The Moraga Historical Society

2025 THIRD QUARTER - MHS CELEBRATING 60 YEARS

A Jewel of Moraga, Saint Mary's College

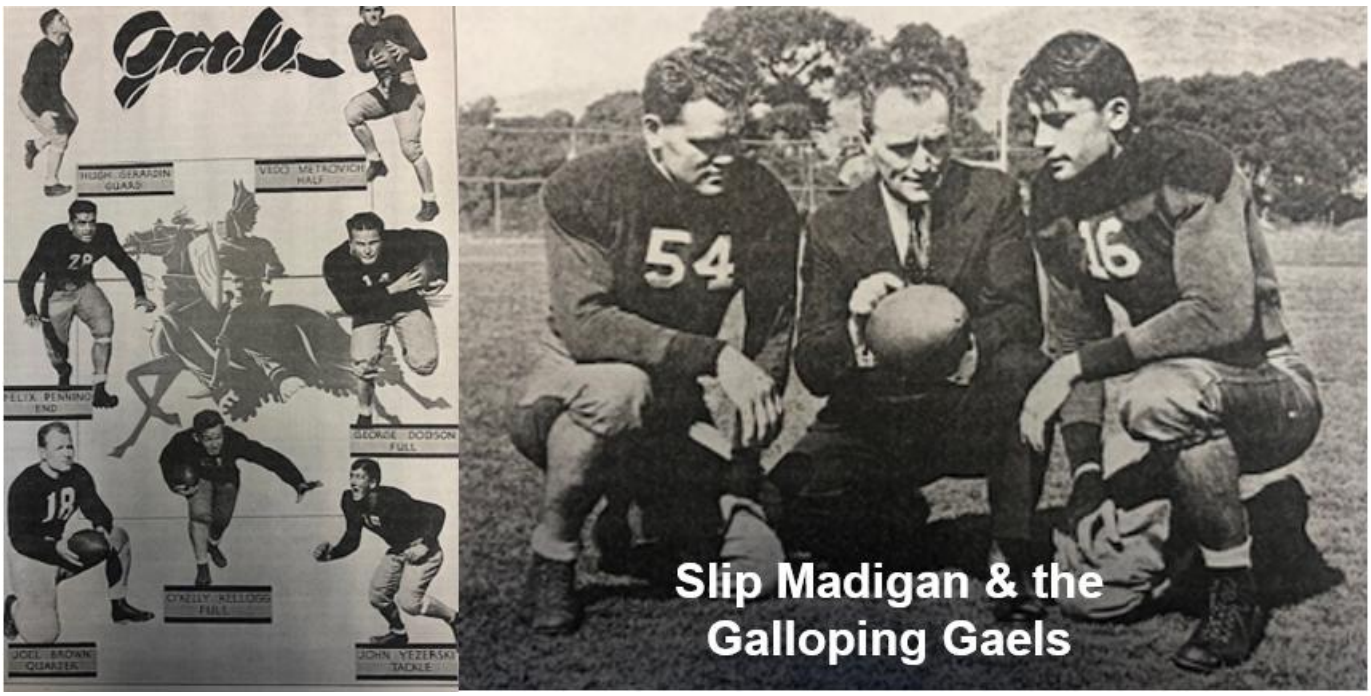
By Susan Sperry

Nestled among the grass-covered hills of Moraga now lies the picturesque Spanish Renaissance-California Mission-style campus of Saint Mary's College, a college originally dedicated July 9, 1863, on Mission Road in San Francisco, one of the oldest colleges in the West. The De La Salle Christian Brothers arrived on August 11, 1868, adding a commercial curriculum. The College was chartered by the State of California on May 20 of that year and conferred its first Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees, and in 1873 the first Master of Arts degree.

