



Brother Albert O. Coletto, S.D.B.
(1913-2003)



In Memoriam

Albert Octavio Coletto, SDB

Born: January 18, 1913

Professed: September 12, 1933

Died: December 26, 2003

After several months of slow decline, Brother Albert Coletto died on Friday, December 26, 2003 at a hospital in West Covina, California. He was 90 years of age. He was a member of the Salesian Society for the last seventy years; a member of Salesian Community of Don Bosco Tech, Rosemead, for the last 28 years.

Several years ago I brought him a metal cart that needed repair. It had been used and abused. He studied it carefully and went to work to mend it. In just a few hours it was back in service, even stronger than before. At dinner that evening, I made it a point to thank him for his labors and for the craftsmanship of his work. Feeling uncomfortable about being the subject of the compliment, he said, "Please don't make advertisement. I have enough to do!" Albert was a quiet man.

He outlived all his immediate family and almost everyone who knew him during the first half of his life. He spoke little about himself and his early life preferring to live in the present rather in the past.

His Life Before Coming to North America

The little we know about his early life is this. He was born in Val di Susa, the 18th of January 1913, near the village of Almese in northern Italy. He was the youngest of 9 children and he survived all his other 5 brothers and 3 sisters. He was the only one of his family to leave Italy.

His father, Silvestro Coletto, was a shoemaker. His mother, Nicol Maurizia, a housewife. At the completion of his elementary education at the age of 13, he began his life of work for his village's blacksmith. Later in life he would machine metal with precision lathes and mills. He began his work with metal, however, at the fires of a forge and with a sledge hammer as his main tool.

He first learned of the Salesians through copies of the Salesian Bulletin that his father received. His first contact with the Salesians came in September of 1928. As a result of this contact he journeyed with his father by train and by foot to Foglizzo where he entered as a student artisan in training on January 15, 1929.

In 1930 he moved to Rebaudengo and would remain there until 1932 studying foundry and forging. The shop was poorly equipped and the work was hard. It was at Rebaudengo that he also began his training in machining and mechanical trades.

He entered the novitiate for the Salesian province of Turin in August of 1932 and made his first profession one year later on September 12, 1933 at Villa Moglia in the town of Chieri, Italy.

After the novitiate he returned to Rebaudengo for further training and remained there from 1933 to 1936. In September of 1936 he was assigned to the Salesian school in Nice, the first school founded by Don Bosco in France. He spent a year there working in one of the school's shops and studying French in preparation for his eventual assignment to Haiti.

He sailed to Haiti in August 1937. He would spend a total of 12 years in Haiti. He served on the faculty of the Ecole National des Arts et Métiers, a school that included four shops that had been built by Steneo Vincent, the first elected president of Haiti. The early Salesian staff for the school was a "Society of Nations" with 3 members from Italy, 3 from France, 1 from Switzerland, and 1 from Uruguay. Later they were joined by a Czechoslovak and a Belgian. His years in Haiti were very hard. "The community had one bicycle," he told me once. "And that bicycle was not for play, only to go to the market." One can imagine him coming back from town balancing metal stock on the community bicycle.

The trades taught at the Ecole National des Arts et Métiers were cabinet making, shoe making, tailoring, and

machining. He really liked being a machinist, even in Haiti with all of the difficulties of an underdeveloped nation. His first drill press was made in the US in 1897. He spent his first six years in Haiti using the old machinery he started with to build new machines to replace them. The school's shops were made of wood with sheet metal roofs. The only air conditioning was the breeze blowing through the open doors or windows. Tragedy struck in his sixth year when a fire swept through the school's shops destroying not only the buildings but also most of the machines he had managed to build or rebuild. He would continue to work in Haiti six more years rebuilding his shop one machine at a time, often rewinding the damaged electrical motors himself.

Albert made his perpetual profession on September 12, 1939 at the conclusion of his yearly retreat in Santo Domingo. Once during his 12 years in Haiti someone was sent to take his place but his replacement could not bear the challenges Haiti presented and soon left. It wasn't until 1950 that Albert was able to make the 31 day return trip to Italy and visit his family. He would remain in Italy for a year at the Oratory in Turin, working in the Oratory's Electro-mechanics Shop learning and helping students build motors, transformers and welding units.

