MT. CARMEL-ON-THE-TECHE
AN HISTORIC INSTITUTION

by Morris Raphael

Mt. Carmel Academy, the educational and spiritual institution which stands so proudly on the banks of Bayou Teche in New Iberia, is a living monument to an ancient order which began its struggle in France over a hundred and sixty years ago. The building has withstood the elements of time and is of great historical significance—considering that it is associated with so many dramatic events of a bygone era.

The Sisters of Mt. Carmel began in Tours, France, on December 4, 1824. The order was initiated by Father Charles Boutelou, a local cleric, who recognized the good that women could do in the education of youth, the care of the sick, and assistance to the poor.

In 1828, Mother St. Paul, one of the foundresses of the order, made a prophecy on her death bed which was directed to Sister Therese Chevrel. She said, “Carmel will live in another country. God will use you, you will cross the sea and it (meaning Carmel) will not perish."

Following the death of Mother St. Paul, Sister Therese, then 22, became Superior of the congregation. The French Revolution of 1830 caused serious financial and personal problems for the order because the revolt was aimed at the destruction of the Church.

Father Boutelou fled to Louisiana and when Bishop Nekere of New Orleans heard of the fate of the French congregation, he invited Mother Therese to come to New Orleans. Mother Therese and Mother St. Augustine arrived in New Orleans in 1833 and were later sent to Platteville where Father Boutelou awaited them.

Bishop Anthony Blanc, who succeeded Bishop Nekere after his death, opened the way for the Sisters to establish a school in New Orleans. The time for a day-school for girls had arrived. This was followed by requests from other parishes. In 1846, five sisters under the leadership of Mother St. Paul Aucoin opened a school in Lafayette.

Reverend Father L. A. Chasse of St. Peter’s Catholic Church in New Iberia requested that the Mt. Carmel order establish a school in his community. In 1870, Mother St. John of the Cross Aucoin, Sister Stephan Altheimer, Sister Albertine Passon, and Sister Mary Joseph Leo arrived in New Iberia and opened a school next to St. Peter’s Church. This marked the 5th school in the state established by the Sisters of Mt. Carmel.

Needling more room for their rapidly expanding system, the Sisters purchased the Duperier home and grounds in 1872 for the sum of $12,000 and converted the complex into Mt. Carmel-on-the-Teche, a boarding school for girls.

At this point we inject a brief history of the building and the Duperiers. The old structure nearest the Bayou Teche was built by Henry Frederick Duperier in 1826. As a child of 12, Duperier escaped with his aunt from Santo Domingo where his parents were beheaded during an insurrection.

One of Henry’s sons, Dr. Alfred Duperier, married Emma Mille of Plaquemine. A tragic, though romantic story is told about Alfred and Emma who survived the Last Island hurricane disaster in the Gulf of Mexico on August 10, 1856, where 150 people were drowned. The two had been washed ashore and Alfred, though weak and exhausted, managed to attend to the critically injured Emma. Since her parents were lost in the storm, he brought her to his home in New Iberia to recuperate. They fell in love and were later married. A window pane appears today in the old home where Emma inscribed her name with a diamond ring.

In 1877, the original school building next to the church on St. Peter’s Street was utilized by the Nuns for teaching black children until the school was destroyed by fire in 1904. In 1903 the Sisters took on the task of educating the boys at St. Peter’s College which was located on East Main Street.

The flood of 1927 had a devastating effect on Mt. Carmel-on-the-Teche causing the boarders and the Sisters to evacuate until the waters had receded and the damage had been repaired. A gymnasium was constructed in 1940, the cafeteria enlarged in 1944, classrooms were built over the cafeteria in 1946 and Fatima Hall was constructed in 1948. As the enrollment expanded, more and more annexation and class room juggling took place.

During the mid 1970’s the Convent entered into a major expansion program by purchasing the old Dauterive Hospital, adding a new gymnasium and renovating the existing facilities. The principals of the academy for the last half century are as follows: Sr. M. deSales 1934-1936; Mother M. Ligouri 1937-1942; Sr. Mary Anna Senac 1943; Mother Francis LeBlanc 1944-1948; Mother Dorothy Guiubalt 1949-1954; Mother Rita Monk 1955-1960; Sr. Rose Marie Penouilh 1961-1966; Sr. Berchman Daigle 1967; Sr. Rose Marie 1968-1972; Sr. Immaculata Garcia 1973-1977; Sr. Rose Marie Penouilh 1978-1984; Sr. Janet LeBlanc 1985 to the present time.

The Sisters of Mt. Carmel, through their dedication and sacrifices, have made a tremendous contribution to society. The thousands upon thousands of young ladies who have passed through the portals of the ancient establishment have been professionally prepared, from an educational as well as a spiritual standpoint, to meet the challenges of life.

On April 27, 1984, an historical marker was dedicated on the grounds, commemorating the grand and glorious achievements of Mt. Carmel Academy.