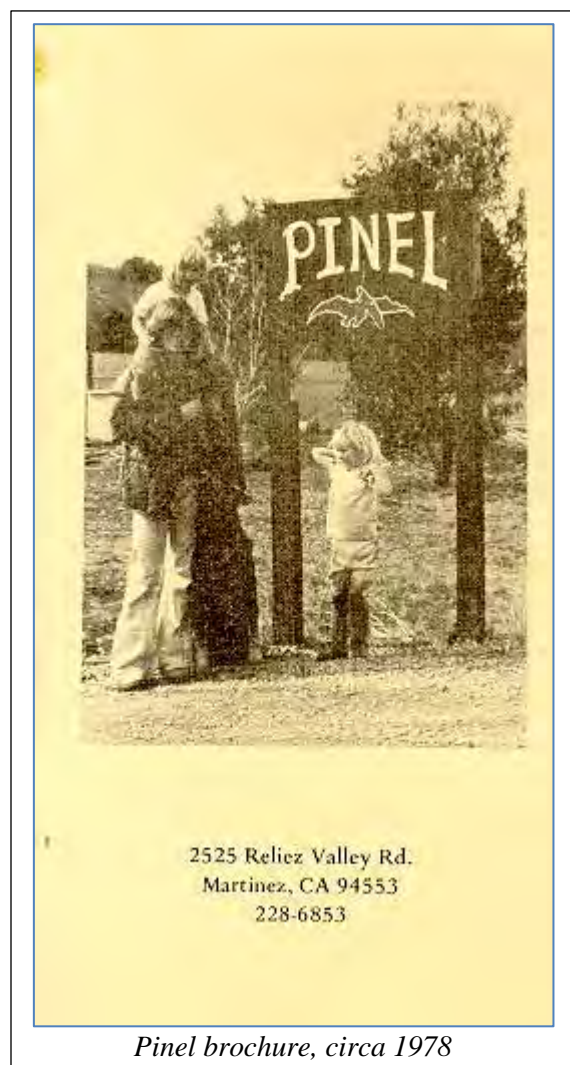


Our years at Pinel School

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August 25, 2022



Pinel brochure, circa 1978

Our time at Pinel School, three school years for me and a fourth for Elaine and Marilyn, deserves its own chapter. Actually it needs an entire book, and not just a memoir. The place was the quintessence of, and a crossroads for, the later Sixties era. The younger staff teacher, Sallie Rhyne, has written a memoir called *Following My Bliss* with a lot of detail. There is also an active Pinel Alumni web site, run by our friend David Wilson.

In seeing the big sandbox, I told mom that I'd play there and tell folks I was studying vulcanology. Ultimately I did play there often. Friends and I would construct an entire intricate city-state from sand, descriptively known as Barbaria. Then, after a while, we'd go into Godzilla mode and stomp the place.

The oldest building, with a meeting room, sat on the east side of a seasonal creek, nearest the road. A small room held a fully equipped darkroom, so I learned some basics of photography. I had a Kodak Brownie camera, but little in the way of film, and thankfully have preserved those images. The student teacher who ran it warned me to not, in my usual quirky style, sniff curiously at the chemicals. Because, simply put, I'd get poisoned.

A year later the school completed a library building, across the creek bed and farther up the hill than two buildings with classrooms. Among its volumes was a collection of TinTin books, by Herge. First written in Belgium, those English versions were, and remain, rare.

Much later, my wife and I would take shelter from a sudden thunderstorm, while doing laundry in a back room, in a TinTin themed coffee house in Helsinki. Our friendly Skandia Hotel clerk had advised us, "a laundry is behind the cafeteria," and soon we discovered this actual urban oddity.

Another book mentioned Phillippe Pinel, the French doctor who liberated asylum inmates from literal shackles, and introduced more humane treatment to his nation's mental health system. One teacher, Ray, told me that every so often a student would happen upon this tidbit, and yes, they did name the school after him.

We Pinellions did feel unshackled. There was no mandatory attendance, for the school day or for any particular class. We could, and often did, spend the day on our own activities, or hike up into nearby Briones Regional Park. Many of the public school kids who lived down Reliez Valley road, in the quickly spreading housing tracts, were insanely jealous.

Still, the teachers were excellent, the classes informative, and (as seen from our alumni gatherings), in fact Pinel grads have gone on to achieve a whole lot. Sallie had a large collection of Cuisinaire rods, multicolored and sized to teach mathematical functions.

