

# Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 37: SPIRE OF HOLY ROSARY, TACOMA

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On April 29, 1965, a 6.5 magnitude earthquake struck western Washington. South Seattle sustained the worst damage: thousands of chimneys collapsed in West Seattle, and at the Rainier Beer headquarters in Georgetown a large brewing tank came loose from its foundations, spilling two thousand gallons of beer. In Tacoma, the quake toppled the cross atop the spire of Holy Rosary Church, a Tacoma landmark with a long history.

St. Leo the Great, Tacoma's first parish, was the city's only church for many years. Not until 1891, at the request of the German-speaking Catholics of Tacoma, did Bishop Junger establish a second parish in the city, to be staffed by the Benedictines of St. Martin's Abbey in Lacey. The story is told that the people could not agree on which saint to honor in the naming of the new church, and were contemplating calling it "All Saints" when Abbot Bernard of St. Martin's came to visit in June, 1891, just before the new church opened. He was presented with a bouquet of roses, and suggested the name "Our Lady of the Holy Rosary" which was promptly adopted.

Soon the tiny church was bursting at the seams—in 1892, there were 78 baptisms. The new church served more than German-speaking Catholics. On January 4, 1894, Henry Crosby and Catherine Harrigan were married at Holy Rosary—the future parents of Bing Crosby.

In spite of the rapid growth of the "City of Destiny," Holy Rosary parish constantly struggled to keep the church and school going. And yet, they needed to expand. In 1921, under the leadership of Father Mark Wiechmann, OSB, a new church was built to accommodate the growing community. The beautiful Gothic structure with its 210-foot spire was designed by an architect and parishioner of the church. (The same plans were used for Assumption Church in Bellingham.)

The parish was in debt even before the new church was built; afterwards, the debt seemed insurmountable. Though parish clubs were constantly raising funds, the debt had not been significantly reduced when the stock market crash of 1929



**Above:** The spire of Holy Rosary Church, Tacoma (1921), a city landmark that is clearly visible from I-5. **Below:** Henry and Catherine Crosby were one of the first couples to be married at Holy Rosary—pictured here with their famous son Harry "Bing" Crosby, Jr. *Courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle.*

heralded the beginning of the Great Depression.

During the Depression, the Benedictine Sisters at the school established a hot lunch program, and waived tuition for hundreds of poor families. The parish conducted regular food and clothing drives. Needless to say, the parish struggled mightily under the burden of debt, as so many parishes did during the Depression. When Bishop Shaughnessy visited in 1937, the church—just sixteen years old—was in bad shape. "The church... is nice looking, but inside is undecorative and is practically a sieve at all window joints and at many other places around the eaves," he wrote in his report on the visit. "The musty, damp smell that assails one's nostrils upon entrance into this church is most marked." Not until World War II brought new jobs and increased prosperity to Tacoma did things turn around. Finally, in 1946, the parish debt was paid off.

August, 1966 marked seventy-five years since Holy Rosary Parish was established and the parish celebrated this occasion with due solemnity. The centerpiece of the celebration was the raising of a new cross on the church steeple, replacing the one the earthquake had toppled the year before. Father Mark Wiechmann, who had built the new church in 1921, was there to see the cross raised into its place—aged 91! There was Mass with Bishop Gill and "a ham and roast beef dinner" followed in the school hall.

Bing Crosby, the parish's most distinguished former member, was not able to come in person, but he telephoned during the dinner, a call which was broadcast throughout the auditorium. Crosby sang "Ave Maria" in memory of his parents, reminisced for a while, and ended with "Swinging on a Star" from one of his most famous films, *Going My Way*. The festivities concluded with a torchlight rosary at 10:00pm and Benediction in the church.

That steeple visible from the interstate crowns a church with a long and rich history.

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*