Tracing the rich history of Grand Coteau

This archival photo shows the wood frame house donated by Mrs. Charles Smith where the Academy of the Sacred Heart first was established in 1921.
The Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau is the world's oldest Sacred Heart school in continuous operation and the site of a miracle recognized by the Roman Catholic Church.

Academy of the Sacred Heart enjoys growth and success

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

GRAND COTEAU — In this tiny town just off Interstate 94 between Lafayette and Opelousas is one of America's most significant Roman Catholic landmarks. The Academy of the Sacred Heart is the world's oldest Sacred Heart school in continuous operation and the site of an 1886 miracle.

"This is the only Sacred Heart convent (school) in existence that has never closed for one day," said Inez Gautier, who graduated from Sacred Heart and was hired as its second lay teacher in 1939.

The school also houses a shrine to St. John Berchmans, who was canonized after a student's miraculous recovery from a seemingly terminal illness following her prayers to the young Jesuit.

In its 186-year history, young women from some of Louisiana's most prominent Catholic families have been educated at the school known universally as Grand Coteau.

The Founding

In the early 19th century, Monsignor Dubourg, bishop of the Louisiana Territory, traveled to his home in France seeking help for his large diocese. Mother Madeleine Sophie Barat, founder of the Society of the Sacred Heart, came to his assistance, and, in 1828, sent a group of nuns from France to organize missions in America. Mother Eugene Audet and Sister Mary Layton were among those led by Mother Rose Philippine Duchesne from St. charles Mo. to establish a convent there.

On Aug. 5, 1829, Mother Audet and Sister Layton set out from St. Louis aboard the steamboat, Le Rapide, so named because it took only 20 days to travel from St. Louis to New Orleans to establish a school for girls in a wood frame house donated by Mrs. Charles Smith in Grand Coteau. Mother Audet described the perilous journey in a letter to Mother Barat in France.

After the miracle attributed to John Berchmans, a young Jesuit whose intercession is credited with saving the life of student Mary Wilson, the nuns created a shrine in the room where Wilson was cured of a massive hemorrhage.

"Our trip was monotonous enough for as far as the narrowness near Plaquemine." Mother Audet wrote, "that here the monotony ended. At 10 p.m., the boatman deposited your two daughters on an extremely muddy shore. After pushing our way through water for 15 minutes, we reached an inn, happy to get there with our shoes still on our feet. We were lodged in a little room tapestrined with spider webs. At intervals these creatures descended in a most friendly fashion to look right into our faces."

The next day, the women traveled nearly 20 miles to reach a flatboat on Bayou Teche, where they traveled for another half day. After a stretch on horseback, they arrived at Mrs. Smith's house some 20 days after they had left St. Louis. The news spread quickly that the nuns would be opening a school for girls in the isolated area. Five pupils enrolled in what was called the Institute for the Education of Young Ladies when it opened in October 1831. For the first three months, Mother Audet was the only teacher until a second teacher arrived in 1832.

That same year, Mother Duchesne visited Grand Coteau from St. Louis. She wrote to Mother Barat in Paris, "Our house of Opelousas is, at the end of the first year, well organized and completely free from debt. The chapel is pretty and devotional, the sacristy well supplied with sacred vessels. Thanks to the genrousity of several priests. The Academy has 11 girls, and 5 or 6 others are expectetd. They are making remarkable progress in pray and in their studies."

In 1835, Mother Audet was sent to found another house in Covington, and Mother Xavier Murphy became the second superior of Grand Coteau.

In September 1839, construction began in a two-story building to accommodate the growing number of young ladies attending the academy. School archives
Landmarks
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In 1894, the enrollent reached 101, and this included laick, paracy, and laundry house women were onpleated at the rear of the original brick building. A year later, a large addition added 73 feet to the original building.

The academy used the French place of study adapted by the Supebus of the Sacred Heart, Hightlighting culturral subjects. Classes were conducted in Frenic, with English taught as a speciaul course. The young ladies learned literature, history, language, art, music, peanmanship and needlework with a strong emphasis on "petite deportement."

Arrival of the Jesuits

The school continued to grow under the leadership of Mother Murphy, whose great address was the lack of charity in the area. Finally at her urging, the Jesuit Fathers in 1857 received the alriong aid to Mrs. Smith and in 1858 opened a college on the property. Mother Murphy donated the Jesuits some 200,000 dollars which she had made for one at the academy.

