



The Christian Brothers Monastery and Vineyards
Mont La Salle, Napa County, California

History of Mont La Salle Napa, California

Brothers of the Christian Schools, San Francisco District

The property known to members of the Lasallian Family as *Mont La Salle*, was purchased in 1930 by De La Salle Institute, the legal corporation for the District of San Francisco, under the presidency of Brother Gregory Mallon, FSC, Provincial.

Consisting of 338 acres some seven miles northwest of the City of Napa, its purchase price was \$50,000. And included an old stone winery, a small still, and one hundred thousand gallons of dry wine, as well as orchards, gardens, a swimming pool, ponds, twelve small cottages, and twelve thousand gallons of grape juice.

Mr. H. Hudemann had settled and farmed the property in 1864, when it was known as "Sprout Farm" because of its numerous springs. In 1884, the site was acquired by Mr. Rudolf Jordan, Jr., who planted seventy-five acres of vineyard, naming it "Lotus Vineyard" after an Egyptian Lotus that grew in an artificial lake on the property. Jordan, in turn, sold the property to Mr. Theodore Gier in 1900, and the new owner planted additional acres of grapes, built a spacious stone cellar, and changed the name again, to "Sequoia Vineyards." When the Christian Brothers purchased the property in 1930, it was given the name "Mount La Salle," in honor of St. John Baptist de La Salle, founder of the Christian Brothers. In keeping with St. La Salle's French heritage, "Mont" was substituted the following year, and remains today.

Brother Gregory floated a bond issue of \$500,000 for the purchase and the construction of three two-story buildings surrounding a beautiful chapel, in the combined Spanish, Romanesque, and Mission-styles, designed by H. A. Minton, AIA of San Francisco, with J. Brennan of Berkeley as Contractor. The Juniorate for high school candidates to the Brothers, the Novitiate for young Brothers continuing in the vocation, and a residence for retired Brothers were each connected with the Chapel by arcades which enclosed three wide, shady patios.

Ground was broken for construction in April 1931, and the cornerstone, was laid by the Most Reverend John J. Mitty the Bishop of Salt Lake City and Coadjutor Archbishop Designate for San Francisco, on May 17 of that same year.

The junior novices, novices, and retired Brothers, known as the Holy Family Community, moved from Martinez to Mont La Salle in April 1932. The winery operation completed its move to the Napa Location in 1932, transporting 60,000 gallons of sacramental wines from Martinez. Brother Gregory was the first Provincial at Mont La Salle, with Brother V. Leo serving as Director of Novices, Brother Arcadius Patrick, Director of Juniors, and Brother Ulfian, Director of the Holy Family Community.

Mont La Salle was dedicated on September 5, 1932, by Archbishop Edward J. Hanna and Coadjutor Archbishop John J. Mitty of San Francisco, both alumni from Christian Brothers' schools in New York. The Brothers' cemetery also moved from Martinez to Mont La Salle in October of 1932; subsequently, the remains of Brothers buried in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Oakland were moved to Napa as well. By 1996, Mont La Salle had become the final resting-place for 209 Brothers. For Brothers, alumni, and friends who come to Mont La Salle, a visit to the cemetery provides a moment of reflection and remembrance.

The Junior Novitiate

The Juniorate academic program, for boys of high school age who wished to pursue a vocation to the Christian Brothers, originally consisted of three years of college preparatory courses and two years of summer school to fulfill requirements for a secondary diploma, granted by Saint Mary's College High School of Berkeley. In 1934, the high school term was extended to four years, and diplomas were issued by Mont La Salle High School.

Due to a decreased number of candidates for the Junior Novitiate, and less emphasis on recruitment for high school candidates for the priesthood and brotherhood, the department was closed in 1969 by Brother Bertram Coleman, Provincial, and the District Council. That same year, the District's elementary boarding school was moved to the former Juniorate wing from its longtime location at Saint Mary's College High School in Berkeley, and was renamed Saint Mary's Residence School for Boys. The Residence School became a financial drain on the resources of the District, particularly in the early 80's, when the number of Brothers on faculty decreased and additional salaried lay men and women were hired to operate both the school and the residence facilities. In May 1986, Brother Norman Cook, then Provincial, and the District Council decided to close the school. Brother John Nunes, the last administrator of the Residence School and the only Brother on its faculty in 1985/1986, was appointed Director of Mont La Salle Center, which would occupy the vacant school facilities as a conference and retreat center. However, the limited room for lodging, as well as the open dormitories minimized the marketability of the facilities for large groups. After one year of operation, the decision was made to close the Center.

