

# HISTORY OF THE CATALINA ISLAND SCHOOL, TOYON BAY, 1928–1943

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**ABSTRACT**—Well before most existing educational institutions had been established on the Channel Islands, Toyon Bay on Santa Catalina Island was the home of the prestigious Catalina Island School for Boys (CISB). This exclusive preparatory school was established with the help of the Wrigley family, and its board of directors included members from many prominent California families. Graduates from CISB's academic program attended Harvard, Yale, Stanford and other prestigious universities. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and America's entry into World War II, the school relocated temporarily to the mainland and then closed.

*Keywords: Catalina Island School, Keith Vosburg, Santa Catalina Island, Toyon Bay*

## INTRODUCTION

In the late 1920s educator Keith Vosburg had a vision to establish a boarding school for grades 7–12 that combined the character-building aspects of the Boy Scout program with a high quality classical education like those offered by the best British schools such as Eton and Rugby. He located it on Santa Catalina Island (hereafter Catalina) where he felt the students would be removed from the bright lights and distractions of the city and be surrounded by the outdoors. By keeping the students active, they would not reflect on the social isolation and instead would take advantage of the island setting (Anonymous 1966).

Vosburg was well educated with B.A. degrees from both the University of California and Oxford, as well as an M.A. from Harvard. He originally hoped to earn a Ph.D. in history and teach at the University of California, but his plans were interrupted with the outbreak of World War I (Anonymous 1966). Prior to U.S. involvement, Vosburg served with American Ambulance in France and enlisted in the U.S. Army when America entered the war (Anonymous 1966).

During his graduate education Vosburg taught college students. Following the War he became the scoutmaster of a Los Angeles area Boy Scout troop. It was here he discovered that he preferred working with boys in their formative years more than those in college, and formulated his vision for

the school. His focus on Santa Catalina Island as the new school's location required contacting William Wrigley Jr., founder of the Chicago-based chewing gum company and head of the Santa Catalina Island Company (SCICo), which owned most of the island at the time.

Vosburg and architect Robert Johnson visited Catalina in 1927 and chose Toyon Bay as the desired site for the school. He contacted classmate James Gibson, a lawyer with the prestigious firm Gibson, Dunn and Crutcher which represented Mr. Wrigley in Los Angeles. A meeting was arranged with Mr. Wrigley and included prominent Los Angeles residents Morgan Adams, Stuart O'Melveny, James Page, Lyman McFie and Gerald Young. The school was given a 50-year lease. Those in attendance all became board members of the newly formed Catalina Island School for Boys (CISB) and contributed toward the \$100,000 start-up costs, with additional donations coming from William Kerckhoff, William Keck, Allan Balch and others.

There were few existing facilities available at Toyon Bay. During the Banning ownership of the island (1892–1919), the school site became known as Banning's Beach since the family used it for picnics. The earliest recorded use was as Camp Banning, a camp for reform school boys and girls operated by the Whittier State School from 1902 until they relocated to neighboring Gallagher's Cove in 1912. In 1912 it was reportedly used by

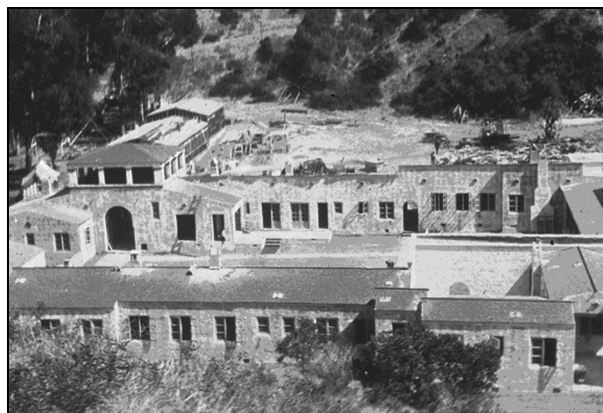


Figure 1. The lower quadrangle of the Catalina Island School for Boys under construction in 1927–1928.

the Los Angeles YMCA and in 1916 by the Los Angeles Boy Scout Council. By 1919, the year Mr. Wrigley acquired ownership of the island through purchase of SCICo stock, it housed the Pasadena-San Gabriel Boy Scout Camp. It is possible that Vosburg first became interested in Toyon if he was involved with the Scout camp.