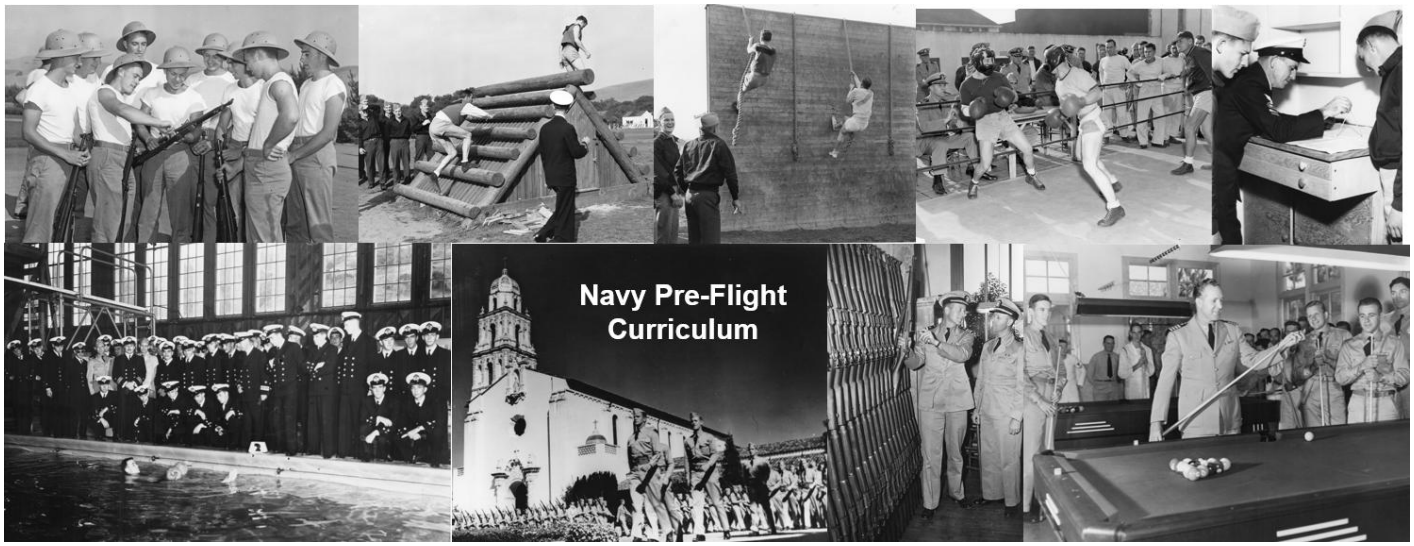
Outgrowing the San Francisco campus, the College moved to 30th and Broadway in Oakland to a facility affectionately known as the "Brickpile" on August 15,1889. As years went by, the College added Civil and Mechanical Engineering, Art, Pre-med, Schools of Commerce, Foreign Trade, Education, Law, Economics, Business Administration, Letters and Science, and the World Classics Core Curriculum. During the 19th century tuition was $60 per academic year for day students and $250 for boarding students.

In 1927 James Irvine, Southern California entrepreneur, offered Saint Mary's College 100 acres of free land, hoping to advance his schemes to subdivide. The Brothers were not impressed with the marshy basin they saw upon arrival at the site but accepted the offer and purchased three hundred additional acres. Ground was broken on May 15, 1927, the feast of St. John the Baptist de la Salle. In 1940, the hillside was graced with the addition of "La Cruz de la Victoria", the Cross of Victory, a familiar landmark on the hills above the chapel.

In the 1920's and 1930's Slip Madigan, a visionary raconteur coach, built Saint Mary's into a national college football power. His teams traveled more miles, dressed more flamboyantly, and scored more upsets than any other team, being the first West Coast team to go to Hawaii and the East Coast. The Galloping Gaels outhit, outthought and outplayed major opponents with much larger student bodies, even without its own stadium.



After the Pearl Harbor attack in December of 1941, the war effort siphoned off Saint Mary's student body, and the College offered its facilities to the Navy for a pre-flight training school. To accommodate its recruits, the Navy constructed barracks, a field house, swimming pool, mess hall, rifle range, infirmary, and boxing pavilion, and expanded gas, electrical and sewage capacity and ran a two-mile water main from the East Bay Utilities District Lafayette plant. The Navy departed after the war.