As if to make up for his lack of travel and movement in the years prior to

1950, the 1950s were a time when he would move constantly.

While in Italy, Don Modesto Bellido, the Salesian in charge of the Missions, assigned Albert to California. The ship he sailed on docked in Cuba. Albert, traveling on an Italian passport, did not have any official papers to enter the United States. "Without Official Papers" he remained in Camagüey, Cuba from Sept. 1951 to August 1952. From Cuba he moved to Mexico, where he spent 6 months doing the welding and steel structure for the roof of the chapel at the Salesian Studentate in Guadalajara.

While in Mexico he received his "papers" to enter the United States as a "student" traveling on an Italian passport "for Aptos, California." He arrived in San Francisco by plane and was met by Fr. Joseph Costanzo who took him to SS. Peter & Paul Church in San Francisco—the Western provincial office at that time. Shortly after he arrived in California he was sent by Fr. Alfred Cogliandro, the Provincial, to Richmond. He worked at the Salesian High School Seminary doing maintenance for about 6 months. Many Salesians remember the bright yellow paint Albert applied to many of the things he repaired. Even after he left Richmond that shade of yellow paint—acquired as much of his raw materials, from government surplus—was referred to as "Coletto Yellow." From Richmond he was then sent to Paterson, NJ to assist



Albert with Fr. Frank Ribotta in Richmond sometime during the 1950's

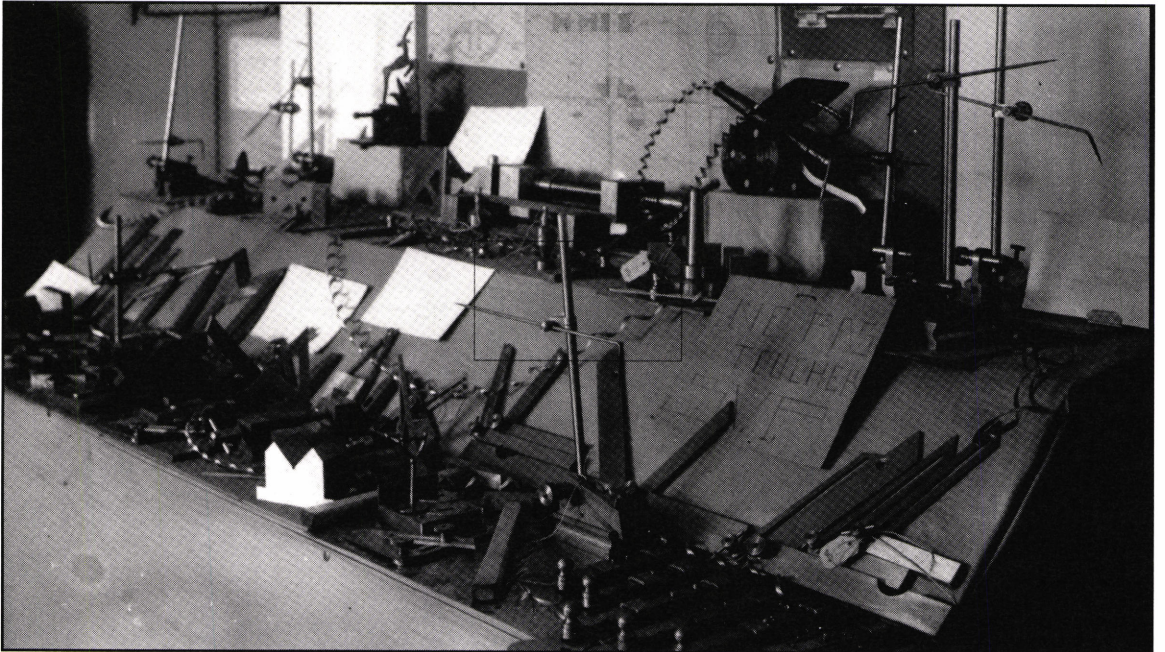
in the machine shop for 6 months. Then he moved to Boston where he worked at Don Bosco Tech for six months maintaining equipment in the school's machine shop. He then returned to Richmond, California, for a few months.

In August 1958 he was assigned to St. Mary's School in Edmonton, Canada, shortly after the school opened in its new location on 137th Avenue in the north east corner of the city.

