

Books of The Times

Michel, MC, JVB, Black Jack, Lee, Stas, Jackie, JFK & Ari

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

THE BOUVIERS: Portrait of an American Family. By John H. Davis. 424 pages. Farrar, Straus Giroux. \$10.

JOHN H. DAVIS'S "The Bouviers: Portrait of an American Family" is a 400-page Christmas card—you know, one of those breezy newsletters that bring friends and relations up to date on what the family has been up to these last 157 years. Viz: Greetings All! 1968 was a busy year for the Bouviers and witnessed some momentous events for its widespread members. In January, Cousin LEE starred on national TV in Truman Capote's adaptation of "Laura." "Nearly everyone (Mr. Davis writes) made allowances for her inexperience." Cousin JACKIE finally remarried!!! The lucky fellow was Aristotle Socrates Onassis, the Greek shipping magnate. Jackie now has her own island and her own airline. Meanwhile, things were heating up in the Middle East, with consequences for MICHEL BOUVIER 3d. Michel is Director of Operations for Europe and the Middle East of Grumman International. "The job turned out to be a particularly congenial one at which he was very successful." And so forth.



Virginia Thoren-Rice

John H. Davis

Swimming in the Mainstream

It's easy enough to sympathize with Mr. Davis for choosing the printing press over the mimeograph machine to circulate his newsletter. Since the summer of 1815, when 23-year-old Michel Bouvier (1792-1874) left his home in southern France to emigrate to America, the Bouviers have had a remarkable history. Through six generations they have swum in the mainstream of American social and financial history. Mr. Davis, who is a direct descendant, has every right to be proud.

In 1817 Michel Bouvier, who was the author's great-great-grandfather, settled in Philadelphia, still the center of the New World. Starting as a cabinetmaker, he worked hard, invested shrewdly in land and real estate, sired 12 children by two marriages, and left them a fortune amounting to \$2.5-million by today's standards.

The second generation prospered even more. Michel's fifth child, Emma (1833-1883), married Francis A. Drexel, who helped to build one of the nation's great banking fortunes. Michel's ninth child and second son, John Vernou Bouvier (1843-1926), fought for the Union in the Civil War, and, with his youngest brother, Michel Charles Bouvier (1847-1935), shifted the family's locus to New York City, and propagated the Bouvier name and fortune. JVB fathered JVB Jr., and MC, rising to

the status of "Dean of Wall Street brokers," amassed a fortune worth nearly \$9-million by today's standards.

In the third generation, John Vernou Bouvier Jr. (1865-1948), or "The Major," as he came to be called, was the first of his family to attend college. He attained eminence as a trial lawyer, public speaker, club member and patriot. He fixed the Bouviers at the pinnacle of the East Hampton-Park Avenue social axis (with the help of a family history he wrote, called "Our Forebears," which decorated the family tree with spurious royal roots).

'Black Jack'

The Major's eldest son was John Vernou Bouvier 3d (1891-1957), who grew up to be a spectacular, though only moderately successful, Wall Street trader. Black Jack, the Black Prince, the Black Orchid, as he was variously nicknamed, married briefly, divorced, and spent the rest of his life wooing women and vying with his ex-wife for the attention of his two daughters, Jacqueline and Caroline Lee. (They of course would resurrect the family's prestige by marrying John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Prince Stanislas Radziwill.)

Black Jack's younger brother, William Sergeant (Bud) Bouvier, fought in World War I and passed the Bouvier name to his son, Michel Bouvier 3d, before dying of alcoholism. Jack's and Bud's younger sister, Edith Ewing Bouvier ("Big Edie"), grew to be a reclusive East Hampton bohemian. (Coincidentally, her daughter, "Little Edie," nearly married Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.) And the Major's two youngest daughters, twins Maude and Michelle, have served as the family's archivists. Together, they have preserved most of the family's heirlooms. And Maude is the mother of the author of this book.

So for readers who can identify with mobility upward, family tradition accumulated, and fortunes gained and lost, there is much to commend Mr. Davis's chronicle. And—be fair—though the early record is hazy and Mr. Davis overindulges himself in "must have's" and "probably's" and batters too greedily on what letters, diaries and wills have survived, the book has its moments. His memories of the family's summer gatherings in East Hampton are tinged with moving nostalgia for a past social era. And his personal reminiscences of Jackie's White House years are irresistible.

Mr. Davis has moved light years away from his grandfather's fanciful history. The Major would pale at the revelations of humble beginnings and poor French relatives. Still, the author is a member of the family and the underlying premise of his history is pride and loyalty. He has no thesis. He makes no profound attempt to dissect anyone's character (his chief analytical tools being astrology and bloodlines) or to relate the family story to a coherent perspective on American social history. And he is far too cozy with the clichés of historical writing. "The Bouviers" is simply high-level gossip for friends and admirers of the family.