Initial construction of the school was limited to a lower quadrangle used for dormitories, offices and dining, and the initial row of classrooms (Fig. 1). These structures were built about 200 yards up the canyon from the shoreline where they would be less obtrusive from the water. The playing field was graded between the buildings and the beach, and a wharf was built. The school relied on a natural spring until water, power and telephone service were brought in from Avalon in 1932. CISB opened on 21 September 1928, with 14 boys enrolled in grades 8 through 10. Keith Vosburg served as headmaster with Anson Thacher, Bennett Preble and Henry Parkinson as the teachers, or masters as they were known. Only classes required for the college entrance examination board were taught. The school's history as presented below is based largely on two sources, the school's newspaper *The Wheel* and school catalogs unless otherwise cited.

#### *The School Grows And Establishes Academic Excellence*

The early success of the school's educational and Scouting programs resulted in 32 boys enrolling in the fall of 1929. A second or upper quadrangle of dormitories and faculty housing, a second row of classrooms and a library were built

during the spring and summer of its second year of operation to accommodate the increasing enrollment. By 1930, 44 boys were in attendance with a 10th grade graduating class of seven. The faculty (Fig. 2) now included Roland Hermes, Martin Perry, Samuel Jepperson, Sherman Thacher, Robert Heilbron and Ken Robinson, who would later become assistant headmaster. Reginald Sheldrick served as business manager and drama coach.

In the beginning the student body was organized on the basis of the Boy Scout troop model. Initially, each student was expected to achieve the rank of Eagle Scout, and then go on to become a Sea Scout. Each dormitory represented a patrol (Fig. 3). These units served as the basis for living arrangements, intramural athletic competition and other school activities. The patrols had varying names including Torqua, Bald Eagle, Flying Fish, Bald Eagle, Pirate, Albatross, Buccaneer, Barracuda, Pirates and the Older Group.

During the first year, with only the 8–10th grades present, the masters oversaw the dormitories and patrols. Each student's dorm room was inspected daily (Fig. 4). Students wore khaki shirts and shorts as their daily uniforms. Due to the high humidity of their maritime location, the school buildings were often cold in winter. Originally there were fireplaces built in the common rooms of each dormitory, but no central heating. In late 1938, new stove oil heaters were added to the common rooms, which were used by the boys in the evening.



Figure 2. The early faculty of the Catalina Island School for Boys in the school's lower quadrangle outside the office.

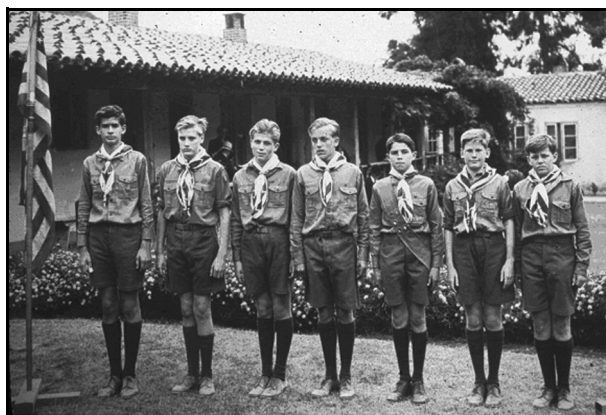


Figure 3. A dormitory Boy Scout patrol standing at attention for inspection in the school's lower quadrangle.

Each week one of the faculty served as the "master of the week" and was largely responsible for overseeing the daily activities and events. Later, when the upper grades were added, student leaders known as prefects were selected by a committee of faculty and the "Older Group," those boys 16 years or older. By 1932 the Scouting program had lost appeal for the older boys and became elective for them, but the younger students were still required to participate. In 1935 it was decided to make the program elective for all students.

