



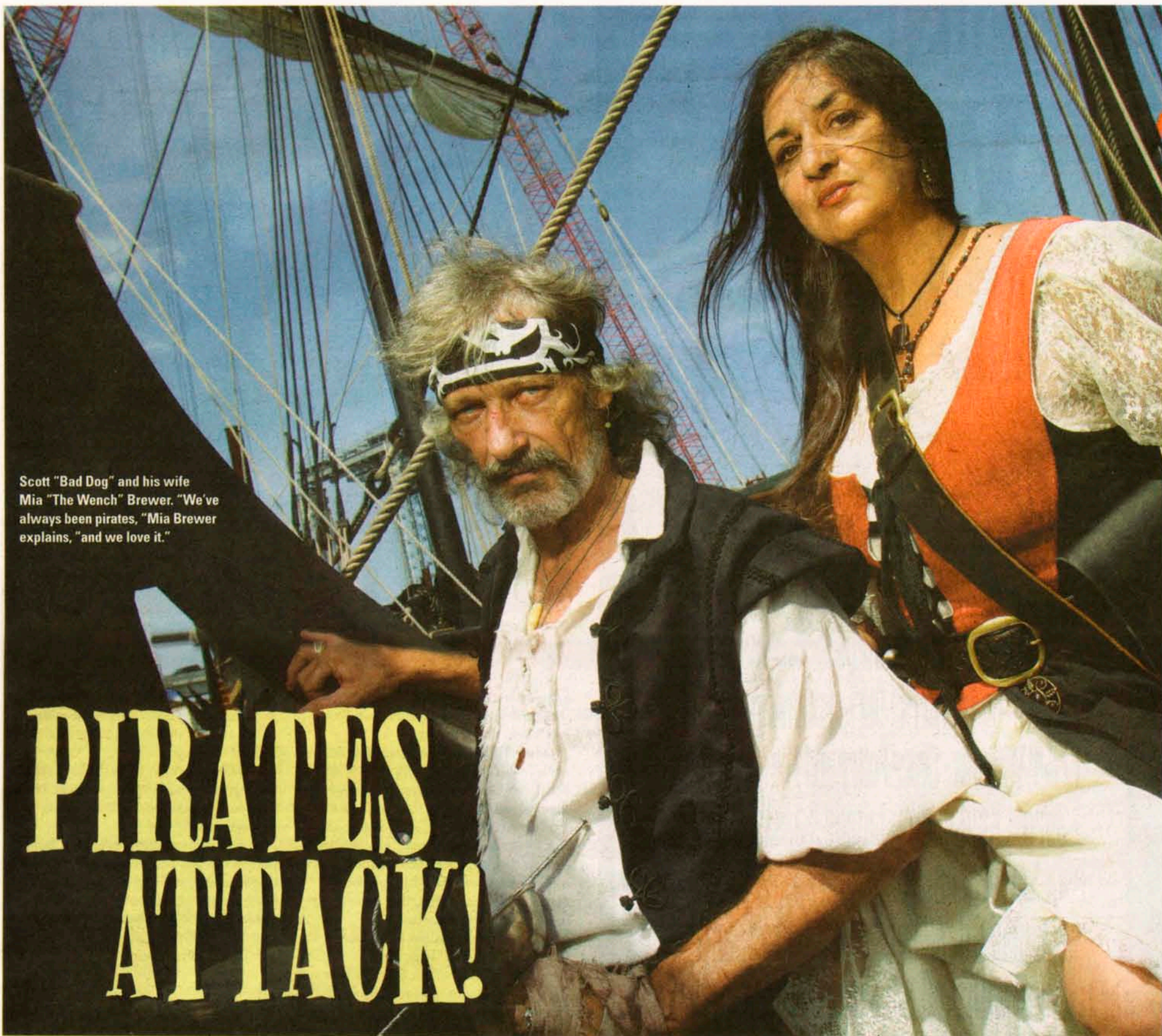
PIRATES ATTACK!

Having infiltrated St. Augustine's tourist trade, faux pirates now threaten to sink the ship of historic legitimacy.

