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STUDENT LIFE
AT
SANTA CLARA COLLEGE
IN 1875/

By
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Presumably the Protestant was Fred V. Ashley, who at 24, passed away on February 24, 1882. A native of Missouri and never married, Ashley had been employed as a compositor for the San Jose Daily Mercury, a skill he could have easily acquired at Santa Clara. He died after suffering several months from hemorrhaging of the lungs.

The student uprising incident was still not forgotten 33 years later, when, in 1908, an anonymous priest incorporated it into the Jesuit magazine's obituary of Fr. Coltellì. The description concluded that, "as always the case, in the ways of God, good came of it; all who had taken part in the outbreak repented afterwards of their youthful folly."²⁷

In the 1960s, youthful folly resulted in student dismissals probably more controversial than those of nearly a century before. The memory of the activities of the 1870s is now little more than a faded dream kept alive through the documents of the time: the Prefect's Log, minute books, The Owl, and local newspapers. The simple facts these sources provide present a picture of a time of student uprising and change, a time not unlike our own recent past.

Founded on the Santa Clara Mission site on March 19, 1851, Santa Clara College was the first institution of higher learning established in California. It was similar to other schools of the nineteenth century in several respects, among them: courses offered, size and discipline. What made Santa Clara unique was her isolation: from the neighboring towns as well as the rest of the country. Students revolted to this isolation and in 1875 nineteen of them were expelled for their actions which will be examined here.

In 1875 Santa Clara College boasted an enrollment of about 275 boys (although named in honor of a woman, the University of Santa Clara did not become co-educational until 1962). They were enrolled in various programs from the elementary level on up; only a third of them had reached the college level.¹ A century later about 4,000 students attended the University, nearly half of them women.

A promotional pamphlet for the Santa Clara Valley produced in 1873 described Santa Clara College as occupying "a number of elegant buildings, in an enclosure of some twelve acres, in the heart of the beautiful town of Santa Clara." It added that Santa Clara was "known throughout the coast as a first-class educational institution."²

The general background of the students can be hypothesized by examining the documents available in the University's archives. The majority were most likely middle and upper-class whites, and there were some Mexican students. From Salt Lake

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City, Virginia, Oregon and San Francisco, the Catholics and Protestants alike came to receive the Catholic education offered at Santa Clara.

Because the Jesuits hoped that confinement would "promote moral growth by shielding the young from the world's corrupting influences,"³ they separated the boarding students from the surrounding communities. Even those whose parents lived close by were only allowed to visit home one day per month and had to return prior to sunset.

Despite its relative isolation, Santa Clara College proved itself fertile educational ground for a number of famous Californians. Thomas I. Bergin, who became the first to receive a college degree in the state of California in 1857, became a well known lawyer in San Francisco. Peter Burnett, the first governor of the state of California, sent his two sons to Santa Clara, and the older one, John, became the second graduate in 1858. Stephen M. White, an 1871 graduate who served as the first native Californian United States Senator, was perhaps best known for his role in the political battle over whether Los Angeles' harbor should be located at Santa Monica or San Pedro. White won out over Collis P. Huntington of "Big Four" railroad monopoly fame, and helped establish the harbor at San Pedro. Considering Santa Clara's small size, the number of successful men she helped to educate is impressive.

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By the 1870s, the college had become largely self-sufficient, furthering its isolation. Within its walls could be found a bakery, tailor's shop, vineyards, water works, shoemaker's shop, machine shop, infirmary, laundry, printing office and chapel as well as classrooms and dormitories.

Santa Clara College's curriculum covered many areas. Among other things, courses were offered in English, theology, mathematics, philosophy, chemistry, dancing, drawing, music, foreign languages and military drill. Practical courses in telegraphy, photography, surveying and printing were also part of the curriculum. In addition to classroom instruction, students were required to assemble in the chapel daily, each in his assigned place, for religious obligations which included morning and evening prayers.

