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ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH. A BIT OF HISTORY

This year our church, St. Mark's Episcopal Church of Casper, Wyoming, is one hundred years old. Happy Birthday, St. Mark's! And may your second century of sacred worship to God the Father be as eventful and productive as was your first. It was not always smooth sailing through those pioneer times in this desert West of ours. St. Mark's had to survive trials exceeding even those of our climatic extremes of winters' cold and summers' heat. We had to survive a the great depression, a survival neither easily nor quickly accomplished. We helped our country survive two devastating major wars and two more wars called lesser ones. But on a positive parochial note, we built three churches for our congregation during our first one hundred years here in Casper, one after another, beginning with a humble frame structure in 1891, then a larger brick church in 1907, eventually culminating in the magnificent, truly beautiful house of God we now occupy, and have since its completion in 1925, the prettiest church in town some of us say. But the claim we like best to make, the one that pleases us at this centennial time, is that we Episcopalians were the folks who established the first church in Casper. The story goes this way.

A man named Talbot came to our fledgling cow town in the summer of 1890. A special man, this, for he was the first Episcopal Missionary Bishop of Wyoming (along with part of Nebraska and Idaho), the Rt. Rev. Ethelbert Talbot, and he came for the purpose of organizing an Episcopal congregation in this frontier town not yet two years old. An early step in this attempt was his offer personally to contribute \$500 toward the erection of a structure suitable for a church and, if the community subscribed a like amount, he would loan them another \$500. Pretty good stake offer in 1890 dollars! But also a pretty hearty undertaking in this infant town still stumbling along toward identity. Bishop Talbot worked on fund raising himself, even going personally into the saloons of Casper to importune proprietors for financial support, and he got it! A man well adapted to the pioneer West. By November enough money had been collected to turn attention to the building of this first little Episcopal church. It was a frame building whose erection was contracted to the Douglas firm of Brenning and McFarland for a sum of \$750--although eventually the total

cost of this church building must have run to about \$1,500. Work began in January, 1891, and the church was completed that summer.

Although earlier there had been a tabernacle, at least for a time, St. Mark's was Casper's first ordained Christian church. It was located at the corner of Wolcott and Second Streets, a location later to be occupied by the Wyoming National Bank building. Amongst contributors recorded in the annals of this first church (not necessarily saloon keepers!) are names familiar to parishioners of the present-day St. Mark's. The Hon. George Mitchell, first mayor of Casper, is one such; and also A. J. Cunningham, B. B. Brooks, Wilson S. Kimball and Peter C. Nicolaysen. Mr. Brooks, a rancher, was later Governor of Wyoming. Messrs. Kimball and Nicolaysen, who in those earliest efforts were members of the "Bishop's Committee" (i.e., Bishop Talbot), became vestrymen of St. Mark's, and much later (1948 or '49) were elected life members of the vestry.

The first priest to serve St. Marks was the Rev. F. H. Argo who came sometime in 1891. Three years later, 1894, Father Argo was succeeded by an Irishman, the Rev. John Wilson, who came directly from the auld sod, a good soul but a misfit even in his native land, perhaps assigned here because the church powers didn't know what else to do with him. Thus what happened might well have been predicted. It was not long before the dear man was disillusioned by the hard work, the meager income and indeed what he felt were uncertainties of existence in this rough and rugged frontier settlement. And indeed, he was not universally admired by the congregation. At least one parishioner ruefully remembered him mostly for "his unshined old shoes turned sharply up at the toes as if much too large, and clothes likewise disreputable." The parishioner said further, "He and his wife and young son must have nearly starved while they were here in spite of the plentiful fish and game given them frequently by some of the parishioners." Father Wilson stuck it out for nearly four years, but then he pulled up stakes to return to his beloved Ireland, apparently with little or no warning. In that parishioner's opinion, "The Bishop had given up on him as impossible and had him recalled." During the six months that followed church services in the struggling mission were few and far between, these few handled by laymen, an occasional deacon, or once in a while the Bishop himself, when he

could manage to be in Casper.

But came 1898, and with it the Rev. James L. Craig, recent graduate from an ecclesiastical school and on his first assignment, but in one opinion, "a fine, earnest young man." He arrived as a deacon but was soon ordained to the priesthood. Most certainly, Father Craig was made of sterner stuff than the Irishman for his pastorate extended until 1908, i.e., a ten-year period.

