

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémond

I'm Not Lisa

In December of 2007, the city officials of Murcia, Spain, decided to crack down on young *señors* and *señoritas* who had been drinking a little too much. To implement this plan they solicited the aid of the *serenos*, or the persons who in bygone days lit the streetlights (and put them out, as well). Over time the term "*serenos*" has evolved into "night watchmen", and in this present incarnation their job was to spot the young tipplers in the Murcia City Centre and then notify the local police.

Murcia was founded in 825 A.D. by Arab emir Abd ar-Rahman II and given the name Medinat Mursiya. After 1031 it came under the rule of Almería, Toledo and Seville. Then followed the Castellians and the Kingdom of Aragon. Under many flags like New Orleans, the town suffered severely from floods in 1651, 1879 and 1907. But now they have levees ... and *serenos*! "*Son las doce de la noche y todo esta bien*".

A Spanish soldier named Cristobal de Lisa left Murcia and made his way to New Orleans via St. Augustine and Cuba with his wife Maria Ignacia Rodriguez. Cristobal did not last long in their new home, and his widow soon remarried Antonio Francisco Cayetano Augel Ramis in September of that same year (1774). Ramis (of Huecha, Majorca), a major land speculator in the Faubourg Tremé, became stepfather to Maria Josefa, José Joaquin and Manuel de Lisa. Antonio and Maria Ignacia had a child together, Maria Rosa, who married José Castañedo in 1797. One can still view the home she lived in as a widow at 2033-2035 Esplanade. At the time of her death the house was a smaller Spanish colonial-style residence and was at one time located in the middle of the street. It was moved to its present location when the Avenue was extended (over the widow's objections) and enlarged around the 1890s.

But the children from Maria Ignacia's first marriage were to lead the most interesting lives.

Daughter Maria Josefa de Lisa later married Juan de Castañedo, the colonial treasurer in New Orleans who served as *mayordomo de propios*, or a non-voting member of the Cabildo in charge of managing municipal funds. He served late in the Spanish administration from 1793-1803 and had duties like keeping records of the tax collected on rum, "*aquardiente de caña*", that came through the port from Cuba. He was also given charge of the lighting department and the *serenos*. Those old lamplighters ... New Orleans had them, too.

The son of Cristobal and Maria Ignacia was Manuel Lisa (September 8, 1772 – August 12, 1820), a famous fur trader and explorer who saw parts of this nation long before others traveled to these new lands. Endowed with entrepreneurial zeal, this young man became involved in the fur business while still in his teens. By 1796 he owned and operated a trading vessel on the Mississippi and had married a widow, Mary (Polly) Charles Chew. He arrived in St. Louis, Missouri, about 1799 and convinced the Spanish officials to provide him with a land grant. Within a year he was directly competing with the powerful Chouteau family and was the pre-eminent fur trader in the area. He soon wrangled a fur trading monopoly with the Osage Indians in 1802. Right behind these maneuverings, he was involved in the preparation for the journeys of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1803-1804. Neither Lewis nor Clark

particularly liked him, however.

The Yellowstone River was first explored in 1806, when Lieutenant William Clark went down the river on his return from the Pacific Ocean. In 1807, through Lisa's commercial fur ventures, he organized an historic excursion. Lisa, accompanied by John Colter (said to be the first white man to see the geysers of Yellowstone Park) established a trading post and fort at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Bighorn Rivers in present-day Montana. Lisa named it Fort Raymond after his son, but it was later referred to as Fort Manuel.

In 1808-1809 Manuel Lisa helped found the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company, a joint venture with William Clark, Jean-Pierre Chouteau, Andrew Henry, Reuben Lewis (brother of Meriwether) and others. Its 1811 expedition became renowned for heading up the Missouri on barges and keelboats and overtaking John Jacob Astor's team that had departed three weeks earlier. Lisa was a ruthless and relentless competitor.

Lisa is considered Nebraska's first white settler after spending all those winters there, building Fort Lisa near present day Omaha. He returned to St. Louis each spring. In 1813 he became one of the incorporators of the Bank of St. Louis. His first wife died in 1817, but he also had an Omaha Indian wife named Mitain at Fort Lisa. This outpost was very important in this region for years to come.

Lisa had great experience over the years with various Indian tribes, including the Blackfeet. In 1814, William Clark (who was then governor of the Missouri Territory) appointed Lisa subagent to the tribes above the mouth of the Kansas River. This was to counteract British influence among these tribes. The winter of 1819-1820 was spent at Fort Lisa with Lisa's third wife, Mary Hempstead Keeney (another widow). Her nephew, Stephen P. Hempstead, was the second governor of Iowa. Manuel Lisa died that summer after returning to St. Louis. He was buried there at Bellefontaine Cemetery.

For twelve years before his death he had traversed over twenty-five thousand miles, spending three solid years on the Missouri River. He once said, "I find that I have traveled a great distance while others are deciding whether to start their journey today or tomorrow."

In 1807 intrepid voyageurs John Colter and Manuel Lisa were on the Yellowstone River. It is curious that in 1975, Jessi Colter (wife of Waylon Jennings) reached number one on the country music charts with a song entitled "I'm Not Lisa". Not many could be.

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