The people of Grand Coteau may occasionally have their differences, but the historic town retains its atmosphere of peace and quiet.

By James Edmunds  Photos by Robin May

By the time the last echo of the shrill siren wall has finally wafted through the outspread limbs of the giant oaks, the entire population of the school has formed itself into an array of straight lines in the courtyard, facing the venerable multiple galleries of the main building of the Academy of the Sacred Heart.

It is a rule that silence must be maintained during the drill, and the students, from kindergarten girls to college-bound young women, stand patiently and unsmiling in the rigors of their finial drill. The next day, when a tree-planting ceremony and cookie sale are the final activities before they bound away to their long Thanksgiving holiday, they will play and chatter in this golden midday light, but for now, respectful silence is the rule.

Even as school children, the girls at Sacred Heart are able to call upon reserves of a special quality that will mark their memories of Grand Coteau for all their lives, and marks the memories of countless others who visit this little community on religious retreats. Here is a place where one can attain, at least for a moment, quiet and peace.

For thousands of girls and women and their families, Grand Coteau is the place they go or went to school, to a special school that finds the hard flint in a young woman that makes her strong, and then applies the polish that will carry her gracefully through her career and family life. For thousands of others, Grand Coteau is a hallowed sanctuary of religious retreat where it is possible to step away from the encroachment of modern life for a time of meditative prayer. For a great many in Acadiana and even beyond, Grand Coteau is simply a perfect destination for a pretty drive in the country, with charming old houses nestled next to the stateliness of oak and pine alleys.

For a relative few—less than 1,200 people—Grand Coteau is home, is "our town." It is an agrarian hamlet in a rural parish, charmed perhaps for its historic quality and the presence of the quiet, stable institutions of the church, but a town nevertheless, defined for some large part by the confluence of hope and desire and frustrations of its handful of citizens.

The 20th century has not been especially kind to little towns like Grand Coteau. The upheaval of the post-World War II and the massive displacement of farm workers brought about by the mechanization of agriculture, have crushed the livelihood from hundreds of southern rural communities. Some are only remnants of their former selves, and a few have gone completely. What has fallen hard on these communities has fallen hardest on the landlow and poor, often meaning black, farmers. What had been an already black heritage—the most likely future of life on farmlands—sunk even further into nothing. The options were to stay and struggle to survive, or to move away and struggle elsewhere.

Two major institutions, the Academy of the Sacred Heart and St. Charles College, go a long way in distinguishing Grand Coteau from other towns in our parish. The Academy is in Grand Coteau, which was founded in 1821, in the oldest continuously operating school of the 200 or so in the whole Sacred Heart network. "You can't walk out of this place without thinking about who has been here and what's been done," says Luella Morgan, a twelfth-grader. "You're inspired just by pride or a sense of history, but by the feeling that the tradition will continue.

"On the ride to school in the morning, in the last few yards, there's a way that the light comes through the trees, and then you turn the curve and see the school," she says.

"You're energized and comfortable at the same time. It's a nice balance." The leadership of the school attributes that balance between two forces principal Sara Ann Rude, R.S.C.J., describes as the stewardship of the past and need to prepare for the future, "We're preparing for the 21st century," Sr. Rude says, "and we stress the need for an active, relevant faith. But all the while, we are keenly aware that we hold all of the past in trust—and we must pass on the torch.

It costs about $4,000 a year to send a girl to the Academy, and the school today retains a patron of the etuennelier, associated with its earliest days, when daughters of socially prominent Parishes families gave the religious order, and Louisiana could sometimes serve as a haven for aristocratic facing a revolutionary France.

Today, however, about a fourth of the students enjoy some sort of scholarship assistance, and there is a significant minority population, which Sr. Rude says she would like to see grow.

The school, and the religious who are part of the Sacred Heart community, today take part in the work of the Thurston Center, a social service organization based on helping the poor. And though there are now two elementary schools in Grand Coteau (both integrated, the Catholic school majority white and the public schools majority black), in the past, the Sisters have sponsored daycares for local black and white students from outside the Academy premise.

Sacred Heart now serves as a therapeutic society, but today one of the three local communities of Sisters, the one in which Sr. Rude resides, is located not at the school but in the town of Grand Coteau. Perhaps because of the Sisters' history of being destitute and the historically monastic lifestyle of the St. Charles Jesuits, there is a bit of a surprised reaction when members of those communities don't comply to their aloof stereotype.

When there was a great deal of discussion recently over a local bar running extended weekend hours, "A lot of people told me I shouldn't come," recalls Sr. Rude. "They also pointed out that we don't party. My response was that we employ a lot of people here and we don't feel uncomfortable. Moreover, while I live here, I want to fully enter the life of the town, and I am very concerned over quality of life issues."
uality of life issues are important in Grand Coteau. The most fi
ery issue for many town residents in recent years was the con
struction of a 24-hour filling station, food
store, and deli in the entrance to town from I-49. The notable
thing about that battle was not who won—
developers opposed to it, the gas station
was built, and is actually a fairly popular look-
ing representative of its genre—but that, in
a town this size, it was fought at all.