By Kara Pound p. 19

COULD MICHAEL VICK BE HEADED FOR A STINT IN JACKSONVILLE? p. 15

THE LOCAL ECONOMY NEEDS HELP — FROM LOCAL PEOPLE. p. 63



Scott "Bad Dog" and his wife Mia "The Wench" Brewer. "We've always been pirates," Mia Brewer explains, "and we love it."

PIRATES ATTACK!

Having infiltrated St. Augustine's tourist trade, faux pirates now threaten to sink the ship of historic legitimacy. **By Kara Pound. Photos by Walter Coker.**

After five solid days of rain, the pirates of the Black Raven are desperate to leave port. Not so much to reclaim the open seas or sing their shanties, but because this enterprise is kept afloat, in part, by gratuities. And the tip jar is critically, echoing empty.

Shortly after 2 p.m., the ship pushes away from the city marina in downtown St. Augustine. A three-story, 72-foot steel replica of a 1700s Spanish Galleon, the yellow, black and red-lacquered ship deftly moves north through the Bridge of Lions construction zone. There are no sails to fill (the boat is diesel motor-powered), but the pirates aren't sticklers for historic authenticity. After a brief safety speech, Olie Mackerel, William Mayhem and Blackbeard — the crew's most vocal and theatrical members — launch into an hour-and-a-half of pirate storytelling, unconvincing magic tricks and raunchy jokes. Complete with cardboard cocked pirate hats and

black-paint mustaches, they sing "Haul Away Joe," "Drunken Sailor" and — with tambourines, no less — "A Pirate's Life For Me (Yo Ho)." Their speech is peppered with arrrgs and ayes, their soggy jokes designed to elicit groans. "Why do seagulls fly over the sea?" asks one. "Because if they flew over the bay they'd be *bagels!*"

Not to be outdone, Olie Mackerel, shouts to a passing sailboat, "Your dinghy's hanging out!"

Because this is the Black Raven's daily "family" cruise, the humor is presumably a little less blue than on the nighttime voyages. But William Mayhem, a sturdy man with a knack for second-rate magic tricks, admits that after 25 years of working in Las Vegas as a comedian, he feels more at home on the adult cruises, where people are drinking.

Even a little of this kind of journey makes clear why some local historians, re-enactors and city boosters are

concerned about the impact the current surge in piracy is having on St. Augustine's historic image. The Black Raven is hardly the only pirate-driven tourist destination: The Ancient City is now a virtual pirate fetishist's dream. There are pirate stores, pirate festivals, pirate-themed taverns. There are pirate photography studios, pirate B&Bs and pirate-guided ghost tours. If you didn't know better, you might actually think that pirates had a firm place in city history, or at least in its tourist trade. To the contrary, most historians deny or downplay piracy, and until about 10 years ago, there was almost no pirate presence whatsoever.

The transformation is hard to overstate. In a city where for years the only costumed people downtown were Spanish Colonial re-enactors — many on city payroll — St. Augustine has, quite literally, been taken over by pirates. Almost without exception, the movement favors good times over historical truth. Bodices and



Blackbeard hawks T-shirts during a recent cruise aboard the Black Raven.

fishnets dominate; “grog” is the nectar that turns computer programmers into weekend libertines.

There are dozens of events and clubs that advance this agenda. According to St. Augustine Pirate University, an online “knowledge sharing” site (seriously), there are at least 20 local pirate clubs. Some, like “Swashbucklers, Pirates and Buccaneers,” exist primarily because their members “enjoy raiding a nice seafood restaurant” (the club specifically mentions Red Lobster). Other groups stage battles or perform at parties.

That this trend might be part of a larger civic concern surfaced in the recent Destination Master Plan report. Commissioned by St. Johns County’s Tourist Development Council in advance of the city’s 450th anniversary in 2015, the study emphasized the need for St. Augustine to move away from “tacky” enterprises that detract from the city’s legitimate history. At the same time, longtime entrepreneurs, particularly those with their roots in the Spanish Colonial era, are concerned that the vivid pirate fantasy steals tourists’ attention — and dollars — from their earnest, but arguably less colorful, enterprises.

“I’ve always thought of pirates as part of the dumbing-down of our history to a fourth-grade level,” says city historian and author David Nolan. “I’m sure it’s fun for students of that age who visit St. Augustine to buy plastic swords, eyepatches and flags with skulls-and-crossbones, but it tends to balloon out of proportion in relation to its significance in our history.”

