from corn and molasses.

Bouligny, who took charge of the Wyche plantation a few days before the arrival of the Federal forces, stated that he was the only person living on the place at the time. It may be well to mention here that during that period, Confederate Major John Fletcher Wyche, owner of the plantation, was serving in another section of the country. His wife Mary, their 4 year old son, James and several slaves fled the premises prior to the Yankee takeover for fear of their lives—they joined a wagon train headed for Texas. Bouligny testified that there was a huge amount of sugar confiscated by the Union troops who hauled the product away by means of four-mule wagons. He mentioned that his $300 horse was also taken by a Yankee.

According to Bouligny, the bayou country people living in the vicinity of the Wyche plantation destroyed all their skiffs in order to prevent the Yankees from crossing the bayou. He stated that Federal stragglers took the big doors off the sugar house and used them in their foraging operations. The door rafts, he explained, were used in crossing over to Mrs. de Spanet DeBlanc's place where chickens were stolen.

During the deposition it was learned that the main segment of the invading Federal army camped on the Wyche premises one night and took off late the following morning in the direction of St. Martinville and Opelousas.

According to the Wyche family records, the Union troops removed the rosewood grand piano from the house, took the strings from it, and used it as a trough to feed and water their horses. Cabins were pulled down, fences were used for firewood, and some planking was removed from the home. Mary returned from Texas in 1865 and paid the back taxes on the plantation with gold they had earned from cotton crops in Texas. Mary and her family smuggled the gold back home by sewing pieces in their undergarments. Mary's son James was the father of James Wyche, Jr., the present owner of Belmont, who lives
there with his wife and family.

There's a lot that's been written about Belmont, and there's no telling how far back in history the grounds were utilized by human beings. Arrows, pottery and other artifacts indicate that the Attakapas Indians once lived on the place. Belmont is a part of Spanish heritage. The original dwelling and plantation were established in 1765. The home itself was built for one of the Spanish commandants of the area.

Unfortunately Belmont was destroyed by fire in 1947 and the home that exists today is a replica. The old plantation bell, which was cast in 1859, is seen in a tower on the side of the house. This bell rang out on many Fourth of July celebrations which were held on the premises. It's amazing that, after almost two and a quarter centuries, the hallowed grounds of Belmont Plantation still stand out as an operational, historical, and integral part of Acadiana.