

PIRATES

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biscuits and bed.)

But now you live in Southwest Florida, where pirates, described by one online analyst as “cutthroats, bandits, runaway slaves, disgruntled merchantmen and disinherited youth,” have always been close. And sometimes they’ve been far too close for fairy-tale comfort, depending on how you define piracy and when you lived here.

“We are often asked, does piracy exist today? The answer is definitely, yes,” write James and Sarah Jane Kaserman, co-authors of a new book, “Pirates of Southwest Florida: Fact and Legend.”

Apparently, the rich historic tradition of stealing boats and treasures from their rightful owners in Florida waters, and then using them for nefarious purposes — the singular act and questionable art of piracy — is not quite as antiquated and charming as, say, Capt. Jack Sparrow (of “Pirates of the Caribbean” cinematic fame), or the similarly fantastic Jose “Gasparilla” Gaspar (of mythological fame) would have you believe.

This year, for example, boat thefts have increased about 30 percent in Florida, with 1,200 stolen so far, reports the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission.

That determined and honorable arm of the law could be called the Florida Fish, Wildlife and Pirates Conservation Commission (FFWPCC), except the acronym is about as graceful as a garbage scow, and there is one other little problem: the responsible men and women who serve the FWCC are not trying to conserve pirates, just fish and wildlife.

In fact, they are not kindly disposed toward pirates, at all.

“Go-fast boats, 26 to 39 feet long, are being targeted (by modern pirates) with greater frequency than in previous years,” says Lt. John Humphreys, a member of the FWCC Investigations Section, speaking to boat owners.

And why? Well naturally, “because of their high-dollar value and for use in maritime-based smuggling activities.”

Smuggling is where the real money in piracy lies, nowadays, in case you’re thinking of getting into it — although every so often a leisure cruise turns into a nightmare, and a boat floats back empty, if it floats back at all, minus the happy little group who embarked on a vacation to the Caribbean. (Presumably their lucre has been taken, their throats cut, and their bodies tossed overboard in traditional pirate fashion. Or alternatively, their lives have been spared so they could be sold into slavery in some distant quarter of the world, all of which suggests how unpleasant real pirates usually prove to be.)

More than boarding such boats or pirating their crews and passengers, however, the true business of piracy has often been smuggling: of humans, guns, alcohol or drugs, transported by night and to shore, through the Keys or from the Ten Thousand Islands north to the far reaches of Charlotte Harbor.

Once Upon a Time

Around here, that kind of thing has been going on a long time, at least since the 17th and 18th centuries, when the first of the famous swashbucklers arrived to lend Captiva Island its name.

Henri Caesar, A.K.A. Black Caesar, was an African chief who supplied European slavers with slaves, until they made him one, and he escaped after a hurricane in what was known as the Spanish Main (in the Caribbean, where a lot of Spanish ships operated).

He floated ashore on Florida’s Elliot Key, there establishing his own band of pirates and from that shallow-water retreat raising so much hell that he had to hide his harem of kidnapped women on — where else? — Captiva Island, the



Kasermans report.

For years he and his crews issued forth from the coastlines between Sanibel-Captiva and Elliot Key, to make raids. But in 1718, he’d combined forces with Blackbeard, who also operated in the region, and that proved his downfall. The two were captured aboard Blackbeard’s ship, and hung.

At the same moment in time, John Rackham was having both a good and a bad year, first as quartermaster on an English warship, and then as a mutineer who took the helm of that ship, dumped the captain on an island, began to dress vividly in cotton clothes, lost his ship to the Spanish off Jamaica, captured another Spanish sloop with two fishing boats near Cuba, and sailed into New Providence in the Bahamas.

There he met the beautiful, Irish-born Anne Bonny, who gave up her husband, a less-capable pirate named James Bonny, and headed out with John, now known as “Calico Jack” Rackham — but not before the two stole the Curlew, a ship with real speed. (Actually, she stole the Curlew at gunpoint, but the Kasermans fail to report where he was; probably drunk somewhere, as future events would suggest.)

They did well, for a while, knocking over ships on the Spanish Main, until a gun battle destroyed their mainmast and a storm blew them onto Estero Island in

“Calico Jack” Rackham and Blackbeard are two of many infamous pirates to swashbuckle up and down Southwest Florida back in the day.

present-day Lee County.

It was on Lover’s Key, apparently, that the couple spent weeks in a small cottage they built, having what she later described as a “honeymoon,” and lending the key its name.

Not long after that, Calico Jack, Ann and her friend Mary Read (that’s another story) captured a ship, and he got drunk that night. When the law came to call, he and the boys huddled up like ducks in a puddle, too soused to defend themselves, while she and Mary fought it out, and lost. All of them were captured and the men were hung. That was in 1720.

