Sacred Heart Academy Noting 150th Anniversary

By KEN GRISOM
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GRAND COTEAU — Mother Aude and Sister Mary Layman of the Sacred Heart Society must have been in pretty high spirits when they rode into Grand Coteau on horseback in 1871. Anticipation of what they would accomplish here and genuine relief to be at the end of a long trip probably made a pretty happy combination.

The two nuns had traveled from the Sacred Heart house in St. Charles, Mo., down the Mississippi River by paddle wheeler to Plaquemine. From there they went by wagon to Attakapas where they boarded a flatboat for the trip across the Atchafalaya Basin and to the Bayou Teche. At a point along the Teche, they switched to horses for the final leg of an epic voyage.

Institute Founded

The end of the trip marked the beginning of something else. In October of that year Mother Aude and Sister Mary founded the Institute for the Education of Young Ladies. Now known as the Academy of the Sacred Heart, the school will celebrate its 150th anniversary next weekend. It is the oldest Sacred Heart school in continuous existence and a pioneer of education in Louisiana.

The modern school is a rare blend of the best of modern education — with emphasis placed on self-discipline and strong student discipline — and the traditions of religious principle and feminine grace derived from its French heritage. There are 352 students enrolled at the academy. Once exclusively a boarding school for the daughters of plantation owners, the academy now has only 85 resident students. Others come from Lafayette and Opelousas.

The Academy of the Sacred Heart became possible when Mother Charles Smith, an early settler in Acadia, gave some acres of land and a frame house to the Bishop of Louisiana. The two nuns came from Missouri and began the school. The first class consisted of five girls from nearby plantations.

In 1826, a new school was built of bricks manufactured on the estate. Slowly, over the years, the present facilities of the academy were formed. A Sacred Heart has a lot to celebrate on this sesquicentennial year. Like the two nuns who founded the academy, the school has seen some good red or yellow cypress shingles. The walls of all the rooms shall be well plastered with good strong lime and sand mortars.

The grounds, landscaped by a gardener from Paris, grew more lush through the years. The avenues were lined with live oaks. In 1860 a chateau was built. Enrollment had gradually increased to over 100.

Then came the Civil War. The South was invaded and Union soldiers camped beneath the oaks at the Academy of the Sacred Heart, but the school's facilities remained undisturbed. The invading army's commander was a dashing officer. General Banks, had a daughter enrolled at the Sacred Heart school in New York (where a graduate

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Not only did the Grand Coteau school, Mother Harvey, was in charge. Banks biếnfed the academy. He set up a guard to protect the girls and sent supplies to see them through the lean winter months.

Political Turmoil

At various times throughout the period of political turmoil following the war, the school's enrollment fell to as low as 17. It was hard for anything to prosper under the iron rule of Reconstruction, but the academy held on.

It would seem the Academy of the Sacred Heart has had help from a stronger resource than the good people — the Mrs. Smith and General Banks — who have contributed to it. In 1899, a man was dying in a room at the academy. He could no longer eat and had grown so weak, the doctors gave up all hope. An apparition, whom they identified as St. John Berchmans, appeared to him. He had no explanation, however, when she suddenly checked off the illness and restored her health. The Cacogue Church investigated the incident and named it a bona fide miracle.

With such a colorful history behind it, the Academy of the Sacred Heart has a lot to celebrate on this sesquicentennial year. Like the two nuns who founded the academy, the school has seen some good red or yellow cypress shingles. The walls of all the rooms shall be well plastered with good strong lime and sand mortars.

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