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CHRISTIAN BROTHERS HIGH SCHOOL 100 YEARS RECALLED DURING COMMEMORATIVE CELEBRATION

By Stanley Gilliam '41, Printed in the February 26, 1976 issue of *The Catholic Herald*



Photo by John Boll 2014

Christian Brothers High School

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 finally – and hopefully last – Christian Brothers High School.

Despite those name changes – of which more later – and locations at four sites, there are two unbroken links spanning that century: The continuous administration by the Brothers of the Christian Schools and a long line – thin at times, but uninterrupted – of graduates now numbering in the thousands and all proud to be known as “Brothers Boys.”

The reasons behind the establishment 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 regular education for their children and general dissatisfaction with the quality of public instruction as it then existed. Accomplishing the task took a good five years.

Finally, with impetus from Father Patrick Scanlan and doorbell-ringing and arm-twisting by Miss Cunningham, the great day arrived – establishing the first high school offering both academic and commercial classes.

Officially known as St. Patrick's Institute after the patron saint of the Sacramento (then Grass Valley) Diocese but commonly referred to as the Sacramento Institute by the brothers who staffed it, the school officially was dedicated July 16, 1876, by Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany, OP, of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. The next day the brothers began enrolling students and by the following Monday – July 24 – 200 of them began their first classes. They wasted no time in those days.

What sort of place was it, this school which opened its doors in the nation's Centennial year at 12th and K Streets on the site of what is now Weinstock's department store? The past never can be judged in terms of the present, and what appears Spartan today was rather opulent in 1876.

There were all of four classrooms, with seats for 260 students (all but 10 would be filled within six months). 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 of the fledgling community who took over the new building. For each classroom there also was furnished, according to contemporary accounts, a teacher' desk and a revolving chair. With classes averaging over 60, the latter probably was kept in the perpetual spin.

While the brothers and their "boys" were not exactly lolling in luxury's ample lap, they did have their moments of glory. In just 10 months the school conferred its first diplomas – two, to be exact—in the Assembly Chamber of the Capitol, just two blocks away, with Gov. William Irwin presiding.

During the next two decades the school –still known as the Sacramento Institute—thrived until, in 1896 and at the urging of Bishop Thomas Grace of Sacramento, it became the Christian Brothers College.

Nor was the term "college" loosely used, 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 and K Streets before –if he wished a degree—transferring to Saint Mary's College, then located in Oakland.

Thus it was that the concept of the junior college came to reality in the Sacramento area in the hands of the brothers a good 20 years before Sacramento Junior College as an adjunct of Sacramento High School, began offering post-secondary school courses.

And all the while, in the two-track system later to be emulated by the public schools, the Christian Brothers were pouring, through the Commercial and Banking Departments, a steady stream of young men into the business life of Sacramento.



Photo from the *Catholic Herald*

Brother Cianan was succeeded by members of his institute whose names—Stephen, Bertram, Sabinian, Bosonis John, Genebern, Walter Erminold and Victor Ambrose—are now footnotes to history. But in 1900 there came on the scene Brother Vellesian, still remembered fondly by many, who returned in the early 1920's to preside over the construction of the "new" school at 21st and Y Streets and who into the early 1940's was a beloved figure on what by then was known as the Broadway campus.

Meanwhile, in those early days of the century, space became a problem. The cost of an addition came in the form of \$5000 from Mrs. Michael Bethel, a benefactress—in the mold of Maggie Cunningham.

By this time the brothers must have considered themselves permanently established in the Capital City. Besides enlarging the school—it is noted by the well-remembered Brother U. Lewis in a history of the school through 1924—they owned, jointly with the Sisters of Mercy, a burial plot in St Joseph's Cemetery.

The brothers' names now become more familiar to at least the older among the "old boys." The directors include Brothers Florinus Peter; the saintly V. Leo—"White Leo"—noted later both as engineer and poet; Ximines George, a memorable administrator who was not above the manual labor needed for maintaining what by then was an aging structure; and V. Jasper, later provincial of the San Francisco District.

The history of those years is minimal as to detail, perhaps, because, as Brother Lewis noted with a rare touch of asperity, "Brothers Florinus, 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, which was three times threatened with destruction by fire in 1919 and 1920 while under the administration of Brother U. Vivian.

It must have been felt by his superiors that Brother Vivian had endured enough—or perhaps that he was jinxed—because after that near-disastrous year he gave way to a former director, Brother George, who presided over the disintegrating structure until December 1921, when, upon the return of Brother Vellesian, a new era was about to dawn.

The downtown school was falling apart and the value of the property—still owned by the diocese—was such that its commercial value made its sale—for \$210,000—imperative. Imperative or not, it put Brother Vellesian, his faculty and student body in a position that was, at best, somewhat awkward.

The property had to be vacated by June 1, 1923, and it would have taken a series of miracles to have a new school ready for the start of classes in August.

Brother Vellesian, a practical man, and a not particularly demanding one, preferred to depend on his own resources rather than to tax Divine Providence. The result was a move to the only available place in the city—a site, actually, almost out of the city, the abandoned East Sacramento Public School building at 39th and J Streets where Sacred Heart Church now stands.

