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Marine Sergeant Who Was King Of 12,000 Natives on Voodoo Isle

Yank Was Believed Reincarnation of Faustin I.

By ROBERT H. MYERS

Released by Western Newspaper Union.

(Through courtesy of THE LEATHERNECK, the magazine of the U. S. Marines.)

ONE dark, gloomy night in the year 1848, on the tiny tropical voodoo isle of La Gonave, black King Faustin I suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. Years crept by and King Faustin I was never heard from again, but a legend was born that some day a descendant of his name would return to rule this West Indies island.

Some three score and ten years later, in 1920, a creaky sailboat lurched across the choppy waters of the channel from Port au Prince and scraped up on the sands of La Gonave. Bounding out was a strange collection of occupants; chattering black natives, bawling cattle—and Gunnery Sergeant Wirkus of the United States marines—whose first name was Faustin.

Thus was forged a link in one of the strangest stories that ever came out of this storied, superstition-bound island. For Faustin E. Wirkus, a blue-eyed, square-chinned Yankee from the state of Pennsylvania, who had never heard of King Faustin I or about his mysterious disappearance from La Gonave, and most certainly was no descendant of the ebony emperor, eventually was crowned King Faustin II and reigned virtually singlehanded over the 12,000 natives for nearly five years—between 1921 and 1925.

He's Asked About "Queen."

He became famous as the "White King of La Gonave," and as he goes about more commonplace duties in the marine corps today, he still gets numerous inquiries about his years in Haiti; about the broad and beaming native woman, Queen Ti Memenne, who had chosen him to rule the island.

Queen Ti Memenne, of course, was not really a queen, nor was Wirkus truly a king, because La Gonave was merely a province of Haiti and under the administration of the Haitian republic and its president. But the stormy little country had been the scene of a bloody uprising a few years before, starting in 1915. Marines had been sent in to settle it, and a picked number had remained to train and run the native Gendarmerie.

Gunnery Sergeant Wirkus was one of these men, and by congressional permission, was on detached duty with the Gendarmerie and held the rank of lieutenant in the force. Assigned to La Gonave, he was officially a subdistrict commander.

Today Wirkus is a warrant officer, in charge of the marine aviation detachment at the navy's pre-flight school at Chapel Hill, N. C. But to go back to those years of yesterday—

Soon after enlisting, he landed in Haiti with the first outfits of marines that went down to settle the trouble in that country. His was the old Twenty-second company, led by Capt. Alexander S. Williams, and his battalion commander was a man later destined for world fame, Gen. Smedley Butler.

Five Years of Bushfighting.

Off and on for five years, the marines were busy bushfighting the treacherous "cacos," knife-wielding natives whose tactics were bloody if not successful. Wirkus engaged in many scraps—he killed seven cacos in one bitter engagement—and gradually gained recognition as an efficient and straight-shooting non-com.

Once in Port au Prince he took a handful of native gendarmerie and broke up a secret voodoo ceremony and captured the ringleaders. This he accomplished with not a man injured. Voodoo meetings were often hotbeds of trouble.

During these years Wirkus kept hearing tales about the island of La Gonave, 40 miles north of Port au Prince and about 300 square miles in area. Voodooism was rampant on the island, and fearsome were some of the tales. A white man, so it was whispered, was not safe on La Gonave. No one wanted that outpost duty. Ghosts and spooks, they said, haunted the place.

But Wirkus made one visit to the island and decided he wanted it as a sub-district command. He scoffed at voodoo scare tales—and still does—and figured it would be a good place as a one-man job. Hunting and fishing were good, the climate was no barrier, and Wirkus was ambitious to make a name for himself as the key man in running the subdistrict. It was his responsibility to regulate travel and traffic, prevent smuggling, exercise control over the prison, enforce harbor and docking regulations, sanitation requirements, and see that lands were properly allotted and taxes paid.

Natives Suspicious.

When Wirkus arrived on brooding La Gonave, he found the natives suspicious of all white men, which was hardly surprising. For years they had been exploited and cheated. Their lot was a poor one, to say the least. Wirkus set out to correct these conditions, and behind his success was a genuine affection for the native population. As sequester, or administrator, he not only handled his official duties, but went out of his way to help the people. He showed them better ways to till their lands, for the main industry was agriculture. He repaired their antique equipment and modernized it where possible.

