

St. Mary's will mark centennial

On May 16, when 122 seniors receive their diplomas in commencement ceremonies, they will be marking a milestone for their alma mater — they are the 100th graduating class of St. Mary's Academy.

Literally thousands of young women have completed their high school education at St. Mary's. But, said principal Sister Demetria Williams, S.S.F., regrettably, many of their old records were lost when the building in which they were stored was destroyed during Hurricane Betsy, so they have no exact numbers.

THE SCHOOL IS actually older than the century this graduating class will be marking, because it began in 1867 as an elementary school. The upper grades were gradually phased in. In later years, the lower grades were gradually phased out to accommodate the increasing number of high school students.

Sister Demetria characterizes the school as close knit, in some ways likening it to a family. She is a graduate of St. Mary's Academy (Class of 1936) as are also the vice-principal, two school secretaries, and many members of the faculty and staff.

For years, the school was also a boarding school, attracting students from all over the United States and Central America. The boarding division closed when the school moved from its French Quarter location to its present one at 6905 Chef Menteur Hwy.

"WHEN WE BUILT THIS new school," explained Sister Demetria, "the decision was made to phase out the boarding section. But we had some senior boarders who would be finishing their last year (some had at-

tended the school for 12 years), so we housed them at the St. John Berchmans Orphanage for that last year."

The new school opened in the fall of 1966, with modern facilities and spacious grounds. But the transition from old building to new was not without difficulties. The old school, at 717 Orleans Ave., was the site of the historic Orleans Ballroom. As such, it was considered a local landmark.

When indications first surfaced in the early 1960's that the sisters wanted to move the school from the location and divest themselves of the old building, a controversy started brewing which went on for years.

WHEN THE DUST eventually settled, the sisters moved the academy to its present location; developers demolished the old building and built a hotel, preserving the Orleans Ballroom as part of the agreement.

Sister Demetria, who has been principal since 1962, supervised that move. "I wouldn't want anyone to have to go through that again," she shuddered. "We were there for 90 years."

For one year, while the new building was under construction, the school was housed in the old St. Louis Cathedral School on St. Ann Street. "We had to sell the Orleans Avenue building in order to finance the new school," explained Sister Demetria. "So we had to find a place to hold classes for that transitional year."

MRS. MARJORIE GABRIEL, an academy secretary and a graduate of the class of 1941, also recalled the move, saying that she and Sister Demetria were the last two to leave Orleans Avenue.

Mrs. Gabriel, who has worked for the academy since her own graduation,

remembers when she was teaching physical education in the old building. All the girls would gather in the courtyard in the middle, and she, from a second floor balcony, would direct their exercises.

The school gained a lot from the move, said Mrs. Ora Martin Davis, also a graduate of the Class of 1941, but there was some loss.

Mrs. Davis, whose granddaughter, Aleska Evans, is a member of the centennial graduating class, recalled the old building and its setting as being romantic. She used to walk a mile each way to attend the academy.

MRS. LEONOR LOMBARD, class of 1937, had to come from across the river in Algiers to attend St. Mary's. But, as she pointed out, if a young black girl wanted to attend a Catholic high school, she had only two choices in those days — St. Mary's Academy and Xavier Prep.

And, added Mrs. Lombard, whose granddaughter Tanya Lombard is a member of the 1985 graduating class, "The tuition was only \$1 a month in those days."

Mrs. Sandra Regis, another school secretary, graduated in 1963 when the school was still on Orleans Avenue. "The uniforms have changed and so have some other small things," she said, "but the regulations and restrictions are pretty much the same."

MRS. REGIS' DAUGHTER graduated in 1984. "I didn't think my daughter would ever get old enough to finally get here, but now she has come and gone. She attended St. Mary's from seventh through 12th grade."

The Chef Menteur campus has been

steadily added to since the first building was completed. "We've added a seventh grade building, a student center and a fine arts building," said Sister Demetria. Work is presently under way on a school chapel, which will be completed this fall.

"So much of what we have been able to accomplish here is due to our parents' group," said Sister Demetria. "They are one of the finest parent groups... may I say, in the country. We have parents still in the group, even though they no longer have children in the school.

"Their contributions help keep the school's tuition down, as does the number of Sisters of the Holy Family (22) on the faculty.