Roughly a century later the second Black Caesar, known as Caesar le Grande, cut his slave master into pieces with a saw and took up pirating, eventually establishing camps on Marco, Black, Sanibel, Captiva and Pine Islands — where presumably he hid treasure, and for recreation cut other people into pieces, too (his reputation for viciousness was peerless at the time, but matched by others, later, in Lee County).

Like his namesake, Caesar le Grande also apparently held captured women on Captiva Island (where some women, arguably, remain captive to this day, shackled by those tandem pirates, wealth le grande and comfort le grande).

But after the War of 1812, and especially beginning about 1821, life became more difficult for pirates, since both American and Spanish warships began to hunt them in earnest. Caesar le Grande, however, lasted until 1829, when the Spanish captured him off the coast of Cuba and “he died shortly after,” according to the Kasermans, who are masters of sober understatement.

Meanwhile, the famous pirate Jean LaFitte, operating out of New Orleans like a Mafia don by sending others to do his piracy, claimed to have buried vast amounts of gold and silver on the barrier islands that stretch throughout Lee and Collier Counties. LaFitte was an actual figure, to whom President Andrew Jackson gave clemency from his crimes in return for support during the war of 1812, against the British — a war that went badly for the U.S., especially

when the capital in Washington D.C. was burned. But in 1815, LaFitte came through for the new nation.

“Most historians agree that were it not for LaFitte’s powder, flints and extraordinary bombarding by Dominique You (LaFitte’s brother) Great Britain would have won the Battle of New Orleans that foggy morning of January 8, 1815,” write the Kasermans.

A lot of other treasure besides LaFitte’s is rumored to lie in hiding along the coast here, but little of it has been recovered.

At roughly the same time LaFitte was operating out of New Orleans and sending his pirates up and down the coastline of Southwest Florida, another British naval officer-turned-mutineer set up camp in Bojelia on Pine Island, renamed by his anglo crew as Bookelia (bilingual ability was not their goal). He was Brewster Baker, “allegedly one of the most successful of the little-known pirates who operated in the waters around Florida,” the Kasermans say.

In all of this marvelous history, fact and fiction seem to be woven together like threads in the same carpet.

There were others, of course — the famous John Gomez, said to be 122 when he finally died in 1900, but that’s nothing; he also claimed to have sailed with Gasparilla.

He’s the famous pirate who wasn’t, according to the Kasermans, although long and vivid accounts of his life in and out of Southwest Florida exist in many places. Gasparilla was said to be brilliant, multi-lingual, generous to a fault, and violently vengeful (he cut off the head of the woman he loved, when she disappointed him).

And he was also too proud to surrender. As the story goes, when he finally lost a sea battle to a U.S. Navy ship in 1821, he wrapped an anchor chain around his waist (one that would have been too heavy for a man to lift, the Kasermans point out), and threw himself overboard.

Gasparilla, whose story lends the island its name, might well be catalogued with the most fashionable pirates of contemporary display, the “Pirates of the Caribbean.”

He certainly fits the mold. And the others, real or legendary, are now cast in its hyperbolic form, as well.

The Everglades City Piracy Bust

But pirates of the past do not hold sole claim to the questionable art of piracy. It was only 24 years ago in 1983, after all, that the entire town of Everglades City finally had to pay the tab for taking up the jolly life 15 years earlier.

Tim Jepson lifts anchor on this peculiar history in a British newspaper, The Telegraph, by recounting a moment he shared in a restaurant in Everglades City with some of the locals not long ago.

“Billy tells me to buy a drink for Conrad, a good ol’ boy out on parole after 20 years in the state penitentiary. ‘Drugs and Cubans was what our economy was based on,’ says Billy. ‘There’s always been smuggling in the Everglades. Used to be rum running during Prohibition; Cubans after the Bay of Pigs; then, in the Seventies, half the weed for the US was coming in through the islands. Fishermen were the only people who could find their way through the oyster reefs at night. Reagan put a stop to all that in 1983.’”

Carl Hiaasen, then reporting hard news for the Miami Herald, takes the story’s helm.

“In 1983, I caught a whiff of something strange going on in the Ten Thousand Islands from a contact in the FBI — we knew it was drugs. I asked Gerry, my photographer, to drive down and hang around in Everglades City, told him to sit on the bridge with a fishing rod and look like a tourist. I followed him down the Tamiami Trail. The FBI and DEA had men everywhere — in the motels, sitting in cars by the highway, setting up roadblocks.