Later, membership in the Older Group required a student to be at least 16 years old and in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade or higher. The older boys were allowed to wear blue shirts instead of the traditional khaki, further distinguishing them from the younger students. Additional privileges included the use of boats without a master present, an additional movie run to Avalon, permission for two or more members to camp unsupervised, and occasional trips to the other Channel Islands. By 1938, complaints about too many prefect privileges were being voiced, yet in 1939 seniors were given privileges separate from those of the Older Group for the first time. These included late lights, one extra weekend and town permission on Saturdays. The younger group also had its special activities, such as a war canoe outing to White's Landing each year.

The school day began with reveille at 7:00 AM. Breakfast was served at 7:15, followed by the morning dormitory inspection at 7:45 and morning assembly at 8:00. Classes were held from 8:15 AM

to 1:10 PM with a break at 11:00 for a snack known as "morning lunch." Lunch at 1:15 was followed by detention from 2:00–2:45 for those boys who had earned punishment, and games from 2:40–5:00. A final academic session preceded dinner which was served at 6:15. In the tradition of the best British schools, this meal was formal and required a blue blazer, gray flannel slacks and school tie. The assembly and headmaster's reading followed at 7:15, with study hall or room study from 7:45–9:00. Taps sounded at 9:30 for the younger boys and 10:00 for the Older Group.

A highlight of the day was when Keith Vosburg read from a current book to the boys gathered in front of the fireplace in the large common room. The day's mail was distributed following the reading. By 1938, other activities in the common room included discussion of current events on Mondays, talks by the school masters on Tuesdays, debates on Wednesdays and community sing-a-longs on Thursdays.

Tuition the first year was \$2,000 which included all spending money, clothing, books and other needs. Each boy received the same equipment, clothing and 50 cents a week for spending money, thus eliminating any obvious socio-economic differences. Although most students came from wealthy backgrounds, about 10% received paid scholarships to the school. The following year, accounts for money from home were allowed but only for special purposes.

The Great Depression hit the West Coast in 1929, just as CISB was establishing its academic and athletic reputation. The school struggled

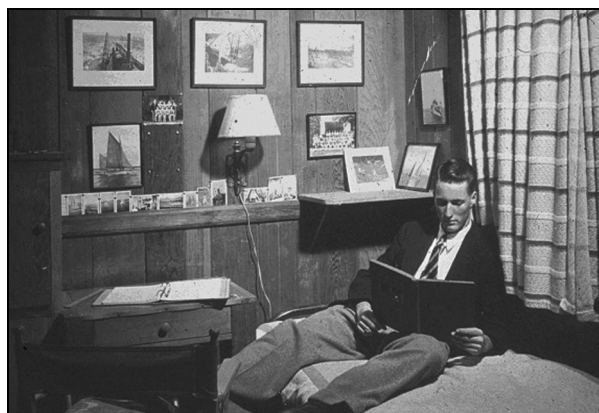


Figure 4. Student dressed for formal dinner studying in his redwood paneled dormitory room.

financially during this period, without benefit of the alumni support possible at more established schools, but still made great strides. Following the stock market collapse, tuition dropped to \$1,600 in 1930, with an additional \$250 fee for haircuts, laundry and "amusement." If a student received gifts of candy, cake and other edibles from home, they had to be shared with the rest of his patrol. In 1936 tuition had dropped to \$1,500 plus a set fee of \$350.

In 1938 the school switched from a trimester to a semester-based grading system. The school library was used for study hall. Members of the Older Group were given room study privileges, but were also required to supervise evening study hall for the younger students. Headmaster Vosburg felt those excelling in academics needed more recognition since athletic honors were already plentiful. Students earning a B- or better grade average received an extra day on their mainland weekend.

In 1937 each of CISB's four Harvard candidates received honor grades in the college entrance examinations, earning the school special recognition from Harvard. In 1938, a team from CISB won the Cal Tech chemistry trophy in competition with schools from all over southern California. That same year a student was awarded a special grade over the maximum by the college entrance examination board in Latin, and the same student repeated this achievement the following year in mathematics.