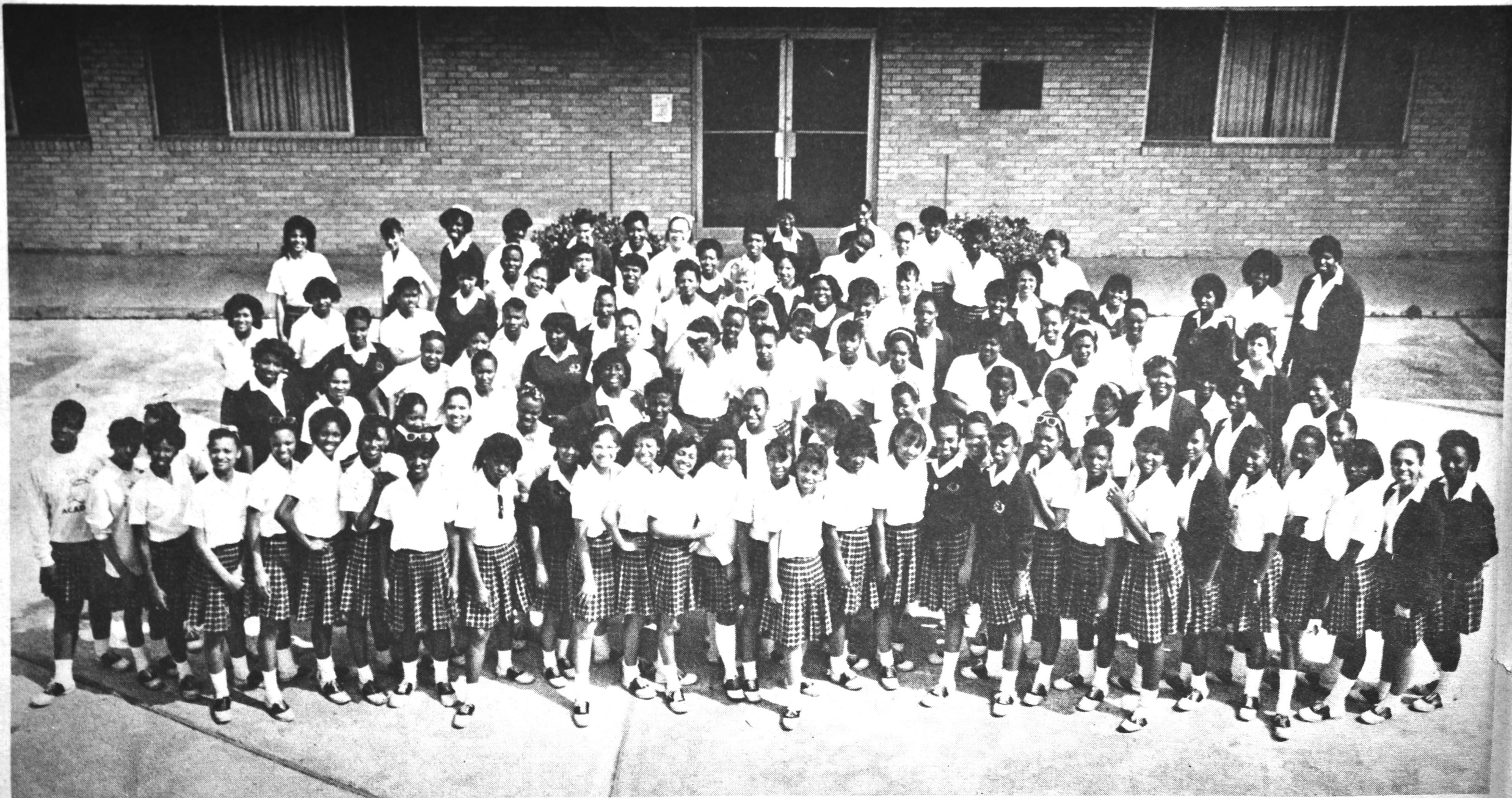
"BUT JUST BECAUSE our tuition is inexpensive, that doesn't reflect on the education that the girls are getting. Our girls can compete academically with anyone," she emphasized.

Recent figures show that upwards of 90% of the academy's graduates go on to college. "They may not all graduate, but the majority of them do," said Sister Demetria, adding that the school lists doctors and lawyers, educators and judges among its graduates.

This year, the school has an enrollment of 757 students, near capacity. "And we have a waiting list," said the principal.

This graduating class reached back to the roots of St. Mary's for its senior class banquet, returning to the Orleans Ballroom to hold the function. "Many girls' mothers are graduates of St. Mary's," said Sister Demetria.

The graduation ceremonies May 16 will be at 4 p.m. in Municipal Auditorium.



THE 1985 CENTENNIAL GRADUATING CLASS of St. Mary's Academy poses in front of the school. The girls graduate May 16.