Student schedules were tightly structured, with only Thursdays and Sundays off. Hiking and picnicking were the main events when the weather permitted, and even these activities were carefully chaperoned. Holiday activities were further restricted by the recommendation that parents allow their children only 25 cents per week spending money. Sports like handball and baseball, as well as hunting and fishing, were popular.

A playground was provided for the elementary students. It contained a separate section for the day students, thereby decreasing contact between on-campus students and those who lived at home.

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Even the correspondence from students to their parents and friends was subject to inspection by the college president. A regulation passed by the administration warned the day students that they were forbidden to take papers, books, or messages of any kind from the boarders. Nor were they allowed to deliver such items to fellow students. This ultimatum proved difficult to enforce in spite of the fact that the elementary day students not only had to play in their own section of the yard, but, following their dismissal at five o'clock each evening, they were also not permitted to play with the boarders.

College students were permitted more freedom in their activities than their younger companions. At nineteen, they were allowed to spend their Thursdays "calling on girl friends in San Jose at the local women's colleges."⁴

While studying on the campus, students of 1875 could enjoy several new buildings for which Fr. Aloysius Varsi was largely responsible. Varsi served as President of Santa Clara College from 1868 until 1876, and during his tenure the College Hall and senior dormitory were constructed. In addition, the theatre, which came to be known as "The Ship," opened its doors in 1875. The name originated from its unique construction: its 80 huge beams were held in place by dovetailing and wooden pegs instead of nails. Varsi contended that this flexibility would enable "The Ship" to ride out the occasional earthquake storms.

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The landmark for which Santa Clara was best known was the old Mission Church, built in 1825. Within the quadrangle bordered on the north by the Mission Church could be found the productive "Father's Garden." In 1875 one student described it as "especially beautiful this season, with its evergreen trees and fresh lawns, its bright flower beds, and overhanging vines; and its aspect is much enlivened by the numerous caged birds which line the paths and carol unceasingly from sun-rise until sun-set."⁵

For the entire student population, which had leveled off at about 300 in the 1870s, there were only 25 teachers, most of whom were Jesuits. Even though Santa Clara had earlier claimed "the largest number of professors and tutors connected with any institution on the Pacific Coast,"⁶ the student-faculty ratio of eleven-to-one (and the students' behavior) necessitated strong disciplinary rules. Every year was inaugurated with a reading of the "Regulations for Students" to the entire assembled student body, and the rules were then posted for all to read.⁷

Although there was a small staff to perform such non-academic tasks as cooking, laundry and the like, professors were responsible for prefecting the dormitories in addition to teaching. Fr. Varsi urged the prefects to keep alert for possible disturbances, so that "the evil may be nipped in the bud." Veteran faculty members informed their new colleagues that this task could be accomplished only by the "foreseeing

and preventing of trouble" before it got out of hand.⁸

As early as 1856 punishments were introduced for particular misdeeds. The assignment of lines to be committed to memory or to writing was the most common penalty, and it soon became known as "Letter A," corresponding to the letter inscribed above the door of the room in which the lines were administered. Many a student thought twice about breaking the rules again after serving his punishment of Letter A. The verses committed to memory or to paper were not popular ones; the priests seemed to be experts at selecting pieces that the students had never seen before.

In the 1850s the dormitories had proved to be convenient for the institution because they were instrumental in accomplishing the educational goal of developing the "whole man." But in the boarders' opinion, the isolation which kept them on campus was perhaps the least reasonable of regulations. They were physically isolated from the outside world by a ten-foot high wooden fence which encircled the campus. At night students were kept in (and prowlers out) by the employment of a watchman and dogs.⁹

Nonetheless, by the 1870s, the boarding facilities had become an annoyance to the Jesuits because the monumental task of prefecting the dorms seemed to devour the faculty's precious time, while at the same time, "traditional discipline had become increasingly difficult to enforce."¹⁰

