

THE ORGANIZATION AND FIRST PASTORATE OF THE FIRST  
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF WALLA WALLA,  
WASHINGTON\*

The remark is not an infrequent one that "history repeats itself," meaning that the current events which go to make history occur again after an interval of time; this is true in a general sense but seldom in the exact or scientific meaning of the phrase. In the narration of history, however, there is necessarily some repetition, particularly that of a single institution or individual; and the narrative of the organization and life of the First Congregational Church of Walla Walla has been told before and cannot be changed materially in the retelling. But upon the fiftieth anniversary of the organization of the church it is very fitting that the story be repeated and memories refreshed as to the events of the past.

The honor of organizing the first protestant church in the County of Walla Walla is claimed by both the Congregationalist and the Presbyterian denominations. As an introductory chapter to the history of this particular church brief inquiry might be made concerning the growth of the religious idea in this Walla Walla Valley. It would be of some value to inquire whether, as stated by some, Capt. William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in the years 1805-6 told the story of the divinity of Christ to the natives of the Shahaptin family of Indians hereabouts. It would be of interest to know the religious beliefs and influence, if any, of the various gentlemen fur traders of the Hudson Bay Company in charge of the commercial establishment known as Fort Walla Walla on the Columbia River from the year 1818 on to 1856. It would be well, even if not profitable, to inquire as to the permanency of the missionary labors of Dr. Marcus Whitman, whose was the ruling mind in the first Protestant religious organization in this Valley at the Waiilatpu Mission on August 18th, 1838; and it would be courteous to mention the work of Father Chereuse, the Roman Catholic missionary who some years later followed Dr. Whitman as a resident religious teacher and erected the first building devoted to strictly religious work in the Valley. Mention of the religious teachings and visitations of Rev. Cushing Eells, one of the honored founders of this church, while a resident at the Whitman Mission Donation Land Claim six miles west of this city would complete the chapter, aside from some pertinent inquiry into any possible influence of his missionary associate, Rev. Henry H. Spalding, who came

\*A paper read at the anniversary service on January 2nd, 1915.

to this valley about the same time as did Father Eells and made his home here for nearly three years, but seemingly was not active in religious work. In fact an entire paper might be written in answer to this inquiry.

The First Congregational Church of Walla Walla was formally organized on New Year's Day, 1865, but the proceedings on that day were merely the consummation of activities during the year 1864 by one man, Rev. P. B. Chamberlain, who came here from Portland, Oregon, in April, canvassed the field and made preliminary arrangements for the use of a building to preach in, then returned to Portland and again arrived here with his family the last of May, 1864. For the proper historic setting let us review briefly the conditions existing here in Walla Walla in this year 1864 when Mr. Chamberlain arrived.

Walla Walla in the spring of 1864 was enjoying or enduring, whichever may be the more proper word to express it, the sixth year of its existence as a community. It was then the most widely known and the largest city in the Territory of Washington; in fact retained that prestige until after 1880. This prominence then arose from its unique location with relation to the rich mining camps and districts that had developed along the streams and among the mountains of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. With the discovery of gold in this interior country people (men, not women) hastened into it literally by the thousand, and many passed through Walla Walla along one of the main lines of travel. Walla Walla was an outfitting point for these mining camps and the trade center for all the small settlements that were taking form in what we now know as the Inland Empire. Pack trains outfitted here and wended their way to distant Montana and British Columbia, to the Clearwater and Salmon River Districts and the Boise Basin in Idaho, and some to the Powder River and Owyhee Districts in Southeastern Oregon. There were other outfitting points to be sure; The Dalles nearer to water navigation from Portland, Umatilla City or Landing, which in 1863 had as large a population as Walla Walla, and Lewiston, then the capitol of the Territory of Idaho; but Walla Walla was the favorite locality for returning miners and prospectors to spend the winter, because of its usually mild weather, favorable to the tent life and the miserable building protection of those days; because of its location in a fine agricultural valley where food was plentiful for man and beast; because of its military post and Indian agency, and its comparatively regular connection with the outer world.

Physically, in 1864, Walla Walla was a rambling collection of wooden shacks used for temporary living and business purposes. The residences were located within easy reach of, and for the most part to the south and west of its main thoroughfare, first known as Nez Perce street,

none of them constructed with a view to permanent convenience or comfort. Its business was practically confined to one long street lined with store buildings, which with four exceptions were all built of wood, nearly all of one-story in height, with walks of uneven grade along their fronts and street of miring mud or flying dust according to the weather. There has been exhibited recently a photograph of that Main Street taken during that very year, 1864, the oldest known photo taken during the frontier period, and the scene reproduced is certainly not artistic. You are not unfamiliar with the sight of a six-year-old urchin belonging to some unkempt family and permitted to play in the streets, with torn clothing, uncut hair and nails, begrimmed hands and face, and to such an urchin the six-year-old town (proudly labelled a CITY) of Walla Walla in 1864 may well be physically compared. The population of the city at that time was about three fourths of a thousand, and the southern or "secesh" sentiment was by no means small. That was the year before the close of the war between the states. The business done was very large in proportion to the population, because so much of it was with mining camps and outside communities.

