

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 25: BELL FROM THE SECOND SACRED HEART CHURCH

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On the grounds of Sacred Heart Church in Seattle is a bell, no longer in use. This historic bell once hung in the tower of the second Sacred Heart Church. The bell was recast from the bells of the first Sacred Heart Church, dramatically destroyed by fire in 1899 (see #25 in this series).

The parish community wasted not a moment. Just three days after the fire, they met to talk about the building of a new church. Within weeks the ruins of the old building had been cleared away to make way for the new. The cornerstone was laid on August 11, 1899, and a year later the new Sacred Heart Church was dedicated.

A Detroit architect, Harry Rill, had been selected, and his “blending of both Roman and Gothic styles,” reported the *Catholic Sentinel*, “will make a very pretty effect.” The generosity of the parish and the broader community to the building of the new church was extraordinary. When Father Brown solicited donors for new stained glass, all except one window was paid for by the end of the first day. An unusual element of the new church was the double choir galleries—there was one above the main entrance for the adult choir, and another above the transept for the school choir. The latter were so expertly trained by the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary that they sang at the dedication Mass, with a 13-year old, Eleanor Nordhoff, at the organ!

The new church far surpassed the old in beauty, but it was not without its detractors. The Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle preserves two letters of complaint about the bell, which was rung by the altar servers (one of whom was Russell Ryan, father of our own Father Ryan) before each Mass. “Does it ever occur to you that your church bell is a nuisance to the neighborhood?” wrote an anonymous Belltown resident in 1905. “Any person who would be led to prayer, or in whose mind a beautiful thought could be aroused by the funereal tones of your bell, would be a saint indeed. . . . Why even the dogs of the neighborhood howl. . . all the time it is ringing.” Another letter arrived a few months later: “This morning your bell ringer forgot to ring his bell at half past 7 o’clock, for which the entire neighborhood was duly thankful. . . . really dear sir, why can it not be forgotten every morning? The bell is dismal sounding and unmusical and altogether an infernal nuisance.”

The second Sacred Heart Church was also destined to be



Above: The tower of the second Sacred Heart Church succumbs to a dynamite blast, March, 1929. Courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle. Below: The parish bell, is preserved on the grounds of the current Sacred Heart Church, adjacent to the Seattle Center.

short-lived. In 1910, what is known as Denny Regrade Number 1 leveled the western part of the hill on the waterfront side. As early as 1917, plans were underway for Denny Regrade Number 2, which would raze the eastern part of the hill—including the site of Sacred Heart Church.

In 1928, the property was sold. The parishioners were far from pleased. A poem addressed to the Sacred Heart church appeared in the *Progress*: “The hill whereon you, martyred, stand / Is soon to melt away / Before the onward march of trade / God of this newer day.” In September of that year, the Redemptorist priests moved to a new residence on Warren Avenue, and on October 12 the last Mass was offered in Sacred Heart Church. “The bell at Sacred Heart has sounded the Angelus for the last time,” wrote a parishioner in the *Progress*. “Denny Hill is coming down, and old Sacred Heart Church will fall before the wreckers. . . . We have lost our faithful friend. The Bell of Sacred Heart has sounded its own requiem.”

The church itself was demolished in March of 1929. The walls came down easily, but the cross-topped bell tower (minus the bell, which was preserved) was another story. It refused to give way to the wreckers, and stood alone on what remained of Denny Hill for several days. The Sisters of Mercy asked the wreckers to remove the cross before collapsing the tower, but since the stairs to the tower had already been removed, their pious request was denied.

The builders had done their work so well that it took “four terrific dynamite blasts” to bring the tower down. One of these blasts was so powerful that it sent fragments of brick all the way to Fourth Avenue, but when the dust cleared, the tower was still standing, “badly battered but seemingly proud of its tenacity to life and tradition.” But at last it fell. The headline in the *P-I* read “Spire, Defiant, Is Humbled.” An extraordinary series of photos captured the tower’s collapse, and was reprinted in newspapers as far away as Montreal. It was time for Sacred Heart to rebuild yet again, but the Great Depression and a war would intervene before the next Sacred Heart Church would rise.

Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy

Want to learn more? Read *Journey of Faith, the illustrated history of the Archdiocese of Seattle*, available in the Cathedral Bookstore.