

Saving the Historic Windows of Petaluma's First Presbyterian Church

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In 1885, the recently formed Presbyterian congregation of Petaluma built its first church on what was then, Kentucky Street. Gracing the perimeter of their white clapboard church was a translucent bracelet of ten stained glass windows. In the spring of 1963, the now-old, wooden structure was torn down and the congregation moved into a contemporary, cement-block church on upper B Street. Although the windows were saved from destruction, a decision was made not to design them into the architecture of the new church. Instead, it was decided to temporarily stack the windows on their sides in a hen house, at Jim and Carol McDowell's Ranch, on the western outskirts of Petaluma. Forty years later, after being exposed to the destructive effects of lead sagging, wood rot and chicken dustings, the windows have been re-discovered.

This is their story.

It is a tremendous good fortune that the windows of First Presbyterian Church have been saved. Over the years, time has taken a withering toll on stained glass throughout America. There have been ghastly instances where re-locating congregations have decided to ground up their old stained glass windows and pour the fine, rainbow-like dust into new, concrete foundations. Here in Northern California, the scarcity of pre-1900 stained glass is particularly acute; much of our early stained glass was smashed during the Earthquake of 1906.

Among the stained glass windows found are: five memorial windows; one front double-door transom sign; three opening windows and a window with a Biblical lyre. They are inlaid with both deep, bold colored-glass and sublime, opalescent-glass, which was invented by John Lafarge in the early 1880's. The manufacturer and exact installation date of these windows may never be known. We can only approximate. The church records make no mention of the construction of the church.

The windows behold an inspiring view into our past. Of the five individuals who are memorialized on the windows; four of them are from Pioneer families. They are, generally, forgotten people. Their lives; however, played major roles in the formation of Sonoma County and, indeed, our nation.

The Petaluma Courier reported the first mention of the windows on February 11, 1885: *“Services were held in the new Presbyterian Church last Sunday. It is a very neat, cosy little church and unlike any other church in the State. The chandeliers are very pretty and light it up well. The stained glass which is being put in the windows will add much to its attractiveness.”*

In that year, 1885, Petaluma was still an upstart frontier town. Its 5,000 residents exceeded the population of Santa Rosa. The West was still considered wild: it would be yet another five years until the census declared, “The Frontier is now closed.”

Time progressed and eventually the tinder-dry edifice outlived its function. Early in 1963, the old church collapsed under the blows of a demolition machine’s claw. Only a cross, some furniture, and the stained glass windows were saved from destruction.

Bill Symons, who in his earlier years painted the church with his father, gave hint to the character of those who constructed the church. He recalled that while painting the steeple, he saw “84” carved into its western pinnacle. He also said that, “During the demolition no one at church seemed interested in saving anything”.

So Bill decided to saw off the hand carved scroll works and the moldings that he had painted in years past. He gave the pieces to Earl Bond, who lived nearby. Bond’s home subsequently burnt down and the artifacts were consumed in the fire.

The earliest death memorialized on a window is for Scottish immigrant, and church charter member, David Stewart. The weekly newspaper misidentified as him as “Daniel”. The death of this agricultural pioneer was reported in The Petaluma Weekly Argus, March 3, 1888, below the headline, “Another Good Citizen Gone”, and captures the melancholia of a fading era.

“Daniel Stewart, one of the largest and most respected farmers in the neighborhood of Lakeville, died on Friday evening of last week. The announcement of his death was a surprise, as it was not generally known that he was even ill. Mr. Stewart was a native of Scotland and 68 years of age at the time of his death. He had lived many years on the place where he died, and was universally esteemed for his probity of character and many sterling qualities as neighbor, friend and father. He was a Deacon in the Presbyterian Church of this city and accounted one of its most valuable and reliable supports. His funeral which took place from that church on Sunday, was one of the largest ever witnessed in this city. Thus it is, one after another of our most valuable friends are passing hence.”

Perhaps, the most artistic and poignant of the windows, featuring a spray of Easter Lillies, is the memorial for Jennie M. Roberts. She was the deeply beloved, 16 year-old,

daughter, of Petaluma's pioneer merchant family, Hugh and Harriet Roberts, residents of Oak Street. Mr. Roberts initially worked for Mr. G. P. McNear before engaging in business for himself. For years the Roberts conducted a grocery and feed store on Kentucky Street and later in East Petaluma. We do not know the cause of Jennie's death in 1890. The parent's reaction to the loss of their child; however, endeared them to the community, as they became renowned civic benefactors.

Mr. Roberts' death was front-page news for two consecutive days in 1917. Excerpts from his eulogy by, Rev. J.S. Watson, bespoke well of the man and the virtues of his time. It read in part:

"By his patience, perseverance, determination and industry he overcame disappointment, discouragement, disaster and defeat and finally arrived at a position of wealth and influence. By his honesty and uprightness and integrity he won the respect of all who had any dealings with him. His kindly and genial nature endeared him to all.

Hugh Roberts was successful as a businessman, but he never allowed his business affairs to eclipse the higher interests of life. He ever remembered that life is something more than buying and selling; he did not allow the lesser things to crowd out the great things. He emphasized the things that are more excellent. He had earned the Master's scale of values.

Brother Roberts was born and brought up in Wales and was imbued with that firm grasp of truth and tender mysticism, which are characteristic of the Welsh people. He was a man of deep religious convictions, of earnest faith and simple piety. A charter member of this church, he loved this house of prayer and attended regularly on all the ordinances.

