

CHRISTIAN BROTHERS: A CENTURY OF SERVICE

One hundred years! A long time, indeed, since an energetic young maiden lady, named Maggie Cunningham saw her fund-raising efforts brought to fruition with the opening of what has, at various times, been known as St. Patrick's Institute, The Sacramento Institute, Christian Brothers College, Christian Brothers School, Bishop Armstrong High School . . . and hopefully last . . . Christian Brothers High School.

The reasons behind the establishing of a school by the sons of St. John Baptist de la Salle, the Christian Brothers, in Sacramento were basically two: The desire by Catholics to provide a religious education for their children and general dissatisfaction with quality public education as it then existed. Accomplishing this task took a good five years.

Finally the impetus from Father Patrick Scanlan and doorbell ringing and arm twisting by Miss Maggie Cunningham, the great day arrived . . . establishing the first High School in Sacramento offering both academic and commercial classes. Officially known as St. Patrick's Institute after the patron saint of Sacramento (then Grass Valley) Diocese, the school was dedicated July 16, 1876 by Archbishop Joseph Alemany. The next day the brothers began enrolling students and by the following Monday . . . July 24th . . . 200 students began their first classes. They wasted no time in those days.

What sort of school was it that opened its doors in the nation's centennial year at 12th & K Streets on the site that is now Weinstocks department store? There were all of four classrooms with seats for 260 students. The most basic division problem indicates the teacher-pupil ratio was such as to put to the acid test even the renowned disciplinary talents of the seven brothers who took over the new building. For each classroom there was furnished, according to contemporary accounts, a teachers desk and revolving chair. With classes averaging over 60 students, the later were probably kept in perpetual spin. All of this required the expenditure of \$24,000, a substantial sum for that day. In just 10 months after its opening, the school conferred its first diplomas . . . two, to be exact . . . in the Assembly Chamber of the Capitol, just two blocks away, with Governor William Irwin presiding.

During the next two decades the school . . . still known as Sacramento Institute . . . thrived until, in 1896 and at the urging of Bishop Thomas Grace of Sacramento, it became Christian Brothers College. The term "college" was not inappropriate, for in those days it was possible for a student to spend his years from the first grade through three years of college right there at 12th & K Streets before . . . if he wished a degree . . . transferring to Saint Mary's College. Thus it was that the concept of the junior college came a reality to the Sacramento area in the hands of the brothers a good twenty years before Sacramento Junior College, as an adjunct of Sacramento High School, began offering post secondary courses.

Brother Cianin, founding director principal, was succeeded by members of his institute whose names . . . Bertram, Sabinian, Genebren and Victor Ambrose . . . are now footnotes to history. In 1900 Brother Vellesian came onto the scene only to return years later in the 1920's to preside over the construction of the "new school" at 21st & Y Streets. The history of the school in these early years is minimal in detail, perhaps because, as Brother Lewis noted with a rare touch of asperity, "Brothers Florinus Peter, V. Leo, and Jasper kept poor records." Maybe, by way of excuse, they were just too busy trying to keep board nailed to board in a crumbling edifice.

The downtown school was falling apart and the commercially valuable property . . . still owned by the diocese . . . was sold. This put Brother Vellestan, his faculty, and student body in a position that was, at best, somewhat awkward. The property had to be vacated by June of 1923, and it would take a series of miracles to have a new school ready for the start of classes in August. Vellestan, a practical man, preferred to depend on his own resources rather than tax devine providence. The result was a move to the abandoned East Sacramento Public School building at 39th & J Streets, where Sacred Heart Church now stands.

- It took seven months to iron out the details of construction which advanced at a break neck pace. The contract was let on Feb. 4, 1924; ground was broken on Feb. 11th, the cornerstone laid on May 18th, and students were in their classrooms and brothers and boarders in their living quarters on Sept. 1st. It would seem Brother Vellestan did have his miracle of sorts. The curriculum having been reduced some years before to eliminate college level courses, the school officially became known as Christian Brothers School on Nov. 5, 1924.

The thirties saw an athletic program reach an even par with other schools of the area. The gridlers, under young Jim Flynn, were able to stum Sac High's purple dragons two years hard running (at which point Sac High followed the only sensible course and hired Flynn), and there "Bud" Hana's basketball and baseball teams played all corners on even terms.

It was during the depression years that the school suffered a premature aging process when maintenance money was just not there, the well loved Brother Patrick kept the boiler together with bailing wire, and magic to provide heat for the classrooms. Meanwhile, the Brothers, on too many mornings, were shaving with cold water. Brother Patrick was also responsible for a major curriculum revision that revitalized the academic program of the school.

The toll of time was felt simultaneously by Christian Brothers, and the two girls high schools . . . St. Joseph & St. Francis . . . and thus it was in 1957 Bishop Armstrong High School, a co-institutional experiment in Catholic secondary education was opened, and old Christian Brothers remained as a feeder school, offering freshman and sophomore classes only, and it appeared that never again would a diploma bear the name "Christian Brothers."

Tradition finally was served . . . and restored . . . in 1964, when two new four year high schools for girls made it, once again, possible for a four year high school (grammar school classes had been discontinued in 1957) under the Christian Brothers to exist in Sacramento. The culmination was the restoration of the old name, in 1968, with the addition of one word, Christian Brothers-High School.

"The 'old boys'" from the Sacramento Institute are gone now and the ranks of those who still call it the "Brothers College" are thinning. But the graduates, young and old, will still agree to a man that what Daniel Webster once said in arguing the famous Dartmouth College case also applies to this alma mater.

... it is a small school but there are those who love it . . ."

indeed there are . . . they number in the thousands.