

September 1926

Just imagine being a thirteen-year-old adventurer leaving the first floor of a six-tenement apartment, the only home heâ€™d ever known, to go on his first trip ever in a car, his uncleâ€™s Ford. This was the first time I left quiet Southbridge, although Tyngsboro was no large city. In fact it, at the time, was a small picturesque town on the banks of the Merrimack River. Tyngsboro came from an Indian name, adopted by settlers who came to the shores of the Merrimack River looking for work and a livelihood.

We arrived at the house of the Marist Brothers in Tyngsboro, which was up on a hill off the main road and called St. Joseph's Juniorate. It was impressive. The first Marists who came to teach in America came from Canada to Lewiston, Maine, in 1886. They came to provide good teachers for the many hardworking people who came to settle in New England; they would all need good teachers for their children. From Lewiston, the Brothers were requested to come to teach in Lowell, Massachusetts, then also in Manchester, New Hampshire; Lawrence, Massachusetts; and Haverhill, Massachusetts. With Brothers in all these places in New England, it became important to have a local training house for new local candidates who would want to join the congregation. A farm coming up for sale in Tyngsboro was an answer to a prayer, and the Marists built their first training center here in 1924. The estate of the Tyng family had a beautiful mansion on a choice spot on the side of a hill that was easily made into an ideal training center for young candidates.

"Welcome, Leonard," was the voice heard as Bro. Frederick Charles came down the majestic stone stairway in front of the three-story building called St. Joseph's Juniorate. The place had opened just two years before my arrival and was now ready for full occupancy for as many candidates as wanted want to come. The Tyng Mansion was kept as a summerhouse, whereas we were in the new house with all the needed facilities. There was a community of some fifteen Brothers and places for 125 young candidates, most of whom were all from the French-Canadian cities of the area. There were fine buildings for the horses, cows, and pigs, along with a huge chicken house. There were barns with two silos and a tremendous greenhouse filled with flowers. All of these facilities surrounded the Tyng Mansion. Behind the new Juniorate were over 200 acres of wonderful land with playing areas, garages, and a variety of trees and bushes. At the foot of the hill adjacent to the huge circle at the entrance was a small house that served as residence for the community chaplain. And next to it were the playing fields for various sports.

Sections of the property were used for vegetable gardens, cornfields, and the fascinating flower-filled greenhouse. There were paths all through woods that came to a small lake that served as a skating rink in the winter. Further into the woods was a huge granite quarry that had been mined until it filled with water and was now our swimming pool, with plenty of fresh water and many good places to dive from. The woods were filled with all sorts of berries and majestic trees of all kinds. It was an impressive place to live, especially when compared to the small tenement I had come from with very little space to play. Everything was big, starting with the community of Brothers and the 125 Juniors, as we were then called. We were to complete our prep school here and then move on to the Novitiate.

Right now we had to get used to many new faces and names all at once. I cherished Bro. Frederick Charles who had come to speak, and I was also impressed by our Master of Juniors, Bro. Edmund Alphonse, who had a pair of unique eyeglasses that would fit on his nose without any connection with his ears. They were called a pince-nez, and I always feared that they would fall when Brother moved his head from side to side, but they never did. He impressed me.

We all lived together in that great house except the chaplain, who had his own house, and a little old layman who did the cooking for us. This was really a gigantic family. The Brothers did everything: they taught our classes, mended our clothes, took care of the cleanliness of the house, taught us musical instruments, took care of the singing choir, and had parties and games organized for us during recreations. It was a healthy life in the country. It was not so much a school but a home where everything was right there for you, and all you had to do was to follow the schedule prepared for all. It was a real family even if it was a huge one.

On the first day there before Mother left, we went to the chapel to thank the Lord for having accepted her first-born and to ask for a safe ride back to Southbridge. I was to be in Tyngsboro for a full year, until June. The parents were welcome on visiting Sunday once a month. Thanks to Mother I was off to a good start.

