Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

Seattle's pioneer priest, Father F. X. Prefontaine, is memorialized in Prefontaine Place, a rather untidy triangle in the Pioneer Square district, with a fountain that is seldom turned on. All but forgotten today, Father Prefontaine was famous in Seattle's early days. He was not only Seattle's pioneer priest: he was one of Seattle's pioneers, who, alongside the likes of the Yeslers and Dennys, helped to transform the settlement into a city.

Francis Xavier Prefontaine was born in Longueil, Quebec, in 1838. He was ordained in 1863 and just three weeks later set out to join Bishop Blanchet in Vancouver. Though Prefontaine spoke almost no English, he agreed to preach in English when the Catholics at Fort Stevens begged for some instruction in their own language. The following Sunday, the church was packed. Father Prefontaine gave his homily— "perspiring copiously during its delivery," he later remarked—only to be told afterwards that not a word of it was intelligible! Within two years Prefontaine was fluent not only in English, but also in Chinook jargon, and proved to be a remarkably effective communicator.

Soon, Bishop Blanchet assigned Prefontaine to Puget Sound. The vast territory for which he was responsible required much travel in wild conditions, and Father Prefontaine later loved to recount some of the dangers he had faced in those early days. On one occasion, he set up camp only to be flooded by rising water in the middle of the night. Climbing to higher ground, he settled down and slept. Only on waking did he find that he had passed the night in an Indian burial ground. On another occasion, two Native Americans urgently sought his assistance for what he understood to be a funeral. Only upon his arrival did he discover that he was to preside not a funeral, but at a wedding, which was disrupted when shots were fired through the window by a jilted lover—not an unheard-of occurrence in those days, since women were few and prospective bridegrooms were many!

In December, 1867, Prefontaine made his first visit to Seattle. It was an unprepossessing settlement at that time—of the 600 inhabitants, just ten were Catholic, and only three of those attended the Mass he offered on Sunday. Bishop Blanchet discouraged Father Prefontaine, famously dismissing Seattle as "a lost cause," but the young priest persevered. He made lifelong friends among the pioneers of Seattle and used his own money to purchase a plot of land at 3rd and Washington for a church. To save money, he cleared the ground with his own hands, and was himself the "superintending architect, carpenter, painter and decorator," as an early biography describes it. The Church of Our Lady of Good Help was completed in the fall of 1870. A year or two later, Father Prefontaine proudly hung a bronze bell in the church tower, cast by the Troy Bell Foundry of New York.

The original bell of Our Lady of Good Help Church hangs high in the Cathedral's south tower. Unlike the peal of six bells installed in 1994, which are controlled by a computer, the Our Lady of Good Help bell can still be rung only by hand.

Meanwhile, Prefontaine proved triumphantly right about Seattle. It grew slowly at first, but then exponentially. Between 1880 and 1890, the population leapt from 3,533 to 42,837—an increase of 1125.5%! Father Prefontaine was ready for the change. In 1877, he purchased an old soap factory, which the ever-resourceful Sisters of Providence converted into a hospital. In 1880, he invited the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary to open a school for girls in Seattle, and thus Holy Names Academy was established. In 1891, he started a school for boys which he soon handed over to the Jesuits—the beginnings of Seattle University.

Growth had other consequences, too. An economic recession in the 1880s led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, suspending all immigration from China to the United States. Acts of violence directed against the Chinese increased. In 1885, 28 Chinese immigrants were murdered by vigilantes in Wyoming, and the wave of violence swept west: in November of the same year, a mob drove out Tacoma's Chinese residents, and in February, 1886, it happened again in Seattle. The mob dragged several hundred Chinese residents of Seattle out of their homes, and dragged them towards the waterfront, insisting that they board the steamer *Queen*, bound for San Francisco. When the authorities realized what was happening, the bells in the city began to ring—including the bell of Our Lady of Good Help—summoning the Seattle Home Guard and the Seattle Rifles to restore order. But these small forces were ill equipped to deal with the mob, which had swelled to nearly 2,000. Martial law was imposed for ten days, and the stand-off ended with little loss of life—one of the rioters was killed, and several were injured. But the Chinese continued to suffer. Those who had not been forced aboard the *Queen* were offered passage on another outward-bound ship. Only a handful remained in Seattle. When the economy rebounded in 1887, the white settlers quickly forgot the descent into violence and prejudice—but not the Chinese. It would be twenty years before the Chinese population again reached the numbers of the early 1880s.

Eventually, inevitably, Seattle outgrew Our Lady of Good Help Church. When Bishop O'Dea was consecrated in 1896, Father Prefontaine wrote urging him to move his episcopal seat to Seattle. Prefontaine hoped that the ground he had cleared with his own hands would become the site for a great city's great cathedral. But Bishop O'Dea did not think it advisable to build his cathedral across the street from the "sporting house" of the notorious local madam Lou Graham. The land was sold, and a new lot purchased at 9th and Columbia. Thus the pioneer church did play a role in the building of a new St. James Cathedral—but not quite the role Father Prefontaine had expected.

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