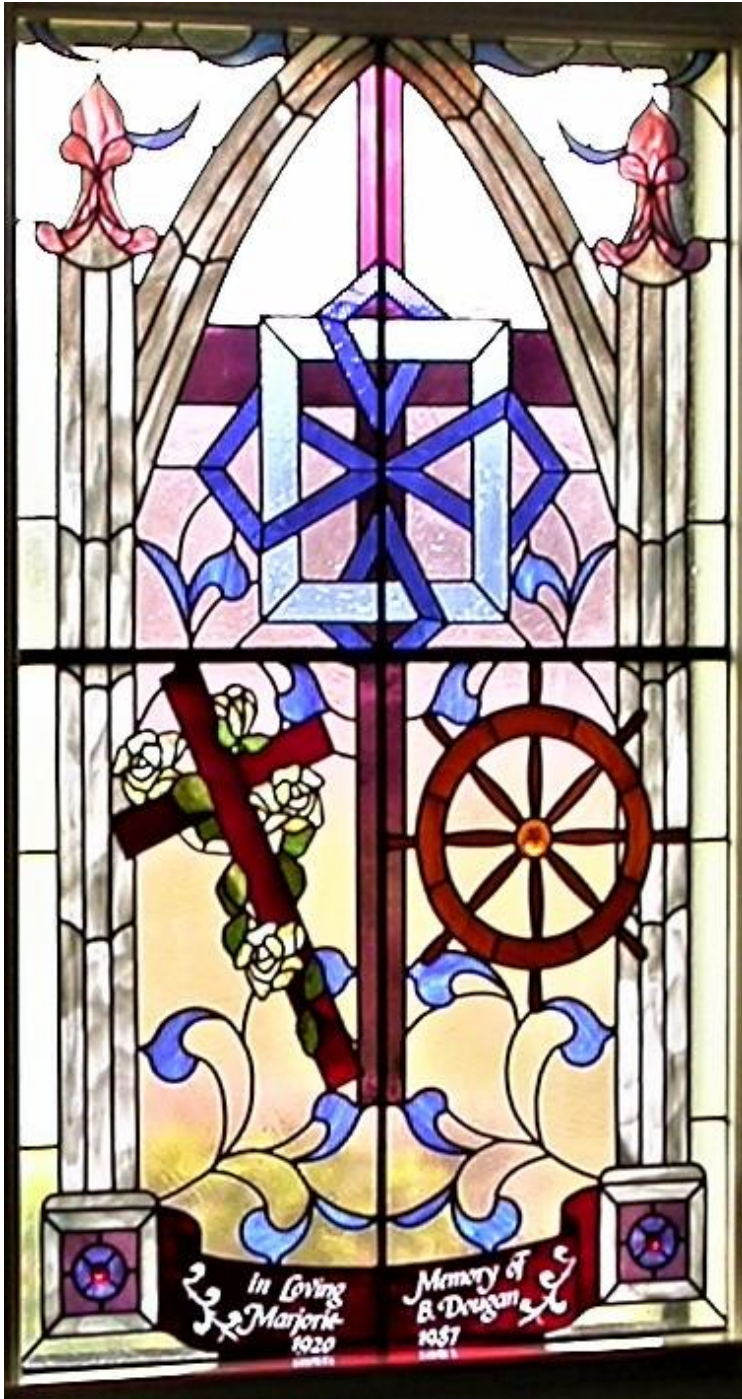


PIONEER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ON CLATSOP PLAINS, OREGON



A BRIEF HISTORY OF PIONEER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH by Rev Dr. Douglas Rich

Those who pioneered the territory of Oregon often did so in spite of the reputation of the land: "It is said that Mr. McDuffe in a speech in the United States Senate halls in 1843 declared that the [Oregon] country was barren and uninviting; that he would not give a pinch of snuff for it for agricultural purposes; that a railroad to it could only be made by tunneling through 500 or 600 miles of mountains; that if there were an embankment of only 5 feet to be removed, he would not consent to the expenditure of \$5.00 to remove it to enable the population to go there, and finally closed with the thanking of God for His mercy in putting the Rocky Mountains as a 'perpetual barrier' to such an inhospitable region" (Dorothy Baerveldt, 15-16).