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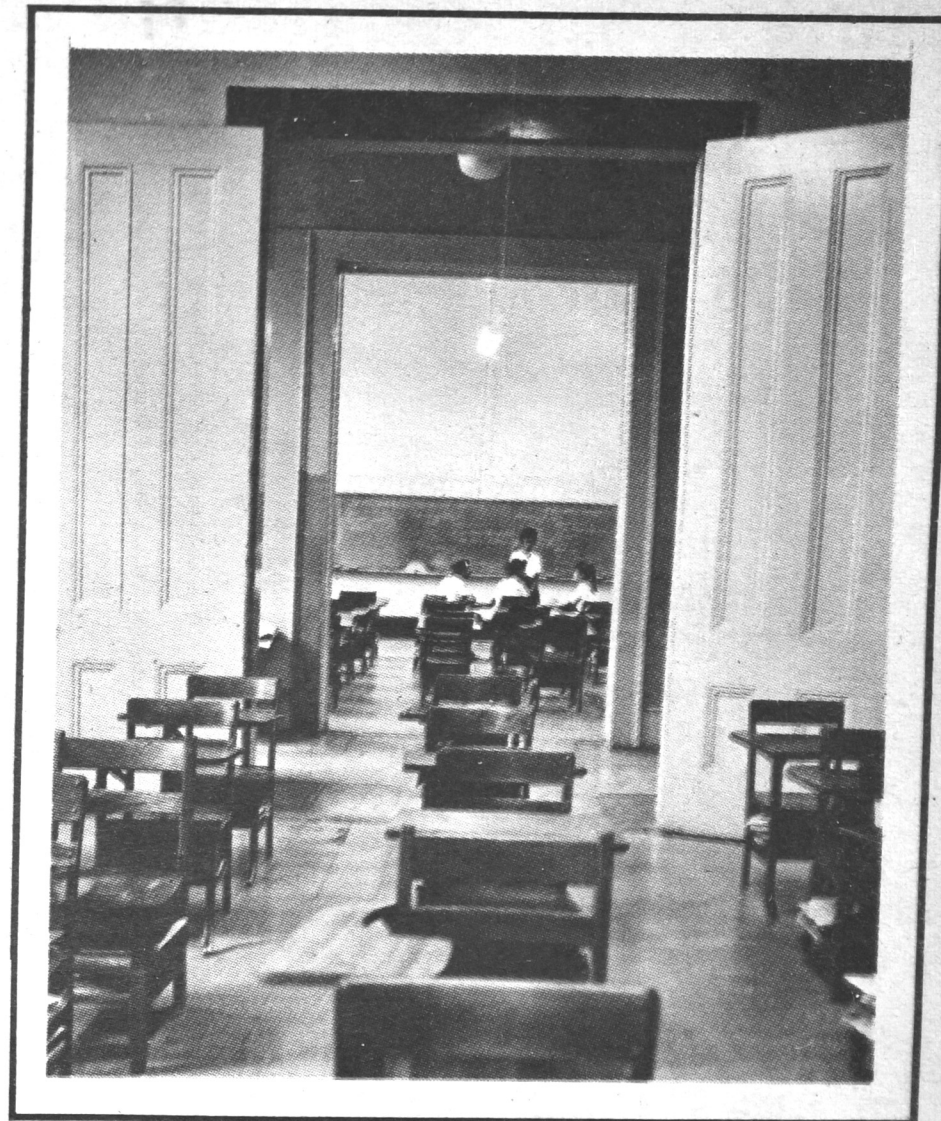
TRYING OUT THEIR caps and gowns are some members of the senior class, above. From left, Monique Irvin, Vanessa Brooks, senior class president; Paulette Francisco, Michelle Diaz, Leslie William, student council president, and Adrienne Young, a National Merit finalist. Behind them stands the statue of the Sacred Heart, which came from

the old building on Orleans Avenue. At right, two members of the graduating class walk with their grandmothers, who also graduated from St. Mary's. From left, Aleska Evans with her grandmother, Mrs. Ora Martin David, class of 1941; Mrs. Leonor Lombard, class of 1937, and her granddaughter Tanya Lombard.





SISTER DEMETRIA WILLIAMS, S.S.F., principal of St. Mary's Academy remembers her own graduation as she looks through a 1936 yearbook. Sr. Demetria has been principal since 1962.



THE OLD SCHOOL, at 717 Orleans Ave., was the site of the historic Orleans Ballroom. Walls partitioned the ballroom into classrooms.