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The rules became stricter in the 1850s, and according to the regulation handbook, expulsion became the penalty for causing general disturbances in the dormitories, as well as for drunkenness and overnight absences without the permission of the president. The new plan of 1875 dictated that when a student had accumulated 1000 lines against his name for bad behavior, he was automatically subject to expulsion, but it later proved unsatisfactory because of the difficulty in maintaining accurate records. Exempted from the tally were lines for smoking and such other minor offenses.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) the tight disciplinary rules enforced at the college, students soon developed favorite acts of defiance. One rebellious activity in which Santa Clarans often engaged was climbing the fence which bordered the school, and escaping to hide-out places where they smoked. There were also times when students would pretend to be ill, get admitted to the infirmary and disturb the quiet routine common to an infirmary until it was discovered that they were not really ill.

In order to relieve some of the boredom of isolation, the college provided organizations, encouraging all students to participate. Many students became members of various societies like the Philalethic Literary Society, the Senior Dramatic Society and the baseball clubs. Among the more active students was Henry Hughes, who served as censor for the Literary Society, secretary of the Dramatic Society and treasurer for the Original Baseball Club. In 1875, William

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Gray was re-elected for the position of vice president of the Literary Society.

The literary and debating societies were the most important components of the extra-curricular program at Santa Clara because in the nineteenth century a poised manner and the ability to speak and write correctly and effectively were the marks of an educated person. The Philalethic Literary Society, supervised in 1875 by Henry Dance, who taught English, Latin and Greek, had strict rules. According to the student minute book of the Literary Society of 1874 to 1887, students were fined 25 cents (most students' entire weekly allowance) if they failed to participate in the discussion of the previous week's meeting, even if the reason for non-participation was absence from the meeting.

Each Wednesday evening, a new debate topic was introduced and the members of the Literary Society were assigned either the affirmative or negative side of such "controversies" as "Resolved, that literature has a more polishing effect on people than art;" "Resolved, that early marriages are conducive to the well being of society;" or, "Resolved, that childhood is the happiest time of life."¹¹ The results of these contests were not included in the minutes.

Drama was also important, especially once the theatre was completed, providing a suitable location for the development of acting talents. Religious and historical themes were popular in the plays produced, and Shakespeare's plays were also performed. Important to the students was the fact that,

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as well as professional plays, their own one-act plays and dialogues were produced on the stage of "The Ship."

Reading was another popular pasttime, and James Kearney, student librarian for the Philalethic Literary Society, maintained careful records for 1875 of the books checked out and returned. The boys eagerly devoured titles still recognized as great works. Among them were Washington Irving's The Alhambra, and Charles Dickens' Great Expectations and David Copperfield. Magazines of the day which have long since been forgotten provided a view of the outside world. The library subscribed to such publications as Chamber's Edinburgh Journal and Cornhill Magazine which published authors like Charlotte Brontë.¹²

The students not only read magazines, they produced one themselves. The Owl, founded in 1869 as a monthly, was the first literary publication west of the Mississippi. At first it was printed by Bosque and H.H. Bancroft in San Francisco, but soon the students began printing it themselves, on the college press. The Owl described itself as "a magazine devoted to mental improvement,"¹³ and students contributed most of the material published. Each issue contained two or three prose pieces, often on such religious or philosophical topics as "Freedom: What is it?" and Henry Hughes' "Monks and Monasticism," and poems like "Leo and Attila" and "A Dream," written in traditional styles. There was also an "Owlet's Corner" which printed submissions of high school

students of Santa Clara, like Johnnie Smith's "The Tail of the Ape and the Ant." The "Editor's Table" and miscellaneous items under "Idle Notes" rounded out each issue. Among his other responsibilities at school in 1875, the already-mentioned William Gray served on the student board of The Owl.