The next year (1844), another Congressman had this to say about the territory of Oregon: "Of all the countries on the face of the earth, Oregon is the least favored by heaven. It is the mere settlings of creation. Russia has her Siberia and England her Botany Bay, and if the United States should ever want a place to which to banish her rogues and her scoundrels, the utility of Oregon would be manifest" (Baerveldt, 16).

Jason Lee, a missionary from the Methodist Church, arrived in Oregon in 1834 and set up his headquarters in the Willamette Valley. At his prompting the Methodists, in May of 1840, sent

The Rev. **Joseph H. Frost** to take up his ministry at the mouth of the Columbia River. His ship, the *Lausanne*, was piloted upriver to Fort Vancouver by **James Birnie** of Astoria. Once he arrived at the fort, Frost met with a group of churchmen from the interior settlements. Among those men was **Solomon H. Smith**, a Methodist layman.

In July of 1840, Frost and another Methodist minister, the Rev. **Daniel Lee** (nephew to Jason Lee), left Vancouver and traveled down to the mouth of the Columbia in a canoe with two Indian guides. Like Lewis & Clark, 35 years before them, Frost & Lee visited first the Chinook people on the north bank of the river, but decided on settling with the Clatsop Indians on the south bank of the river. There, unlike Lewis & Clark, they purchased, rather than stole, a large canoe from the Clatsops, who, along with the Chinooks, were considered the premier boat builders among the Indians. Lee departed for his ministry among the Indians at the Dalles, and Frost moved his family to the Birnie home in Astoria.

Frost's wife, **Sarah**, wrote in one of her letters back home that Birnie had warned them, "Don't go to those Clatsop Indians; they will kill you," but her husband replied, "I am under orders and must go and shall consider myself immortal until my work is done." Her husband explained to the Clatsops that "they must not kill, or steal, or lie, or commit adultery; they must love God, and love each other. They promised to do as he said, and they literally kept their word as long as we remained among them. They never showed any rudeness or indignity to us. They willingly assisted us in

building the mission house. I mention these things to show that they were not as bad as represented, except in the matter of infanticide—many of the female children were destroyed” (Atwood, 91).

In August of 1840, Solomon Smith, who had married **Celiast** (the daughter of the Clatsop Chief **Cobaway**) in Vancouver, moved his family to Clatsop Plains. Frost and Smith became good friends and together they built log dwellings about five miles south of the Columbia River. A mission house was constructed about a mile north of their settlement along what became Smith Lake; this was replaced by **W.W. Raymond** two years later with what was the first building of milled lumber, brought downriver from the Hudson’s Bay Company at Fort Vancouver.

In the spring of 1841, the Rev. **William W. Kone** arrived to become an assistant to Frost. Kone also built a home on Clatsop Plains and, as did the families of both Frost and Smith, his wife and children remained with the Birnies in Astoria while it was being built. When the men moved their families into their new homes, they came by canoe across Young’s Bay, up the Skipanon River and through the marshland and timbered land to the plains; the trip took two days.

In Frost’s book, Ten Years in Oregon, he expresses his feelings at this time: “My cause is before the Lord, and I would fully confide in his wisdom and goodness, to preserve me and mine, although in the Indian country surrounded with intense moral darkness, and to guide us in the way that will be acceptable in his sight” (quoted in Miller, 166).

The Indians promised they would attend worship services at the settlement, but few ever did.

Early missionaries used what was called “Chinook Jargon,” which was a mixture of many Indian dialects with French and English words. Chief Cobaway, with his wives and slaves, may have attended and, if so, probably because of the influence of Smith’s wife, who also was Cobaway’s daughter. His daughter, Celiast, known as Helen among the settlers, was a bridge between the two cultures; she became an interpreter and spent much of her time working with Indian wives and children and helped soften the stiff behavior of the white “Boston men” (so named by the Indians because of their tall ships that sailed out of Boston).

Kone did not adjust well to life among the Indians and his wife’s health was bad, so the Methodist Superintendent, **Jason Lee**, finally had him reassigned to the Virginia Conference in November of the same year he arrived at Clatsop Plains. Dissatisfied with the progress of the mission to the Indians, the church replaced Lee in 1843. In 1844, the new Superintendent, **George Gary**, sold the mission farm, buildings and cattle at the Clatsop station and had Frost reassigned to the New York Conference.

