

1906: New tradition for education begins at St. Joseph

This column continues the story of St. Joseph College.

In 1905, Father Constantineau of the Oblate Fathers in the area conferred with Brother Michaelis of the Marist Brothers, and the Marists agreed to take over direction St. Joseph College in 1906. This decision may have been motivated because Brownsville and the surrounding area, now accessible to the rest of the country by railroad, was showing good prospects for growth and progress. The first Marists to arrive in Brownsville were two Frenchman and one Spaniard, Brothers Anthony, Paul and Fumeaux. These three served as the faculty during the first year of Marist responsibility, marking the beginning of a new tradition in education at St. Joseph.

St. Joseph continued to be located on East Elizabeth Street for another 53 years. During these years, under Marist responsibility, the school saw steady progress, with an increasing enrollment, an upgraded curriculum, additional student activities and improved physical facilities.

The early years, however, were not easy for the Marists. The school facilities were in poor condition, and the brothers initially slept on cots and had to get along without some of the necessities of life.

In 1906, the enrollment was 35 students, with tuition, according to one historical account, of 75 cents per month, paid in Mexican money. Financial support continued to be provided by the Oblates, and the Marist brothers themselves undertook projects in an effort to supplement their meager income. They established a vegetable garden, planted peach trees and acquired some chickens. They ate some of this food and sold eggs to help cover their expenses.

Brother Paul, the youngest of the three brothers, served as cook. Their meager income did not permit them to hire a cook or other domestic help. A fire was started in the cook stove before classes began, and, at recess time, Brother Paul would hurry to put the noon meal on the stove to cook. He later recalled that, after several months of this type of cooking, arrangements were made with a café to provide the noon meal.

Brother Paul never spoke of hardships, but life was difficult in those early days. Brownsville was without electric service and running water until 1908, so for the first two years the brothers lived without those utilities. Their living quarters were difficult to keep warm during cold weather.

The brothers and the students led a frugal life, but did enjoy some pleasant times with various forms of entertainment. Chicken races were held on the school grounds, with the students noisily expressing loyalty for their favorite chickens.

Brother Paul remained at St. Joseph for 35 years. However, as a citizen of France, he was required under French law to serve six years in the military of his country. During those years, he was away from St. Joseph, and then he returned after meeting his military obligation. Brother Paul and another Marist, Brother Henry, served as supervisors of the school for many years, until they finally retired at a home for brothers in Mexico.

The school became a haven for a group of Oblate brothers from Mexico in 1914 — and again in 1936. During these periods, the brothers were forced to leave Mexico because of persecution of the Catholic Church.

Conditions slowly improved after the first few years, and the 1920s were good years for Brownsville and for St. Joseph. Many new businesses were established in the community, and the population grew from 11,791 to 20,021. During that decade, St. Joseph made progress by upgrading its physical facilities and offered improved academic opportunities for the students.

The year 1920 saw construction of a second building on the downtown campus, containing six classrooms and the office of the school director. At about that same time, the school began providing room and board on campus for students who needed these facilities.

This story will be continued next week.

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