THE FIRST MAN TO LEAD A DOG’S LIFE—HAPPENED NEAR ABBEVILLE IN VERMILION

LOUISIANA PIONEER WORE COLLAR OF CANNIBAL INDIAN PRINCESS TO KEEP OUT OF THE STEW—AND GOT IN THE PICTURES

A dog’s life is, according to some authorities, a celestial achievement; hence the term “lucky dog.” Other authorities, and they usually are a variety of husbands, are prone to liken their existence to that of the lowly canine, and a “dog’s life” becomes, on the lips of certain of the masculine, a term of opprobrium, an ignominy usually the result of a too vivid imagination or a shrewtongued wife.

A distinguished, if forgotten, Louisiana pioneer once really led a dog’s life. There was nothing imaginative about his predicament, which lasted for two years, for our hero, one of the early soldier-settlers under Bienville, who has left many descendants bearing his name, actually wore a collar and leash while earning his title of “the first man in Louisiana to lead a dog’s life,” and passed this existence among the men—eating Indians of this state.

Simars de Belle-Isle, handsome and debonair, young, vigorous and adventurous, in spite of the remarkable series of incidents that befell him when he first set foot on Louisiana soil, was no mythical hero of fanciful romance. No, M. de Belle-Isle has his niche in the state’s history other than the one I am about to give him. His title (look it up) was “Chevalier de l’Ordre Royal et Militaire de Saint-Louis, Major de la Nouvelle Orleans, and faissant fonctions de devant de Major-General des troupes de la Marine à la Louisiane,” and how many Belle-Isles, Melaries or Belises of today can call him forebear is problematical.

Resembles Story of Pocahontas
This strange, true story of Louisians, and I refer you to a yellowed, well-worn copy of “Nouveaux Voyages aux Indes Occidentales,” by M. Beau, capitaine dans les troupes de Marine, bearing an imprint of 1768, for the authenticity of what I am about to re-relate, has no equal in early annals save that it resembles, in part only, the historic occurrence in Virginia in which a gentry captain, John Smith and the Indian princess Pochonhas, played stellar roles.

In 1715, aboard one of the clumsy sailing vessels chartered by M. de Cruzy and his Company of the Indies, part of a fleet carrying a thousand officers and volunteers from the Old World to populate the newly founded Louisiana, was Simars de Belle-Isle. Due to contrary winds and unfavorable currents the vessel missed the mouth of the Mississippi river and passed to the westward until it came agrain in an opening called the Bay of St. Bernard, but now better known as Galveston. While waiting for a high tide to release the vessel, M. de Belle-Isle, with four of his comrades and his hunting dog to which he was devotedly attached, went ashore to explore the strange new country and relieve the monotony of the ship’s fare with game, while the crew put fresh drinking water aboard.

On the return of the young French officer and his men to the place where they had beached their chaloupes, their consternation can better be imagined than expressed—the vessel which had carried them to the new land had disappeared! As it was subsequently learned, the captain, after having the casks filled, took advantage of the tide and freshening wind, ordered up the anchor and sailed eastward to New Orleans, quite forgetful of the five men and a dog that had plunged into the lush green woods seeking game.

Dressed Like a Gentleman
This was indeed a predicament for our dashing officer. Belonging to an era when a spic and span uniform was a necessary French military asset, Simars de Belle-Isle faced his subsequent adventures in the Louisiana wilds accoutered in high boots, white breeches, a blue coat faced with red and radiating with golden trimmings. In his best was a blue tricorne, embellished with a blue and white cockade on one side, and the cornered headgear was set at a rakish angle over his well-frizzled peruke.

In spite of high hopes and a long wait on the beach, the vessel that had marooned them failed to return, and the five were forced to subsist on insects and herbs as they made their way eastward. When hunger grew unbearable the officer’s four men decided that Belle-Isle’s dog should be eaten, and upon the refusal of the young Frenchman to permit the sacrifice of an animal to which he was greatly attached, the men endeavored to take the dog by force.