As a part of the attempt to build sound bodies and minds, the school emphasized good nutrition and exercise. For a while each of the two quads had their own dining hall. In 1936, all students ate in the upper dining hall, and a committee was formed to hear complaints about the food, an action "needed for some time" according to an article in *The Wheel*. Sunday dinner was later deemed optional except for those boys on nurse Gilbert's "underweight list." Honey was supplied to the school from 30 beehives operated in 1935 by master Robinson (1979). In 1937 food on the island was being rationed due to the threat of a cross-channel steamer strike. About this time masters Thacher and Paul Sherbert (later a headmaster of the post-War school) started a chicken ranch. Apparently fewer eggs were eaten than were thrown at various targets around campus. In 1940, Mr. Vosburg's dogs ate the chickens,

putting a stop to this enterprise. Other masters and faculty wives started vegetable gardens.

A daily calisthenics program was instituted in 1931–32. The school even took pictures of the students before and after this program to illustrate improvement in each boy's posture. At the end of 1933, *The Wheel* voiced student complaints about "those awful hikes to Little Harbor," an annual 16-mile hike to the other side of the island instituted by Vosburg as part of the outdoor experience. In 1938, grade cards included not only a student's grades and rank in class, but also their height and weight changes.

### *Extracurricular Activities*

Athletics were considered an important part of the school program. Organized sports over the years included field hockey, soccer, touch football, tennis, baseball, basketball, rugby, track, wrestling, speedball, and badminton. Vosburg believed that the close association between students and masters on the athletic field helped to break down barriers between them, and made the masters more effective counselors and confidants in the boarding school environment (Anonymous 1966). The increased student enrollment allowed participation in inter-scholastic athletics with other regional private schools including Thacher, Cate, Midland, Laguna Blanca and Webb.

In addition to the academic and athletic activities, Vosburg believed in the value of the arts, teaching current events and other activities. A special morning period was set aside for these activities. Masters and students would give talks and read poetry during this period. Samuel Jepperson served as the music master, spending three or four days a week on campus teaching music classes and leading the orchestra. The rest of the time he lead an orchestra in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Student activities were indeed numerous. Saturday evening entertainment was provided for by the patrols, and one year the school's common room was converted into a gambling casino. An astronomy club was formed and built a 6-inch reflecting scope to take advantage of the island's clear skies. Other clubs included model trains, photography, arts and crafts, model building, microscope, gas powered model airplanes, dramatics, art, carpentry, German band and radio. The amateur radio station W5ENK, horseshoe

contests, checkers tournaments and experimental rocket building were all popular clubs.

Other activities included woodshop which gave the boys an opportunity to build various things with the ulterior motive being to avoid breaking the maintenance department's tools. Unfortunately one of the woods chosen by the students to carve was the island's endemic ironwood subspecies (*Lyonothamnus floribundus*). One student found diversion panning for gold in the back canyon. Archaeological activities were introduced, perhaps heightened by the discovery of a Native American midden by the beach. Widening the school's drainage ditch after major rainstorms unearthed an Indian skull which the students named "Uncle Louie." In 1938 a gun club was established in "tennis court canyon" (later called rifle range canyon).

Special events included the spring dance, Parent's Day, and later an Alumni Day in June after the school's alumni association was formed in 1936. Since students in 1930 were only allowed one weekend on the mainland each term, they were anxious to have their mainland girlfriends over for the dance. The other two events featured a father-son baseball game and student-alumni competition in field hockey, baseball and soccer. The annual costume banquet was also a big hit, especially in 1935 when a student dressed as Adolf Hitler won first prize and a group dressed as the Dione quintuplets and their parents received second prize.

