Louisiana Rich in Duelist Lore

Shreveport Times March 31, 1974

Francois Mignon's Plantation Memo

Duels at Half-Way House

"However, not all happenings at the Half-Way House were filled with gaiety. The oak trees outside of the establishment provided a favorite canopy for duelists in the 19th Century. On Sunday, May 27, 1866, A. R. Waud sketched one of these duels and when it was published in Harper's Weekly, July 14, 1866, it bore the wry caption 'Sunday Amusements at New Orleans — Duel at the Half-Way House.' The duel was fought between the husband of a singer at the French Opera House in New Orleans and another member of the cast who had caused him to be jealous. On the third round, the seconds declared that honor had been satisfied when the husband received a wound in the leg and his opponent, believing he had killed him, clasped his hands to his head and fainted. Harper's concluded the story: 'The event proved to be an excellent topic for breakfast and it was revived with fresh interest at intervals throughout the day; the jealous husband meanwhile gnashing his teeth over his wounded leg and disappointed revenge — a beautiful instance of the futility of dueling.'

"Another such duel at the Half-Way House was reported in the New Orleans Delta, February 3, 1860. Two young Creoles fought with small swords over a girl who was 'divinely fair.' After one received a minor flesh wound the successful duelist treated all the parties to the affair to a breakfast at the Half-Way House, during which much champagne was put away, as were the duelists later, when they were taken to jail for disturbing the peace and assaulting an officer of the law."

"Many duels were not such comical affairs, but proved fatal to one or both parties. George A. Waggaman, the judge and senator, died as a result of a wound received in a duel with former New Orleans Mayor Dennis Prieur, fought on the Shell Road near the location of the Half-Way House in 1843."

During the late 19th Century, the Half-Way House was relocated on the east side of the New Basin Canal and the establishment there was a home of early New Orleans jazz. The Louisiana Tourist Commission has been petitioned to erect historic markers in Louisiana where famous duels have taken place, — cross pistols, Bowie-knives rampant, or whatever, with appropriate inscriptions for each site. Physical contests always captivate the casual imagination. Surely our days of duelling are an integral part of our Louisiana heritage.

Cherokee, restored by Mrs. Theodoria Nolan in 1973. The protagonist, with their numerous seconds were General Pierre E. Bossier and General Francois Gainnie. General Pierre slew General Francois, both members of prominent Louisiana families. It was because of the prominence of the duelists and the celebrity and dire fate of many of their seconds that the wide publicity was given the encounter.

New Orleans, of course, ranked the highest in population and accordingly the number of its duels exceeded those in other parts of the state. One of the best accounts of dueling in the Crescent City that I know appeared in the March 4, 1974 issue of Riders' Digest: "Throughout the second half of the 19th Century, pleasure-seeking New Orleanians would repair to a tavern in Metairie called the Half-Way House... Here racing fans and lakefront tourists could stop for coffee, beer and other refreshments."

"Described in Waldo's 1879 guide to New Orleans as 'kept in first class style' with 'refreshments of the best kind... at moderate prices,' the Half-Way House was accessible by Canal Street horse cars (fare five cents each way). From the Half-Way House, mule-towed barges and small steamboats conveyed passengers to the lakefront, as did omnibuses which made the trip on the shell road."

In the Cane River country some half-dozen miles south of Natchitoches a duel destined to become famous took place on September 14, 1839. It occurred on the savannah just in the rear of the plantation of Emile Sompayrac, today admired as..."