One landmark event came early in Father Craig's time when in 1899 St. Mark's Guild was organized to assist the rector and care for the altar. This must have been a live wire group, for suppers to raise money for the Guild were well attended not only by St. Mark's parishioners but by people of other denominations and even a few cow hands! Had it not been for the money raised by this organization the rector would at times have been short of salary. Then there was St. Mark's Synergae, organized somewhat later, 1908, with Mrs. Julian Lever as first sponsor. Original members constitute a roll of still familiar names: Helen and Evelyn Wallace, Maren Nicolaysen, Irma Patton, Ethel McGrath, Hazel Adams, Isabelle Wheeler, Hazel Conwell, Gretchen Brennamen, Nell Grieve, Gladys Phillips, Leone Blackmore, Edness Kimball, Ina and Violet Lever. They raised money for the church by bake sales, teas, luncheons, and dances, all of which were held in the old Parish house. Interestingly, the first social event held in that little white frame church, Casper's first church wedding, was the marriage of Mr. W. T. Evans's daughter, Clementine, to Peter C. Nicolaysen.

It was also during Father Craig's time that a major physical improvement of church building was effected. Under the urging of this same W. T. Evans, Clementine's father--a contractor then building a school at First and Durbin Streets and a jail on David--the original frame church, then nearly fifteen years old, was moved to the back of the lot and the erection of a "neat brick church" begun. The brick church, said to seat 200 people, cost \$8,000. It was completed in mid-1907 and dedicated on Thanksgiving Day. That the occasion was considered pretty special is attested by the presence, amongst the clergy attending the dedication, of the great Arapaho priest, the Rev. Sherman Coolidge, who preached at the evening service. (Father Coolidge would later become a canon of St. John's Cathedral in Denver.)

Father Craig, following a long and productive ministry in Casper, was moved north in 1908 to Montana. For an interim several months the congregation was ministered to by the Rev. Mr. McCullough, an archdeacon who came every few weeks and conducted services. Later in 1908 the Rev. J. C. Villiers, an Englishman said to be unusually well educated, with a fine and talented family, was assigned to St. Mark's and remained for some five years. It was during his time that a choir is first mentioned, "several young girls of the community who served ably," with names easily recalled to this day: Helen and Evelyn Wallace, Irma Patton, Edness Kimball, and Gladys Phillips. Gladys Phillips married and became Gladys Bon. (It was only a year or so ago that this dear lady passed away.) In spite of Father Villiers relatively long tenure there were some who thought him as incapable of building up the church as had been the Irishman! Yet Father Villiers was successful in his next parish in Hawaii at Maui, a parish he served for the rest of his life.

Out of Wilson S. Kimball's memories comes an amusing anecdote, an event that happened during Father Villiers time in Casper but which mainly concerns the Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Nathaniel Seymour Thomas, second Missionary Bishop of Wyoming, by then in charge of this diocese. The Bishop had just completed a two-month trip by team and wagon through the Big Horn Basin and Yellowstone National Park. Leaving the wagon in the care of his teamster, he proceeded by train to Casper where he asked Father Villiers to accompany him to Glenrock on church business. They stayed at the Kimball Hotel in Glenrock, operated by Wilson Kimball's mother, where, as Mr. Kimball said, "the Bishop learned that I was about to drive with my family down to Glenrock and he asked me to take along my gun and get him some sage hens to take home to his wife. I was glad to do it and was fortunate enough to get him five nice young birds. At breakfast next morning the Bishop asked what kind of gun I had used. I explained that it was a common double-barrel 12-gauge which I got by saving Horseshoe tobacco tags." It seems that the Bishop had a new Remington shotgun, a repeater then new on the market, "which he offered to show me after breakfast."