Solomon and Celiast Smith, however, apparently remained in their home on the plains where he had many careers: missionary, first public school teacher, millwright, merchant and Oregon State Senator. As far as I can tell, the Smiths became Presbyterians when this church was organized. They are buried in our cemetery. In my tenure here as pastor, I have had the privilege of meeting one of their great, great grand-daughters (**Diana Jean Parks**) and one of their great, great

grandsons (**Richard Basch**), both of whom are leaders in the Chinook Nation.

At the time of the founding of the **First Presbyterian Society of Clatsop Plains** back in 1846, there were only 95 white people in Clatsop County (Miller, 105). Life here required hard work and eager enterprise. Potatoes for seed were purchased from James Birnie, trader of the Hudson's Bay Company post in Astoria or from Fort Vancouver and paid for in kind when the crop was harvested. Wheat had to be taken 140 miles by canoe to Oregon City to be ground into flour, a round trip which was both arduous and hazardous. Some ground their own flour in coffee mills. Tea, coffee and sugar could be obtained at either the Smith or Birnie stores. Salmon and potatoes were the staple articles of diet during the winter, but waterfowl were hunted during their migration, when the skies would be filled with game birds—especially geese—and their deafening cries. Berries were picked, dried and used as a substitute for hard-to-get sugar. Clams, elk and bear were hunted in season, but early settlers could gather mussels from the lower part of Haystack Rock almost any time, just as long as they were covered by the tides daily to remain healthy.

Among those early pioneers were the following interesting people:

Eldridge Trask and his family settled near the Smith cabin in 1843, where he raised cattle, horses and sheep; he later moved to southern Oregon and became the subject of a novel, *Trask*, written by Don Berry in 1960.

William Hobson believed Clatsop Plains to be a land of milk and honey. He kept bees, planted the first

berries and was the one who sent to England for Scotch broom to beautify his place back in 1843. From there he and his family, fascinated by the blooms of the plant, spread them to other parts of Oregon. Forty years later Scotch broom was sold to the U.S. Government for use at Fort Stevens to hold the sand in place. Soon the broom lined the highways and gave our county the nickname of "The Golden Trail." It grows in abundance!

Philip Gearhart, for whom Gearhart is named, moved to the present site of that city in 1849 with his family of four children in a big Chinook canoe and set up housekeeping in a log cabin.

Henry Weinhard started a one-man brewery in Astoria in 1856 and today it's still going strong, although its headquarters has been moved to Portland and the family sold the company back in 1979.

The First Presbyterian Society of Clatsop Plains was established in 1846. Its first pastor was Rev. **Lewis Thompson**, who was a cousin of Captain **William Warren**, after whom Warrenton was named. Thompson graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. He was opposed to slavery, and left his native Kentucky after freeing the slaves who were kept on his father's estate. He found the views supporting slavery no different in Missouri, so he joined the wagon train of 1844 to migrate to the Oregon frontier. Once here, he took up a land claim located just south of our present church property.

One early member of the congregation, **William Henry Gray**, came west with the Whitman party in 1836 as a lay worker. In a trip back east for supplies, Gray was captured by hostile Indians, robbed of all his possessions and turned loose to make his

way as best he could without the aid of his Indian guides, who had been killed in the skirmish. After serving with **Marcus Whitman** at Wailatpu (near present-day Walla Walla, WA) and with **Henry Spalding** at the Lapwai Mission (near present-day Lewiston, ID), Gray migrated to the Willamette Valley, where he worked with Jason Lee at the Salem Mission. Gray participated in the meeting of western settlers at Champoeig in 1843, when they voted to join the infant United States. Somewhere around 1845 he filed on a Donation Land Claim on Clatsop Plains. Once again he made a trip east, this time to purchase sheep for his farm. Just a short distance from home a sudden storm overturned the barge in which they were traveling and all of his sheep drowned.

