





A COUNTRY ESTATE WITH A STORY TO TELL

AN ANTEBELLUM
“SUNDAY HOUSE”
AND OTHER
STRUCTURES OF THE
ERA FILL THE
GROUNDS AROUND
THE METICULOUSLY
RESTORED HENRI
PENNE HOME NEAR
BREAUX BRIDGE.

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When restoration consultant Robert E. Smith was ready to add a house on his land near Breaux Bridge, he didn't go through the usual routine of hiring a contractor and building something modern. Instead, he searched until he found just the right "old" house that he could move onto his property.

The house Bob found was steeped in history, was of sound construction and wasn't too big to transport along the bayou country's narrow highways. His choice was a 1½-story, 44-foot-square house built in 1830 by Henri Penne. It is a fine example of the architecture common in Louisiana during the early part of the past century, featuring a large central hall with the usual pair of rooms on either side.

The only problem was that the house was located in Jeanerette, 38 miles away. But Bob was determined to have it, so, after careful labeling for reassembly, the roof and front and back porches were removed for traveling.

Today the Henri Penne House is completely restored and filled with furnishings and accessories from the era of its construction. The smallest details were researched—such as the use of silk flowers on the dining room table and the addition of a palm branch behind the portrait of a deceased relative—so that the home would accurately reflect rural life in the Louisiana of the 1820s.

But Bob still wasn't satisfied. He needed another project... and another and another. Now he has created a complete compound of authentic buildings from the same period as his main house, including the oldest documented privy (circa 1830) in Louisiana. And it's a fine privy, too, with three seats of graduated sizes.

In the front of his house, just outside the new, white picket fence, is a *pigeonnier*. The old dovecote dates to about 1827 and was built on Orange Grove Plantation

ROBERT SMITH BELIEVES THESE INTERIOR COLORS WERE THE SUBCONSCIOUS EFFORTS OF EARLY FRENCH HOMEOWNERS TO DUPLICATE NATURE'S SKY, EARTH TONES AND DARK-GREEN "TRIMWORK" OF FOLIAGE.







near New Iberia. Even Bob's new fence was researched carefully so it would be exactly like the back fence shown in one of Adrien Persac's 1861 paintings of *The Shadows-on-the-Teche* in New Iberia.

Bob's collection also includes a little 1820s building he calls the Cormier *magasin*, built for the storage of valuable food commodities at the farmhouse of a family named Cormier near Henderson.

The latest addition to the Smith compound is a small, charming town house called a *maison dimanche* from St. Martinville. These "Sunday houses" were used by plantation families of the area when visiting the town—especially on Sundays when they came to attend Mass at the old St. Martin de Tours Church. Bob's *maison dimanche* was built in about 1827 by Charles Durande of nearby Pine Alley Plantation, and today it is a showcase for a portion of Bob's collection of French and Louisiana-made furniture and decorative arts of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The Durande *maison dimanche* is a 22-by-28-foot structure that features Louis XVI-style fireplace mantels and fully dressed beams and overboards.

Somehow, in the midst of gathering and restoring his

own collection of historic buildings, Bob also has found time to build a solid reputation as a restorer of homes for others. He has saved many an old home by moving it to Lafayette or elsewhere and returning it to elegant livability, and he was responsible for the ultra-authentic restoration of Orange Grove Plantation near Houma, featured in the July/August 1983 *Louisiana Life*.

Besides the Louisiana antiques Bob has assembled to complement his home, he also has become a serious collector of early Louisiana handicrafts. He has gathered more than 100 19th-century Acadian homespun materials, for instance, and he has more than 50 baskets made by Louisiana Indians between 1880 and 1970. All of his treasures are on display in his home and outbuildings, and, while the complex is not open to the general public, group tours can be arranged by calling Bob at (318) 332-2852.

The ambitious project undertaken by Bob Smith is never ending. He is constantly adding authentic furnishings and accessories from the early 19th century. And, most of all, he enjoys living in his museumlike setting. Only electricity and indoor plumbing are there to reassure guests that they have not returned to another century. □

CHAIRS AND SPINNING WHEEL FROM NATCHITOCHES, PLUS EARLY ACADIAN-MADE BED, ARMOIRE AND TEXTILES, FILL THIS RUSTIC BEDROOM.



THE OLDEST KNOWN PRIVY IN LOUISIANA COMPLETES ROBERT SMITH'S
COLLECTION OF 1820-ERA BAYOU COUNTRY BUILDINGS.