By CHRIS FRINK
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CARVILLE — When the first four Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul arrived at Carville in 1896 to care for Hansen's disease patients, they found little but pain, squalor and misery.

At a centennial celebration of their service, members of the order got back some of what it gave so much: love, compassion and caring.

The sisters came to a rundown plantation in Carville that eventually became a hospital 18 months after the first patients came upriver from New Orleans in 1894.

"They arrived to do a job that no one else would do, to care for Hansen's disease patients," hospital Director Robert Jacobson said during Friday's centennial ceremony.

They transformed Carville into a hospital, he said. "A facility without anybody to perform required care for its patients cannot really be considered a hospital."

For 100 years the sisters, first in their white starched "Flying Nun"-style headgear and now in simple blue and white habits, have been fixtures at the national Hansen's disease hospital.

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They were there when the disease was still called leprosy. They helped patients, some in chains, to adapt to life after being forced to Carville.

They helped doctors research and administer the first disease-curing drugs in the early 1940s. They were there when the resident patient population began dropping as treatment and understanding of the disease grew.

"Without them, it might not have happened," Jacobson said. "You truly are a gift to us," he told more than 20 nuns at the ceremony.

Eight sisters from the order still work and live at Carville. More than a dozen returned for the ceremony.

"I believe there were 15 sisters here when I arrived in 1935," said Johnny Harmon, now 85 and a resident. "I have never seen a group of workers who performed their duties as efficiently as the sisters."

The sisters were more than medical workers, Harmon said, they went out of their way to help patients.

Harmon and other speakers talked about nuns such as Sister Laura Sticker, a pharmacist who also taught piano to patients and directed musical productions. Or, Sister Vincent Fleer, who served more than 34 years at Carville as a nurse, dietitian and finally volunteer until her death. She is buried at Carville.

Or, Sister Hilary Ross, who kept the first medical records and taught herself photography to chronicle life at Carville and patients' healing progress.

"She was always willing to share her knowledge of photography with me," said Harmon, who went on to become a professional photographer.

Harmon also remembered Sister Francis de Sales Provancher, who arrived in 1942 soon after Harmon returned to Carville.

"She was retired but stayed as a volunteer with the same love and devotion," he said. "The Daughters of Charity have made it easier for me in so many ways."

They truly have been the wind beneath our wings. They have lifted us up many a time when we were down," patient Theresa Wilson told the audience. "I hope that they will be our Florence Nightingales for many more years to come."

The sisters helped make life tolerable for Julia Elwood when she arrived at Carville as teen-age girl in the 1950s.

Sister Estelle Laiche helped Elwood get through that first night far from her family in Texas. "She took me under her wing. She stayed with me and cried with me," Elwood said after the ceremony she organized.

She is now the hospital public affairs specialist who wrote and edited "With Love in Their Hearts," a book that marks the sisters' centennial at Carville.

"They were very comforting and giving to me. They were just like a shining light," Elwood said.