Gray had been a Presbyterian in his home state of New York, and invited Rev. Thompson to preach a sermon in his home on September 19th, 1846. Invited to join in worship were friends and neighbors, among whom were **Alva & Ruth Condit** and **Robert & Nancy Morrison**. Other members soon joined them and their meetings alternated between the homes of the Grays and the Morrisons for the next four years. The Smiths were among that circle of friends.

Nancy Morrison wrote that she did not think very much of the idea of moving from their home in Missouri to Clatsop Plains, but "since Robert desired it" she agreed to the sale of their farm and made the necessary preparations for the journey west as cheerfully and thoroughly as though it were her heart's desire. She spent many hours in the loom house weaving cloth for clothes for the entire family to wear on the long and arduous journey

ahead of them. The job completed, she carefully packed some raw wool, a packet of flax seed and her spinning wheel. She was described by others in her party as being "an angel of mercy." In addition to caring for her own family, Nancy Morrison nursed the sick, shared her food with families whose supply ran out, comforted the dying and prepared their bodies for burial. When one of the mothers died en route, Nancy provided for her six children until they could be left to the care and safety of the Whitman Mission. Nancy quipped she had not slept in a house for the entire eight-month journey.

A Baptist missionary, the Rev. **Ezra Fisher**, came to Astoria in the fall of 1846 and moved to Clatsop Plains in the spring of that next year. He joined Rev. Lewis Thompson in organizing a Sunday school in the log house built by the Methodists and in which Solomon Smith was the teacher of the public school on week days. Fisher established a Baptist church at Smith Lake and also one near the present site of Gearhart.

By 1850 it had become apparent that a permanent meeting place was both necessary and desirable. Robert Morrison gave a "bond deed" (a copy of which is on the church history wall), by which he donated one acre of land for a cemetery and four acres for a church. At that time, Morrison had no legal title to the land, simply because no agency of government existed in the new frontier which could bestow fee-simple ownership. Morrison later received a patent to his land signed by President Grant in 1869 (a copy of which also is on the church history wall). With the title to his land secure, Morrison made good on his bond to cede the land to the church. Later it was found

that part of the land ceded had been in Nancy Morrison's share of the claim, but the family quickly corrected this oversight.

William H. Gray had been trained as a cabinet maker and he contracted to erect the first building in 1850. It stood on the site of the present church building, and was 20 feet by 30 feet, complete with pews and windows, painted on the exterior and cost \$1,500! A model of the church building, which may have been built by **Robert S. MacEwan**, is in the fellowship room. The original building housed the gathered congregation until 1873 (23 years), when a severe windstorm demolished it.



Also in 1850 a cedar log that had been washed up on a nearby beach was hauled to the Morrison mill, where it was cut and the lumber used by MacEwan to construct a pulpit. Captain William Warren's wife, Emma, obtained permission to

move the pulpit into the Community Presbyterian Church of Cannon Beach when it was dedicated in 1931. It made its way home in the mid 1960's, where it was refinished by members **Dorothy and Rex Stalcup** in 1979. It is the one still in use today.

The need for a cemetery did not arise until 1850, when a sailor's body was washed up on Clatsop beach and another young man was killed in a gunshot accident. This prompted the Morrison family to give a plot of land for the cemetery and the terms of their gift specified that anyone could be buried in it with no charge. Additional land was purchased later. Maintenance was provided by community members and included cutting back the prolific grass and Scotch broom and repairing damage done by vandals. By 1940, maintenance had become too great a task for the church, and a legislative act passed that year deeded the cemetery property to Clatsop County, who imposed a modest tax to pay for the upkeep by the County Road Department. One of the conditions of the change in ownership was that there would be no further burials unless the person to be interred had been a resident of the county prior to Oregon statehood in 1859. A plot map of the existing graves was made in 1976, but many others, about whom little is known, are buried here in now unmarked graves. They silently represent the kind of people who had the courage, strength, and persistence to settle this rugged Pacific Northwest coast.

A new building, largely the gift of **Alva and Ruth Condit**, was constructed to the east of the present building at the bottom of the hill. This

building lasted until 1929 (56 years), when it was torn down.