Mothers were astonished but grateful when he came to their aid in bringing up their offspring. They didn't know it, but he bought a book, "The Care and Feeding of Children," to help him with such problems. He surveyed the lands and divided, eliminating bitter disputes, and he reduced taxes for some and boosted it for others, many of whom had enjoyed favoritism from corrupt local representatives of the Haitian government.

It took a full year for Wirkus to gain the trust and friendship of the islanders, and particularly Queen Ti Memenne. The "queen" was the leading figure in a group of matriarchal societies which dominated affairs of business and society on La Gonave. During his early months there, Wirkus had made it a point to humor the fat and friendly queen, and she soon began to accept his advice and help.

Summons From Queen.

One day Wirkus received a summons at his newly built home on the coast. Messengers from the queen delivered it. They were very solemn. The message asked that Wirkus hasten inland and up into the back mountain country to the queen's village of whitewashed mud huts. The queen very urgently wanted to see the young American, who was then not quite 25.

Wondering what it could be about, Wirkus accepted and started off on horseback. The trails up the mountain were crowded with natives, all heading for the queen's village. When he finally reached the village he was ushered, still somewhat mysteriously, into a dwelling especially reserved for him. It was late afternoon and the queen's emissaries informed him that his presence would not be wanted before Queen Ti Memenne until late that night. Already drums were slowly beating in the village center. Still wondering what it was all about, he calmly undressed and went to sleep.

Warrant Officer Faustin Wirkus as he looks today.

Khaki-Clad Monarch.

Later the marine sergeant, dressed in his usual khaki and puttees, entered the queen's house, stepping into a tiny room. Squatting in close array on the floor were members of the inner court. Ti Memenne, barefoot and dressed in a gaily colored robe, sat at the front in regal fashion, her black face shadowy in the sputtering, vague rays of candles. Queen Ti Memenne must have been in her forties or more, and, while a friendly woman, she had a way of commanding and getting respect.

The marine found out why he had been summoned before the queen. He was to be crowned "King Faustin II."

"At first I thought it was just a way they had of telling me they liked me, but later it developed that Ti Memenne and her people were in earnest about the matter. They had discussed the thing for days, and had agreed to name me as their 'white king.' "

The ceremony, weird in many ways, lasted nearly three hours. Outside the drums rolled and pounded, all but drowning out the bleating of a young goat scared to the tip of his tail, which was brought into the royal chamber and offered up as a blood sacrifice.

Wirkus was seated on a small, short-legged chair, and at the queen's command, an attendant came from the next room bearing a heavy, ornate crown.

"I now crown you 'King Faustin II,' " proclaimed Queen Ti Memenne, and she placed the crown—the same crown, so it was said, that once had adorned the head of King Faustin I—on Wirkus!

"Two huge blacks then picked me up and carried me outside. As soon as I appeared the drums beat out the king's salute—four ruffles and three taps. I knew that this was no empty honor they were paying me."

'White King of La Gonave.'

Thus was crowned "The White King of La Gonave," a title that was to bring Wirkus, the marine, fame in many countries. William B. Seabrook made him the featured romantic character of his book, "Magic Isle," and later Mr. Wirkus himself wrote a book which he called "The White King of La Gonave."

With the fame, however, also came envy and jealousy from certain quarters. Haiti's president a few years later, Louis Borno, hardly relished the popularity of La Gonave's subdistrict commander, or the thought that a "king," official or unofficial, was in charge of one of his provinces. So eventually Wirkus was transferred to another West Indies station.

Before that happened, though, the adventure - loving leatherneck proved himself a good and kindly administrator. The natives greeted him with "Bon soir, Roi," or "Good evening, King," and he was forever amused at the intense interest the natives took in his everyday affairs. Often they stood around his home, just to watch him dress.

As "King," of course, he had no more authority than he had before. In the eyes of his marine associates in the Gendarmerie, he was still merely subdistrict commander. He received no pay for his kingly title, and his stay on the island was as routine as before. To him, it was just a high compliment.

In 1925 Wirkus was transferred to another station in the West Indies. It was a sad occasion when "The White King of La Gonave" bade his people goodby. The natives lined the shores and cheered as Queen Ti Memenne gravely prophesied:

"Some day you will come back and rule the island of La Gonave."

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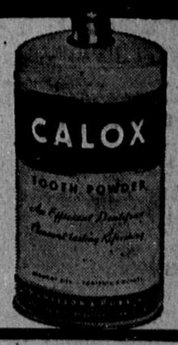
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