

#1 November 15, 14 Telling the Nativity Story: through the decades 1864

As we approach 150 years of feeding body, mind, and soul at the Church of the Nativity, we start a monthly series of Nativity stories. Historical documents give us a choice between celebrating 150 years from 1864, the initial gatherings for worship for Episcopalians in the Lewis Clark Valley, or from 1873, the beginning of regular worship services in the Valley. Today's committee and vestry have chosen to celebrate 150 years from the initial 1864 gatherings of Episcopalians in Lewiston.

The Centennial Vestry and Centennial Committee chose 1973 as the Centennial date. Here are their written words:

"Tradition, backed by a few skimpy records, says that the initial meeting that would eventually lead to the founding of the Church of the Nativity, was held under a tree, near what is now 2nd St. between C and D streets." ¹

"The year 1973 was selected as a centennial year, not a 100 anniversary of the Church of the Nativity. Because of incomplete records, it is impossible to categorically state that the first service was held on some specific date in 1873, for there are accounts of visits by Episcopal priests as early as 1864-1865. And undoubtedly there were services, limited as they might have been, between then and 1873. ...But 1973 was picked as a centennial date because it appeared to be the year in which a decision was made to place Lewiston on the list scheduled for "regular" visitations by priests of the Missionary District of Montana, Utah and Idaho." ²

Based on best evidence, contemporary Lewiston historian Stephen Branting writes that:

"North Idaho's first Episcopalian service occurred in Lewiston on Christmas Day, 1864. Presumably under the direction of Reverend J. Michael Fackler, director of the Missionary District of Idaho." ³

And what did the Episcopalians encounter in Lewiston in the 1860s: the gold rush in Pierce and Orofino, creation of Idaho's territorial capitol, and the beginning of "Rag Town" as Lewiston was known. Our Centennial Booklet explained:

"The earliest serving church history, composed by the Rev. Everett P. Smith, indicates that the congregation progressed by degrees from underneath the tree to the Red Cross Hall. ... This would indicate that early-day Episcopalians worshipped in a variety of structures during the interim. Speculation is that a majority of these structures were log cabins, although Lewiston at that time had its share of large tents. ...during 1879-80 when the church was in the Red Cross Hall, 50 boys and 10 girls regularly attended Sunday school. There were only five adult communicants." ⁴

According to historian Margaret Allen: "Downtown...consisted of ten short streets—the east-west A through E and north-south First through Fifth. ...The Clearwater River gradually washed A street away. ... Later, Rev. J. D. McConkey, the first resident priest, in a letter, wrote: "Here will be found a free and easy people. They are perfectly indifferent in the matter of religion and religious teaching. If there be preaching or religious teaching, well and good. They will not seek it but when it comes they will not directly oppose it. They regard religion as a good thing in its place but not indispensable, for they live by the theory that they can subsist without it, although when they come to die or be buried they cannot do without its consolation." ⁵

One hundred and fifty years later, The Episcopal Church of the Nativity is still feeding body, mind, and soul and still burying and consoling latter day parishioners.

-- Deloris Jungert Davisson and Margaret Cole November 15, 2014

Endnotes:

¹ The reader will find a complete discussion of the choice dates between initial gatherings and the start of "regular" worship services for the Church of the Nativity in The Centennial Booklet printed for the 1973 celebration. P. 3

² Ibid.

³ Branting, S. D. "1864: North Idaho's First Episcopalian Congregation." Historic Firsts of Lewiston Idaho. Charleston, SC 29403 The History Press p. 55.

⁴ Boren and Campbell, The Centennial Booklet, p. 7

⁵ Allen, M.A. Lewiston Country Nezperce County Historical Society, Inc. 1990 p. 188

Works cited:

Allen, M.A. Lewiston Country Nezperce County Historical Society, Inc. 1990

Branting, S. D. Historic Firsts of Lewiston Idaho. Charleston, SC 29403 The History Press (2013)

Boren, Charles P. and Thomas W. Campbell. "The Mists of History." The Centennial Booklet (1983):



The Centennial Vestry and Centennial Committee
Charles P. Boren and
Thomas W. Campbell, authors of
The Centennial Booklet 1873—1973

How many of these parishioners do you recognize?

Telling the Nativity Story: through the decades -- 1870's into the 80's

This year, a CHRISTMAS TREE graces our sanctuary at 8th Street and 8th Avenue, and we begin the year-long 150th celebration of Nativity's ministry to body, mind and soul. Back in 1864, the tree at 2nd Street between C and D Streets provided a site for the Episcopalian Christmas service—according to best sources! It must have been an unusually warm December that Christmas when Rev. J. Michael Fackler, director of the Southern Idaho Missionary District, gathered those 19th Century Episcopalians, "Sheltered by a Tree".¹

There are two trees extant at Nativity's legendary "Christmas" tree site; neither tree can be the original tree, as neither tree is an indigenous Idaho tree. Oaks aren't native here. Nobody documented or photographed that 19th century tree, but we do have documents and photographs of many 19th Century Episcopalians in the Valley. Our story is about who they were and why they came to the Lewis Clark Valley—remember, history is written by the winners.

