The network of Sacred Heart schools is a bit like the Royal Family. Both are grounded in centuries of tradition and both are still vibrant in the last decade of the 20th century.

The Academy of Sacred Heart was founded in the early 1800s by Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat in Amiens, France. She wrote the guiding principles for Sacred Heart education that today resound in more than 390 Sacred Heart schools in 26 countries.

"It is an education rooted in the past, yet pointed for the future and focused on the single child. It is a living tradition with vision," said Sister Patricia Stopen, head of the elementary school at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau.

The Academy in Grand Coteau is the oldest Sacred Heart school in the United States, operating in North America. It was established in 1881 by Saint Philiiphine Duchesne who brought the Religious of the Sacred Heart to the United States in 1816.

The legacy that began in the early 19th century is alive today in hundreds of local Sacred Heart graduates and thousands of other alumnae.

The school originally served students in grades five through 12. But since 1988, a full 12 grades and Kindergarten have been available to girls from around the world.

At a recent parent's meeting, Sister Stopen gave a presentation titled "Education: How New is the Old?" She read from a selection of writings by Sacred Heart educators and showed slides of children in different learning environments at the school today.

Sister Stopen's readings began with material dated in 1805 and moved across almost two centuries of education with quotations from the 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s.

"Academic subjects are taught by class mistresses. All other subjects—such as music, dance, art, and physical education—are taught by outside masters. All these come on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. On the other days, the younger children study with their classmates and learn botany and nature study which are taught in the peaceful gardens of the convent," according to a school journal from Amiens, France, dated 1867.

On the scene, parents saw their children in French class, dance class, working on computers and working in their gardens on the school's 50-acre grounds.

Many quotations were taken from the book, "Education of Catholic Girls" by Mother Jean...
Sacred Heart and leading educator in the early 1900s.

"Our education is not meant to turn the children out small and fragilized, but seriously begun on a wise basic. Elizabeth Stuart means arriving at new power, and the concomitants of new power is one of the most stimulating things in life," wrote Mother Stuart.

Today, students in the prep department, grades five through eight, begin each day with quiet reflection in the school's chapel. It's a good way to start the day. It gives you time to gather your thoughts between running to get to school and beginning class," said Br. Richard Burchard, a member of the prep student council.

In that, Mother Stuart wrote of the students, "It is in two things that we must establish her fundamentally - quiet of mind and firmness of will. Quiet of mind, equally removed from stagnation and from excitement."

Terri Ryder, prep student council president, said the Academy of the Sacred Heart is unique because of its atmosphere.

"I've been to another school, but here it's more positive. There are more activities and they make learning fun," Ryder said. "They have interesting ways of teaching, every teacher has her own style."

To study prehistoric humans, history teacher Janis Purtell showed students a primitive cave in one of the school's little-used rooms. Children gather there to create and study "cave drawings."

In the learning center, students work in "clans" to make tools of stone and leather - the test was to crack a pecan.

In another classroom students were involved in learning that was far from the traditional schoolroom, teacher-centered environment.

Cindy Legner's sixth grade class had just completed a lesson on "how much is a million," which they had counted on paper. They counted exactly one million dollar bills in the classroom.

Each sixth grader quietly explained the concept of one million to her partner, a wide-awake first grader from Ann Hardy's class.

"The course of study at a Sacred Heart school reflects intellectual challenges and inspires a love of learning. It is a curriculum based on national standards and rigorous evaluation," according to Goals and Criteria, 1990.

In 1997, the Academy of the Sacred Heart of the Sacred Heart has set standards, a curriculum that is unique in the entire nation.

The Academy, for all its educational achievements, has a history, a tradition, a community. It is the heart of Sacred Heart, the heart of the Sacred Heart.