Emasculated and weakened, the five men fought a desperate battle on the sands of the Gulf of Mexico. Though the odds were four to one, de Belle-Isle bested his companions and saved his dog. Hungry and weakly weakened by malnutrition, unable to sight off the hordes of mosquitoes that descended upon them by night, the five men struggled valiantly for life. One by one his men died as the party made its way along the coast, and de Belle-Isle fell the task of burying all of his companions; the last sound after he passed the Sabine and made his way into what is now Louisiana, Termed by insects, the dog, which had stayed with his master, one day fled to the nearby woods and de Belle-Isle was left all alone, kept alive by his youth, pluck and strong constitution. A few days later, when he was about to follow his men on
their Great Adventure, the Frenchman's dog repaired from out of the woods, bearing in his jaws a strange animal he had caught. It was "rat de bois," or oppossum, as we call it, and the dog deposited the animal at his master's feet and indicated his joy at having found de Belle-Ile. The wood rat "saved" the Frenchman from starvation, and in their subsequent wanderings the dog provided meat for the scanty larder.

**Dog's Life Given For Master**

But this was not all de Belle-Ile had to face before he reached his own people and white man's food. His handsome uniform torn, cut and bruised by thorny bushes, the officer plunged blindly through the wilderness just off the shores of the Gulf. One night, while sleeping the sleep of the physically exhausted, a snarling, bucking fracas awakened him. A "vigue," perhaps a coyote or such member of the cat family, had endeavored to attack him as he lay stretched out on the ground, and his faithful dog had saved him from injury. But in the rout of the cat, the dog had been slashed so badly that de Belle-Ile was forced to kill him—fearing the dog would go mad, later he ate the dog and from his knees thanked God for having protected his life so far.

Lost some, in reading this veracious recounting of de Belle-Ile's adventures rush to the conclusion at this point that this is the "dog's life" he led in Louisiana, let me quickly dismiss your idea. To speak in the elocutionary of the present day, Simms hadn't started to be himself yet. There was a lot in his younger days about the tribes of Calabistie Indians, an Indian woman who claimed him as her own and made good on the claim, the participation of their encounters with other Indians, nursing dirty-faced papooses, an' everything! Read on.

**Tea Thin For Cannibal Feast**

De Belle-Ile swayed away before them, pointing first to his mouth and then to his stomach to indicate he was hungry and crave food. His panoply, unfortunately, was that used by the Atakapas in designating the barbecueing-gone of their followers! Fortunately, de Belle-Ile's adeptness had made him so thin and emaciated that a curious examination showed the savages he would be tough pickings, that he was too good a catch for most of the tribe, and they had just caught him in preference, which was a good thing for this party, otherwise it would have ended right here. However, they cut through with the white captive. No need to stop back to the main village, located just above the present site of Abbeville to fasten him for a future feast.

When left of his gay uniform was divided among the Atakapas, and Simms, arrayed as Nature first dressed him, was moved into the outer village of the great wandering cannibal tribe and incarcerated in an enclosure that kept him secure but permitted the whole Atakapas word to see what had been caught. Whether or not this was a fattening pen for luckless candidates for the tribe's festal board our authorities do not enlighten us, but this we do know, things were not so bright and rosy for Simms, in spite of the fact that his long fast was over and he was recovering food faster than he could ask for.

But, as we have said before, Simms was young and handsome, tall and well-proportioned and, though robbed of his showy blue and red uniform coat, white breeches, high boots, even his three-cornered hat and frizzled wig were being worn by half a dozen Indians, and hadn't even an undershirt, still Simms made a presentable figure of a man.

At this point enters the woman element. A daughter of Chief Kinema, a comely princess, widow, we are told, by the tribe's warfare with the fierce Chitimaches, a woman with a mind of her own, cast eyes upon the undressed white prisoner, whose rapt to the delight of his original captors, were fast disappearing the rest of his figure rounding out.

So the young princess—widow, whose name we do not know if it is illustrated, whose steel engraving its reproduced on this page, is to be believed, she was easy to look at and was an all-encompassing eye—perhaps Simms (he is not on page) from the impecuniosity of the Jumilian or whatever it was the Atakapas called their place of residence.

**Princess Had to Adopt Ruse**

Mercifully asking that Simms be made hers avails the princess not a thing! The Indians who had taken the Frenchman on the banks of the smooth-flowing Mermentau were inclined to the fancy...

But leaves it to the fancy of the—specimen—dude, buckskin weaver, woman of A. D. 1719. It seemed that there was a law among these particular Indians to this effect: Who...
trophies were taken in battle or merely picked up along the river bank, the chief of the tribe or his sons or daughters, were entitled to take first pick of the booty and, even after, this article became invariable. But this did not apply to natives, Cimars' caps and mantled, and a man designated for the spoil was something else, and in Western Louisiana men were not men so much as they were food. Quick thinking was necessary, for the prisoner was waxing fatter day by day. But the chieftain's daughter was there, as we would put it, with the think-tank, as her subsequent actions indicated.

