Three years ago anyone driving along Parish Road 2-2, eight miles south of Abbeville could easily miss seeing Bancker’s monument to a miracle. 

Instead a passerby would have seen nothing but overgrown brush.

Two years ago Teddy and Barbara LeMaire, of Abbeville, assumed the chore of restoring a brush-buried grotto that was first constructed in 1937 by the Rev. Gerard De Vos to complement the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Parish grounds.

However, the church was torn down in 1940 and the parish moved several miles down the road to follow the influx of people moving into nearby Henry.

Bishop Jules B. Jeanmard and De Vos then thought it prudent to dismantle the church and reconstruct another one within the larger population area, according to the Rev. Joseph Stemmann, pastor of Henry’s St. John’s Catholic Church and St. James Chapel in Esther.

Meanwhile, the Bancker grotto site was abandoned, and eventually overrun by grass, weeds and decay. The LeMaire’s say they accepted Stemmann’s call to restore Bancker’s Our Lady of Lourdes tribute as part of a volunteer project, and from the spiritual fuel they felt for the mother of Jesus Christ following a 1987 pilgrimage to Medjugorje, Yugoslavia.

Many believe the Blessed Mary began appearing to four children in the Yugoslavian village in June 1984 to encourage prayer for world salvation and repentance of sins.

For the past two years, the LeMaire’s have spent time at the 3-acre site renovating, reconstructing and recreating the miracle of Our Lady of Lourdes – the thematic symbol of the old grotto standing near the east bank of the Vermilion River.

In the small community of Lourdes, France in 1858, the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to 13-year-old Bernadette Soubirous in a nearby cave (grotto).

“When Our Lady appeared in Lourdes her message was for the conversion of sinners,” Stemmann says.

“And to give sinners a visible sign, there was a little stream of water where if one bathed in the stream it supposedly yielded physical and spiritual healing powers,” the pastor says.

After several visitations in France, grottos replicating the miracle began appearing in throughout the U.S., Stemmann says.

“And about in 1935, priests began building grottos in each of their parishes and this is how this one came about,” the pastor says.

Stemmann said he plans to conduct a Mass every August at the Bancker grotto, and hopes to spur more awareness of the shrine when Our Lady of Prompt Succor parish celebrates its centennial in 1997.

Today, the Bancker grotto containing the image of Mary sits on a landscaped grounds flanked by 14 crucifixes representing the various “Stations of the Cross” throughout the 3-acre site.

“We hope to have it all complete in about another year,” Barbara says.

“We still have sidewalks and landscaping left to do and clear brush up to the bayou,” Barbara says.

The couple eventually hopes to construct a wharf on the Vermilion River to combine the river’s ambience with the serenity of the grotto site.

Teddy LeMaire says two or three Rosary groups are already making regular appearances at the grotto.

“And I think more will come once more people know what has been done and we get it all finished,” Teddy says.

“It’s really been rewarding to see what the grotto site looked like before, to what it is now,” Barbara adds.

The couple say they have bulldozed, cleared brush, reconstructed the grotto with donated money only.

“We do a little more each time we get donations,” Barbara says.

Currently, a bricked side-walk is being laid from the grotto to the street.

Reconstruction work on the grotto is complete. The couple used wood, wire and concrete to refurbish the old shrine.

During the three-year project, the LeMaires say they will have spent about $2,000-$3,000, and battled a couple of severe cases of poison ivy by the time they finish the grotto around this time next year.

At left, the Rev. Joseph Stemmann, Barbara LeMaire and Teddy LeMaire recount the miracle of Lady of Lourdes alongside the Bancker grotto. Below, a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary stands inside the reconditioned grotto.