Our available sources, mostly church centennial pamphlets and writings by local historians, offer quite different stories about our first clergy persons and the first worshippers.² All sources do find that the first Episcopal priests were missionaries. And all the sources portray the first people as 1) miners passing through on their way to the gold fields, or 2) merchants supplying miners on the way to the gold fields.

Lineage of those first white people extends down the decades. Some stayed to participate in Episcopal worship at a series of locations. In 1879 church services were held at the Red Cross Hall. In 1880, they were at the Masonic Hall. But after Rev. John D McConkey became the first resident pastor, Lewiston Episcopalians finally worshipped in a genuine church, the Universalist Church! "It was in September of 1881 that the church acquired its first real estate, a log cabin on D St. between 4th and 5th St. ...But parishioners objected to a church at this location [near the hotels and saloons] and arrangements were made for a trade of property with John P. Vollmer, Lewiston merchant and communicant of the Church of the Nativity."³ Vollmer took the downtown lot in exchange for a lot at 11th and F Street where a real church was built. Its interior redwood paneling graced the church built there. Then in 1920 the church was pulled on skids up the hill to our present location at 8th and 8th. See photo below.

Today's Nativity has a visible connection to one of those first merchant families—the Vollmers. Author Steve Branting tells the story of the first child born to Sarah and John Vollmer on Tuesday, November 19, 1872. Her father was an entrepreneur who would by most accounts, eventually become Idaho's first millionaire [a prominent early merchant, banker, and Idaho benefactor.] In early September 1881, Evangeline became ill...and died. Reverend McConkey held the service in the Universalist Church where the Episcopalians met. The Nativity Window, moved from downtown to its present location, was given by John and Sarah Vollmer in memory of Evangeline.⁴ The window is the oldest relic of the church.⁵ There are more window stories coming soon.

This Christmas season we decorated our indoor Christmas Tree below Evangeline's magnificent stained glass window. The window still glows brightly and will all year for the 150th Celebration of The Episcopal Church of the Nativity. And we are grateful for that first nativity worship—"Sheltered by a Tree."

1 Oren and Campbell, The Centennial Booklet, p. 7

2 Earlier churches in Lewiston included the following: "This raw and boisterous mining town was much too preoccupied by other things to spend much time in prayer and contemplation. There was no regular house of worship at Lewiston until 1867, when the Rev. Joseph Cataldo built the first Catholic church. Some Presbyterians were holding meeting this time but the first Protestant church, the Universalist, didn't go up until 1869. The Rev. J. D. McConkey...arrived a Lewiston in 1881 as the first resident pastor of the Episcopal Church. " Allen, Margaret Day, Lewiston Country Nezperce County Historical Society, Inc. 1990 p. 187-8

3 Oren and Campbell, The Centennial Booklet, p. 7-8

4 Branting, S. D. Hidden History of Lewiston, Idaho. Charleston, SC 29403 The History Press (2013) p. 55-63

5 Oren and Campbell, The Centennial Booklet, p. 25

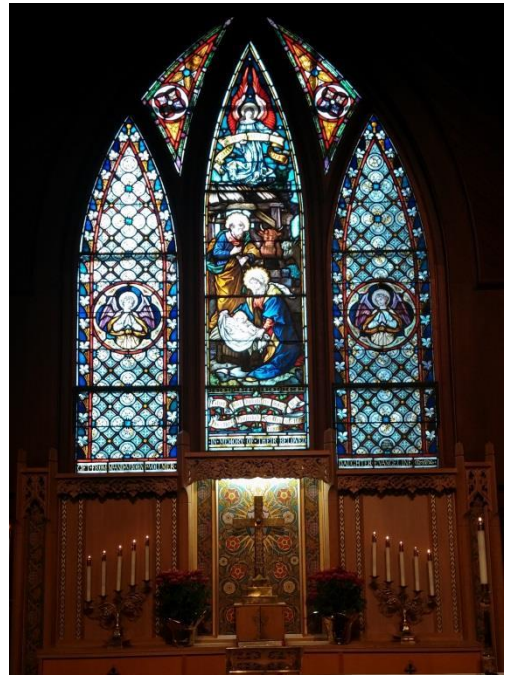
Works cited:

Branting, S. D. Hidden History of Lewiston, Idaho. Charleston, SC 29403 The History Press (2013)

Oren, Charles P. and Thomas W. Campbell. "The Mists of History." The Centennial Booklet (1983):



The church as it appeared when it stood at 11th and F Streets



Check out the inscription in the lowest panel of the window.