The Kimballs: Wilson, his mother and his wife, gathered in the hotel's

lounge where the Bishop demonstrated the gun, pointing out near the end of his explanation that if you wanted but one shot it wasn't necessary to run it through the magazine; you had only to insert it directly into the breech, like so. And taking a live shell from his pocket he demonstrated just how you opened the breech thus, inserted the shell into the barrel like so, closed the breech--then you cocked the gun thus, and pulled the trigger. The trouble was that the Bishop did these things with that loaded shell in the chamber, and it worked! Bang! The Kimball daughter had just come down the stairway seconds before, directly in the line of fire. She escaped being hit. Her brother was nearby, but he was not hit. Matter of fact, no one was injured except the Bishop--whose mental anguish was monumental as he sat and moaned over and over, "Oh, what have I done?"

Well--he had done nothing, really, except to put a neat one-inch hole through a nearby partition, and nick a couple of pieces of furniture! Yet Bishop Thomas's contrition was enormous and it drove his mind to the possibility of publicity. He worried that the newspapers would make such a story of it he'd never live it down. But Wilson Kimball concludes the story, "As a former newspaper man, I went directly to the editor in Glenrock and, as well, to the editor of the Tribune in Casper. To each of them I told the the whole story in confidence, along with a strong plea that it not be published. It never was. And for my part, I didn't re-tell the story for some forty years, by which time I figured it could do no harm."

At St. Mark's Rev. Villiers was followed by the Rev. R. B. W. Hutt who served the church for four years (1914-1918) during which period our parish first became self-supporting, notable accomplishment indeed. It can be conjectured that the discovery in 1912 of major oil fields in the Salt Creek vicinity had a definite effect for good in this, helping the prosperity of Casper in general and that of St. Mark's parish as well. Father Hutt left St. Mark's when he went into the army in May of 1918.

Rev. Hutt was succeeded by the Rev. Phillip Knox Edwards, D. C., who commenced his service in February 1919. The following year a major developmental step was taken by Dr. Edwards and the St. Mark's vestry. The oil boom was in full flower, good times were being enjoyed by all, and the

decision was made to sell ~~for~~ the lots on which the two churches stood (the frame building and the brick church), and with these funds to purchase a new property located at the southeast corner of Seventh Street and Wolcott--which is, of course, the land on which our present church stands. The lots sold for \$75,000, testament to the relative prosperity of 1920. The brick church was razed, but the still serviceable frame church was moved to the new location and served as our house of worship until the St. Mark's of today was completed in 1925.

Plans and preparations for the erection of a new church were made under the guidance and direction of Dr. Edwards and Bishop Thomas. Thus came our present St. Mark's, whose cornerstone was laid in the summer of 1924 and whose completion was substantially realized in the following ten months, which is to say that our present church became our place of worship in 1925. Some sources say the cost was in the range of \$140,000, but the Bishop's office lists the following items making up the entire establishment: Land \$17,000, Church \$120,000, Rectory \$10,000, Parish House \$10,000, Church furniture \$8,000, for a total of \$165,000. Good bit of money in the middle '20s! To put it in perspective one might try comparing to today's prices. If one were to assume an inflation factor of only 3 1/3% per year since 1935, then 1935's \$165,000 is represented by today's \$1,000,000. If one used the more realistic factor of 4 3/4% per year, that 1935's \$165,000 becomes \$2,000,000. Such calculations, however, are rather theoretical. There is something, however, that the past 55 years has not changed. The dimensions of St. Mark's church remain just as they were in 1935. And here they are: length--from the west entrance wall to the window behind the High Altar--110 feet; Width--the nave exclusive of side aisles--32 feet; Height--floor of the nave to the peak of the roof--56 feet.

Dr. Edwards, who in his thirteen years at St. Mark's had accomplished so much, was struck down by illness in late 1932 which compelled him to go to the Pacific Coast in hopes of regaining his health. It was not to be, and some months later he passed away. His ashes are interred beneath the High Altar of St. Mark's.

The spiritual care of the parish passed into the hands of Rev. Joseph D.

Saltar in 1932. He served as St. Mark's rector for five years, until the end of 1937. It was during Father Saltar's term that the first decisive steps were taken to allay the substantial debt that hung over St. Mark's head as a result of having been built to relatively grand proportions at great cost! Some folks at the time had felt the church was over-built. Of course, for its time, that might have been. But it seems a good wager that most of us feel now that its size was the result of some noble far-seeing by the two men most responsible for its concept, Dr. Edwards and Bishop Thomas.

