

FIRST PERSON

My first view of Napa, August 2, 1946

PAT O'BRIEN

It was a long drive from my home in San Francisco to Napa 70 years ago when I, a high school freshman, entered Mont La Salle set in the foothills of Napa on the west side of the Napa Valley. The drive took us over the Bay Bridge and up what is now Interstate 80 to the streets of Vallejo where we then drove on Highway 29 to Napa, population about 10,000.

Passing Imola I recalled that my San Francisco friends had given me quizzical looks. ("Isn't that the insane asylum, and you're going to Napa?") Of course, I just laughed.

We continued down the road beyond the State Hospital, past the large factory that made jeans — I wonder what ever happened to it. Then Napa began.

Downtown was several blocks of old two-story buildings around First and Main, a few stores, a couple of bars and



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Pat O'Brien, a former Christian Brother, shares his memories of his time at Mont La Salle in Napa.

and then lots of small pleasant homes. The unique sight of coin collecting devices for parking

surprised me; later the system would be imitated by other cities. It seems the city fathers were way ahead of other California towns for I had never seen them before — remember this was 1946.

That day, I was then introduced to the U.S. Post Office and the Greyhound bus station. Whenever we'd go to Napa, the Post Office was the drop-off place and pick-up location. Be there or walk the eight miles or so up Redwood Road to the Mont. Obviously, the threat worked because nobody ever missed the station wagon.

The Greyhound was a large terminal that provided a way to get to the Bay Area if needed. During the Second World War, 1941-1945, gas rationing limited the number of trips a family could make, so Greyhound was a good alternative.

In those days, the path to Mont La Salle was west on First

Street, then a half moon slant to get to Redwood Road, and then left following the creek up to Mont La Salle. As I recall, Redwood Road then did not cross the freeway (there was no freeway, just a Highway 29 to St Helena and beyond).

There was no Queen of the Valley hospital, but a small emergency facility. Good ol' Dr. Dwight Murray, M.D. volunteered his services to the Brothers and students; and for just about every illness there was a miracle remedy: a shot in the butt, the universal treatment. For his years of service to the Brothers, Dr. Murray was made an honorary Christian Brother in later years.

Thus it was that on Aug. 2, 1946, I arrived at Mont La Salle with a new group of 11 joining the 16 returning students for a total student body of 27.

Everyone had an interest in being a Christian Brother, the

teaching order, which happened to make wine to pay the bills and keep the Brothers' schools in California afloat.

Classes, religious services, Mass and prayers, Gregorian Chant, chores and athletics were the order of the day. White shirt with a black tie was the usual attire; shirts could be laundered at Bertain's laundry in Napa for a reasonable price or we could send our dirty clothes home by parcel post and get them back in about a week.

We would spend 11 months and all holidays at the Mont and go home for vacation during July after our June summer enrichment classes like typing. The high school curriculum was strong college core that included two years of Latin, two of French.

It's remarkable how many of the students became high school

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and college teachers, even two college presidents. Based on this, our small school received immediate approval by the University of California when applied for in 1951.

Our days would start with a bell at 5:45 a.m., followed by morning prayer and Mass with the Brothers and novices. A number of older retired Brothers, affectionately called the Ancients, were kindly men and good examples to us.

When students graduated from the high school, they'd enter the novitiate, on the right side of the main chapel, for a year of prayer, study of the Rule, chanting and formation in the religious life.

During this time, some determined this life, this school wasn't for them. When someone would leave, it usually happened when we were in class or at Mass. Leaving the Mont could be difficult because of the strong friendships involved. No sense making it more difficult for everyone.

Visiting Sunday was once a month when parents and families would visit, bring a picnic lunch and spend the day. Dinner that night would be a smorgasbord of everything left over from picnics. Trips to the Mont from Bay Area locations were fairly easy, but not those from Fresno and beyond. One family, the Meuels from Fresno, had a four-hour trip each way to get to and from Mont La Salle.



PHOTO OF MONT LA SALLE BY BROTHER ALFRED (1952) COURTESY OF MONT LA SALLE SFNO DISTRICT ARCHIVES

Mont La Salle in 1952, with its chapel, novitiate and conference center, was surrounded by more than 300 acres of vineyards.

I recall making my way down the rutted ground between the vines to the football field where we played touch football, soccer, baseball or softball.

Adjacent to the field was a large lake, Lake Muscatel we called it, filled with the stinky reddish grape residue from the cleaning of Vats. No one ever swam in that icky mess. We did have a swimming pool that must have been built years before, a cork plug held back the water of the 6 foot deep pool. No matter, it was a delightful splash in its unheated waters on a summer's day.

In my first days there, I got poison oak so bad that I could only drink through a straw for several days. After another bout, I was not permitted to go on hikes because I had a special sensitivity to poison oak. I didn't have to touch it; a gentle breeze would be all that was needed.

Despite these precautions, I got poison oak several more times in my five years at the Mont.

No, we didn't pick the grapes; that was handled by the workers. The year before I entered, there had been a big fire on Mount Veeder and authorities begged Mont La Salle to send its young men to help.

The rickety bus took novices and high school students up the mountain with the famed Brother Timothy driving. On a slight downgrade, the bus paused; the brake didn't hold, and miracle of miracles, the bus was stopped by a lonely small tree beside the road. Only a few who had jumped from the bus, were hurt. Years later when Brother Timothy was asked about the event, he just turned his head and walked away.

Brother Timothy was loved by the four or five major vintners of the Napa Valley even though Christian Brothers was a competitor of theirs. It's remarkable that when family problems arose in some wine families, it was Brother Timothy who was there to quell the problems with his soft and caring approach.

Brother Timothy had been asked to serve in the winery after two years of teaching high school chemistry. He was probably the most famous Christian Brother in the world because of advertising and promotions, but you'd never know it because of his quiet and mild manner. But ask him a question about wine and you'd get the full explanation, which taught people not to ask if they didn't want the full dis-

course.

At the Mont, we'd have a few picnics to places around Napa. I remember a place called Lake Louise on the east side of the Napa River, a large resort with swimming, and a covered area with picnic tables. There was also another family home/pool that we really enjoyed owned by the Imboden family off Trancas/Monticello Road. Many people were gracious to the Christian Brothers. Many would attend our Christmas Eve Mass, too.

For me, I became a Brother in 1950, attended St. Mary's College, then taught, coached and counseled in Brothers schools in Los Angeles, Sacramento and Moraga. In 1966, I assisted my Mont La Salle buddy Brother Bede as he became the founding principal at Justin-Siena High in Napa. Sadly, Bede and many of my other friends have passed away and are buried at Mont La Salle.

I left the Brotherhood in 1970, the year I was married. Fortunately, I was then hired by the Brothers at Christian Brothers High in Sacramento to develop their counseling department.

In 1992, I organized Les Amis des Freres, a group of former Brothers who return each summer with our families to enjoy the beauty and memories of Mont La Salle. And I'll be there with these good friends at our annual picnic on Aug. 27. One place we're sure to visit is the small peaceful cemetery on a hillside at the Mont where good Brother-friends lie. God bless them.