He was ... was generous to a fault and always ready to contribute to any worth cause. To his enterprise and faith, to his liberality and labor, we in this church owe much today...The primary department room of our Sunday school was built and furnished by Mr. And Mrs. Roberts in memory of their only child... Each year after leaving Petaluma... at Christmas-tide, he sent a very substantial sum to be used for the Sunday school children"

The William Carter Hinshaw Memorial Window is in remembrance of yet another wealthy pioneer family's child, who predeceased his parents. William was almost 29 in 1893 when he died of, "Hepetitis and Gastritis". He was the last surviving child of William Pettis and Sabrey Carter Hinshaw. Two older siblings had died decades before, within months of their birth. His death, like most of the other memorial windows, was front-page news.

His father, "Pet", was a 49er, who came to California from Surry County, North Carolina with the argonauts. In the early 1850's, he returned to the East and in 1857 married his first cousin, Sabrey. That same year, the Hinshaws returned to California in an oxen cart, pushing livestock ahead of them from Missouri. Later, the couple would make a fortune in dairy and Petaluma real estate. When William Pettis died in 1900, he was one of the wealthiest men in Sonoma County and the second largest taxpayer in Petaluma. The Petaluma Daily Courier described him as, "peculiar, bordering on the eccentric." He was a hard working, flinty man of whom it was reported, "dressed poorer than the humblest laborer. When he came to town his carriage reposed in the barn, while he sat astride his old white mare or rode on his lumber wagon. He cared not much for the world and never left his ranch except on business."

Sabrey, an extremely generous woman, died at 83 years old in 1914. She resided in two beautiful residences on Keller Street hill. Upon her death, she left 1,000 acres of the home ranch at Bloomfield, worth more than \$100,000, for a fund, "which will be given to the poor of Petaluma and which is to be carried out on the same plans as the Mecham Relief Fund."

Such a fund could have reasonably generated millions of dollars in charitable donations to the poor in the 91 years since her death, and still be worth many more millions of dollars today; however, it was not to be.

Two years after her death, in 1916, The San Francisco Examiner, reported, "Mrs. Hinshaw's Will Is Broken By Heirs":

"Petaluma, May 20. - The estate of the late Sabrey Hinshaw, a wealthy woman of this county, has been settled by a compromise of the heirs. A trust clause in the will of Mrs. Hinshaw was held void by Judge Seawell. Mrs. Hinshaw directed that land valued at \$100,000 be set aside for the poor of the city and named J.R. Denman and H.B. Higbee of this city as trustees. The land will now go to the heirs. Mrs. Hinshaw's estate was worth \$300,000."

The Arthur Lloyd Dean Memorial Window reveals itself with an entry penned in the church's Book of Minutes dated, February 5, 1899, "Arthur Lloyd Dean, Killed at the Battle of Manila." Following the end of the Spanish-American War, in December 1898, there was a tense standoff between the once-allied Philippine irregular army and U.S. soldiers. On the night of February 4, 1899, there was an incident in which American soldiers shot and killed Philippine soldiers. Corporal Arthur Dean was killed that night, too, and the date marked the beginning of a little-known, three-year insurgency war in the Philippines.

The shock that this news brought to the City of Petaluma is captured in the lyrical reporting found in the Petaluma Daily Courier. Selected excerpts follow:

"... The news has cast a gloom over the city and has caused deeper anxiety to overcast those who have son, brothers or other dear ones at the front and Petaluma is represented at Manila by over a score of brave boys... The local friends of the young soldier saw the fatal list and the parents and brother were informed. The parents were almost prostrated by the news, and the mother, who was continually worried over the safety of her boy, can scarcely be made to realize her son's death. The family home on Fair Street was thronged with friends who however could do but little to assuage the sorrow of the stricken ones... Arthur Dean was the eldest son of Mr. And Mrs. C.F. Dean of this city and was a native of Lapear, Michigan, aged 24-years. He came to California with his parents and for the last three years has been an engineer at the Petaluma incubator factory... Two days ago his parents received his photo from Manila, taken in his Corporal's white uniform. To them it is now a priceless treasure... When he went away he was told by Mr. Byce that a situation would be open for him on his return home. His brother, Leslie, works at the incubator factory and when seen today by a Courier reporter, was silently weeping at his workbench in the tinning department. He dreaded to go home. He confirmed the news and stated that the name on the death roll was undoubtedly that of his brother... little else than the young soldiers death was heard on the streets today. Young Dean was a quiet, unassuming young man, a regular attendant at the Presbyterian church and was esteemed by all who knew him. The blow comes unusually severe as the war fighting was supposed to have been all over with, and our boys on foreign shores, safe from danger."

The last of the individuals memorialized on a window was another strong member of the agricultural community, a Canadian immigrant and a pioneer, John Martin. The Church Minutes record that he, "Drowned in the Eel River."

In the days preceding the newspaper's story of the 56-yr old's death in 1901, the papers were filled with reports of a freakish storm, bearing tornado-like winds. According to the Petaluma Daily Courier, Mr. Martin was one of our most respected and esteemed pioneers, having resided in the area for thirty-five years. He was an early dairyman before moving to town and building a home. He was reported to be interested in the "Percival (sp?) Mills", at an unspecified location.

Today, forty years after being exposed to the vagaries of a "chicken-coop crypt", the historic stained glass windows of First Presbyterian Church await needed restoration. They are fragile vaults, clinging onto the legends of our past. The proud witness they have preserved of early Californians is only beginning to be told and, with proper stewardship, will resonate for ages to come.

If you would like more information, or would like to help restore the windows, please mail your comments and donations to:

First Presbyterian Church
C/o Stained Glass Restoration
939 B Street
Petaluma, CA 94952