To be fair, there is some education mixed with the entertainment. As the Black Raven returns to port, the pirate actors offer up anecdotes about Pedro Menendez, discuss the difference between pirates and “privateers,” and talk about Robert Searle’s

1668 sacking of St. Augustine. But lest anyone think that the purpose of the outing is purely educational, Pirate Blackbeard gestures at the tip box.

“We’ve been working really hard on our singing, as you can see,” he observes, “so we have our Pirate’s Libation and Singing Research Fund.”

A few coins and dollar bills go in, but frankly, this two-hour trip already cost each passenger \$38, and it’s hard to want to shell out a few more bucks so the pirates can go drinking after work. Then again, the high-seas shakedown is one part of the voyage that feels undeniably authentic.

Depending on whom you ask, and possibly their mood, the word “pirate” conjures either images of a dashing, dreadlocked Johnny Depp or a band of Somali youth armed with assault rifles. Either way, piracy is a business. In Hollywood, the game is sexy and lucrative, dominated by puffy shirts, Disney tie-ins and enough plastic paraphernalia to sink the Queen Anne’s Revenge. In the Gulf of Aden, the game is desperate and terroristic, a seaside extension of a failed African state. Romance is negligible; tall ships are replaced by fiberglass skiffs, gleaming sabers by RPG-7 rocket launchers.

Pirates have been around for as long as the oceans have been used as trade routes. The earliest documented cases of piracy date back to the 13th Century BC, when a shadowy group of thieves known as the Sea Peoples threatened ships on the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. Piracy has always been considered a desperate way of life — pirates ate poorly and died young, and few became wealthy. Most governments and townspeople looked at pirates as filthy, money-driven mercenaries — more akin to crack



Pirates love their grog, but put safety first: Olie Mackerel demonstrates proper deployment of drinking and lifesaving equipment.



dealers than tycoons — and their behavior was legendarily bad. They raped, pillaged, murdered and excelled at devising cruel methods to punish disobedience.

The fact that pirates have been romanticized in the modern era probably has less to do with their inherent marketability than a Western appetite for plunder and predatory economics (credit default swaps, anyone?). But it may also owe something to the practice of government-sanctioned piracy known as privateering.

A privateer essentially behaves like a pirate — capturing enemy vessels and looting cities. The difference is they do it with a permission slip or “a letter of marque” from their government. Privateers, also known as corsairs, typically were authorized to attack during wartime, with their plunder serving as a source of tax revenue. Not all nations recognized the legitimacy of privateers (Spain, for one, was known for executing privateers with their letters of marque prominently displayed on their bodies). And not all privateers limited their activity to “legitimate” attacks. But privateers have muddied the waters, historically speaking, particularly in St. Augustine.

As the oldest continuously occupied European-established city and the oldest port in the continental United States, St. Augustine has existed under several flags. It was ruled by the Spanish and the British before being peacefully turned over to become an American territory. And depending on whom you ask, it either was or was not attacked by pirates. Historians, Colonial re-enactors, pirate re-enactors and tourism officials all take a different view on whether pirates have a place in city history.

“It’s a fine line, depending on who’s telling the story,” says Jay Humphreys, communications director of the St.

Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches Visitors & Convention Bureau. Humphreys is also the author of “Handbook of 50 Pirates,” an illustrated tribute to “seagoing desperado[s] and other classic artwork of the times — all in full color!” according to a description on his website.

“Pirates have always been a part of St. Augustine’s history,” Humphrey says. “I think our re-enactments like [Sir Francis] Drake’s Raid and [Captain Robert] Searle’s Raid are authentic depictions — or as authentic as we can make them — of the

In a city where for years the only costumed people downtown were Spanish Colonial re-enactors, St. Augustine has quite literally been taken over by pirates. Bodices and fishnets dominate; grog is the nectar that turns computer programmers into weekend libertines.

role of piracy in St. Augustine’s history. I don’t think there’s probably another city in the United States whose history is more closely linked with piracy than St. Augustine.”

But Robert Hall, a historian, for Flagler College art professor and retired Colonial re-enactor of 30-plus years, disagrees. He maintains that St. Augustine history — including

Drake and Searle — is rooted in privateering, not piracy. Not only is the current spate of dress-up pirates historically incorrect, he says, it flies in the face of what the city stood for.

