Grand Coteau in 1912

Woman recalls early years at school

By MARY ALICE FONTENOT
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GRAND COTEAU — "My grandmother never got married!"

This naive statement by a 9-year-old Esther Stelly in 1912 failed to impress her young classmates, but shocked her teachers at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau.

Mother FizWilliam, who knew the story of the unmarried "grandmother," took the little girl aside and explained that her grandmother was indeed a vieille fille (spinster) who had reared Esther's father, Louis Stelly, as her own.

Vivacious and animated at 97, Esther Stelly Gouaux continues to delight in telling the story of Mere-Mere Ophilia Broussard.

"Ophilia Broussard was my real grandmother's best friend," she relates. "When my grandmother died in childbirth, my grandfather, George Stelly, already the father of seven, took the baby to Ophilia. Ophilia didn't want the baby. She resented him for causing the death of her friend. So she found a nourrice, a wet nurse, among the slaves and turned the infant over to her.

"In time the inevitable happened. One day the baby cried. Ophilia took him into her room. He never left there again until he grew up. When his father remarried and came to claim Louis, Ophilia threatened suicide."

The child's father continued to try and persuade Ophilia to let him have his son. She refused.

"I'll never be parted from him," she said.

"And she never was," the granddaughter said. "When my father grew up and married he took his bride, Louise Patte, to Ophilia's big house to live."

The Broussard home was in the area of Pont Brule and Prairie Basse in the southern part of St. Landry Parish. Mrs. Gouaux said. She explained that Pont Brule (Burnt Bridge) got its name when the Yankees burned a bridge over a stream during the Civil War. Prairie Basse means "low prairie."

"Mrs. Gouaux also likes to reminisce about her years at the Grand Coteau girls' school, which she entered in 1912.

"We slept on wool mattresses in winter and moss mattresses in summer," she said. "The moss mattresses were cool to sleep on. Some of the mattresses were wool on one side and moss on the other: that way they could be turned over when the seasons changed."

"We bathed in large tin bathtubs. We were each given a bath dress, a voluminous white cotton garment that we were supposed to wear while bathing. I was sneaky. I dipped my bath dress in the water, wrung it out, and laid it aside while I bathed. I never could understand how one could bathe while wearing a dress!"

Esther Stelly Gouaux

"The traditional afternoon snack at the boarding school was goatee, which is cane syrup over homemade bread."

"And how we loved it," she recalled. "To this day I love syrup and bread."

One of her school-day anecdotes concerns the twice-a-week bath time at the school.

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Mrs. Gouaux grew up and married a military man, the late Col. Fernand Gouaux. They are the parents of three children: the late Monsigneur Fernand Gouaux Jr., Louise Gouaux and Esther "Ting" Sahuie. She also has seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

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