



THE SOUTH EAST: FRENCH DIRK, ST MARTINVILLE, LOUISIANA.

Wes: We made a short trip across the State Line for our next investigation, in the heart of Louisiana.

Tukufu: we've come to the lovely French-speaking town of St. Martinville. But first, we have to go back in time to 1809. For two days, the Emperor Napoleon's French Army has been held up in the battle of Wagram in Austria. The course of the Battle hangs in the balance, until a single act of conspicuous bravery by a young French officer swings the battle back into Napoleon's favor. Or so the story goes. His name was Jean Julien Rousseau, and thousands of miles and two centuries away in the tiny town of St. Martinville, Louisiana, his legend lives on through this mysterious heirloom. It's been passed down through four generations to his great-granddaughters, Inez and Isabelle Rousseau. I'm Tukufu Zuberi. Wes Cowan and I are in rural Louisiana to meet the Rousseau sisters and investigate what is fact and what is fiction.

Rousseau sisters: Our French culture is very important to us. The first member of the Rousseau family who came to Louisiana and to St. Martinville came in 1815. We think we have something very important Napoleon gave to my great-grandfather. We think that it's authentic.

Tukufu: How in world did you come by this little sword?

Rousseaus: And you know, technically it's not a sword, it's a dirk.

Wes: This is really a pretty neat piece.

Rousseaus: Dirks are not common. It's been in the family since -- oh, 200 years. Our great-great-grandfather, Jean Julien Rousseau, fought in the battle of Wagram. And the Flag Bearer was killed. And Jean Julien Rousseau ran up, picked up the flag and led the troops over the bridge. And in appreciation, Bonaparte handed him the sword.

Tukufu: What can we do for you?

Rousseaus: Our ancestors have repeated this story. It has come down through generations. And we want you to prove that this is a true story. Is this Napoleon's sword?

Wes: So this a fascinating story, but is this really a sword that Napoleon would have given somebody? I want to show this to some Napoleonic experts.

Tukufu: Okay. See what they have to say. While you're doing that, I'm going to go check up on this guy, Jean Julien Rousseau, and see who he was. If any records exist in the United States for Jean Julien Rousseau, they would be here in the Courthouse. Since the founding of St. Martinville in 1766, all official documents, surveys and censuses have been kept here. 200 years have gone by since the days of Jean Julien Rousseau, and there are a lot of documents to sift through. Here I have a sworn affidavit by Felician Martan, who is the daughter-in-law of Jean Julien Rousseau. "On this 4th day of November, 1915" and she's swearing this affidavit about the exploits of her father-in-law. This is very interesting. "But principally of an incident which happened during the battle of Wagram, Austria, that on the morning of the year 1809 after Napoleon " -- this is the Emperor Napoleon, right? -- "that Napoleon had ordered the Army to cross Danube River, the soldier carrying one of the Division's battle flags was killed. Colonel Rousseau picked the flag and carried it across the bridge. Napoleon personally presented to Colonel Rousseau a beautiful short sword."

Tukufu: Let's see what else she has to say. Oh, listen to this. "That before dying, he left to his son, Jules Jean Rousseau, two swords and two pistols." I wonder what happened to the other pistols? I mean, she has a lot of signatures here. We have several people signing this document. She brings out a Who's Who of St. Martinville during this time. However, this story is being recounted by his daughter-in-law, not necessarily a very objective source of information, and the townspeople are confirming it, but they have something to gain as well. we need some objective confirmation that Napoleon gave Jean Julien Rousseau our sword.

Wes: While Tukufu makes progress researching our man Rousseau, I'm finding out everything there is to know about this dirk. Few Napoleonic scholars are as passionate about the great Emperor as Daniel Adolphe. A veteran of the

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Vietnam War, Daniel brings his own personal experience to the study of Napoleon's strategy. So, Daniel, did Napoleon give out things like swords as rewards for bravery or heroic acts?

Daniel Adolphe: Yes, he did. He did give out swords, pistols, muskets of honor, trumpets of honor, drumstick of honor, which I have one to show you right now. And these are known as drumsticks of honor.