That solved only part of the problem, however, because there remained the rather vital matter of living quarters for the faculty and some 30 boarders. These facilities were found in an old residence and adjoining cottage at 20th and T Streets. Two buses conveyed teachers and boarding students to school each morning, home for lunch, back to school and home again during a year which must have seemed endless.

Meanwhile, even though it took seven months to iron out the details, construction of the new school advanced at breakneck pace: The contract was let on February 4, 1924; ground broken February 11, the cornerstone was laid May 18 and students were in their new classrooms and brothers and boarders in their living quarters on September 15. It would seem that Brother Vellesian did have his miracle, of sorts.

By November 23 the finishing touches were put on the \$225,000 facility and the dedication on that date drew a large crowd including, most fittingly, a maiden lady, no longer young, whose

memory went back to another dedication 48 years before. Her name? Maggie Cunningham, of course.



MAGGIE CUNNINGHAM, BENEFACTRESS

The energetic Miss Maggie Cunningham had come to the fore as principal fund raiser for the new school. It was through her efforts that most of the monies necessary were raised from the community, most of it from non-catholic sources. Soon after, Miss Cunningham was granted Letters of Affiliation by the Superior General of the Brothers, making her an affiliate member of the Institute and the first woman so honored on the West Coast.

The curriculum having been reduced some years before to eliminate college-level courses, it again was time for a name change, and on November 5, 1924, it became officially the Christian Brothers School.

A classroom wing built to accommodate 300 students extended along the Y Street (now Broadway) side of the campus; brothers' and boarders' quarters were on 21st Street; an arcade, later providing entrance to a gymnasium, connected the two.

Even in those days, an early photograph indicates, times were a little tough, because there on the corner, blocking complete view of the handsome structure, stood the first of several ugly—but profitable—service stations.

There, for some 40 years, the brothers continued to provide educational excellence in their elementary school and their academic and commercial high school classes. They continued some old athletic legends, too, on the diamond, and they created some new ones on the gridiron and basketball court.

Long a baseball power, Christian Brothers' football had a rather ill-boding inauguration back in 1917 with a 32-6 loss to Harkness Junior High School. Ten years later they were playing stronger opposition—Sacramento High School—but still losing by such astronomical scores as 87-0.

But by the mid-1930's the gridgers, under young Jim Flynn, were able to stun Sacramento High's Purple Dragons two years hand-running (at which point Sacramento High followed the

only sensible course and hired Flynn), and Henry “Bud” Hanna’s basketball and baseball teams played all comers on even terms.

It was also during those Depression years that the still new school suffered a pre-mature aging process when maintenance money was just not there, and the saintly and well-loved Brother Arcadius 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.

But the years under Brother Patrick and his worthy successors were good ones under devoted teachers, and students were filled with pride in what was by then “the little school behind the big service station.” Brother Patrick was also responsible for a major curriculum revision that revitalized the academic program of the school.

The toll of times finally was felt simultaneously by Christian Brothers, and the two girls high schools—St Joseph and St Francis—and thus it was that in 1947 Bishop Armstrong High School, a co-institutional experiment in Catholic secondary education, was opened, and the old Christian Brothers remained as a “feeder” school, offering freshmen and sophomore classes only, and it appeared that never again would a diploma bear the name “Christian Brothers School.”

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 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 these who still call it the “Brothers College” are thinning. But the graduates, young and old, will agree to a man that what Daniel Webster once said in arguing the famous Dartmouth College case also applies to their alma mater: “. . . it is a small school, but there are those who love it . . .”

Indeed there are—they number in the thousands.

Sources for this Article

Invaluable in the preparation of the above, and in no particular order, were a master’s thesis by Sister Marie Vandenberg, RC, an article in “The Gael” yearbook for 1964 by Ted McKnight, Brother U. Lewis’ informal history, old files of the Catholic Herald and Brother Maurice Flynn, F.S.C., archivist for the San Francisco District.

About the Author



Photo from the *Sacramento Bee*

Charles Stanley Gilliam died December 18, 2011 at the age of 87. He was a graduate of Christian Brothers High School in the class of 1941 and married Joan Cecilia Jones in 1950. They had a happy marriage for 57 years and were blessed with three children and six grandchildren.

Prior to his working for the *Sacramento Bee*, Stan spent the first 17 years of his career in education, first at Grant Union High School/Grant Technical College and then at Sacramento High School where he touched many lives of students. He also spent 20 years as a seasonal timekeeper and night office manager at Del Monte Corporation in Sacramento.

Stan had a long career as a writer for the *Sacramento Bee*. Prior to his retirement from the *Bee* in 1989, he penned the daily column "*Stan's Sacramento*" for 11 years. The preceding 12 years, he entertained and educated Sacramento's restaurant goers with his weekly column "*Eating Out*." In all, Stan was with the *Bee* for 28 years, starting out as a part-time copy editor.



Photo by John Boll 2014

Christian Brothers High School 2014