She returned the following month and was anxious to know how her son had made out. It was then that she met my greatest friend, Athanase Cote, who was from Manchester, New Hampshire. Athanase had just lost his mother, and so mine was happy to get to know him and actually wanted to "adopt" him; and always thereafter asked to see Athanase when she came to visit me. She came alone with Uncle Wally, and Dad had stayed at home. He still did not encourage me in the life I chose. Mother, however, assured him that his son was very happy in his new life and that she felt sure I would make out well not only in my studies but also in the future. It began to seem like the whole idea was working out and that I really had a calling. Dad finally accompanied Mother on her fourth visit. Although he said very little as usual, he seemed to be happy to know that his son fit in so well with the rest of the students.

This was a new experience living in such a large family with such caring individuals. The Brother Prefect was with us most of the time and slept in his own room in our large dormitory. All the other Brothers were our teachers and workers. Each one was in charge of one of our activities, and we soon got to know each Brother and respected each for his capacity in his field. Saturday was our work day: there was the house to clean, the floors to polish, laundry to be attended to, and all the various jobs a community of that size required. There was always plenty to do, and it was great to learn to manage a new job. Some worked in the gardens, some in the barn, and everyone had a specific task to do, and each one felt that he was part of the family spirit. We visited the Brothers in Lowell and Lawrence or they visited us, always bringing some little goodies for the Juniors.

I recall when we had a visit from the Superior General of the Marist family, who came to meet all of us. He was Brother Diogene and had come to visit our summer camp at Isle LaMotte in New Hampshire and talk to us. He was like the grandfather of this whole family all over the world. It was quite impressive and we all loved him from the very start.

I learned about that time that Athanase's brother, Bro. Philip John in Poughkeepsie, and his two cousins, Bro. Leo Sylvius and Bro. Paul Emile, were also Marist Brothers. Besides that, his uncle was our Brother Aloysius who was an expert carpenter and was the one who had built our beautiful chapel where we prayed daily. I was always close to the Cote family in the many years that followed.

In the winters we skated directly from our shoe room to the skating rink. The Brothers prepared a path in the snow with water, which froze into a solid block so that we could put on our skates and skate directly to the rink. We were even able to skate on the Merrimack River all the way to Lowell, six miles away, and visit our Brothers there. I also enjoyed the many visits of our Marist Brothers from the various schools. They would always come to join us in our various celebrations. We enjoyed the warmth of the real Marist family spirit.

On Feb. 27, 1927, three of us were sent to the hospital in Lowell to be operated on for appendicitis. In those days it was a much more serious operation than it is nowadays. We had to be in the hospital for a full week. I remember that, since they had no ward for younger Brothers, we were placed in the ward with all the men; that made us feel important. I did not mind having the operation. In fact, when the nurse asked who would be the first for the operation, I volunteered and did not regret it. I was awake from the ether when they brought in Athanase who was recovering next to me, and I listened to what he had to say as he was still under the influence of the ether. He was talking to some of the angels in his sleep and did not realize that the "angels" were really the nurses attending him. I teased him for a long time after we returned to Tyngsboro.

Our motto was Prayer and Work and it was drummed into us how important this would be for us in the years ahead. We were family and had to do everything together. We prepared for special Feast days or Jubilees, remembered each one's birthday, and lived as a very close family. The three words most often heard jointly were work, prayer, and together. We visited our sick in the infirmary, prepared the house for the visitors on the visiting Sundays, and took pride in keeping the place spic and span. It was our home.

Little did I realize that 50 years later I would be appointed the Director of the Tyngsboro community with the specific task of finding a buyer for the place and procuring smaller quarters for our retired Brothers. There were no longer Juniors coming to live there, and it had become a rest home for the elderly. The large facility was just too much work for some twelve remaining Marist Brothers to take care of. We had no need for a 200-acre farm and a house that could accommodate 125 or more students. We were fortunate enough to be able to sell the place to the Wang Institute for the technical computer work that made it famous. It became a computer school and was later given over to Boston University to be used as a branch of its computer college.

With the school year and classes coming to an end, it was time to take action and to move the Tyngsboro graduates to the next step into their training. We prepared to move to the high school of the Marist Brothers in Poughkeepsie, New York.