Back-Tracking
1776-1976
By Sue Eakin

A Plantation With a Difference

STONEWALL, La. — Driving through the picturesque hills of northern Desoto Parish looking for Allendale, we searched the countryside for the big white-columned house that would tell us we were approaching the plantation. The place interested me as the home site of my colleague at LSUA, Prof. Greg Marshall. Little did I realize that Allendale was different and that one of the most remarkable of my plantation visits was ahead.

The plantation started with John James Marshall, who came west sometime during the 1800s as so many restless Americans did at that time. Most of north Louisiana was just getting settled then, and the two Marshall brothers, like most immigrants, probably stepped on the frontier in a land that reminded them of home back in South Carolina. Besides, even at that early date, most of the rich bottomland was claimed, but Marshall secured two sections — two square miles — of this land covered with virgin forests and then returned to South Carolina to bring his family. He didn’t have to worry immediately about living quarters, for a quarter named Allen, a U.S. Indian agent and trapper, had left his well-built single pen log house.

And to my amazement and delight the Allendale Plantation house we saw after making that last turn through the hills was the home that was started with Allen’s log cabin chinked with mud and moss! The ancient log house — two pens (rooms) with an enclosed “dog trot” — is located in a deep shade atop one of those beautiful hills, and old-fashioned roses are blooming in the front yard and ivy curls around the old outside chimney. For generations the Marshalls have made a home of this extraordinary place, each occupant over the decades adding his unpretentious bit that was in keeping with the frontier look of the house. And now it stands as a memorial, so rare there may not be another one anywhere, to more than a century of family living that took place here.

To Allen’s single pen log cabin in 1840 Marshall added another pen, as pioneers across the frontier customarily did as their families grew. Sometime in the 1870s the two cabins were shifted, and to the north of them Marshall built two additional pens with a 12 foot space separating the two new cabins from the old one. This made a 30 foot long “dog trot” — open space down the center — with two pens (rooms) on either side. The present front doors were used as an entrance opening into the “dog trot,” but the 12 foot space between pens formed an east-west breezeway which he left open and the back end of the dog trot was left open too.

A fifth log pen was built for a kitchen back in the 1860s, sitting off to itself in the back yard. In the 1870s John Julian Marshall, the son of the first settler, figured on marrying Mattie Nicholson, and he used rich pine boards and paneled the log bedroom to give it a new look, and he built in some closets for his bride. Today, the rich color of the pine in the walls, the scrubbed look of the bare floors, the old fireplace, and the tester bed with patchwork quilt are the authentic articles. This is the way it was, and this is the charm of it all — the simplicity and candor with which Allendale documents the history of this country.

Ten years later the couple added a dining room in which the handmade dining table brought from South Carolina is still in use today. The old Home Comfort stove, the simple open shelves where Mattie stored her dishes, the coffee grinder on the wall, the family churn — it is all there so truly the way things were in Southern rural homes it is literally like walking back to your own childhood. The small room where stove wood was a necessity, and the wicks had to be trimmed in the coal oil lamps if you wanted to see after dark.

In the 1930s the practical Marshalls had to salvage the best of the log pens and retaining all what was usable, they kept just two of the original rooms which form the bedroom and parlor today.

The parlor with the company lamps, the plain sturdy furniture and patina of rich old age, reminds the visitor of the scholarly bent of the Marshalls. Besides bringing carved out of one piece of oak by a neighbor, Bernard Frierson, a strip of red carpet, a marble baptismal font, and the pump organ installed when the church was dedicated in 1837, complete the awe-inspiring picture of the little white church in its cleared spot among tall pines.

“All this place is nothing more than a house where we used to live, and the church is an old church that has been here three generations,” Mrs. Marshall said.

“Just a place to go to church — it’s not a sacred place. We had to go to church in the old church, then we had this church. It’s just a place to go to church.”