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## ST JOSEPH COLLEGE, ROHNERVILLE Church in the Gold Mines

By Father John Dwyer, printed in the August 12, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*

Bishop O'Connell often lamented to Cardinal Barnabo, the Prefect of *Propaganda Fidei*, that while the girls in his vast diocese were well taken care of educationally by the Sisters of Notre Dame, the Sisters of Mercy and the Daughters of Charity, he had been unable to persuade any order of Brothers to found a school for boys.

Thus he was overjoyed in 1869 when the Precious Blood Father Patrick Henneberry proposed that his congregation would open the long desired school. At the time Father Henneberry was the superior of a Precious Blood Monastery located in Eureka, and also pastor of St Bernard Parish. Although the motive for opening the school was to make a profit in order to support the monastery, yet its very opening would fulfill the bishop's ardent desire.

Father Henneberry proceeded to locate a site for the school. He purchased a 160 acre tract in Ferndale for \$6,500, but in the winter it flooded and the land was put up for sale. That summer an ideal site was located in Rohnerville, seven miles east of Ferndale. The owner, James Degnan, donated 30 acres, 12 of which were flat, the remainder on a lovely bluff over-looking the countryside. In the fall Father Henneberry let a contract for the new building, borrowing heavily, often at exorbitant rates of interest.

The new building, consisting of two floors and an attic floor, was 170 feet long and 46 feet deep. However the central portion was deeper than the two ends. A corridor eight feet wide ran 120 feet almost the length of the building. There were 62 doors, 97 windows and eight skylights.

Built of wood and plaster interiorly, the building contained many fireplaces needed because of the damp climate in the entire Humboldt area. Nine carpenters, three painters and two bricklayers, as well as a laborer were kept busy all through 1870 and most of 1871 until the building was completed in September 1871. The new school was widely advertised and when classes began on January 16, 1872 there were 40 boarders. The year 1873 was even more promising because there were 100 students, both boarders and day pupils.

When the college opened, the community of priests, brothers and seminarians moved from Eureka to the new building. Father Henneberry resigned as pastor of Eureka and was appointed superior of the new college. Father Dickman was appointed the new pastor of Eureka.

The major superior sent additional personnel from Ohio in the persons of Father Thomas O'Neill who became the assistant at Eureka, Father Joseph Uphaus who went to the college, and Father Daniel F. Dade came from Visalia in California. But encouraging as things seemed in 1873, the following year was filled with tragedy. Father Dade died on April 2, 1874. Father Guggenberger left the community, went to Buffalo, New York and joined the Jesuits. Several of the seminarians became discouraged and left. One of them, William Walrath later went to India as a Jesuit missionary. The seminarian Lawlor later entered the Dominicans and was known as Father Sadoc Lawlor.

The only priest left with the small community in 1874 was Father Thomas O'Neill, three seminarians and a total of 18 students. The college limped along, laden with debt, too far removed from the centers of population to attract sufficient students to make it self-sustaining.

At this time Bishop O'Connell came to the rescue of the financially burdened community by sending the well-known scholar Father Lawrence Kennedy to teach at St Joseph College. He remained with the Precious Blood community until the school closed in 1879 when he became the founding pastor of Ferndale.



Photo by John E Boll 2010

**Church of the Assumption, Ferndale, Humboldt County,  
Founded by Father Lawrence Kennedy**



Photo from Diocesan Archives

**Father Patrick Henneberry, CPPS**

Other names listed as being on the faculty in 1875 and 1876 were Father V Grilli, J. A. Gerster and Father Ebnaether. Father Henneberry's confidence in the project remained unbroken. The creditors pressed hard and his religious community in Ohio reluctantly met the obligations but Father Henneberry felt the debts were his own and he was determined to pay back every cent owed. Therefore on August 15, 1877 he sailed for Australia to begin a series of missions.

While Father Henneberry was busy preaching missions, the occupation for which he became famous, his pet project in Rohnerville gradually failed until, with the end of the school term on September 17, 1879, notice was given that it was to be closed.

It must not, however, be thought that the venture was a complete failure. The institution apparently served well those who attended it. A graduate of the Eureka foundation was Father Michael Walrath who attended the Eureka Seminary from its founding until his ordination by Bishop O'Connell on September 4, 1871. Likewise the seminarians who became priests in other orders received part of their education at this Precious Blood foundation.

Several men of prominence were products of the Rohnerville College, among them the future Los Angeles Superior Court Judge William Aggeler of Ferndale, Brother Jasper Fitzsimmons of St Mary's College whose family lived in Table Bluff, and Charles Friedenback, a prominent business man of Fortuna who was the leader of the committee for the building of St Joseph Church in Fortuna in 1910. Evidently those who attended the college did receive a good education. The problem was that because of its location, so few could attend.

In 1885 Father Henneberry received permission from his superiors to attempt to make a success of the college. Bishop Manogue gave his approval on the undertaking. The Roman headquarters sent two priests to assist, Father Joseph and Frederick Schaeper. Thus the school was refurnished and reopened in 1886 but within three years it was again closed for the same reasons that had caused it to fail in the first place, the location, the lack of students and the heavy financial outlay to maintain it. The property was eventually taken over by the man who held the mortgage, Mr Geigenbaum.

The building was abandoned, eventually was vandalized and gradually fell into ruin until finally it was raised to salvage some of the lumber. Thus the famous Rohnerville College of the old Grass Valley Diocese passed into oblivion, but only after it had attempted to serve a need in the diocese. The need was eventually met when the Christian Brothers came to Sacramento in 1876 and that city became included in the old diocese with the see change to Sacramento in 1886.