“They would have been in chains,” says Hall of pirates.

David Nolan echoes Hall. “It was just the opposite of a pirate hangout,” he says of the city. “It was designed to protect people — more from private navies and privateers than pirates themselves.”

While the main focus of most St. Augustine pirates is benign entertainment — generally for themselves — some fear that it confuses visitors and distorts city history. “It can look like great fun. Oh, these guys are out here and they’re drinking and swearing and waving swords around and it’s great fun,” says Hall. “And that’s the image that I think is detrimental. I’m just afraid that there’s an influx now, and those that are dealing in fantasy/movie world kind of thing. It’s a romantic image that we all have — [and] it’s unrealistic.”

Mia Brewer calls herself The Wench. Dressed in full pirate garb despite the 84 degree day — lace blouse, skirt, vest — Brewer sits in A1A Ale Works with her husband, Scott (aka Bad Dog). The room is packed with tourists and locals, and it’s obvious which is which. The tourists can’t stop staring at the Brewers; the locals barely notice them. Between facial moles, yellow teeth and weathered skin, these two actually look the part. In a city where pirates of dubious authenticity abound, the couple claims to be the real deal.

“We’ve always been pirates,” Brewer explains while sipping on a rum and coke. “This is re-enactor heaven, and we love it.”





"Everybody has their inner child," says Lady Red, far left. Fortunately, the city has an abundance of capable wet-nurses.

The couple, who were married as pirates on a ship in Key West 10 years ago, says they take their roles as re-enactors seriously, investing a lot of time, money and effort. (Brewer made her own outfit and her husband's — cotton-lined wool pants, bandana, blouse and vest — along with those of many pirates around town). They consider themselves "authentic" pirates, but they understand why some people choose to just dabble in fantasy.

"Piracy is something that people can feel really comfortable getting into," says Brewer. "They'll get a big sword, they'll put a patch on, and they go out and they go 'Arrgh!' And you know what? That's cool."

When it comes to piracy, the couple points out, fantasy is sometimes necessary. "The truth of it is, most of the pirates that came to shore here were filthy, dirty, smelly, nasty and lice-ridden," says Mia.

Her husband agrees. "If I actually did period correct, you would not be sitting across the table," Bad Dog spits, staring at my chest for the zillionth time. "And you would probably have difficulty with bladder control."



Colonial re-enactor Robert Hall fears the influx of pirates is "detrimental" to legitimate city history.

The Brewers head over the Bridge of Lions to a bar called American Graffiti for a meeting of the Ancient City Privateers. The organization, which claims 58 members, has two primary aims: organizing drinking parties at bars and staging charity events. The group has also participated in citywide pirate events, including the city's first-ever Pirate Gathering, a weekend-long event staged at the Fountain of Youth and sites around downtown in November 2008. Brewer, who coordinated the event, estimates that the weekend brought more than 3,000 revelers to the area, with some 300 pirates taking part in parades and historical demonstrations. She's already in the early stages of planning this year's gathering.

The bar crowd includes a few dozen pirates from all walks of life — a retired judge, a Mary Kay representative, a chemistry teacher, even a retired sheriff. Sylvia McGinnis, aka Lady Red (named for her crimson curls), jokes that she became a pirate 25 years ago as an excuse to lie and cheat. "Everybody has their inner child and when you dress up as somebody else, people don't recognize you and you can just have fun," she says.

Chad Light, a good friend of the Brewers, explains that being a pirate in St. Augustine has its perks. "It's the only town you can walk through with two pistols and a sword, and the police say, 'Hello.'"

T.J. Tolmie, a 20-year-old waiting tables at the bar, fills out an application to join the Ancient City Privateers. Asked why, he stumbles a bit. "I like the pirate outfits. I want to dress-up. I don't know. It looks like fun. I want a sword."

Lady Red explains the application process. She notes that membership costs \$25 up front and that club members consider an applicant's personality, character and standing in the community. They don't conduct a police background check, she adds, but they do ask that members keep their nose clean. Just because they're pirates doesn't mean they aren't respectable.

Pirates Attack!