In 1989, under Provincial Brother Mark Murphy, the District Council approved the move of both the Provincial headquarters at St. Mary's College in Moraga and the Provincial residence in Lafayette to Mont La Salle. A Napa residence housing Brothers serving in the winery was also sold, and the winery Brothers joined the Provinciate Community at Mont La Salle. Renovations to the former Juniorate/St. Mary's Residence School/Mont La Salle Center were undertaken to accommodate the offices of De La Salle Institute personnel, the Provincial administration, and a residence for the Provinciate Community of Brothers. The open dormitories were remodeled to create fourteen separate bedrooms, including two suites, all with private bath facilities. A large study hall was converted into a conference room and nearby office and bathroom facilities for personnel of the new Christian Brothers Conference and Retreat Center.

The Novitiate

The Novitiate at Mont La Salle, home to young men in formation for the brotherhood, averaged eight to twelve novices during its early years at the Napa location. During the 1950's, the number of vocations increased and an addition to the Novitiate facility was constructed in 1952 to accommodate formation groups that had grown to more than thirty postulants and novices. During this period of growth, Brother Alfred Brousseau was Provincial, serving in that capacity for fifteen years, from 1944 to 1959. As vocations to the Christian Brothers, to other religious orders, and to the priesthood later began to decrease. There were periods when the Novitiate was closed due to the lack of candidates: 1978-1979, 1982-1983, 1986-1991, 1993-1994, 1995-1996, and 1997-1998.

In 1980, the east wing of the Novitiate building was remodeled to house the Guadalupana Sisters of St. La Salle who came from Mexico to provide food service for the residents of Mont La Salle. When the Conference and Retreat Center opened in 1989, the Sisters found themselves unable to provide the type of service that would be required by the many and varied groups that would rent the Center, and ARA (later ARAMARK), became the catering service for the Center and for the regular residents of Mont La Salle.

The Sisters moved from Mont La Salle in July 1989, and their convent was converted into the first-floor facilities to house the District Archives, which moved from St. Mary's College to its new home in Napa in January 1990, and the second-floor bedrooms and bathroom facilities for the Novitiate.

Holy Family Community

From 1932 to 1961, the Holy Family Community residing at Mont La Salle was comprised of retired Brothers, Brother Provincial and his staff, and the Brothers assigned to the winery operations.

In 1961, Brother Jerome West, then Provincial, moved his residence and the office of De La Salle Institute to Rheem Valley, near St. Mary's College in Moraga. Brother Bertram Coleman, who succeeded Brother Jerome, moved the Provincial residence from Rheem to Lafayette in 1973, but the Institute offices remaining at Rheem. In 1978, the new Provincial, Brother Raphael Willeke, constructed offices for De La Salle Institute and Provincial Headquarters on the campus of St. Mary's College.

In 1983, several rooms on the second floor of the Novitiate building at Mont La Salle were renovated to accommodate the growing numbers of the Holy Family Community of retired Brothers. An infirmary wing was added, as well, which joined the Holy Family Community residence to the Novitiate wing, and provided needed services for the Brothers. Simultaneously, rooms in the retired Brothers' facility were altered to provide each Brother a suite that included a full bath, a study area, and a bedroom. A chapel for the community was also created on the second floor. Five years later, in the spring of 1988, the entire second floor of the Novitiate was again remodeled to provide five more suites for retired and infirm Brothers.

Mont La Salle Vineyards

Brother John Hoffman (whose given name was Stanley S. Hoffman, to distinguish him from his brother, John Hoffman, who later became Vice-President of Mont La Salle Vineyards, in charge of Production) was assigned to the winery at Mont La Salle in 1934, and was joined there a year later by Brother Timothy Diener. These two men were responsible for the commercial growth and remarkable success of the winery operation in the 1940's and 1950's. Brother John died in 1962, and was succeeded as President of Mont La Salle Vineyards by Brother Gregory Schiefelbein, who had joined the winery operation in 1946. Brother Timothy, renowned Cellar Master, retired in 1986 after more than fifty years of wine making.

