

The Mer Rouge High School (1925) is a two-story, brown brick veneer-over-masonry building that combines the English Jacobean Revival with elements of the domestic Bungalow style, although the former is dominant. The school is located on a fairly large campus on the edge of the small community of Mer Rouge and is easily the largest historic building in town. Included in the nominated acreage is an elliptical driveway in front of the school, lined with mature trees, which gives every indication of being a historic landscape feature. Excluded from the nominated acreage are a free-standing gym and elementary school, dating from 1949, and located behind the candidate. (They do not contribute to the candidate's Register significance.) Alterations to Mer Rouge High have been confined to deterioration on the interior due to a leaky roof and covered walkways at the rear. The building has been vacant since 1997.

The Mer Rouge School is a symmetrical building with a central entrance (set in a slightly protruding pavilion) opening to a capacious front hall flanked by offices. The entrance hall leads to a main hall running from side to side which provides access to a pair of classrooms (set front to back) at each end of the building. These classroom pairs protrude slightly from the front of the building forming end pavilions. This yields the familiar five-part composition so common among early twentieth century schools. At the ends of the main hall (facing toward the rear) are a pair of staircases providing access to the second story. Here, each end of the building features a pair of classrooms set front to back, mirroring the ones below. Between the classroom wings, on the second story façade, is a long library/study hall. At the center of the rear elevation is a two-story auditorium wing.

As is typical of the era, rooms are lit by bands of multi-pane windows (in this case industrial type metal windows with the center section hinged from the top to open outwards). These support the overall Jacobean character of the building, Jacobean being one of very few historic architectural styles that routinely placed windows in groups. Another convincing Jacobean feature is the entrance pavilion (relatively vertical in proportion) which is marked by quoins in a contrasting color (white) and material (cast concrete), a 45 degree gable top and a strong classical style cast concrete entrance doorway (in this case Roman Doric). The entablature features triglyphs and a strapwork-like design. The multiple-layer cornice features small dentils. The double window over the entrance is set off in contrasting quoins as well, and the gable is given additional texture by the exclusive use of headers in the laying up of the brickwork. The gable culminates in a central crest. Classroom windows in the end pavilions are also set off in contrasting quoins in the Jacobean fashion. But instead of the usual Jacobean triangular gables, these pavilions are surmounted by Bungalow style jerkin-head gables with a pronounced kick. This roof style is echoed on the rear auditorium wing (without the kick). The eaves feature Bungalow-style struts.

The interiors for the most part are typical of a small town school of the period. Wooden doors with operable transoms above provide access to classroom and offices. The classroom sets on the south side (upstairs and down) have a cloakroom between. The classrooms retain their original blackboards and wooden floors. The large auditorium is given far more architectural treatment that would be expected for a small country town. (As will be explained in Part 8, it served as Mer Rouge's community center, where all manner of events were held.) Seating for 503 is provided on the ground floor and in a balcony. The fixed seating is original. The windows are set off by colossal pilasters. The ceiling has a paneled treatment, and dentils ornament a pronounced cornice. The highlight of the impressive space is the squared-off cast plaster proscenium which is richly worked with various decorative motifs, including large anthemions, a rope design, bead-and-reel, papyrus leaves, and other plant and floral forms.

With the exception of two covered walkways attached to the auditorium wing) providing access to the 1949 buildings), the exterior is unaltered. The interior has suffered some deterioration (fairly notable in one room) due to a leaky roof, and there is some rot evident in the eaves. It is the hope of the Morehouse Parish School Board and various local graduates that National Register listing will provide additional impetus to a nascent "Save our School" campaign (as it has for the nearby Bastrop High School, also in Morehouse Parish, listed on the Register in

2002). In terms of National Register guidelines, there are no integrity issues. The building would still be readily identifiable to someone who attended events there during the historic period.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1925-1953
ARCHITECT/BUILDER: J. W. Smith Architects (Monroe, LA)
CRITERION: A

The Mer Rouge High School is of local significance as a milestone in the history of public education in the community, and perhaps even more importantly, its auditorium was Mer Rouge's community center. As one longtime citizen explained, in rural areas, schools are much more than just schools; they were the "heart of the community," where all manner of large events took place. The period of significance as a community center continued well past the Register's present fifty year cutoff (1953). The period of significance under education is 1925 because it is the very opening of the school that was the milestone.

Like rural Louisiana on the whole, public education was in its infancy in Mer Rouge at the turn of the twentieth century. Information is sketchy for this early period, but it is known that the first public school in Mer Rouge proper, apparently in the 1890s, was conducted in a rambling one story frame residential-looking building. The school remained in this location until 1912, when the school district passed a tax to buy property and construct a new school building. The 1913 school, two stories and of brick construction, represents a definite chapter in the history of public education in small Louisiana towns -- the arrival of "modern brick" schools in the early years of the twentieth century. The long demolished, almost square building appears from an old photo to have had eight large classrooms. Its footprint (per a 1919 Sanborn map) is not as large as that of the candidate. As was typical of the period, grades 1 through 11 were taught in the one building.

By the 1920s public education had advanced sufficiently in Mer Rouge to warrant the construction of a separate building for the high school grades (8-11 at that time). The community, however, did not experience the population explosion of Bastrop, the Morehouse Parish seat, which placed tremendous strains on the school infrastructure. The Mer Rouge population was 656 in 1920 and 669 in 1930. Enrollment in the high school for the 1925-1935 period was between 60 and 70 (per a 1935 publication).

Although the foregoing is certainly not as dramatic as the transition from a ramshackle frame school to a large modern brick school (as was sometimes the case), the erection of the small rural community's first purpose-built high school was obviously a milestone -- one of symbolic as well as tangible value. In fact, it's actually quite a large and impressive building for an enrollment in the first decade of between 60 and 70. (Enrollment swelled to 107 in the 1927-28 term.) Now the high school had its own building with eight large classrooms (some of which were science laboratories) and a quite large sunny library/study hall. And for the first time, the school system had an auditorium for all manner of school activities (plays, graduation, etc.). Regrettably, the new school's dedication did not make the parish newspaper, but based on research for other similar nominations, it must have been a time of great pride in the accomplishments of a fairly young public school system in a small rural community.

Longtime citizens of Mer Rouge interviewed for this nomination remember the building fondly not only from their school days, but also as the place for any community activity of any size. (There were no other venues -- no large space in a town hall, for instance.) Any "big" event, they reminisced, was at the school. It was the "heart of the community." Examples from the historic period include minstrel shows, dance recitals, recitals for private music lessons, the senior class play, performances by Centenary College choir (Shreveport, LA), Halloween carnivals, and the community's Christmas festivities. Again, these were community-wide events, not school events. Christmas was remembered with particular nostalgia -- a huge tree on the

stage and the arrival of Santa. In the pre-television age, these were eagerly awaited diversions in rural America, and Mer Rouge was no exception. The school auditorium was also used by the Home Demonstration Club agent to teach classes from home canning to crafts such as weaving.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Bonner, Walter. "A Brief History of the Mer Rouge School." Typescript copy in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation. Based upon research mainly in primary sources, including school board minutes.

Historic photos of early schools in Mer Rouge. Copies in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

Interviews with long-time residents of Mer Rouge who recall the building's use as a community center during the historic period. Conducted by Donna Fricker, Division of Historic Preservation, September 2003.