

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

Somalia spoils fun for make-believe pirates

By Moises Mendoza
The Houston Chronicle
April 16, 2009



Galveston's Nonus Gallery features a drawing of pirate Jean Lafitte.

America's pirate subculture is a peculiar world where grown men strap on eye patches, sing pirate chanteys and take on names like, in Clayton Jackson's case, Morick Towain.

Once a month, Jackson dresses up in pirate garb — such as a head wrap, pair of pointy boots and special piratey pants. Then he hits the bars for some drinks with a few similarly dressed friends.

“Being a pirate is about freedom, it's the lifestyle of that old-time period that catches my attention,” said Jackson of Dallas, who runs a social group for Texas pirates.

Spurred by popular movies like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, interest in pirates of centuries past has skyrocketed in recent years.

But the recent worldwide furor over real-life Somali pirates raises a pressing question: Should people really be romanticizing murderous pirates — even old ones?

In the tightknit pirate subculture, the issue is a touchy subject and rarely discussed. Leaders of the movement

say they've recently begun fielding more pointed, occasionally uncomfortable questions. “If we had been thinking ahead we would have called it ‘Talk Like a Buccaneer Day,’ ” said John Baur, speaking of the now famous Talk Like a Pirate Day he co-founded with friend Mark Summers in 1995.

Summers became so concerned with the issue of modern-day piracy, he recently wrote an open letter to the Somali pirates in a trade magazine.

Golden age of piracy

From the dawn of shipping, pirates have plied the seas, stealing from ships and attacking villages.

In the age of antiquity, pirates could be found throughout the Mediterranean. Julius Caesar is even said to have been kidnapped and held by pirates for a time.

But many of today's legends stem from the 17th to 18th centuries — known today as piracy's golden age.

Back then, men with names like Blackbeard roamed the ocean, pillaging and raping at will.

In the 17th century, buccaneers were renowned for their cruelty. They hung men by their genitals and bound ropes around victims' heads to make their eyes bulge, said Virginia Lunsford, a history professor at the U.S. Naval Academy.

"They were horribly violent, much more violent than anything we would see today," Lunsford said.

But as European armies decimated piracy and the threat faded away, the once-feared ruffians began to be idealized. Their legends have spawned books, movies and even resting spots dedicated to their memory — Galveston pirate Jean Lafitte, for instance, has his own leafy Louisiana park.

"As we get further away from the past, it's easier to become more romantic about piracy," said Stephen Curley, a Texas A&M-Galveston English professor. "It's sort of the exotic Robin Hood phenomenon."

In recent years, pirates have moved beyond mere romanticism: Now they are widely seen as silly, fun rum-swiggers. So, too, are participants in the American pirate subculture. But the questions about Somali pirates have become a wee bit annoying — and the founders of Talk Like a Pirate Day face them all the time.

In Summers' Pirates Magazine piece, he wrote that modern-day pirates lack colorful characters like the pirates of old. Plus, he wrote, the AK-47 is a vulgar weapon.

In an e-mail explaining his position, he said that "none of them will be — nor should be — romanticized in their lifetime."

Said Baur: "We have to explain to our audience that we definitely don't condone piracy in any way. ... Pirates in the old days were thieves and scoundrels but we've smeared Vaseline on the lens of history in a way."

The Bilge Pumps, a group of Dallas natives who dress in pirate gear and sing chanteys, have also answered tough questions about one of their magnets. It says "The Bilge Pumps Support Piracy."

Band member Craig Lutke said it's just meant to be funny.

"People who see our show and know who we are realize exactly how silly we are," Lutke said. "We know they were scoundrels back then. Obviously we're different."

'Just about having fun'

The commission that runs Corpus Christi's pirate-themed festival, which starts next week, says the negative pirate attention hasn't affected them.

"It really isn't an issue. This is just about having fun," said Barry Box, the head of the commission that puts on the festival.

Experts say it's unclear how the blitz of publicity for modern-day pirates could mold future perceptions of a bygone era's scoundrels.

But, Lunsford said, pirates are likely to maintain their place in popular lore.

"I don't think, honestly, people understand how horrific they were," she said.