

The Livingston Parish News

More than meets the eye

By Carol Stuart

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Denham Springs artist Bob Mellon and his wife Troy, a doctoral candidate in philosophy, are pictured beside "Barrataria," a 36x46 oil painting by Lionel Kabel (d. Feb. 14, 2009), which he gave to the Mellons late last year. Shortly before his death, Kabel agreed to allow the Mellons to donate the painting to Old City Hall. It is currently being stored in Mayor Jimmy Durbin's office while walls are prepared to hang it in its permanent location in Old City Hall in time for the April 17 dedication and open house. (News photo by David Normand)

Local artist Bob Mellon never touched brush to the canvas of the oil painting "Barrataria." He did, however, provide two important links in the chain of four artists that brought the historic painting to the walls of Denham Springs Old City Hall.

The story of the "Barrataria" is an old one, first recounted to the public by the New York Times in an 1863 article reprinted on this page. The gunboat began life transporting sugar through the bayous before being commandeered by the Union and sent to New York to be armor-plated. It returned to Louisiana only to be snagged in the Amite River and ultimately destroyed.

After summarizing the story in a recent interview, Mellon remarked, "As far as I can tell they had two problems - thinking they could take a gunboat up the Amite and not get snagged, and misspelling 'Barataria.'"

F.H. Schell, an important recorder of events and personalities involved in the Civil War, was the first artist in the series of four. His sketch of the grounded Barrataria while it was under fire from Confederate forces was one of those sketches. Two weeks after the story was reported in the New York Times, Schell's sketch and brief account of the action was published in Harper's Weekly. Schell's sketches are now valued collectibles. "Krakatoa Eruption," a Schell sketch that was not Civil War related, is currently available online as a giclee print.

But that was not how Mellon obtained his copy of the "Barrataria" lithograph.

Enter the second artist, Bob Helmer. The two Bobs were acquaintances in New Orleans more than 50 years ago. Mellon, a young lawyer, not an artist at the time, drew up legal papers organizing a new cooperative gallery, The Orleans Gallery of which Helmer was a member, and in the process they became closer friends.

"After I moved to Denham Springs, he came to spend weekends with us and knew the area," Mellon said. "He collected old books and magazines and spotted the name 'Amite River.' So he cut it out, tinted it and framed it and gave it to us."

That was in 1958. Ten years later, Helmer died, giving the lithograph even more sentimental value than it already had.

Fast forward 40 years. Mellon is still living with his wife Troy in the same River Road house and the lithograph is hanging on the kitchen wall. He has retired from the practice of law, however, and taken up painting, earning a BFA at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge and achieving some success and recognition as an artist, thus retroactively becoming the third in the "Barrataria" chain.

Fourth in the chain was Lionel Kabel, an artist specializing in local historic scenes. The two men had long been acquainted through their involvement in civic affairs, Mellon as an attorney and Kabel as a businessman, amateur historian and preservationist. Now they were both artists, Kabel for far longer than Mellon, and had become very close friends.

"We were drinking coffee at the kitchen table," Mellon said, "when Lionel spotted the lithograph and commented that it would make a great painting. I told him, 'It's just your style. Take it and paint it.' He wouldn't accept it, but he did make a copy and paint the scene." "That's how he was," Troy Mellon commented. "One time he saw me walking across the yard with a basket of laundry and said it would make a great painting. When I told Margaret [Kabel's wife] about it, she said that was how he saw things all the time. He had such a gift to be so aware of the land and the history and the people."

When Mellon made one of his frequent visits late last year, Kabel was engaged in the final stages of his battle with cancer.

"He told me, 'I'm tidying up my life and I want you to have this painting,'" Mellon said.

Mellon took the painting but called on Kabel two or three months later when Kabel had stopped taking chemotherapy, a sign to Mellon that he was prepared to die.

"I told him I wanted to give the painting to the Old City Hall because he had been so important to the project," Mellon said. "At first he said 'No' but when I told him that only about 12 people would see it at my house and everyone could see it at Old City Hall, he told me, 'OK, OK.'"

The day of Kabel's funeral, Mellon stopped in at the office of Patti Peairs, the director of Old City Hall, and told her about the donation, asking when would be a good time to drop it off. She told him to come by the night of the February Main Street Commission meeting, thinking to make it a surprise. And it was, a surprise to the Mellons and to Peairs, who was taken unaware herself by the overwhelming response of the committee.

"We were so pleased that they were excited," Mellon said.

"Some were almost crying and were just thrilled," Troy Mellon said. "It was so rewarding and spoke so to the feeling about Lionel and his contributions. We knew it was an aesthetic treasure, an economic treasure, a historical treasure ... and a sentimental treasure."

The painting is currently hanging over the conference table in Denham Springs Mayor Jimmy Durbin's office waiting for a painting hanging system to be installed at Old City Hall, but it will be on display along with the Harper's Weekly lithograph, also donated by Mellon, in time for the April 17 Old City Hall rededication ceremony at 3 p.m. and the tours and reception that will follow until 7.