Lafayette man recalls days when he helped build St. John Cathedral

By Belinda Decuir

LAFFAYETTE

We sometimes forget that local history, interesting tidbits of recorded events, is not always found between the covers of a book. There are those who can sit down and tell you, first hand, that tossing bricks to a fellow worker on a scaffold alongside St. John's Cathedral sometimes made your hands bleed.

Emmanuel Hoffpauir is one of those people. He was 18 years old, earning $1.25 a day as a laborer for the construction of the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Lafayette which took from 1913 to 1916 to complete.

Hoffpauir stands second from left on the top row in the picture which his father, Nicholas Hoffpauir (middle man in trio at bottom), bought from the photographer. Looking at the picture he smiled and explained the events, is not always found between the covers of a book. There are those who can sit down and tell you, first hand, that tossing bricks to a fellow worker on a scaffold alongside St. John's Cathedral sometimes made your hands bleed.

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"At that time you had to make the mortar by hand and haul it in a wheelbarrow. The concrete and bricks were also hauled in a wheelbarrow. And then you had to push the wheelbarrow to the elevator which was pulled by a horse."

He pointed to the picture, "This was Meleon Broussard (first from left on second row). He was the driver of the horses that pulled to lift the elevators."

He proceeded to point out the few men he remembered; he couldn't recall some of their first names.

"This was Alton Breaux (second from right in top row)," he said laughing lightly. "He could never make it up the slanted walk with the wheelbarrow. Every time he tried, he'd either slide back or the wheelbarrow would tip to the side."

Hoffpauir explained that he was one of those who would toss bricks to the bricklayers on the scaffolds.

"A pair of gloves then lasted no time when you had to pitch bricks by hand. Before you knew it, your fingers were bleeding."

He smiled when he thought of the differences in old and modern methods of the construction business, but pointed out that the way things had to be done were very dangerous.

"One time the scaffold board gave in and I fell," said Hoffpauir. "I stayed a month without working. I fell on my back several feet to the ground. There was broken bricks all around. I was lucky. I fell in an empty spot and only hurt my knee."

Father W.J. Teurlings was the leader of the project to build the new church. In 1906 he was appointed rector of the Church of St. John the Evangelist and Dean of the Lafayette Deanery by Archbishop Blenk of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

By 1912 the funds were well in hand and a design by A. E. Cousin, a famous European architect, was accepted. The contractor selected was Eugene Guillot (first from right of trio at bottom of picture) of New Iberia.

Father Teurlings was a close friend of the Hoffpauir family.

"I knew Father Teurlings very well," said Hoffpauir. "In fact, Father Teurlings married my wife (formerly Jeanne Crocmin) and I in the new church in 1917."

Hoffpauir pointed to the wooden structure in the corner of the picture saying, "This was the old church. It was moved forward and the new church was built behind it."

In 1916 the finishing touches were made to the exterior of the new church and up until the very last details Hoffpauir was involved.

"You know the cross way at the top of the church?" asked Hoffpauir.

"I was the one who held that cross while they bolted it down."

The Romanesque-design church became the bishop's church, or the Cathedral church of the Lafayette diocese, established in 1918. Bishop Jules B. Jeanmard served as Lafayette's first bishop. The church has since become a tourist attraction as well as an architectural and historical landmark.