

2 Boarding School, 1948

I graduated from Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Elementary School in Colusa, California, a small rice town of 2,800 residents perched alongside the Sacramento River, sixty miles north of Sacramento. That such a small rural town would even have a Catholic school was quite remarkable, but those of us living there who were Catholic simply took its presence for granted.

My mother, a staunch Catholic, wanted me to attend a Catholic high school, and though the closest one available was in Sacramento, they provided a boarding department for out-of-town students. I too wanted to stay in Catholic school and had been encouraged by some of my teachers, Sisters of the Holy Cross, to enter junior seminary of the Fathers of the Holy Cross in Notre Dame, Indiana.

I decided to enroll at Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento and live in their boarding department, which was located on the campus. I was the first boarder to check in for the new school year—my first year of high school. My mother and father had driven me down Highway 99 from Colusa. I had one large suitcase that contained all the clothes and personal items I would need. The boarding department had sent us a list of what I should bring with me, and my mother had checked each item off the list as she packed it.

Brother Gilbert was the prefect of boarders. He was a big, broad-shouldered man who measured well over six feet tall and weighed 220 pounds or

more. Sitting atop his huge frame was a smiling baby face with sparkling eyes. He spoke with an Irish accent, but a different one than the brogue of the priests I frequently heard in Colusa. His accent was East Coast—he was a Bostonian. I liked him immediately. Clothed in his flowing black robes and starched white collar, he exuded confidence and kindly authority but make no mistake—without doubt, Brother Gilbert was the man in charge. You could tell that just by looking at him.

“You are the first to arrive,” he told my parents. We walked into the institutional-looking two-story building with high ceilings. From north to south, this wing of the high school was bisected down the middle by a wide hallway that fed the small dormitory rooms on both sides. The bathroom and shower facility rooms were located at midpoint. About halfway down, he opened a door and ushered us into a long, narrow room. It was wide enough to accommodate five metal beds with their headboards butted up against the south wall, leaving an informal hallway some four feet wide along the north wall. At the end of the room was a large window that began waist high and ran almost up to the high ceiling. In the corner next to the window was a bathroom-size sink with hot and cold running water. A mirror was affixed to the wall above the sink. The walls were bare. The only decoration was a large crucifix high on the wall above the middle bed.

“Well, LeRoy, because you are the first one here, you get to choose. Which bed do you want?” What bed did I want? I had no idea. I quickly looked down the room at the beds that were identical. Should I select the bed next to the window? A few seconds passed as my mother and father and Brother Gilbert waited expectantly. With a stab of desperation, I said the middle one. My non-Catholic father turned to Brother Gilbert and said, “He chose the one with the crucifix.” Brother nodded and smiled in pleased agreement.

The Brothers of the Christian Schools, or De La Salle Christian Brothers, is a Catholic teaching institute founded in France in the late seventeenth century and officially recognized by the Vatican in 1725. Its original mission was the education of poor children. Members must take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The institute established itself in Northern California in 1868, founding wineries, the proceeds from which maintained its schools and homes for retired brothers. The first Lasallian school in Sacramento, named St. Patrick’s Institute, was opened in 1876. The school site eventually moved in 1924 and became Christian Brothers High School. A majority of graduates from the school entered military service in World War II; nine lost their lives.

By 1949, the student population was growing and administrators were considering new locations.

I unpacked. There must have been bureaus in the room to accommodate five boarders but I don't remember them. I just can't remember them. (Why can I remember some details so well and others not at all?) Soon enough, I was finished. I walked with my parents out to the car, said goodbye with a hug from each, and they drove away. I was alone, the first boarder to arrive early in September 1948. I was fourteen years old. I don't remember crying, though I could have. I just remember being alone.

Surely, there must have been public detention centers for youthful offenders during the 1940s, but I don't remember any nor do I remember kids my age talking about them like I heard my own kids in the 1980s talk about juvenile hall or Boys' Ranch, a juvenile detention center serving the county of Sacramento. I found out soon enough that boarding schools filled a special niche in the juvenile court system of the 1940s.

I was the only boarder in my five-bed dormitory who was not the product of a broken home, that is, a home where only a single mother had the responsibility of raising the child. Either the husband was deceased or had drifted away or the parents were divorced. Strange as it might seem now, divorce was quite unusual during my childhood years, especially in rural areas of Northern California, and when it did occur it was talked about in hushed tones and certainly not in front of children.

In those cases where the single mother could not cope with raising the teenage child for financial and especially behavioral reasons, oftentimes the child would be named a ward of the court and was assigned to attend a boarding school. These institutions, especially those operated by Catholic religious orders, had earned the reputation of being strict with their charges, and the use of corporal punishment (about which I can personally attest) was not at all uncommon. Religious boarding schools believed in the principle of *in loco parentis*, especially when it came to discipline and respect for authority. My 1948 Sacramento boarding school had some tough kids present, and equally tough love methods were used to keep good order, maintain respect for authority, and promote good study habits. Frankly, I think they did a good job, and while I was not a problem child and was much too skinny and naive to be a tough kid, I thrived under this Catholic boarding school system of law and order.

I admired the work of Brother Gilbert, his fatherly concern for us

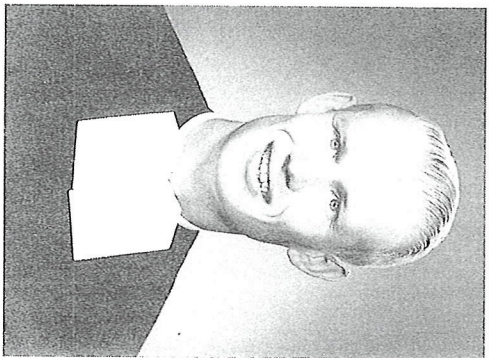


FIGURE 5 Brother Gilbert (Chatfield). After graduating from St. Mary's College of California with a degree in philosophy, he was assigned to teach high school in Bakersfield. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Chatfield family.

boarders, and his administration of law and order. So much so that at the end of the school year, I sought entrance into the order of the Christian Brothers and was accepted into their high school of monastic religious training in the Mount Veeder area, a few miles west of Napa. When I qualified to wear the religious robe, I was required to give up my family name and choose another. Quite naturally, I chose the name Brother Gilbert.