By then, the school was finally completed, although Mother Morphy was never able to see it.

The school would have been built earlier, but the Jesuits were trying to decide whether to accept a gift of property in Grand Coteau or in Opelousas. Burns presented the headmistress of the Academy of the Sacred Heart, "If we offered the Jesuit the bricks if they would build in Grand Coteau."

Burns was the to Delltie Peete, the first rector of the Jesuit academy, who had been a major promoter of the school. Burns was a mover and a shaker, and he was able to convince the Jesuits to come to the area.

The Miracle

Perhaps the greatest event in the history of Grand Coteau is the miracle in which a student, Mary Watson, was cured of a seemingly terminal illness following her prayers to John Berchmans, who was canonized as a saint.

Reconstruction

Following the Civil War, most of the planter families were left in poverty. Confederate bonds were worthless. Many of the South's educational institutions that had not closed during the war were forced to close in the years following. As a result, the Jesuits were faced with a difficult decision. In October 1866, the school was reorganized and a new building was constructed.

The academy continued to thrive. Today there are 180 students at the Academy of the Sacred Heart from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Only 3% of the students are boys.

"When Silvy and I were here, everyone was a bracer, except those girls who lived in Sunset or Grand Coteau," said Burns.

Many of the traditions established decades ago remain, although some things have changed over the years.

The death of the last remaining of the Jesuits who were at the school for the moment was a poignant moment.

According to Burns, the school is a place where students are able to experience the power of faith and the importance of community. The school is open to all students, regardless of background or ability.

For more than 200 years, students have been educated in the chapel, which is connected to the main building.

The children in the boarding school worked and had service in the poor school.

In 1851, the academy was assisted by the state to grant college degrees, and in 1856, it was fully accredited by the state Department of Education. In 1853, the academy opened a new junior college, and in 1857, the college became a four-year liberal arts college.

In 1856, the college was closed due to dwindling enrollment. Students and alumnae had worked hard to keep the college open.

"I felt as well as I ever did in my whole life," said Wilson, wrote in a deailed account of the event.

Documents reported at the mirabile were sent to Rome, and in 1898, Berchmans was canonized by Pope Leo XIII.

A shrine honoring St. John Berchmans was established in the town where Mary Watson was cured. Over the years, thousands of pilgrims have prayed at the shrine.

St. John Berchman is recognized today as the patron saint of the young, of all sailors and of semi-marinists.

A museum in the main building illustrates the lives of the nuns during the early history of the school with a typical above, a dining area and an area where the nuns entertained each other with discussion.

Reconstruction, 1851-1859

To put to use the talents of the Jesuits, the Catholic Bishop, Father Shannon, the head- mistress in 1875, opened a free school for the black children.

"The sisters always had a school for girls and a school for poor children," said headmistress Burns.

The new building was opened in 1858, and the school has continued to grow ever since.

"We used to have a school for girls and a school for boys," said Burns.

The nuns were always placed a lot of emphasis on discipline, party and livery behavior.

"When I was there, you had to respect your peers every morning and it made it with perfect square corners," said Mary Ann Flanagan, who attended the school from 1857-58.

"The dressed in auburn (shaved) near our bed, stripped your bed, went to Mass, had breakfast and returned to the dorm to make your bed. Acting the mistress is what we were told we were doing. It was just discipline."

Flanagan recalled how the school was like a "great big machine."

"It was a festival and celebration," she said. "It was so exciting the night before the concert. The older girls would come through the rooms and dornus singing this song on the way to make the Go-Go."

There were games and competitions depending on the day.

For over 100 years, the school has been fully accredited and has graduated numerous".

Several years ago, the gaffers who are not familiar with the school think they got the gaffs off the other end, and they were not allowed to enter the building."

Burns said. The building is still open and is used for education.

"I think that we have such extensive grounds that it is a big, big place.

A museum in the main building illustrates the life of the nuns during the early history of the school with a typical above, a dining area and an area where the nuns entertained each other with discussion.

For decades, students were grad- ed on conduct in a weekly exercise called "pryors." The students would sit in a semicircle with the mother superior at the front. Each student was called up individually, and each student was told to the center for black children.

"They got me ready for college. I had to work to wear two sets," said Burns.

Now a couple needs to stop for hurting others of start of relationship.