Morally, Walla Walla in 1864 was quite low down the scale of civilization. The town was overrun with thieves, gamblers and women of the demi-monde, particularly during the winter months when this class of humanity flocked here from the larger cities of Portland and San Francisco. "The hounds are coming" was the common street parlance when they began to arrive, for the purpose of course of reaping their annual harvest from the reckless prospectors or miners. Business houses kept their doors open on the Sabbath as on the other six days of the week and the saloons and gambling houses flourished without restraint. Shooting and death were not uncommon events and attracted very little attention. Walla Walla was as lively and wide-open a town then as the frontier West has often produced. This is partially explained by the fact that there were very few families here then.

Educationally and religiously Walla Walla in the Spring of 1864 offered little attraction as a home for a new comer. There was no public school house here then and the instruction of the children was by itinerant teachers in rented rooms without prescribed course of study. There was a county school tax and a superintendent, but the county then embraced all of the Territory of Washington lying south of Snake River, (Asotin, Garfield, Columbia and Walla Walla counties of today) and the few school houses (of log construction) were located in the outside farming communities. The school money available for Walla Walla was turned over to one of the itinerant teachers, who gave instruction free as long as it lasted and then charged a tuition fee for the remainder of the year.

These were called "subscription schools," and the highest attendance reported then was about seventy-five.

As to churches the pioneer sects, Methodists and Roman Catholics, had been organized almost from the beginning of things here in 1859, the latter earliest perhaps because of their friendly relations with the Indians through the residence of Father Chereuse on what came to be known as the St. Rose Mission southwest of the city in 1853-4-5. Catholic services were then being held by Father J. B. A. Brouillet in a building upon the same block now used by that sect, and earlier than that services had been held, I am told, in a very temporary structure built of slabs without floor, and with a roof of poles and shakes, that stood at the corner of Third and Birch Streets, adjoining what was then the burying ground in Walla Walla. The Methodists (Father Berry first pastor, followed by Rev. John Flynn but just then without a resident pastor) owned and worshipped in a small building upon what is now the corner of Alder and Fifth Streets, nearly opposite the Hall of Records on the Court House Square. There were, as has been said, very few families then living in Walla Walla proper. The men of family were more generally scattered through the Valley engaged in farming and stock raising. Church attendance was very, very small. Into this kind of a community then about the 1st of June, 1864, with his family and library, came Rev. P. B. Chamberlain, from Portland, Oregon; where he had been residing without pastoral charge for two years following a service of four years in the pulpit of the First Congregational Church of that city, and proceeded individually to the work of organizing a church. It should be plainly understood that Mr. Chamberlain came upon his own initiative, without any call from church members residing here, without the promise of missionary aid, without even the good will of many of the church he served in Portland, at his own risk and with only such means as he obtained from the sale of his property in Portland. He had literally burned his bridges behind him. Rev. Cushing Eells, familiarly called Father Eells, who had resided on the Whitman Donation Land Claim continuously since the spring of 1861 and during two summers prior to that, knew of the troubles in the church at Portland and he did not invite Mr. Chamberlain to come, although joining heartily in the work with him when here; but Rev. G. R. Atkinson, then the pastor at Oregon City, and Mr. Chamberlain's successor at Portland, had in 1863 temporarily joined the army of gold hunters and spent a summer in the mining district of Idaho and had passed through Walla Walla both going and returning and probably had made some suggestion in the matter. However, here arrived Rev. P. B. Chamberlain, in the fortieth year of his age, in full vigor of mind although of rather frail body, a keen thinker and writer, well educated, fearless in

speech, well informed on the topics of the day, determined to organize a church of the Congregational form of government in the semi-Godless city of Walla Walla.