At the corner of St. George and Hypolita streets, Tiger Lee stands next to the check-out counter at Pirate Portraits N' Treasures. A self-professed pirate from the South China Sea with a Fu Manchu mustache, Lee says he spent three years traveling the country looking for the perfect place to hawk pirate garb and accoutrements, and snap over-the-top pirate portraiture. This past January, he chose St. Augustine.

"There's always been an American fascination with pirates," he explains. "And it's becoming more mainstream." Lee considers his tiny storefront to be more "traditional" than other pirate retail shops in town, noting that he sells period clothing, not costumes. "As opposed to the other pirate shops that sell T-shirts and everything fake and touristy plastic, my shop is not like that. My shop is real silk, wool, cotton, linen clothing." His price points bear this out; one blouse sells for well over \$100.

But it's Lee's photography that draws the most business. At Lee's studio, you can dress up like a privateer, buccaneer, captain or "pinup" pirate — sexy wenches in alluring poses. Some of the wenches end up in his "Hot Pirate Babes" calendar. Now in its fourth year, the calendar features 12 months of half-naked women, holding swords and guns, often perched atop barrels of rum or wood-plank docks. The tagline: "Pirates be hot, but women pirates be hotter!"

Lee is a jack-of-all-pirate trades. He created the "Molly Roger" logo, a female version of the skull-and-crossbones flag. He hosts a monthly "In Garb Pub Crawl" at various bars around town. And he writes a monthly column for Pirates Magazine, which bills itself as "America's first full-color pirate magazine."

"Piracy has always been popular," says Lee. "I don't think this is just a fad."

Still, there's no denying the popularity has taken hold in St. Augustine. As recently

as the late '90s, a tourist would've been hard-pressed to find a mention of pirates, much less have a choice of pirate-flag vendors. (Possible exception: The Pirate Haus Inn, open since 1989, is a buccaneer-themed hostel run by Captain Conrad that includes a free all-you-can-eat "pirate pancake breakfast.") Today, it's almost impossible to find a bar or retail outfit that doesn't raise the Jolly Roger at least once in a while.

Case in point: The Pirate Store. With two prominent downtown locations — on San Marco Avenue at Castillo Drive and

Not only is the current spate of dress-up pirates historically incorrect, it flies in the face of what the city stood for. "Pirates would have been in chains," says historian Robert Hall.

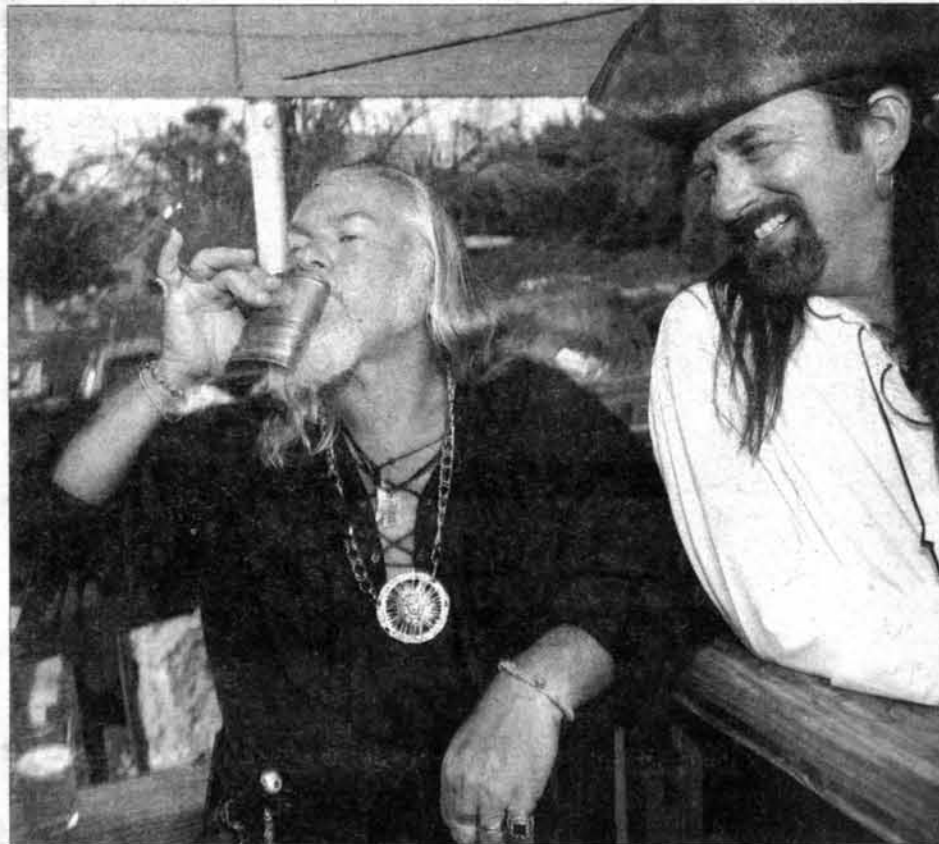
along U.S. 1 — it offers every trinket imaginable: pirate flags, patches, Band-Aids, pencil toppers, beer cozies, coasters, shot glasses and picture frames. Established eight years ago on St. George Street (they moved because of the escalating rent), the stores are owned by Steve and Sheryl Glasscock, and managed by their daughter, Tara Ausili.