In 1960 Albert asked to be changed — "to anywhere" according to Albert. He was sent back to Cuba. Because of the outbreak of the Communist Revolution under Fidel Castro, Albert left Cuba after only a year and returned to Canada. Albert always described his moves from



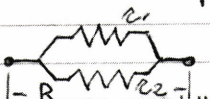
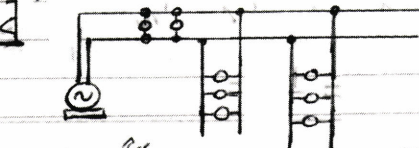
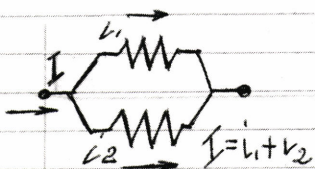
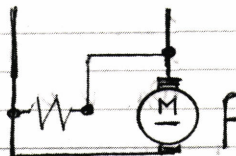
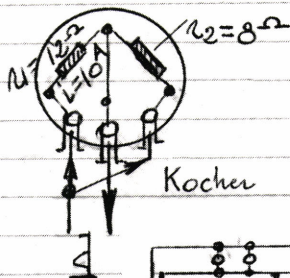
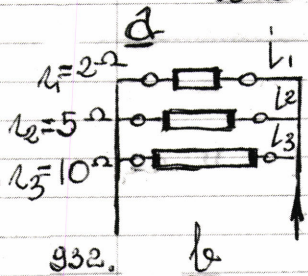
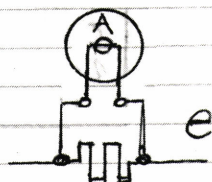
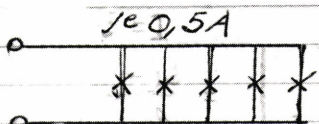
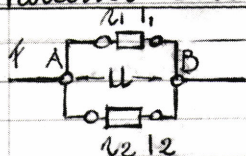
Albert Coletto (Top Row, Far Left). Photo taken while Albert was working in Haiti. This photo includes Salesians working in the Dominican Republic and Haiti with Riccardo Pittini, S.D.B, Archbishop of Santo Domingo (1935-1961).



Examples of the tools and metal projects that were crafted by Albert's students in Haiti (1938-1950). Many of these tools were calipers and gauges that would be used in the making of other tools and machine parts.

Without formal advanced education, Albert taught himself metallurgy, physics, the principles of electricity and mechanical design and much more. These pages are excerpts from the meticulous notes that he prepared in English, Italian and German—a language he taught himself in order to read technical material in the areas he studied.

Parallel- oder Nebeneinanderschaltung

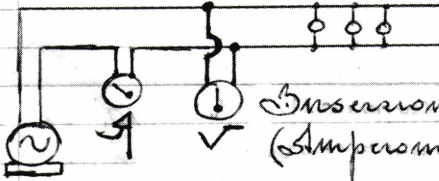


Parallelschaltung von Widerständen

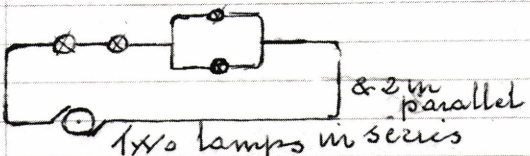
a-b Parallelschaltung allgemein; c Beleuchtungsanlage.

d Kocher (Widerstände in Parallelschaltung)

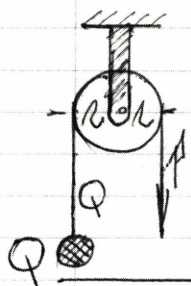
e Strommesser mit Nebenschlußwiderstand zur Erweiterung des Meßbereiches; f Anker mit parallelgeschalteter Feldwicklung



Inserrone di un apparecchio in serie (Ampereom.) e di un voltmetro in serie



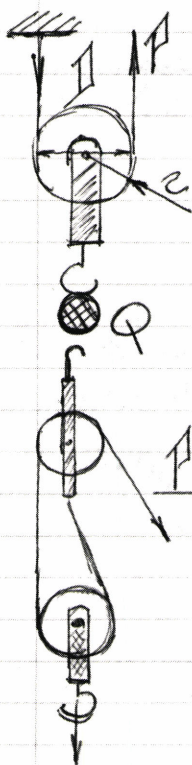
Carrucola puleggia Die Rolle. Poulin - Ludwig Seite 601
 viene considerata come una leva Cosini p. 3/4



$$P = Q$$

La carr. fissa serve solo a variare la direzione e il senso dello sforzo in modo da rendere più comodo il sollevam. dei pesi.