"Grand Coteau represents a pro-Civil
War time capsule: reflecting not a garden
district society, but a town where the town
represent every class," notes John Slagp
ter, a local preservationist who joined the
fight against the gas station. "What we had
preserved here is almost everything."

Slaughter and his wife, Hily, operate a
successful chicken and egg shop on
Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Grand
Coteau's main street. They have lived in
the community for about 15 years and have
helped organize historic preservation at
forty years. The town now has several
properties on the National Register and a
defined Historic District.

He readily admits to the fact that
life-time residents label him and a few similar,
like-minded college-educated whites who
have migrated to Grand Coteau as "vandals,
" and notes that it is a beauty and
tranquility of Grand Coteau that has drawn
them together there.

Grand Coteau is about two-thirds black.
and historic preservation is not traditionally
a black issue. Except for the cherished
memories of friends and loved ones, Old
South nostalgia holds little that is pleasant
or comforting for black Americans. Never-
theless, preservation may have played a
subtle role in this fall's municipal elections.

The winning mayoral candidate, Grand
Coteau Elementary School principal Bobb
Jr., promoted the idea of zoning in an
earlier city council. That, and the fact
that Bobb is open to a redistricting plan
that would make at least some of the city council
seats single-member districts, may
have helped bring him enough of the white
vote to serve as the swing vote in a race
to two blacks, former mayor Bobb
and incumbent mayor Pete Smith.

The fact that Grand Coteau is majority
black and its five council seats are filled
large makes it a reversal of the minority
exclusionary tactics that has been used,
and the courts in places where such a
system allows whites to dominate govern-
ment. Bobb favors redistricting to make
more that whites can be part of the politics of
Grand Coteau—and feels that the commu-
nity ought to be included in that before being
by the courts.

"There ought to be positions for the
whites," the mayor-elect says. "Some blacks
are against that, but it's time to get past
that. What's good for the goose is good for
the gander. Redistricting is going to come.
It's right, and it's fair." Bobb notes that in
the recent election, a white candidate was
elected to join the previously all-black
council.

That change in the composition of the
council brought a great deal of relief from many
in Grand Coteau, and helped defuse the tension associated with the redistricting
question. Many who were involved in the
issue are now looking on it with great
patience and have turned their immediate
attention to fostering some kind of eco-
nomic development that would provide
suitable job opportunities for Grand
Coteau's unemployed—and for those new
city officials.
to look elsewhere for work.

Because the unemployment associated
with economic stagnation has traditionally
been felt strongest in the black community,
development is an obliquely racial issue,
but in the most benign sense.

This is a town where the races have
managed to live together in relative peace.
The town is fiercely Catholic and blacks and
whites have worshipped together at a single
church for decades, for instance. There is
hope that the racial conflicts that redefined
America in the 1960s might someday soon
be fully digested here.

One of Bobb's strongest impressions
from his successful mayoral campaign is
having come to know white preservationists
and learning that they were motivated
by a deep-seated feeling about Grand
Coteau that was close to his own.

"This is a tranquil, peaceful and under-
standing community," Bobb says. "When I
think of the population here, I don't think
of black and white or ratios, I picture a breed
of good-living, domestically-oriented fami-
lies. I couldn't think of living anywhere
else."

One of the hopes for Grand Coteau,
according to Jim Smith, who moved into his
family's 150-year-old home in Grand
Coteau a few years ago, would be a motel
located on 1-49. That would provide a host of jobs and a base for
a microcosmic tourism industry. "We can
have jobs and preserve the historical dis-
trict," says Smith, who works for the
Lafayette Chamber of Commerce. "It could
be the best of both worlds."

Smith says he cherishes the small-town
town of Grand Coteau: walking to the post
office and seeing friends along the way, for
example, or the uplifting effect of the volun-
teer fire department. But he especially re-
veres the beauty and tranquility of the sur-
roundings. His thoughts echo those of not
only dozens of his fellow townspeople but
of those thousands of people from the ex-
tended community of Grand Coteau that
give it a life far beyond its civic borders.

"People who come here and make re-
treats almost to a person have a significant
religious experience while they're here,"
notes Fr. Thomas Madden, who's the Su-
prior of the Jesuit novitiate located at St.
Charles College as well as Director of the
Spirituality Center there. "Being creatures
of flesh and blood, that experience is bound
up in the grounds, the surroundings, the
people. That's what focuses the image for
them, and that helps form the impression of
Grand Coteau as some kind of special holy
place."

By taking an unhurried walk around the
town and the tree-lined grounds that con-
nect the college and the academy—a favorite
activity of townspeople as well as visi-
tors—one can readily experience the spe-
cial elegance and beauty of Grand Coteau.
The Coteau Ridge on which these august
institutions are situated rises with tranquil,
unrushed majesty from the surrounding
countryside.

The grand buildings of the schools and
the modest homes of the town share an easy
grace, and a spacious and nurturing respect
for the trees that shade them and their
approaches. One can, in the instantaneous
flash of one glance, see that in almost two
centuries of human activity, little has been
done to disturb the enchantment that na-
ture sowed here, and understand in that
instant that Grand Coteau is a special place
because it has always been home to those
seeking the high ground.