Wes: Oh, yeah, and they had a little engraved silver plaque.

Daniel: They would be engraved with a silver plaque.

Wes: Daniel, is this the kind of dirk that Napoleon would have owned himself?

Daniel: If it was a dagger, it would be very decorative and it would be gilded in gold, more lavish. A lot of time, Napoleon would have his initial "N" on the dagger or sword or so on, but this dagger would have an "N" already if it was to distinguish that it was personally owned by Napoleon. It's beautiful, but in my opinion it's kind of a hard-to-swallow story.

Wes: So it looks like this isn't Napoleon's dirk after all. But that begs the question: what the heck is it and where did it come from? I left Louisiana to meet with Peter Tweet, an expert on early naval weaponry. If anyone can tell me about this dirk, it's Peter.

Peter Tweet: Well, looking at it, it's obviously a naval dirk. It's got the anchor on the guard and it's got the classic French anchor right here in the cross guard. The eagle is French. The panels, the mother-of-pearl panels, are typical of a French-made dirk.

Wes: Pete, is there any way we can date that dirk?

Peter: Brass scabbards really didn't come into existence until 1820 or so, and possibly later than that.

Wes: Before that they were leather?

Peter: They were typically leather. And another thing doesn't add up. This, for example, is an eagle pommel dirk. It once had a leather scabbard.

Wes: But we know this was made during the Napoleonic era because it's got the large "N" under the eagle pommel.

Peter: Right. These three dirks over here illustrate the spectrum of dirks that were worn in the early 1800s.

Wes: But again, the leather scabbard indicates early.

Peter: Right.

Wes: So in other words, this dirk was made in the 1820s at the earliest. At that point, Napoleon was dead.

Peter: With some restoration, it's a nice example of a French naval dirk.

Wes: Well, you know, you might enjoy having it in your collection, but I would guess that the sisters in Louisiana who own this would have something to say about that.

Peter: I understand that.

Wes: Let's just summarize what we've discovered, then. First, this is a French-made dirk. It was likely made between 1825 and 1835.

Peter: That is correct.



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Wes: And I guess the other thing that's becoming a little bit clearer is that it's likely not Napoleon's dirk.

Tukufu: I'll be honest. I don't know what to think. Is there anything to this story? If the sword didn't belong to Napoleon, what part of the Rousseau story should we believe? Was Jean Julien a Colonel? Was he even in the Army? In a small town like St. Martinville, sometimes the local library has secrets hidden in the stacks. Maybe I'll find what I'm looking for. Here's something. These Church records say that he was born in the city of Nantes in France and had a wife name(d) Sophie. It's a start. Okay, what I have here is "Napoleon's Soldiers in America" and here he is "Jean Julien Rousseau". And he's mentioned as being part of the Grenadiers, so he was a soldier in Napoleon's Army. Maybe this investigation is getting back on track. This particular passage explains -- helps us understand why our man, Jean Julien Rousseau, would have come here to begin with. "Napoleon's devoted soldiers," of which of course he was one, "and officers harbored smoldering resentment toward the new Bourbon Regime and dreamed of new and faraway lands."

Wes: I must have piqued our Napoleon expert's interest. After I left, he continued searching through his collection. He finally made a remarkable discovery. What have you got for me?

Daniel: Oh, I have big surprise.

Wes: Oh, great.

Daniel: I found an old book of all the soldiers of the Napoleonic Empire that received honors. And I found your man. And his name is Jean Rousseau, Grenadier of the 3rd of the line. He received a Gun of Honor for capturing a flag from the enemy.

Wes: So that's the evidence we've been looking for. Wow, that's fabulous! So this Jean Rousseau received a gun, not a sword.

Daniel: Ccorrect.

Wes: But he got the gun from Napoleon.

Daniel: Yes.

Wes: But Rousseau didn't save the French flag, like Inez and Isabelle believed. He captured the enemy flag. This brave act would have had a huge impact on the battlefield. So Daniel, what's the significance of losing a flag?