Feste Rolle (carr. fissa) Poulin fixe -

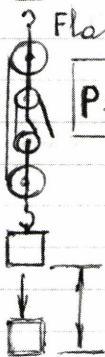


La puleggia mobile rappres. una leva ad un braccio. Il $\frac{D}{2}$ della puleggia D è il braccio di forza il raggio R è il braccio di carico. In equilibrio la forza è la metà del carico.

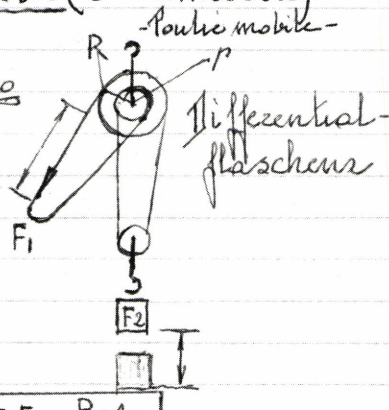
$$P = \frac{Q}{2}$$

Lose Rolle (carr. mobile)

$$P = Q : 2$$

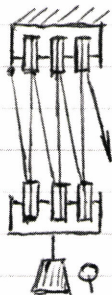


$$P = \frac{Q}{n}$$



$$F_1 = F_2 \cdot \frac{R-r}{2R}$$

vedi Tabellen p. 81



$$P = \frac{Q}{2 \cdot n}$$

Trazione a carrucola

(n = numero delle pulegge mobili)

$$P = \frac{Q}{6}$$



Albert helps Santa Claus (Mr. Richard Holton) distribute gifts to the students of St. Mary's, Edmonton, Alberta. Photo taken in the early 1970's.



Albert at St. Mary's Salesian School, Edmonton in the 1958. He is shown here with fellow Salesians, Br. Larry King and Fr. John Tkalec and surrounded by the boys of St. Mary's to whom he taught the skills of metal work.

the Caribbean to Canada as moves “from the frying pan to the freezer.” He was also quick to remind us that he was not expelled from Cuba, but he had signed papers stating that he was leaving Cuba “under his own free will.”

This time he would remain in Canada until 1975. Except for the single year in Cuba, Albert remained in Canada for 17 years. In Edmonton he worked on maintenance projects of every sort and he taught the school’s resident students the basics of machining. His young students would often spend months learning the proper use of a hand file. Only after they were masters at filing metal would they move on to the operation of machine tools. He taught many how to weld. Some of his students mastered the craft as well as he had and easily found work as welders in Canada’s oil fields. Albert was demanding, but patient. His students were young, but those who showed an interest could learn much from him.

One day in Edmonton he was visited by one of his past students, Nelson Kennedy. Nelson was in the process of taking a class at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology and came to Albert in desperate need of help. While working on a very expensive piece of equipment, Nelson had broken a stainless steel rod. Nelson was frantic about getting a replacement for this unique part. Albert listened to Nelson’s story, took the broken part from Nelson

without a comment, and disappeared into his shop. He returned in a short time, but instead of one replacement part, Albert presented the young man with a dozen identical replacements for the broken rod. With a smile, he handed the pieces to Nelson, “There that should take care of this break and the next few times it breaks.”

In Canada and elsewhere he made a name for himself as being able to make things strong enough to endure even the greatest misuse. If he made it “boy-proof” it would last. Sometime in the early 1970s he saw the photograph of a park “merry-go-round” in a catalog of playground equipment. With just a photograph as a template he created his own “boy-proof” version and had it brought out to the Salesian summer camp at Lac St. Anne, Alberta, Canada. The winter weather wore down most things at that camp, but Albert’s merry-go-round endured. Just the slightest breeze from the lake was enough to cause the merry-go-round to spin.

When changes in school curriculum caused the machine shop in Edmonton to close, he moved to Don Bosco Technical Institute, Rosemead and would remain there, actively involved, for the rest of his life.