"The movies have made making pirate tees a more lucrative business," says Ausili, referring to the in-house shirts that say things like "St. Arrrrrgustine" and "NICE BOOTY! PREPARE TO BE BOARDED!" Although there is surely a saturation point for all things pirate, Ausili doesn't begrudge competitors. In fact, she looks forward to enterprises like the Black Raven helping



Tiger Lee, owner of a pirate shop in St. Augustine, says piracy appeals on many levels. "It's not just a fad."

Pirates Attack!



Note the pinky: Master William Mayhem proves piracy and good breeding are, in fact, compatible.

advance pirate interests in town. "It will be an asset," she says, "once the season starts."

With St. Augustine's 450th Birthday approaching, the Nation's Oldest City will be getting — or at least seeking — a lot of attention. City boosters hope that the event will translate not just into one-time tourist dollars, but will help re-launch the city's "brand," making it something more akin to Savannah and Charleston, less like Weeki Wachee Springs.

As Glenn Hastings, executive director of the Tourist Development Council, told County Commissioners, "This is more than

A young waiter fills out an application to join the Ancient City Privateers. Asked why, he stumbles — "I like the pirate outfits. I want to dress up. I don't know. It looks like fun. I want a sword."

a birthday celebration. It will give world and national attention to centuries of history."

But there is some impatience with the city's emphasis on historic accuracy. The recent TDC report noted that trying to attract visitors on Spanish Colonial history alone had a kind of "eat your veggies" quality that was bound to turn off some. The report even suggested that St. Johns County pursue alternative attractions for the area — something like a water park, which would appeal to kids.

If the choice is between offering tourists a historically accurate experience

or catering to theme-park expectations, Scott Brewer suggests the answer is a no-brainer. Piracy is a lucrative business. "There's two industries in the city of St. Augustine: taxes and tourism," he says. "And they have done taxes to death, so we need to focus on the tourism."

Robert Hall sees it differently. "I think what's disturbing is simply the confusion in the public's mind as to what they're looking at," he says. "So many people just have the idea that, 'Oh, historic clothing, and he's got a sword. Oh, he's a pirate.' People don't distinguish those things. St. Augustine has its work cut out for it, because when people come to town they have no idea what it is."

Jay Humphreys, who himself straddles the line between the tourist and pirate worlds, seems of two minds. "One of the things that the city is going to strive to achieve during the 450th ... that it's an opportunity to get the story right. We see it as a teachable moment where we can actually learn something about our history." At the same time, he acknowledges those messages are going to be tough to control.

"There's no tourism czar or someone who can say, 'OK, you can have this attraction, but you can't have that one because it's not authentic.'" Lacking those restraints, the city will just have to do its best to get its message out — pirates or no.

At the end of the third "Pirates of the Caribbean" film, Johnny Depp's character, Captain Jack Sparrow, is sailing toward the Florida Peninsula in search of the Fountain of Youth. There's a lot of online speculation as to whether the fourth installment will be shot in St. Augustine, and just how much attention the Disney franchise will focus on the city. The film isn't slated for release until 2012, but depending on those answers, the city may find its 450th birthday in 2015 overshadowed by a whole other kind of pirate narrative.

Damn you, Jack Sparrow. □