Blossoms in the wilderness

By Father James Geraghty

A new volume which deserves some attention is Anna Jane Marks’ "Register of Students of the Academy of the Sacred Heart, Grand Coteau, Louisiana, 1821-1971." In the composing for almost ten years, the publication of this book coincides with the 160th anniversary of a "light that shines in the darkness," the lamp of learning, culture and religion that long has shed its steady glow on our entire area, the Academy of the Sacred Heart, Grand Coteau.

The book is not a "reading" book to regale us during the long winter’s evenings, but rather an important research tool, indeed for the genealogists but even more for students of social history. On the surface it is a list of names of students entrusted to the tutelage of the Religious of Sacred Heart, but it is much more than that. It is the concrete evidence of refinement in the midst of a struggling and remote pioneer area.

The reputation of the Religious of Sacred Heart needs no bolstering. Their quality of excellence in education dates back to the foundation of the community in France by St. Madeleine Sophie Barat in the early years of the 19th century. It extended through its first venturing in 1817 into the vast mission field of the Diocese of Louisiana at the invitation of Bishop William DuBourg. At that time his diocese reached up the Mississippi Valley from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border.

Grand Coteau in 1839. The civil records gave the names of these two young ladies as Edvige and Celestine, respectively. The church records as Marie Edvige and Marie Celestine, indicative of the local custom that young ladies were often given the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary as well as a saint’s name.

The whole episode points out the pitfalls of different rending of the same names which is so common in older documents.

Excellence appeared quickly in the first foundation at St. Louis, then considered "upper Louisiana," and the expansion into lower Louisiana with the founding in 1821 of the jewel at Grand Coteau. The excellence persists today, however the impact of the academy on the rough surface of an almost wilderness area deserves a great deal more study.

The actual register starts in 1825, but the informal records of the few earlier years show the growth from five pupils the day the school first opened its doors to an enrollment of 40 pupils by 1829.

The place of origin of most of the early boarding students was quite local at first, including students from as far away as Rapides Parish to the northwest, and St. Mary Parish to the southeast. Girls from New Orleans were there almost from the beginning, as the Sacred Heart nuns did not open their school there until later.

The first out-of-state students, from Natchez, Mississippi, was enrolled in 1834. The following year, two students, sisters, listed as the residence of their father, Mexico (possibly Texas), but with the name Guilbeau, there was obviously a local connection.

In 1838 there was a student from Augusta, Georgia, and in 1840, four Duval sisters from Cincinnati, Ohio, registered.

Collateral use

The value of the book as a research tool becomes enhanced by the collateral use of Father Donald Hebert’s Southwest Louisiana Records. Frequently we can obtain baptismal and parental information about particular students and almost as frequently the dates of their marriages in subsequent years.

On an experimental basis, I checked the names of three students whose parent/guardian was listed as Nero Mayre of Opelousas, only to find that Father Hebert’s records listed him as Michael Mayer and the mother’s name given as Marie Mathilde Nerault. Thus an unusual combination of the names of both appears in the student register as Nero Mayre.

The third child did not have the family name Mayre but was listed as Celestine Robin, with Nero Mayre as the responsible. Again Father Hebert’s records tell us that she was the niece of Michael Mayer’s wife, that her mother had died young, and that her father had remarried. Since there were also listed a number of children of the second marriage, the girl evidently was cared for by her aunt and uncle. All this is genealogical, of course, but it puts flesh and blood on the bare bones of a name on a list.

Marriage record

These same names were checked in a subsequent volume of Father Hebert as to whether the girls ultimately were married. This was verified in two of the three cases, with one wedding taking place at St. Landry in Opelousas in 1836 and the other at St. Charles in

The publication of this exhaustive register is enriched by well chosen photographs, quite useful in stage setting and creating the proper atmosphere. The book deserves wide circulation among the growing number of those interested in Southwest Louisiana’s past, well as among descendants of alumnae. Miss Marks is to be congratulated on a work well done.