For nearly 30 years (1969-1997) Brother Mel Anderson led Saint Mary's slowly and steadily over the troubled years of the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's! In the 1960's the College had moved away from the Catholic tradition. It was the time of the civil rights movement, activism against the Vietnam War, and Saint Mary's was being sucked into these dramatic changes. Brother Mel was asked to take the presidency of the College starting in 1969, at a time of great societal change when he thought the teachings of the College were becoming too secularized, and it was a time of chaos in higher education.

His tenure brought co-education to the campus. He created improved Schools of Business and Education, and resisted the attraction of extreme change where he thought the College would lose its Catholic identity. Brother Mel turned Saint Mary's into a profitable institution. Accepting women allowed the failing School of Education to be revitalized. Under his leadership the College started the MBA program, initiated the School of Nursing, and created a vocational program (later transferred to the University of Phoenix). He added students, structures, and dormitories, while striving to maintain the spiritual focus of the College (check out **Voices of the Past: 2011 History of SMC Talk by Brother Mel** which has a transcript and photos).

Today Saint Mary's College boasts an enrollment of approximately 4,000 students and ranks in the top 27% of four-year colleges in the nation.

Headstone outside of Moraga's History Center reunited with its owner

By Vera Kochan

Anyone that's walked past the windows of the Moraga History Center, at 1500 St. Mary's Road, for approximately the past 15 years has probably noticed a headstone located at the foot of the redwood trees. The 15-½ inch horizontal x 12 inch vertical x 6-½ inch thick stone reads: "Elisa J. Berry, Native of Detroit, Mich. Died July 31, 1876 Aged 28 yrs. May her soul rest in peace, Amen".

Written details were first given to Moraga Historical Society members in a 2022 First Quarter newsletter article, **"Eliza J. Berry Headstone in Moraga"** written by Research Director Susan Skilton.

Elisa/Eliza passed away in San Francisco from puerperal fever (postpartum infection) after giving birth to a son (Franklin Berry) who is listed as born on July 22, 1876. Sadly, the baby died shortly after his mother's death on Aug. 22 from marasmus (nutrient deficiency or malnutrition).

Elisa was buried in San Francisco's Calvary Cemetery, however, her remains were moved in 1940 when San Francisco began digging up thousands of graves in order to make room for the city's expansion. Many relatives or friends could not pay the hefty fee of approximately $30 ($685 in today's money) for the accompanying headstones to be moved with the remains, so instead the unclaimed headstones were sold for public works purposes. Somehow, Elisa's headstone made it all the way to the Valle Vista subdivision in Moraga and was eventually placed in front of the History Center.

John J. Berry, Elisa's husband, was born in 1841 in Buffalo, New York. He was a bookkeeper before enlisting in San Francisco for the Union Army during the Civil War. Given the circumstances of his death, it would appear that John was away working in Sacramento at the time of Elisa's death as records show he attempted to find her grave.

The San Francisco Examiner, on Nov. 8, 1876, included the following article: "FOLLOWED HER HOME. A heart-broken husband kills himself at his wife's grave. About 3 o'clock, yesterday afternoon, the body of a man with a bullet-hole through his head was found on one of the graves in Calvary Cemetery. The deceased was recognized as a man who, a short time before, had inquired of one of the workmen in the cemetery the place where single interments were made three months ago. He was given the desired information. It appears that after receiving this information he went to a grave on the head-board of which is the name 'Eliza J. Berry', stood over it and shot himself through the forehead with a Smith & Wesson revolver. Near his body was found a Catholic

prayer-book, containing the picture of a young woman. On the fly-leaf of the book is written: 'It is with me insanity or death, and in my weak judgment I prefer the latter. God help my baby and forgive me.' The Coroner was notified, and he took charge of the body. The deceased was identified as John J. Berry, who had been employed in the general freight office of the Central Pacific Railroad. He was 35 years of age. A few months ago, he lost his wife, grieved very much, and yesterday shot himself over her grave."

John was initially buried in San Francisco's Odd Fellows Cemetery before being moved in 1933 to San Francisco National Cemetery (Presidio).

