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A haunting tour of Saint Mary's College

By Vera Kochan



Various orbs captured inside the SMC Chapel. (marked with red circles) Photo Vera Kochan

It should come as no surprise that Moraga's Saint Mary's College would have its share of things that go bump in the night. Relocated from Oakland in 1928, its nearly 100-year history practically begs for a few ghost stories during the month of October.

Brother Michael Meister, a theology professor, is the resident campus ghost expert. Having been associated with the college for 39 years, he had many a tale to tell during a recent private evening ghost tour around campus.

In past years, Meister gave daytime tours to SMC's journalism classes. His spooky tales became so well known that he decided to take a break from them for a few years, until he was cajoled out of retirement for the private tour.

According to Meister, the first story began near the art museum. Brother Kyran Aviani, an avid painter, was killed in a car accident in the 1960s by an intoxicated California Highway Patrol officer driving on the wrong side of the road. On the anniversary of his death, many of his paintings that typically hung throughout campus were put on display at the art museum. The next day, 15 of them reappeared in their original locations and only the campus Brothers knew those locations of origin.

The Le Fevre Theatre's ghost story has its roots in the 1950s when a production of a Thornton Wilder play called for the casting of a young girl in one of the parts. An aspiring child actress named Amelia was driven to SMC to take part in the play. On a foggy winter's opening night her parents lost control of their car killing the occupants. Amelia continues to take curtain calls with her poltergeist antics of turning lights on and off, moving props, changing sound or lighting levels and eliciting giggles.

In 1989, during an evening Mass in the chapel, a priest was speaking about the beheading of John the Baptist. Quite suddenly the Loma Prieta earthquake began to shake the foundation as stunned churchgoers witnessed only the head of the statue of John the Baptist above the altar break off and roll across the sanctuary and down the altar steps. It is not known what scared the churchgoers more: the earthquake or the graphic beheading reenactment.

Behind Assumption Hall's parking lot is a very deep ravine that once contained Lake La Salle, Meister said. The water was so dark that only koi seemed to enjoy its murky depths. In the 1950s, three football players decided to take a small rowboat into the lake for an evening of skinny dipping. Only two boys made it back to the boat, all the while calling for the third with no reply. Police divers were never able to recover the body. Years later, a small sewage pump associated with the lake became jammed. The story goes that when a repair crew was called they discovered a decomposed arm wearing a class ring belonging to the missing football player.

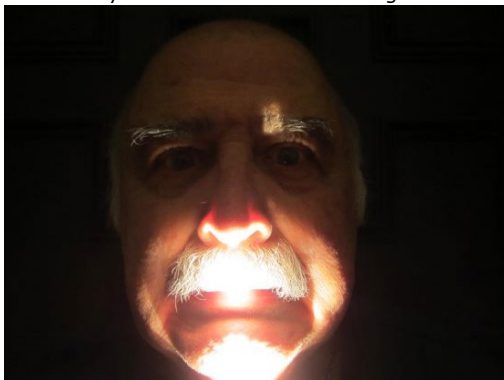
Oftentimes, Meister says, the organ in the chapel would play for no apparent reason for exactly 60 minutes. The chapel doors are always locked when this happens.

The main arcade in front of the church is known to have many catacombs running underneath it and throughout the campus. Today they house much of SMC's electrical circuitry. Decades ago, Meister said, an escaped murderer from Martinez's county jail made his way to the campus. Giving the sheriffs a merry chase he became cornered among the live electrical wiring and accidentally backed into it, thereby saving the taxpayers the cost of a trial and execution.

Before the catacombs contained most of the electrical workings for the campus, Meister said SMC used them to bury deceased brothers. Evening maintenance workers would often report glowing lights appearing in the tunnels near the underground cemetery. It wasn't until the remains were moved to a cemetery in Napa that the mysterious lights stopped.

In early years, fraternities often used the catacombs for pranks. A few students went into the depths not realizing the extent of the maze of tunnels. All but one made it out. By the time authorities had found him, said Meister, he was incoherent and clinically insane.

There are so many more stories to tell, but not enough space to tell them all. It is with tongue-in-cheek that Meister informed this reporter that all of the legends are false, but one. It is up to the reader to decide which story is true. Meister - and the ghosts - aren't telling. Trick or treat!



Brother Michael Meister, Master of the Macabre Photo Vera Kochan

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