Daniel: Well, it's the most devastating thing for the Regiment to lose its flag.

Wes: How often did that happen?

Daniel: It didn't happen too many times because most of the soldiers, they would guard their colors, or the flag, and they would fight till the end and not lose their flag.

Wes: This is great. I can't wait to show this to Inez and Isabelle.

Tukufu: But what was life like for Colonel Rousseau after he arrived in St. Martinville? It appears that he prospered in his new home and made a small fortune as a trader. It also says here that he was known to make frequent trips between France and Louisiana. Do you know how rich he would've had to be to make frequent trips between Louisiana and France? This is very interesting, but listen to this. "While sitting at the Captain's table for dinner, he died suddenly." Typically, if you died on board a ship in the 19th century, they buried you at sea. They dumped your body in the water. "For some reason, the Captain saw fit to preserve the Frenchman's body. The Captain lifted the hatches of his vessel and had the crew bring from below the largest cask filled with the finest European rum." So our guy Rousseau was really an important person. Our man wanted to be buried in his adopted country. But would Rousseau's wealth be reason

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enough for the Captain to preserve his body? Maybe the fact that he'd been a Colonel in Napoleon's Army tipped the balance, because he certainly got his place in the town cemetery.

Wes: So what do we know? Well, Rousseau was a hero, just like the story said, and he was a man of great importance in his community. But I don't know how Inez and Isabelle will take the bad news about their beloved dirk. Isabelle, Inez, we have some good news and some bad news.

Rousseaus: Why don't we start with the bad news.

Wes: As much as we would love to say that this beautiful little dirk belonged to the Emperor Napoleon, we can emphatically tell you that it did not. And the reason is that we know from the style of the dirk that it's the kind that was manufactured in France between about 1825 and 1835, so that's after Napoleon's reign. The other thing that bothered me from the very first was, if you'll notice here on the cross guard, there's an anchor. That's a symbol of the Navy. Napoleon, of course, was a Grenadier. He was Army. He was a foot soldier, led the foot soldiers. And of course, your great-great-grandfather was in the Army, not the Navy. This could not have been Napoleon's dirk. But there's good news. As you know, your great-great-grandfather was a man of distinction. And that brings us to this great big green book, which matches your dress very nicely, by the way. We found that, in fact, your story that's been carried down through your family tradition for 150, almost 200 years, is substantially true. There's a listing of all the soldiers who were awarded honors for actions. Now if we go down this column here, we will find, "Jean Rousseau, a Grenadier of the 3rd Line, received a pistol of honor in April, 1801."

I know that in your great-great-grandfather's possession was another longer sword, as well as two pistols. Do you know what happened to the other sword and the two pistols?

Rousseaus: We believe that an uncle took them and sold them. This is almost, Tukufu, like a story of the fish that got away. [LAUGHTER] but we knew there was something good to come out of it.

Wes: So how does this make you feel?

Rousseaus: Well, a little disappointed that it is not Napoleon's sword. We were after the truth. We wanted to know exactly where we came from.

Wes: We want to make sure that you know how much we appreciate the story, and so we've brought you a little something to put with the sword. And so we wanted to give you this. This is a replica of a Napoleonic battle flag.

MORE ON MILITARY HONORS

Napoleon understood the importance of military honors. He famously said, "give me enough ribbon to cover the tunics of my soldiers and I will conquer the world." Military decorations go way back. The most famous Roman award was the Corona, a crown given to a soldier who saved his entire unit from a besieging Army. General George Washington began rewarding American acts of heroism in 1782 with the badge of military merit, which consisted of a purple cloth heart. This honor fell into disuse after the end of the Revolutionary War. Halfway through the Civil War, the Medal of Honor was introduced to boost morale. It's still the highest U.S. military award. In 1932, the badge of military merit was revived as the Purple Heart to celebrate Washington's bicentennial. It's awarded to those wounded in battle or to the next of kin of those killed in action. But having too many military decorations can have its downside. During the Battle of Trafalgar, Lord Nelson was killed by one of Napoleon's snipers who'd been told to shoot the British officer wearing the most medals.

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