The present building was constructed beginning in 1927 and was dedicated in 1929. The projected cost of the new building was \$15,000 and seemed out of reach for the small, rural congregation. They began construction nonetheless and willing members provided labor early in its building. The three-foot-thick walls of the foundation were the result of these early volunteers. The completion of the building was made possible by a donation of \$10,000 by the Gray's daughter, **Mrs. Jacob Kamm**. As a result of her generosity, the sanctuary was named the "Gray Memorial Chapel." The basement provides space for the Christian education program and kitchen facilities for church functions. Offices for the staff on the main level were later additions in 1967.

The sharp, lean lines of the new building's steeple—characteristic of many New England chapels—did not allow a bell to be hung in it. For 20 years after it was built, there was no church bell to ring people to worship. At the end of World War II, the Alderbrook Presbyterian Church in Astoria was converted into an apartment building and the Columbia River Packer's Association was hired to remove their bell. When the people who had bought the bell discovered it was not solid brass, they backed out of the agreement. The crane operator did not receive cash payment for his work, so he accepted the church's bell as a substitute. The crane operator's name happened to be **Chester Bell**, and he mounted it at his Clatsop Plains home to represent his name. He donated it and its housing to Pioneer Presbyterian Church in 1949. It was located in back of the

church, but in 1967, when the offices were added, it was moved to the front of the church and its housing was replaced. It still rings today.



At about this same time, the practice of building a 40-foot cross of daffodil blooms on our front lawn at Easter time was begun. Neighboring daffodil farmers pinched the blossoms early in order to increase the size and health of the bulbs they sold. These blooms, which normally were thrown away—were used to construct the cross. Today the church raises its own daffodils in order to continue the Easter tradition.



As you face the chancel in the sanctuary the instrument to the right is the reed organ. It was manufactured in 1905 by the Estey Organ Company of Brattleboro, Vermont. It originally was built as a pump organ, but was made electronic before coming to Pioneer Church. The **Tagg-Fertig families** purchased it in 1949 from a church either in Grays Harbor or in Willapa Bay in memory of their mother. The family paid to overhaul it in the late 1980's. The instrument to the left is a Kurzweil digital piano donated by **Barbara Richards** in 2001.



The Celtic Cross on the chancel wall was built by **Les Buntin**. Several women of the church, led by **Ethel Mecklem**, constructed banners for the Six Great Ends of the Christian Church: (1) Proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. (2) Shelter, nurture and spiritual

fellowship of the children of God. (3) Maintenance of divine worship. (4) Preservation of the truth. (5) Promotion of social righteousness. (6) Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.



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The Stained Glass Windows Artist: Andrea Mulkins Weir

Andrea writes, "Many years ago I was introduced to the time honored art form called glass painting. It added a whole new concept to my drawing and painting, the addition of working through light. For many years I have pursued this career."

She was born in Astoria and was raised in Oregon. Her grandfather was a bar pilot on the Columbia River, and from him came her love of nature and the sea. Her mother and grandmother both were quilters, and their ideas of color and patchwork also influenced her art. Her studio is located in an old wooden boat barn in Ocean Park, Washington.

In all of the panels the children are active; they are youth and strength, the energy of the future. On either side of the three panels there are different trees to represent coming from coast to coast.

In panel A, they hold the tools of building. The pick, the plane (also a symbol of Joseph being a carpenter), the nails and hammer. They are here to build in their new land. Their clothing is worn, but clean and patched, they have been through much more than we can ever imagine.

In panel B, Jesus has calmed the sea. In the lower section of the window there is a woman giving water to an old man, this to represent the giving nature of those early pioneers. Also a mother and child represent family.

In panel C, one man mends his nets, this to represent the fishing of the coast as well as the fact that Jesus called us to be fishermen. Near him another watches the sea, with glass in hand. In front are two children, one petting a lamb the other looking at the boat on the horizon.



Andrea Weir: "In the foreground are the items of communion: wheat and bread, grapes and the chalice. Behind the grapes is the Bible, the written Word of God. Marking the open page is a ribbon holding a key, which is knowledge of the Word. On the outer column is a butterfly, representing rebirth and resurrection."



Andrea Weir: "In the foreground is the rock, conveying the permanence of the Church. Here rests the anchor, representing hope and steadfastness, securing us to the community of faith. Waves dash the shore, but the anchor and rock remain solid. In the very foreground are strawberries for righteousness and violets for humility."