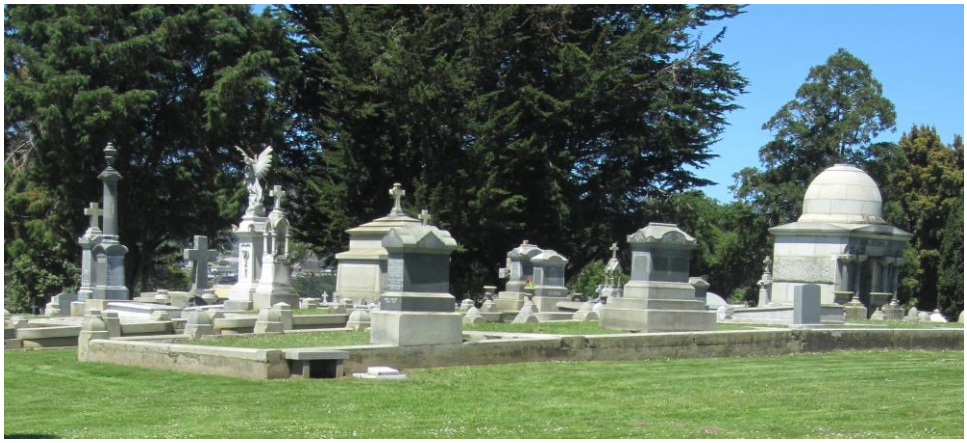
Every time I passed Elisa's headstone lying unclaimed at the History Center, I felt a sadness that wherever she was interred her grave was unmarked, as if she never existed. I had read an October 2023, San Francisco Chronicle article about a book titled, "San Francisco's Forgotten Cemeteries" by Beth Winegarner. Hoping that Winegarner could help me locate Elisa's whereabouts, I emailed her in November of that year, and we hit pay dirt. Through her connections she was able to discover that Holy Cross Cemetery had the remains.

I then contacted Holy Cross, giving them Elisa's Calvary Cemetery burial plot information with the hope that they could use it to cross-reference where she was located today. I was put in touch with Archdiocese of San Francisco, Holy Cross General Manager John Bermudez who, after hearing Elisa's back-story, was more than happy to help. She was indeed buried at Holy Cross in an area that held the remains of Calvary's transfers (all of which had no headstones). Bermudez graciously agreed to accept the long-lost headstone for placement as near to Elisa's grave as was manageable (near a monument about twenty feet away).

On June 5, 2024, MHS President Susan Sperry and myself drove out to Colma with the headstone to meet Winegarner (who wanted to witness the transfer) and Bermudez. His staff expertly cleaned away years of dirt and stains before reverently placing Elisa's headstone into a pre-fabricated cement casing. Both Sperry and myself were so moved by the care and treatment of the solemn event. It was as if she was being buried for the first time. Winegarner even brought flowers from her garden to place alongside the grave.

A few days later, I received an email from Bermudez, "It was a pleasure meeting you and the other ladies last Wednesday. I feel that your actions gave peace to a lot of souls. I thought I would pass on some interesting information regarding Elisa Berry. As you had mentioned to me that Elisa passed while giving birth, and her child passed a few weeks later, I had one of our archivists research the child. We have the following information to report -- the child's name was Franklin S. Berry. Born July 22, 1876. Passed Aug. 22, 1876. He is interred with his mother Elisa. Just thought that you would like to know."

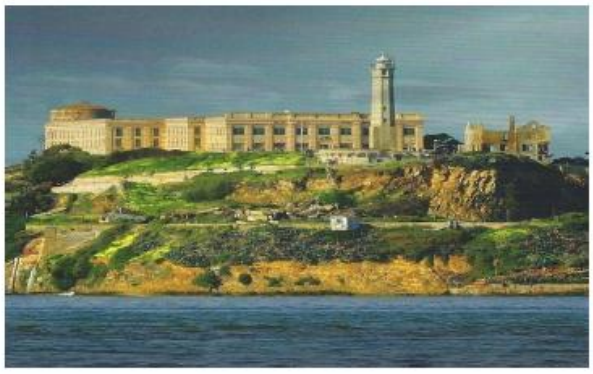
Rest in peace, Elisa.