Reduction of the debt was continued by Father Saltar's successor, the Rev. Nelson L. Chowenhill, who came to Casper as our rector in January of 1938, and remained until mid-summer of 1942. It was during his time that a program of beautifying the interior of St. Mark's was undertaken including the installation of a new High Altar. Also during the Chowenhill era came the charter crisis, on which he must have spent considerable time even though resolution did not come until a few months after his successor, Father Hitchcock, had arrived. The next paragraphs attempt to describe what might be called the charter crisis.

Now, many of us may not think something called a corporate charter is involved with our church. But there is such a thing, and without it the church's operation cannot legally be run. A crisis of unknown proportions and importance occurred when St. Mark's charter was revoked by the Governor of Wyoming in January 1939. Was such an act politically motivated or was it the result of oversights in the business operations of St. Mark's? A moot question! At any rate, the difficulty was not resolved until 1943. The minutes of a vestry meeting held 28 December 1943 describes steps taken to resolve this problem.

At that meeting, Father Hitchcock introduced Mr. Fred W. Layman who informed the vestry that negotiations with Wyoming's Secretary of State had proved it impossible to re-instate our corporate charter. In view of this, Mr. Layman had filed with the State Treasurer new articles of incorporation which would accomplish its re-instatement. He read the proposed By Laws of the new corporation and suggested that it was now in order to elect a temporary chairman to serve until a full slate of officers were chosen.

Father Hitchcock was elected. His term was deucedly short, however, because of what followed immediately--the vestry elected the required full slate of officers by naming the old officers of the now defunct corporation. These were: Father Hitchcock, president; Capt. W. H. James, Senior Warden; Claude M. Ayres, Junior Warden; J. B. Reuter, treasurer; Lin Hopkins, secretary.

Having once again a full legal slate of officers available, the vestry voted in a further action that the legal title of the new corporation henceforth would be: "The Rector, Wardens, and Vestrymen of St. Mark's Church, Casper, Wyoming;" a set of By-Laws was adopted, as was a resolution recognizing the replacement of the old charter by the reorganized corporation, which corporation would be entitled to make binding agreements commencing 20 December 1943. This so, the resolution assumed and adopted "all rights and liabilities accrued, created, or assumed by members of the Parish of St. Mark's Church of Casper, Wyoming," between January 1939 and December 1943. Thus, to all intents and purposes, the 1943 vestry assumed the debts accumulated during the period January 1939 to December 1943 and set the stage for their repayment. Thus was extinguished and put to rest *the crisis*--if a crisis had indeed existed.

September of 1942 came the Rev. Canon Marcus B. Hitchcock.

THE PRIESTS OF ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL

1. F. H. ARGO. . .1891-1894
2. JOHN WILSON. . .1894-1897
3. JAMES L. CRAIG. . .1898-1908
4. J. C. VILLIERS. . .1908-1913
5. R. B. W. HUTT. . .1914-1918
6. PHILLIPS KNOX EDWARDS. . .1919-1932
7. JOSEPH D. SALTAR. . .1932-1937
8. NELSON L CHOWENHILL. . .1938-1942
9. MARCUS B. HITCHCOCK. . .1942-1952
10. ROBERT CORE CLINGMAN. . .1952-1955
11. E. THOMAS RODDA. . .1956-1965
12. ARCH M. HEWITT, JR. . .1966-1969
13. KENNETH H. KINNER. . .1970-1977
14. RICHARD STUBER. . .1978-1980
15. SAMUEL M. BURNS. . .1980-1984
16. JON CRAWFORD. . .1984-1985
17. ROYCE W. BROWN. . .1986 TO PRESENT

An explanation. . .

Background information from which to write a history of our church is sporadic and incomplete. I have had to depend upon scattered written testaments, beginning with an opus sent to the Bishop of Wyoming by someone signing himself simply, "Your Registrar," which document purports to contain all information on the Episcopal Church in Wyoming as of January 1, 1951. In extending this history to the present day I have used several undated, unsigned commentaries, plus information (usually incomplete) from minutes of Vestry meetings of the years since 1951. I strove to keep "creative writing" to a minimum although in some instances a bit of such was necessary for the sake of continuity. Thus, for whatever gaffes appear, I beg the patient indulgence of readers more knowledgeable about St. Mark's than I.

Bruce Sloan