Brothers employed in the operation of the winery were members of the Holy Family Community, residing at Mont La Salle until 1981, at which time a home in nearby St. Helena served as the residence for several of the winery Brothers. Brother Cassian Frye, President, and Brother Timothy, Cellar Master, continued to live at Mont La Salle. In 1989, the Provincialate residence and community at Mont La Salle became home to the entire group of winery Brothers, and the St. Helena residence was sold.

In the 1960's, a five-phase program was designed for relocating the winery operations from Mont La Salle to property owned in South St. Helena. A warehouse was the first building to be constructed, followed by a second warehouse and the crushing operation facility. Phase three saw the transfer of production and public relations to the St. Helena location. Meanwhile, winery tours and tasting operations were discontinued at Mont La Salle. The fourth phase involved moving the bottling machinery, and phase five was completed in January 1987, with the construction of a new administration building on the northeast section of the St. Helena site. The winery leased its facilities at Mont La Salle and forty acres of land to Hess Collection Wine Company, which undertook major renovations of the buildings and surrounding property.

Brother David Brennan, current Provincial of the San Francisco District, became President of Mont La Salle Vineyards in 1982, and initiated the third, fourth, and fifth phases of the winery relocation. In 1987, Brother David appointed Mr. Richard Maher President of Mont La Salle Vineyards, along with his responsibility as President of Christian Brothers Sales Company. Brother David continued to serve the winery as Chairman of the Board and CEO, succeeding Brothers Cassian Frye and Frederick Portillo.

The dire effects of the Great Depression reached Mont La Salle in 1936, when De La Salle Institute declared bankruptcy, unable to redeem bonds issued in 1930 for the construction of Mont La Salle. Brother Jasper Fitzsimmons, who succeeded Brother Gregory Mallon as Provincial, weathered these stormy years, finally reaching an acceptable agreement with the bondholders. The Success of the winery business in the 40's and 50's made it possible for De La Salle Institute to remove its bankruptcy status. Winery operations were expanded, and property adjoining Mont La Salle was acquired for additional vineyards and for water, bringing the total acreage to just fewer than 500.

In 1957, the vineyard and winery operations are incorporated as Mont La Salle Vineyards, and like any privately owned business, paid taxes. Ownership of the winery buildings and vineyards was transferred from De La Salle Institute to the new corporation. The Institute subsequently became a tax-exempt corporation that owned the residence and school buildings at Mont La Salle, as well as several schools operated by the Brothers in California. De La Salle Institute received royalties from the sales of Christian Brothers' wines and brandy, which helped support the District Administration, the training and retirement of the Brothers, and subsidized the schools owned by the corporation.

In 1988, Mont La Salle Vineyards began negotiations for the sale of the winery operations, including the label and vineyards. The sale was made to Heublein, Inc. in May 1989. De La Salle Institute maintained ownership of all buildings and land at Mont La Salle, including the lease to Hess Collection Wine Company of winery buildings and acreage, including vineyards.

The Brothers' Cemetery At Mont La Salle

The Brothers' Cemetery at Mont La Salle in Napa is, to date, the final resting-place for 222 men. 131 San Francisco District Brothers have been buried from the Chapel at Mont La Salle, and 90 more were re-interred at Mont La Salle from seven different cemeteries. Twelve District Brothers, many of who served as missionaries in foreign countries, are buried elsewhere, and are named on a marker in the cemetery. Five men who were not Brothers are buried at Mont La Salle, among them two Affiliated Christian Brothers (AFSC). Four Brothers are buried at St. Vincent's School for Boys in San Rafael, California, in now unmarked graves. (Statistics courtesy of Brother Timothy Diener, FSC).

Compiled by Brother Bertram Coleman, FSC, District Archivist, *from* The Christian Brothers in the United States, 1848-1948 by Brother Angelus Gabriel, FSC; The Christian Brothers in the United States, 1925-1950 by Brother Clair Battersby, FSC; Called to the Pacific by Brother Ronald Isetti, FSC; consultations with Brother Alfred Brousseau, FSC, Archivist, and Brother Timothy Diener, FSC, of Mont La Salle; and resources in the District Archives.