JOIN THE MORAGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY AS WE PRESENT

DONALD BASTIN, LOCAL AUTHOR AND PRESIDENT OF THE EL SOBRANTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, FOR A FASCINATING DISCUSSION ABOUT ALCATRAZ ISLAND AND SAN FRANCISCO'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE CIVIL WAR.

BASTIN'S EXPERTISE AND SLIDES BRING TO LIFE THE LITTLE-KNOWN STORY OF THE PART OUR BAY AREA PLAYED IN KEEPING CONFEDERATE RAIDERS FROM INFILTRATING LOCAL PORTS, FOR FEAR THAT THEY WOULD ABSCOND WITH CALIFORNIA'S GOLD RUSH WEALTH IN ORDER TO BANKROLL THE SOUTH'S LOSING CAUSE. IT'S A HISTORY LESSON NOT TO BE MISSED!



SUNDAY, AUGUST 17, 2025, 1-3 PM

CASITA AT THE HACIENDA DE LAS FLORES

2100 DONALD DRIVE, MORAGA

RSVP TO RANCHSUSAN@AOL.COM

BY AUGUST 10, 2025

MORAGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERS FREE, GUESTS $5

RESERVATIONS ONLY

NO CHILDREN UNDER 12 YEARS

LIMITED SEATING

MHS Web Site Update

During the past quarter we digitized our Photo Folders for Saint Mary's College and its period as a Navy Pre-Flight Training School. All the scanned photos are now available in our online catalogs. SMC will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2028 and in preparation we would appreciate any old photos donated to our physical archives or loaned to us for scanning and uploading to our online catalog.

In 2011 Ellen Beans of the Moraga Citizens Network interviewed Brother Mel Anderson about the history of SMC. We posted the 35 minute video to our **MHS YouTube channel** a year ago as part of our Voices of the Past program, but are sad to report that it has received only 29 views. Well, we felt that was unacceptable because Brother Mel's talk is very good, plus he was a long time MHS board member until he passed away in 2021. So we secured the transcript from YouTube, edited it into a readable form, broke it up into "chapters" you can click on to watch that part which interests you, and created a dedicated **VOP Brother Mel SMC History** web page.

But we also believe pictures are worth thousands of words, and so we sprinkled the VOP transcript web page with the best photos from our catalog. Please check it out! And if you have better photos, please donate or loan them to us.

MHS May-June Update

If you missed our **MHS May-June Update**, which was sent by email as a pdf, visit our home page. We reported on our successful Third Grade History Tour, Sam Sperry's Train History Speaker Event, and the California Genealogical Society Event featuring Susan Skilton on how to use Lamorinda historical society resources to research the past.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Since our April newsletter the members of the Moraga Historical Society have experienced two informative speakers! Susan Skilton, MHS Research Director and author of ***Images of America: Moraga***, coordinated with the California Genealogical Society to present "Unlock the Past in Lamorinda: Strategies for History and Genealogy Research." Susan discussed how to uncover the rich history of our Lamorinda community and trace the roots of early settlers using resources such as local archives, libraries, historical societies, and online databases.

Back by popular demand MHS member Sam Sperry traced the history of the Oakland, Antioch & Eastern Railway's route between Oakland to Sacramento.

Donald Bastin, local author and president of the El Sobrante Historical Society, will discuss Alcatraz Island and San Francisco's involvement in the Civil War on August 17, 2025 (see attached flier).

As usual, the Moraga Historical Society will have a booth at the 4th of July celebration in the Commons. This is a good time to check out our wares, informational materials or buy a throw for a holiday gift!

Members are free at all these presentations, guests $5. Yearly dues can be paid now, $20 single membership and $30 family.

Check out our fantastic website, moragahistory.org, for full details or contact Susan Sperry at ranchsusan@aol.com.

Susan Sperry, President

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