Jefferson Island, Past & Present

By Manon Hunter

It was, many millions of years ago, only a huge salt bed, trapped beneath the earth's crust, the remnant of a great salt lake gone dry. Then forces within the earth created violent pressures that began to push the plastic salt toward the surface. In time, when the weight of the salt equaled that of the overlying earth, the upward movement ceased. It was from this process - taking who knows how many years - that Jefferson Island was born.

The "island" is, of course, not an island at all but one of a number of salt domes found along the Gulf coast. It is a hill where one is least expected, rising for no apparent reason out of a coastal prairie. If this island could speak it could reach into memories thousands of years old to tell of prehistoric animals and, much later, primitive men lured by the salt springs. Later - much later - came the white man, after the area had become a Spanish land grant and named Orange Island. It fell into the hands of a brother-in-law of Jean Lafitte, and the notorious pirate often sought refuge here, hiding in the safety of Lake Peigneur, where larger boats could not follow. Lafitte's presence on the island naturally led to claims of "hidden treasure" that eluded treasure hunters until 1923 when a farmer unearthed a cache of gold coins where a slave cabin had been. Was it left by Lafitte? Or by planters fleeing the advance of Union forces during the Civil War? No one really knows, but the island was indeed a treasure-trove; one waiting to be discovered in mineral deposits of oil, natural gas, sulphur and salt. These discoveries were to come in time, but first another chapter was waiting to be played out on this remarkable plot of land.

The years were the second half of the 1800's and the leading character was the real life matinee idol of the 19th Century, Joseph Jefferson. Jefferson's fame in his time was comparable to Bob Hope's today, and the role for which he was best known was that of Rip Van Winkle in a popular stage adaptation of Washington Irving's famous tale. Jefferson was the son of a French exile from Santo Domingo, a woman who is undoubtedly behind the actor's affinity with the French culture of Louisiana. In his youth, Jefferson barnstormed the rural areas of Louisiana with traveling players, and in later more prosperous years played to packed houses at the famous old St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans. Though his acting career took him all over the world, Jefferson sought refuge in his roots, and in 1869 purchased the plantation that was soon to become Jefferson Island. Here he retreated during the last 36 years of his life, hunting, fishing, painting and entertaining the rich and powerful. For all this he designed and built a marvelous Moorish-Gothic house with an ingenious center well for cooling.

The Jefferson chapter came to a close after the great actor's death in 1905. Not long after, a 7 year old boy, J. Lyle (Jack) Bayless, was visiting nearby Avery Island with his parents. They fell in love with the neighboring island and bought it from the Jefferson heirs in 1917. It was under the Bayless tenure that the island's natural resources were harvested, and rock salt was mined first by the Jefferson Island Salt Company, and later by Diamond Crystal. Jack Bayless loved the island and focused his efforts on the creation and development of magnificent gardens particularly noted for rare varieties of native and foreign camellias. He named his gardens after the live oaks and to Live

Live Oak Gardens

West Indies style visitor's center
Oak Gardens came visitors from all over the world.

All this came to an abrupt halt in 1980. On a quiet November morning an oil drill pierced the salt dome's huge hollow mine some 1300 feet under Lake Peigneur and the lake drained like an unplugged bathtub, taking with it acres of land, the Bayless house, the greenhouses, conservatory, barges, boats and whatever it could hold. The Live Oak Gardens were no more. The Joseph Jefferson house was pulled apart. But the most incredible thing was that all were evacuated from the mine and the island and no lives were lost. The catastrophe marked the end of another chapter in the island's saga.

Today, as befits the ongoing story, a new chapter is being written. The salt mining operations are closed, but the Joseph Jefferson home is magnificently restored, the greenhouses and formal gardens are back, and a fabulous new West Indies style visitors center once again welcomes all comers. Visitors can lunch under lazy ceiling fans on the big front gallery overlooking the lake and ponder the chimney, once a part of the Bayless house, now rising out of the lake. They can watch the aerial films of the catastrophe, and old film footage of the Bayless years and of Joseph Jefferson himself. And everywhere they look there are flowers, flowers.

So many chapters have ended. The dinosaurs, the Indians, the Spanish, the pirates, the Jeffersons, and now even the salt mine and the Bayless family are gone. Jack Bayless died in 1985, but the legacy he left is rebuilt and more beautiful than ever—opening once again for all to share, a brand new chapter in the life of a beautiful Louisiana Island.