The title for the publication was not derived from the bird of wisdom, but because some students, upon leaving the classroom late one evening, decided, "We're owls, conning our books of lore in the night," and decided to name their magazine after the owls inhabiting the neighborhood.¹⁴

Although The Owl was under close faculty supervision, the students established their own standards. The 1874-75 editors stressed to their fellow students that The Owl was their magazine and their property, necessitating a concern for good management.¹⁵ They were so concerned about who should serve as editors for the following year, in fact, that, instead of turning over production to the new seniors, these recent graduates put out the September issue themselves, in which they explained their dilemma:

There is this year quite a respectable number of students who are competent to manage The Owl, it is therefore extremely uncertain who the new editors may be; and it may be well to remind the members of the Owl Association that they should lay aside all feelings of partiality and vote for those only whom they think fully competent and likely to attend conscientiously to their respective duties.¹⁶

Unfortunately, no selection of editors for 1875-76 was ever made because the administration decided at their September

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12 meeting that The Owl was no longer serving any useful purpose and should be discontinued for three reasons: 1) the director, Professor Henry Dance, a layman, wished to be removed from that post (and the College Treasurer wished the same thing, probably because Dance demanded more money for continuing as advisor); 2) the printer was quitting and there was not yet anyone to replace him; and 3) the students did not seem to care about the publication.

Only one professor present at the meeting, Fr. Pinasco, argued in favor of the magazine, not only for its advantages as a learning tool for students, but also because he believed that other schools would criticize Santa Clara for discontinuing it. But his words proved insufficient against those of Vice President Caredda, S.J. Two other instructors, one of whom had no opinion in the matter, voted for discontinuation along with Fr. Caredda.¹⁷

In the October issue The Owl folded its wings, and it was to sleep undisturbed for the next 56 years. In December 1931 The Owl was revived as a literary supplement to the student newspaper by James Pike, who later became an Episcopal Bishop.¹⁸

In their final issue the students, probably counseled by their faculty advisor, merely advised their readers of their "death" without explanation:

We shall surprise many--nay, probably all, of our readers by this announcement; for singular as it may seem, the death which we have to announce is no other than our own. We are in the best of health and vigor

at this moment: we were never, in short, better, and yet we here and now--almost as much to our surprise as to that of any one else--look death deliberately in the face. ... Details as to the why and how of our sudden demise, have more interest for our immediate friends within the college walls, than for those outside them.¹⁹

They were careful to stress the "The Owl has not been a failure in a pecuniary sense any more than in a literary one."²⁰ Proof that finances were not a consideration in the decision is found in their statements that after the payment of their debts, the students calculated that they would have "between three and four hundred dollars of surplus gold left wherewith to erect our tombstone, which is to take the form of an 'Owl' prize annually for ever."²¹

The faculty attempted to provide activities to minimize the boredom, and even after The Owl ceased publication, numerous other activities continued to be offered to students. However, "the fact remains, when all is said and done, that a student at the College found himself confined and restricted in his movements."²² This boredom, primarily produced by confinement, helped promote a series of student uprisings which first surfaced on September 19, 1875.

September 19 appeared a normal Sunday. The students had spent the day studying and attending mandatory religious services. But in the dining hall that evening, a vigorous food fight broke out. The students did not hesitate to employ pancakes, hard rolls or whatever else they could find to use as weapons. Soon the walls, the ceiling and the boys themselves were covered with food.

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Food fights often resulted when the lights failed in the dining hall, and this particular instance of student defiance of authority also appeared spontaneous, but it could have been planned by a few of the senior students for reasons which still remain a mystery. Regardless, the outburst proved to be the initial outpouring of student emotion that continued for a good portion of the semester.

President Varsi admitted that he had sensed the uneasiness of the fall of 1875 in a newspaper interview printed in the spring of 1876, which quoted him as saying that "the senior boarders began to show 'signs of insubordination' shortly after returning from summer vacation."²³

Other schools across the country were not immune to student riots similar to the ones that plagued the Santa Clara campus in 1875. At Santa Clara, the student uprisings abruptly halted with the most significant riot on October 26, 1875, when several students were expelled for misconduct.