Wise, but always a student

Albert never went to college. He held no degrees. He stayed away from

wearing ties which he always associated with “professori.” Yet he was wise and knowledgeable. Much of his wisdom was self taught. He collected technical books on mechanical engineering, electronics, and metallurgy. He meticulously kept note books on what he read. With a great interest always in machinery he corresponded with equipment manufactures in Italy, Spain, France and Germany and studied like a child with a toy catalog the brochures and information they sent him on the latest milling machine or lathe. When he went to Europe to visit his family, he spent just as much time visiting German and Italian machinery makers as he did with his family. He never touched a personal computer, but admired the precision of computerized milling machines and lathes that worked much better than the machines he had learned with as a young apprentice.

He was a linguist. He spoke Piedmontese by birth, he acquired Italian as a child. He learned French, Spanish, English as he journeyed further through life. He taught himself German to be able to read technical books and the brochures he received from German equipment manufacturers. In the last years of his life he still remembered and sung the Piedmontese songs he learned as a child in his village.

Several years before he died, Albert experienced some mental confusion and disorientation that required medical

intervention. One day the doctor who was treating him held up a pencil and asked, “What is this.” Albert was silent for awhile. The doctor had never met Albert before and was trying to determine what kind of grasp this elderly patient had on reality. Albert’s silence began to cause the good doctor some concern that Albert’s condition might be more serious than anyone expected if he could no longer identify a pencil. Albert finally spoke: “Well, I don’t know, but I call it *crayon* in French, *bleistift* in German, *karandash* in Russian, *lapiz* in Spanish, *matita* in Italian, *pencil* in English. Which name do you want?” The doctor didn’t have any more questions for Albert that day.

His knowledge of metal and his ability to work with metal was legendary. When a gear of a printing press would crack or break, he could shape a replacement even when given only part of the original broken piece. He was never limited by the plans and designs of others. When no manufacturer made the kind of hinge that a door needed he would design and make something that would work. He seemed to enjoy the challenge and the chance to create something new.

He shopped the junk yards and the government surplus yards of many counties. Old discarded motors became grinders and buffing machines. Cast off metal scraps found new life as ornamental iron work. He “saved” good drill bits



Albert at Don Bosco Technical Institute (1998) with Fr. Carmine Vairo, President. Albert dedicated over 25 years of service to Bosco Tech.

from premature death and gave new life to discarded machines with new electric motors that he rebuilt himself.

If he made something out of metal, you could be sure of two things: it wouldn't be light weight and it wouldn't break. He admired a good design, quality materials and beautiful workmanship. He fixed many broken school chairs, but was not shy about telling you about how poorly they had been made to start with.

Albert enjoyed sharing a joke or a witty insight into life with others. He wondered about what was miraculous in "Miracle Whip" or what made French fries or French toast French. He enjoyed the strange mix of Italian and English that he heard in San Francisco and called it "North Beachiano." Most of the jokes he shared were in Spanish or Italian. On Thanksgiving Day 2002, the Salesians of Southern California gathered at Don Bosco Tech for Thanksgiving dinner.

Sharing half a dozen jokes at the end of the meal, Albert was the day's entertainment. His canon of jokes always had one or two about one of the world's famous dictators. That day he told us the never-before-published story of how Mussolini having gone to the beach to swim almost drowned, but was saved by a young man. Mussolini in gratitude offered the young man a large sum of money. The young man refused. He offered the young man a handful of precious stones. The young man refused. "What then can I do to repay you?" asked Mussolini. "Please, sir, I only ask one reward. Tell no one I saved Mussolini from drowning."

At his grave side, Fr. Dave Purdy, Provincial, offered this summary of Albert's life:

We may not know much about Albert, but I feel most of us are certain that he was a "Joseph figure"—a quite worker, a good Salesian worthy of the bread he ate and the eternity he now knows, humorous, content with not being the center of attention. Each of us can only reflect on how Albert revealed the love of Christ to others through his skills and talents...and his quiet way.

March 19, 2004
Feast of St. Joseph
Michael J. Gergen, SDB
Director

Brother Albert O. Coletto, SDB

Born: Almese, Turin, Italy
January 18, 1913

First Profession: Villa Moglia, Italy
September 12, 1933

Perpetual Profession: Dominican Republic
September 12, 1939

Died: West Covina, California
December 26, 2003



Salesians of St. John Bosco

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