

Published February 15th, 2023

Former President Gerald R. Ford once taught at SMC's Pre-Flight School during WWII

By Vera Kochan



Commemorative medallion presented to President Gerald R. Ford Photo provided

"aggressiveness, coordination, and alertness" would "help these future pilots become tougher physically than all enemies."

In April 1945, the Navy assigned Ford to Naval Reserve Training Command in Glenview, Ill. While that marked the end of his short career at SMC, the school, as well as the town of Moraga, chose to honor his service here 31 years later, during Ford's visit to the city of Walnut Creek in order to dedicate a replica of the Liberty Bell as a war memorial. The bell is located in present-day Liberty Bell Plaza.

Although Moraga did extend an official invitation to Ford to revisit the town during that May 1976 Contra Costa County trip, his office politely declined due to Ford's busy schedule, suggesting that he might return to California later in the fall.

This did not deter the Moraga Town Council or SMC from presenting a commemorative medallion to Ford during Walnut Creek's celebration. In an unattributed newspaper source, then mayor Merle Gilliland said, "I received a call Friday and was invited to sit on the platform" with Ford. Other local mayors and county supervisors received such an invitation.

"This commemorative medallion was a gift to President Gerald R. Ford from Councilman Merle D. Gilliland and T. Mel Anderson, President of St. Mary's College of California," states the Ford Museum. "The oval-shaped, bronze disc is adorned with a crest in relief on the front and 'Moraga Family Crest Presented to President Gerald R. Ford May 25, 1976 by Town of Moraga & St. Mary's College, Moraga, California' inscribed on back. It measures 3.5" W x 4.5" L." The medallion was made by SMC's metal arts instructor Victor Ries.

Shortly thereafter, both Gilliland and Anderson received identical letters from Ford stating, "It was a real pleasure to visit California. The Moraga Family Crest presented jointly will serve as a lasting remembrance."

The communication between Ford and SMC did not end there. In 1993, Anderson and then Regent Gerry Fitzpatrick visited Ford at his Rancho Mirage, Calif. home to personally deliver a plaque and confer the title of Honorary Alumnus on the former instructor. According to a 2007 article by John Grennan of SMC's Office of College Communications, Anderson was quoted as saying about the visit, "He remembered living in Orinda and driving over to the campus each morning. He really enjoyed his time here."

Ford later wrote to Anderson, "I have wonderful memories of my limited service at St. Mary's."

Special thanks to Moraga Historical Society President Susan Sperry and Archivist Bonnie Krames.

Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA