Bishop Edward O’Dea served as Bishop of Seattle from 1896 until his death on Christmas Day, 1932. His extraordinarily long tenure makes him a towering figure in the history of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest.

O’Dea was born in Massachusetts, but while he was still a young boy his family migrated west, settling in Portland. Mother Joseph became a family friend—as the story goes, during the building of St. Vincent’s Hospital Mother Joseph would go in each night after the workmen had gone home, to inspect their work with her expert eye, while a young boy—often “Eddie” O’Dea—carried her lantern for her. O’Dea was a regular altar server at Portland’s Cathedral where (according to a biography written for his Golden Jubilee) he faithfully assisted “since first his boyish tongue could master the Latin responses.” He was also an excellent horseman: his jet black mare Deerfoot was banned from competing at the Hillsborough County Fair after an unprecedented string of victories.

After finishing high school, O’Dea told Archbishop F. N. Blanchet of Portland that he wanted to become a priest. Blanchet decided to send him to Montreal where he and his brother A. M. A. Blanchet had prepared for the priesthood. In the summer of 1876, at the age of 19, O’Dea set off for the seminary, traveling alone, with a letter of recommendation from Archbishop Blanchet. He then served as secretary to Archbishop Gross for ten years before becoming pastor of St. Patrick’s in Portland. It was there that a reporter from the Oregonian came one evening in 1896 and banged on the front door. O’Dea put his head out of his bedroom window to see what the man wanted.

“We have a dispatch from Rome saying you have been appointed Bishop of Nisqually; have you anything to say about it?” the reporter shouted.

“I haven’t a thing to say, and this is the first I have heard of it,” O’Dea replied.

The rumors were true. On September 8, 1896, O’Dea was consecrated bishop at St. James, Vancouver. His installation liturgy was one of the most splendid the Northwest had ever seen, with five bishops and 85 priests present, and the P-I described him as “one of the youngest as well as one of the best-looking prelates in the United States.”

But O’Dea was tougher than he looked. He embraced his new task of missionary bishop, traveling up and down his vast diocese, which at that time consisted of 40 churches and missions scattered across 70,000 square miles—the entire state of Washington. Much of his time was spent on horseback. One of his priests, stationed in a remote corner of the diocese, complained of the isolation and hardship, so O’Dea invited him to take a few days off and join him on his rounds.

“I endured the stiff journeys for a few days through wind, rain and mosquitoes and the worst nights in vermin-infested and noisy lodgings,” the priest later wrote, “and then I begged permission to terminate my ‘holiday’ and go back to the comparative ease of my mission.”

O’Dea encountered every challenge cheerfully and creatively. He was so impressed with the choir of the parish in Cheney, one of the few choirs of any kind in the eastern part of the state, that he loaded the entire choir along with a wheezy portable organ into a wagon and brought them along on his pastoral tour of the region.

O’Dea was a gentle leader. Once, in conversation with a pastor, O’Dea proposed a particular way of doing things. The priest asked, “is this a command?” O’Dea responded, “I do not command any man.” Those simple words said everything about O’Dea’s quiet, effective leadership, which would encounter and surmount incredible challenges—including the building of a new Cathedral.

—Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy