

beside the point

By JOHN MITCHELL

It seems the older we get, the more special people from our youth become to us. And when we learn one of them has died, we feel the loss deeply.

Last week, as I neared the end of a newsy eight-page letter from my mother, I came across a short paragraph: "I have to tell you that Fr. Guertin, R.I.P., passed away several months ago."

You know something's hit you hard when you suddenly realize you've expelled air and you're not taking any in. And even as you grab ahold of anything nearby to steady yourself and begin to breath again, the face of the person flashes through your mind and you feel a painfully deep sadness.

It had been 30 years since I'd seen the Rev. Rene A. Guertin. And because of the great distance that separated us, even if he had lived to be 100, chances are slim we would have met again.

Yet, he was important to me.

I was a very frightened 10-year-old that chilly March morning back in 1947. It was to be my first full day in the orphanage and I had already been separated from my brother and sister. I stood alone in the silence of a very long corridor, confused as to which direction would lead me to my assigned dormitory.

"You must be the Mitchell boy!" The words reverberated down the corridor in a series of explosions and I almost came out of my shoes. I looked around to see a

gangster-type wearing steel-rimmed glasses and wrapped in a black cassock bearing purposefully down on me. The priest's lips were curled in a scowl as he approached me and roughly dug his fingers into my shoulder.

His questioning and what purported to be a brief welcoming speech were delivered in a loud, tough-to-understand snarl. Then, retaining his firm grip, he guided me to my destination and deposited me under the stern visage of an obviously impatient nun.

My bowels were loose for days afterward.

During the next 3½ years I was to learn that Father Guertin's roughness, scowling and snarling manifested his sweetheart side. The son of a French-Canadian lumberjack, he was raised on no-nonsense hard work and I doubt if he was physically able to move slowly or talk sotto voce until he was on his deathbed.

With his thick French accent, he took a noisy ax to the King's English every time he opened his mouth. Latin was the language of Mass in those days, though you'd never know it by Father Guertin; the nuns would cringe and roll their eyes heavenwards as he lurched through the Confiteor and Apostles' Creed. At high Masses, his singing was a constant source of scandal for visiting seminarians.

His speedometer-smashing deliveries of the last sacraments to victims of nearby accidents became the stuff of legends among us kids. And he drove the children

everywhere: 30 to 40 of us in the old school bus and up to eight of us in his car. God help the unfortunate one who sat next to him in the car; the kid would find his thigh gripped by vicelike fingers while Father Guertin cackled gleefully or bellowed out verse after verse of "Frere Jacques."

Years later, my sister told me she used to duck around a corner when she'd see him coming. My brother, who was always getting into trouble and being disciplined by him, hated the man. I got along with him because I saw him interact the same way with everyone — nuns and kids. The toughness was a veneer for a pussycat.

We kept in touch for a quarter of a century, usually via Christmas cards. Several years ago he wrote he had cataracts on both eyes and was going in for an operation. A couple of Christmases later, he wrote in a very large, almost unreadable scrawl that he was blind in one eye, losing his sight in the other, and he was going in for more surgery. He asked me to pray for him. Without spelling them out, he said other things were wrong with him, too, and he was scared.

I remember the sinking feeling I experienced when I read his words. For Father Guertin to be scared, I knew he had to be in rough shape. Maybe, even, his condition was terminal. I didn't know, and as the months moved along his plight slipped from my consciousness.

Now I know why I didn't get a Christmas card from him last year. And I'm damned sorry I had to find out why.

dateline

Seven years ago this week the Conejo Valley Unified School District was reviewing sites for a third high school in The Conejo. The sites recommended to the board members were selected by a site selection committee.

The school district was looking for a 35- to 40-acre site on which to house 2,500 to 3,000 students within three years.

The asking price for two different sites on the east side of Westlake Boulevard was \$50,000 to \$80,000 per acre. Considering this high cost, the site selection committee submitted two alternate sites for the high school — one in Lang Ranch and the other on the Janss Road school district administrative offices property.

Choosing either of these sites would involve increased costs in site preparation, extensive busing of students and, for the Lang Ranch site, the extension of Westlake Boulevard north to the property.

Ten years ago this week an almost new Newbury Park gas station was declared a public nuisance by the city planners.

The owners, Humble Oil Co., were given 90 days to either tear down the hardly used \$40,000 building, or move it.

Humble wanted to move the station to the southeast corner of Janss and Moorpark roads, but according to city officials, it was too big to be trucked down the Ventura Freeway and too heavy for the freeway overcrossings at Ventu Park and Lynn roads.

The only way the city thought Humble could get the station to the Janss Road site, even if the structure was sliced into thirds, was to haul it along Potrero Road, through Newbury Park, Hidden Valley, Westlake Village, and most of Thousand Oaks.