

CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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FATHER F. X. PREFONTAINE AND THE LOST CAUSE

When we think of Catholics in pioneer Seattle, we think of Father Francis Xavier Prefontaine. It was Bishop Modeste Demers of Vancouver Island, however, who offered the first Mass in the tiny settlement. It was August 22, 1851, and the place was Yesler's cook-house, on a makeshift altar prepared by Arthur Denny. The assembly was highly ecumenical, considering that Bishop Demers was probably the only Catholic present! All listened attentively to the Bishop's sermon, which was on the subject of charity.

In 1865, a young Father Prefontaine was assigned to ministry in Puget Sound, following in the footsteps of another pioneer, Father Luigi Rossi. He was responsible for Steilacoom, Cowlitz, Olympia, Seattle, Port Townsend, Whidby Island, Port Madison, Port Gamble, and Whatcom. Seattle had grown somewhat in its first dozen years of existence, but it still seemed an unlikely prospect. When Father Prefontaine offered his first Mass there on November 24, 1867, only two people attended! Bishop Blanchet urged Father Prefontaine not to waste his time in Seattle, for as a mission center it was, he said, "a lost cause." But Father Prefontaine was never one to listen to advice, even when it came from a bishop. He begged and pleaded and was finally granted permission to build a church in Seattle, provided he did not go into debt.

Our Lady of Good Help, the first Catholic Church in Seattle, was the result. It was located on Washington Street, between Third and Fourth Avenues. It measured 20 feet by 50 feet. Father Prefontaine himself cleared the ground on which it stood, and he also served as "superintending architect, carpenter, painter and decorator," as Father Metz described it in his biography of Father Prefontaine. Little by little the city grew, and Father Prefontaine's ambitions grew right



Traveling alarm clock which once belonged to Father Prefontaine. Presented to Father Ryan by Mary Kay Fitzgerald.

along with it. He became an important figure in the civic community, and he was instrumental in bringing the Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary to Seattle. The hospitals and schools run by the Sisters were a source of pride for the entire city.

—Corinna Laughlin

In our next issue:
Bishop Junger and the Race to the Finish

MY CATHEDRAL

I served many Masses through the years (I came up through ranks)

including funeral and wedding masses. I remember one Sunday novena in particular. I was eleven years old, by this time an old hand at the different services. I lit the charcoal for the censer (incense burner) in preparation for the usual Sunday novena at 4:00pm. At 3:45pm I was informed that due to unforeseen circumstances, the Novena was cancelled.

So I locked up and went home. The next day I was informed by the sacristan that I had almost single-handedly burned down St. James Cathedral. John Hession (who was the sacristan at the time—and an unending fount of Cathedral history) with a great sense of humor, couldn't resist watching me squirm when I was told about the smoke pouring out of the sacristy windows, or all the fire trucks that responded to the smoke. I thought I was going to jail for arson!

Well all that was just a lot of smoke... literally! I had forgotten to douse the charcoal in the water bucket (which I hadn't known existed at the time!). A lot of smoke, but thank God, no fire, and a valuable lesson learned.

—Jerome Kohler

St. James Cathedral Grade School, 1965-1969

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