Wildlife was also a part of the school experience. Rattlesnakes were often killed around campus, especially in the warm spring weather, because they were a hazard to the faculty children and students. In February of 1935, *The Wheel* mentions "50 boar" being released on Catalina, which were brought to the island to control the rattlesnake population (Robinson 1979). Feral goats already existed on the island, and the young of both introduced species often became student pets, with pigs named Pauline and Augustus becoming quite popular. Each year new students would go out to catch a goat kid (Fig. 5). Vosburg required them to show responsibility and take proper care of the young animals. The boys soon tired of such responsibility and tried releasing the kids back into the canyon, but the goats would often beat their caregiver back to campus. Eventually they were paddled by canoe to more



Figure 5. Two students dressed in Boy Scout uniforms taking care of their pet wild goat.

remote canyons and released there. By 1940 it was necessary to erect a barbed wire fence around the school to exclude the bison and Mr. Wrigley's cattle. At one point killer whales reportedly almost upset a group of three war canoes with 11 students in each, which were returning from Avalon (Robinson 1979).

As the school population increased, the older students and masters apparently felt the need for some escape. In the 1930-1931 academic year a shack was built by the "Older Group" on the south hill above the school, and later another shack on a hill in the canyon behind the school. Shack members were initially selected by other shack members. They were allowed to sleep overnight in their shacks; parties were held with cider, ginger ale and cinnamon toast. Initially belonging only to shack members, the shacks were later deemed Older Group common property.

By December of 1932, the masters followed suit, clearing a path to the top of the opposite hill and acquiring lumber to build their own shack (Fig. 6). As faculty, they had a major advantage. Students worked off demerits on Saturdays hauling two tons of lumber, four tons of rocks for the chimney, and 96 pound sacks of cement up to the shack's site (Robinson 1979). Remnants of these three structures still can be seen today.

#### *Discipline and Work Crews*

Despite its stellar reputation, CISB was not immune to disciplinary problems. In the winter of 1932-33 there must have been some petty theft at the school, since Headmaster Vosburg wrote in *The Wheel* that "masters do not search boys' rooms

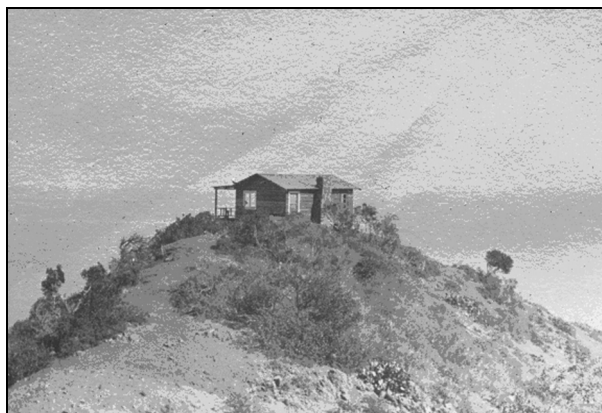


Figure 6. The faculty shack, later known as "The Shrine," on a hilltop high above campus.

for contraband candy or unreturned money" because "members of this school are honest." This was written in the spirit of maintaining close relationships between the masters and students as Vosburg felt it was better than "open warfare" between them. In 1940 there was an editorial about students acting like "hoodlums" in public.

The students created an honor code and banned such activities as smoking, drinking and unauthorized absence from campus. An Honor Committee was created to enforce the rules and punish violators. In 1936 the Older Group was permitted to smoke for the first time, but the following year they voted not to allow it. The early disciplinary system of Saturday morning detention was replaced in 1937 with a system involving physical labor on the afternoon of the infraction. Tasks assigned included pulling weeds, scrubbing the patios, clearing the drainage ditch, and washing school windows.

In 1934 two major rainstorms caused serious damage to the campus, and a school holiday was called to make repairs. The second storm destroyed much of the work completed after the first one. The existing storm drainage ditch was widened to accommodate future storm runoff, requiring new bridges to be built across it. It took a tractor from Avalon four days to cut a new trail down to campus and to clear debris from the soccer field. Eucalyptus groves were planted higher up the canyon to provide some measure of flood control, preventing large branches and rocks from tumbling downstream to the school grounds, and for firewood. At the same time the large cottonwood

trees that stood down by the pier were removed to make way for a second soccer field.