I quickly made friends with Sheldon, David, and a few other nerdish kids, and we'd use those rods to cover a table with spaceship designs and other futuristic creations. This was not mere fancy. We'd want their space-drive to accomplish a certain task, and Sheldon would rapidly calculate the acceleration, transit time, and other relevant data.

Another new friend was Doug, a more outdoorsy type. He only attended with me for a year, but we've stayed in contact ever since. A group of us would decide to visit Briones park, and enjoy the view from its Mott Peak. So we'd take off running, along Reliez Valley road to the (original) park entrance road, wind our way up the trailhead, then on up to the summit. Without stopping.

I've returned there, over the years, and it really is a beautiful view.

On the way up there was a small ranch, the winter quarters of a traveling circus, so instead of the usual horses they had several Asian elephants in a dirt-surfaced paddock out back.

This became a rite of passage. When a new student arrived, not one of the youngest Little Kids or clannish Big Kids, but our own age, soon we'd tell them it was time to go see the elephants. Of course they expected a 'snipe hunt' kind of trick, some wild goose chase, and they'd be doubtful if not scoffing. But, sure enough, we'd show them the elephant herd.

By then the school had a reputation in educational and hippie circles, so almost every day there were adult visitors. The school did need more students, hence budget money, so these folks were welcome. However, we kids didn't fully appreciate this.

This wasn't quite Lord of the Flies, but we did develop tight knit groups. My sisters and their girlfriends formed the Baby Slugs, with their own made-up theme song. They centered upon Alice Kenney, the most beloved of all our teachers.

The Baby Slugs developed a questionnaire, with actual clipboards, so when a visitor showed up, they'd rush over to grill the person. Once an entire bus full of visitors pulled in, sending many of us kids literally screaming, up the hill and out of sight.

The campus featured dozens of railroad ties, both regular and double length. These came cheap, from a gigantic state-surplus warehouse, which as a school we were eligible to shop at. Doug and Sheldon and I attracted several kinds into a loose knit group we called the Fort Gang.

We'd stack those ties, corncrib style, into large rooms. With several kids lifting and others pulling with ropes, we managed to build structures maybe eight feet high, some with multiple rooms. We'd nail scrap plywood to the walls, and otherwise crudely fix up each place. Each winter, after heavy storms the creek bed would flood, and downstream neighbors used escaped railroad ties in their landscaping.

After a year or two of this, the teachers decided it was unsightly, also getting in the way of other things. So we made a deal with teacher Jim Stein. He used his Toyota Land Cruiser, with a small trailer, to haul those railroad ties up to the hill top, where we promised to keep them.

We built another corncrib style fort (much like gigantic Lincoln Logs) but over some weekends, roving vandals would tear it down. So we decided to build something those jealous fools would not be able to destroy.

Doug had moved on, so Sheldon designed and I bossed, and we dug a big pit. Then we roofed it over with ties, and piled all the dirt on top. A literal bunker, with an entrance at the south end and a smaller opening for light at the other. Then we got another idea. We dug a second pit, a few feet behind and aside from the entrance, with a trench leading back. These we covered with wood and plywood, and smoothed them level with the ground. Sheldon's idea was to angle the connecting trench at a setback, so that it was not visible when looking in from the entrance.

One of the Little Kids, who only attended for a year, was named Hans. We did not know it at the time, but his father Ernest Callenbach was a published author, then at work on a near-future novel titled Ecotopia.

Various kids have memories of what followed, and years later I phoned Mr. Callenbach to chat for a while. From all this, I've pieced together what happened.

Being a school parent rather than a dreaded Visitor, even though we didn't know him much, Mr. Callenbach got a warmer reception. He walked up the hill with us Fort Gang kids, to see our new underground hangout.

I thought fast, and told the other (four to six friends, as I recall) kids to get into the hideout. They scrambled in, then I invited our guest to get on his hands and knees, to peer within. No kids! All you could see was a plain empty room.

This impressed the man considerably. If you read Ecotopia, which grew into a seminal tome for the environmentalist and secular utopian movements, you'll find a chapter on Pinel, thinly fictionalized as the Crick School. There's a reference to "gangs of kids with underground hideouts," and yep, that part wasn't fiction at all.

Winter rains would flood the place, however the next school year, after I'd graduated, others began to fix up and expand the fort. From what I'm told it became quite elaborate, but eventually it was deemed hazardous or something, and completely removed.