One morning the widow appeared at the abattoir, or whatever the place was called, and in her hand was a dog's collar which she fastened around Simars' neck. Next she affixed a leash to the neckband. This being accomplished, the comely princess led the new copulant Frenchman from the dining pen, and announced to the whole Atakapas world that she had a new "dog" and that the white young man was it, and warned all to lay hands off her property.

Ensued then a big pow-wow. All the big men attended it. It sounded, one would imagine, because of the subject, more like a pow-wow. A dog was a possession, if a man wasn't, and if she, the daughter of a chief, said the white man was a dog he was, and as far as she was concerned, the argument was ended.

The medicine men and the tom-tom beaters were consulted. So was the chief. Especially was the matter put up to Ochtena, or "buzzard picker", who was hailed forth from his katch, or "bone house," to lend an ear to the council. The ancient of Flaga was appealed to. Everybody was consulted but the chief's daughter, and that was because she would not discuss the matter and, besides, she was busy teaching her recently acquired "dog" new tricks.

The pow-wow of the hungry and disappointed broke up when the "buzzard picker" decided that as long as the princess used their fodder as a dog, so long were his thanks safe.

Children Rode on Shoulders

In such a fashion did our hero enter upon his new existence. We read, in leading his dog's life, he was put in charge of the children and was obliged to carry them about on his shoulders. All of which makes one wonder if Director Barrie had heard of Simars and his singular predicament when he created the dog-nurse, Nana, in "Peter Pan."

Leaving a dog's life and tending the papas about must have had its bright moments, for a freely translated line informs us that Simars "being young and strong, discharged his duties to well his mistress" became quite taken up with him. Did this give rise to the oft-repeated exclamation of "lucky dog?"

Although still marked by the collar that proclaimed him the kind of a dog he was, Simars was gradually given liberty and, in the village, was attacked by the members of a rival tribe, the Frenchman, catching a boy and quiver of arrows, dashed into the foremost of the fight and drove an arrow clear through the leader of the assailants. So great his strength and skill, so well directed were his arrows, that his status was about to be changed from dog to warrior, but the chief's daughter refused to relinquish her property rights and the collars remained about Simars' neck.

For the two years that the Frenchmen led his dog's life, he had many an adventure—one, never to be forgotten, when he was told he was eating venison only to find out later that he had devoured human flesh. He was immediately made very ill, he averred. His dog's life probably would have continued indefinitely had not a deputation of Hasini Indians, a tribe which previously had warned on the Atakapas, arrived with a calumet of peace. Seeing the white man, the pipe-bearing savages remarked that there were others like him in the country whence they came. Simars' captors explained that he was a dog, but they had found in the neighborhood of Grand Lake, that he had been adopted by one of the women of the tribe as her slave but, being such a good marksman, he had been permitted to act as one of the tribe's warriors.

Plea Written on Bark

Understanding what the visitors and said regarding the white men, de Belle-Ile wrote with some on the bark of a tree, explaining his peculiar situation. This message he entrusted to the chief of the visitors, telling him if it were handed to any Frenchman it would be well received.

The message was delivered to M. de Huchores de Saint Denis, commander of the post at Natchitoches. Saint Denis told the Indian messengers that the piece of talking bark was a message speaking with the tongue of his long lost brother in arms, and immediately made preparations for the rescue. Returning to the Atakapas village where the officer of the marines was impounded, the Hasini, according to Saint Denis' instructions, demanded the white man.

The Atakapas refused to let him go, and a pitched battle ensued, in which many of the Indians lost arms, and legs, and heads, etc. (see illustration), for the Hasini were wellarmed, and their guns, supplied by Saint Denis, settled the fray, and Simars de Belle-Ile, dog of an Atakapas woman, was given a white charger on which to ride back to civilization.

The final scene in his canine existence was seized upon by G. de S. Anubin, a Parisian James Montgomery Flagg of 1768, who, with the aid of a steel-etched plate, depicted the tender love-taking of the devoted mistress from her dog, for we are told she "cried at having to part with him."

Such is the story of Simars de Belle-Ile, the first man in Louisiana to lead a dog's life.

Examine the engraving again.

Is it not the expression "leading a dog's life" an opprobrious expiatory?

It can be answered only by the man who thinks he's leading that kind of an existence today.

Editor's Note: This article appeared in the Sunday Magazine section of The Times-Picayune written by Stanley Clisby Arthur. Mention of "Steel Engravings," are made in the article but are not accompanying this story.