These tasks were referred to as the school's "New Deal WPA," a reference to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration economic recovery program, and school work details were still called this as late as 1941. The initial eucalyptus grove washed away in the later flood, so 800 new trees were planted with a total of 1,600 planned. By late 1938 some 1,500 trees were already 40 feet tall. Apparently students showed a lack of interest in the work crews, so permanent jobs were assigned in 1938 giving each student a specific responsibility on campus. These included tennis court repair, beach cleanup, painting buildings, electrical repair, landscaping, forestry, cutting firewood, trail building, cleaning the ditch and leveling school roads. In addition to helping build character, this may also have been a response to the prevailing economic hard times.

#### *World War II and the Move to the Mainland*

By 1940 the school had weathered the worst of the Depression while maintaining its high standards. However, the international climate would soon change this when Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor. In the few days following the bombing the school was blacked out like most of southern California. Its faculty patrolled the waterfront, reportedly armed with a large caliber rifle, shotguns and .22 caliber target rifles from the gun club.

Robinson (1979) reported that the students left Catalina on December 10th for an extended Christmas holiday. The faculty and parents met in the home of Hollywood screenwriter Frances Marion and agreed to keep the boys on the island for safety. As they left the meeting, newsboys were hawking papers with the headline "EXTRA- Ship Sunk by Torpedo in Catalina Channel." The decision was immediately reversed.

The military soon ordered boat service from the island to cease. It was evident the school could no longer continue at the Toyon Bay site, and a new location was sought. The Webb School in Claremont extended an invitation to share its facilities. On 2 January 1942, 40 boys and 14 faculty and family members convened there. The Webb gymnasium became the CISB dormitory, and the library their study hall. The Webb School

dining rooms, classrooms and laboratories were shared between the two schools until April.

During this period Keith Vosburg taught during the week and on weekends scouted for a new interim location for CISB, until the end of the war would allow them to return to Catalina. The former Deane School facility, located on the current Westmont College campus in Montecito, was available (Shelton 1979). Ken Robinson returned to the Toyon facility to load the beds, classroom and laboratory equipment, books and other school belongings onto a chartered barge to the mainland. Once on the mainland, eight Bekin moving vans completed the move from the port to Montecito.

Abandoned since 1934, the Montecito facility was in great need of repair and CISB raised \$10,000 to address this. Wartime priorities made extensive repairs very difficult, but an effort was made to make the new site functional. Several long-term faculty from the school enlisted in the military, reducing the teaching staff. For the remainder of this one academic year, classes were taught at Montecito. There was reference in the 1941-43 school catalog of the need to return to a simpler life involving respectable manual labor and less wastage of natural resources. Perhaps this was in response to student disinterest in the former work crews, as well as resource conservation made necessary by wartime conditions.

In 1943 Curtis Cate, headmaster of the Cate School in Carpenteria, suggested the merger of the two schools. At that time the Cate facilities were not being used to capacity and the union made good sense. The resulting school was known as the Cate and Vosburg School until 1946. In essence, the Catalina Island School had ceased to exist, and Keith Vosburg's dream appeared to have died. After 1943, Vosburg taught at the Webb and Thacher schools as well as at Scripps College. Little did he realize then that his dream would be revived when the school reopened in its former location in 1964.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Henry "Hank" O'Melveny, an alumnus of the original CISB, father of two sons who also graduated from the school in the 1960s and 1970s, board member and strong supporter of the post-War school. As a student, Hank developed a love for Catalina that continued until his death in 2003. He served as a board member of the Catalina Conservancy and helped bring two of its support groups, the yachting *Marineros* and the Catalina Conservancy Divers (CCD), together in support of the CCD marine research and education efforts. The author served as head of the science and math departments, senior master and assistant headmaster of the school from 1969 until it closed in 1979. He co-founded the Catalina Island School Alumni Association (CISAA) in 1983.

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