The plan was executed in the First Division (Senior) dormitory on Tuesday night, October 26. Minute details of the event were never recorded, but while prefecting the dorm, Fathers Francis Veyret and Angelo Coltelli were quickly and quietly attacked by the mischievous students who then proceeded to tie the Jesuits to their beds. After binding the priests securely, the students climbed out the windows to freedom. Unaccustomed to American school children, the 25-year-old Italian seminarian, Coltelli, and the older French priest, Veyret, were horrified by their circumstances. Although

later released, the prefects "suffered for a long time from the effects of that trying ordeal."²⁴ Whether their suffering took physical or mental forms is never made clear.

The Prefect's Log, written in Latin, recorded the names of those expelled for the incident. With such a small enrollment, in most instances only last names were used: William Gray, identified as the (would-be) leader; Ashley, M. Donahue, Hereford, Henry Hughes, James Kearney, Fredani Moore, Plane and Will Sears. Robert Enright and Gray's brother, George, also left, but were not expelled. The librarian's records simply state the the students "Left school," except James Kearney, who "Left school in disgust," but as student librarian, he could have easily penned the entry himself. This example of expulsion was apparently effective because Fr. Varsi recalled the next spring that "Never have the students conducted themselves as well as they do now,"²⁵ and it is elsewhere recorded that "the remainder of the year passed in peace and quiet."²⁶

Two of the student expelled for the October 26 mishap passed away a few years later. Apparently they were aware that death was quickly approaching because before they died, the two asked the priests for forgiveness for their foolish childhood deed. When he learned that a former student was dying, Fr. Veyret came to the side of an unnamed Protestant who, "amidst tears of sincere sorrow" confessed and asked for forgiveness. The other ex-student, a Catholic, did the same, and was attended by another priest from the college.

FOOTNOTES

¹Gerald L. McKevitt, S.J., The History of Santa Clara College (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Xerox University Microfilms, 1975), p. 165.

²J.J. Owen, Santa Clara Valley (San Jose: Mercury Steam Print, 1873), p. 6.

³McKevitt, p. 139.

⁴McKevitt, p. 146.

⁵The Owl, September 1875, p. 36.

⁶The Owl, April 1871.

⁷McKevitt, p. 138.

⁸McKevitt, p. 149.

⁹McKevitt, pp. 138-139.

¹⁰McKevitt, p. 335.

¹¹"Minute Book of the Philalethic Literary Society," Handwritten MS, pp. 46, 60, 61.

¹²Some issues of the publications are preserved in the periodical section of the University's Orradre Library.

¹³The Owl, December 1869.

¹⁴Owls are still observed on the campus occasionally.

¹⁵The Owl, September 1875, p. 35.

¹⁶The Owl, September 1875, p. 35.

¹⁷"Liber Consultationum Domesticarum," Handwritten MS, entry for September 12, 1875, n.p.

¹⁸Linda S. Larson, "Who is the Owl?" The Owl, Spring 1976, p. 33.

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¹⁹The Owl, October 1875, p. 68.

²⁰The Owl, October 1875, p. 69.

²¹The Owl, October 1875, p. 69. However unlikely, it is possible that The Owl prizes still annually awarded are funded from this source, as indicated in Fr. Edward Shipsey's assessment of The Owl, "Facts regarding The Owl prepared at the request of Rev. Fr. President, May 10, 1953," MS, Archives of the University of Santa Clara.

²²McKevitt, pp. 186-187 and Linda S. Larson, "Who is the Owl?" The Owl Spring 1976, p. 31.

²³McKevitt, pp. 147-148.

²⁴McKevitt, p. 150.

²⁵"Fr. Angelo Coltelli," Woodstock Letters, XXXVII (1908), 109.

²⁶Woodstock Letters, p. 109.

²⁷McKevitt, p. 151.

²⁸Woodstock Letters, p. 109.

²⁹The above account of the student deaths is condensed from Woodstock Letters, p. 109.

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