The progress of events connected with the organization during the seven months remaining of the year 1864 can be told in a very few words. The rented building used by the county for a court house had been burned during the brief period of Mr. Chamberlain's absence in Portland and he found himself without any hall in which to preach. The "Washington Statesman" printed on June 3rd, 1864, contains the follow item: "New Church—Rev. P. B. Chamberlain (Congregationalist) has purchased the building known as Ryan's Hall at the upper end of the city and intends to fit it up as a church. Mr. C. has brought his family with him and intends to locate permanently here." Ryan's Hall was a one story saloon and dance hall standing in what is now First street between Main and Alder, and later in the same summer seems to have been purchased by the city council in order to open First street for travel. Mr. Ryan is mentioned soon after as one of the purchasers of the famous Stone and Ball's Saloon further down the street. This purchase by Mr. Chamberlain, if ever completed, does not appear to have been used by him. The necessity for an income upon which to live, combined with the evident lack of school facilities, caused him to change his plans to meet the existing conditions. With his good wife as assistant, he planned to start a "subscription school" and negotiated the purchase from Mr. B. N. Sexton of two lots and a small house situated on the North side of what is now Rose street, just in the rear of the present commodious corner house (occupied now by Mrs. Thompson), at the corner of Second and Rose Streets, which you pass every day in taking your constitutional to and from the present post office building. Just beyond this corner residence will be noticed a smaller dwelling, which has been added to and repaired in many ways, but in its original form stood upon that corner lot, and was one of the best residences in Walla Walla in 1864, built by Mr. I. T. Reese and by him sold to Mr. J. H. Blewitt. The small shed or stable in the rear of this residence was the building which was set on fire on July 11th, 1868, and brought seeming calamity to the existence of this church, as will be later mentioned.

The Sexton dwelling was one of the half dozen houses then standing on the northerly side of Mill Creek near Second Street. It was at once refitted by Mr. Chamberlain for the use of his family. But upon the vacant lot toward the Blewitt house he at once erected at his own expense a one story frame building forty feet long by twenty-six feet in width, enclosing one room suitable for both religious and educational purposes. This was finished sufficiently for school use by the first of September, and

fitted with benches, desk and a small melodion for church use by November, and a formal service of dedication was held in it on the 13th of November, 1864, and in that building the First Congregational Church was formally organized and the first communion administered on the first of January, 1865, which event we now celebrate. When the building was entirely completed, six months later, the following entry appears on the records of the church; "By the time this was done I had expended of my own means in all \$3500.00, the church and lot costing about \$2300.00. So it now stands consecrated to God, as all property should be. I leave it to Him to be refunded or not as He may at some future time move the hearts of the children of men to desire to do. Walla Walla, W. T., June 29, 1866, P. B. Chamberlain." In sorrow be it said that in actual money this was never repaid to him.

It was P. B. Chamberlain who sounded the strong note of belief in God and of punishment for sin and of Sabbath observance and kindred themes and stirred the people to think seriously of their responsibility to a Divine Being. He made it both interesting and profitable in Walla Walla to attend divine worship. And when on the 11th of January, 1868, scarcely two and a half years after its erection, this little church was burned to the ground through the carelessness of some boys with firecrackers, the men of the street without regard to race (there were quite a number of Jews in business in Walla Walla then), avocation or religious belief, spontaneously dug down into their bags of gold dust and subscribed nearly four thousand dollars toward the purchase of a lot and erection of a new church building, so that the church records again read under date October 12th, 1868, scarcely three months after the fire: "New church dedicated yesterday, in all respects a fine building, costing in all, including lot, grading, fence, sidewalk, stoves, furniture & organ, about \$4,700." And this was the building which so many years occupied the now vacant lot on Second street at the corner of Rose street, and which has been the scene of many events precious to the memory of the more recent membership of the church, and in which the funeral services of Mr. Chamberlain himself were held in November, 1889. This building has been moved and now stands facing Division street at the corner of Isaacs Avenue, and is known as Olivet Church, and used for Sunday school purposes. It has been remodeled to some extent, but when erected was the largest church building in the city, and during later years Father Eells presented the bell which hung in the tower. Both the earlier building and this one were known to many as "Chamberlain's Church" rather than the Congregational church and many of those who donated to help build it expressed their objection to having the lot conveyed to the

corporate body of the First Congregational Church, but considered their donation as personal to Mr. Chamberlain.

The organization of the ecclesiastical society or corporate body composed of the male members of the church came as a direct result of this new building, and in the following manner. The church building committee, together with the committee of citizens which raised most of the money, found that not enough had been subscribed to pay the entire cost. Rather than have bills outstanding Dr. D. S. Baker, one of the leading merchants then, paid the deficit and carried it on his books for a time, but very rightly insisted that the church become legally organized, so as to take title and assume the legal liability for its acts. This was done in January, 1869; the incorporators were Cushing Eells, John B. Stowell, Geo. W. Somerindyke, Robt. Thompson, P. B. Chamberlain and Edwin Eells. The note given for this indebtedness of between four and five hundred dollars was later taken off Dr. Baker's hands by another person, but was not entirely paid until after Mr. Cobleigh took the pasotrage in 1882. Another item of interest in this connection is that the lot was purchased from A. Kyger and I. T. Reese, dealers in general merchandise at the corner of Second and Main streets (the present location of the Farmers' Savings Bank), and the term general merchandise in those days covered a multitude of sins, including whiskey, rum, etc.; and the "wet goods" of this firm were kept in a wooden warehouse upon this lot, which was in the rear of their store, across the creek, accessible first by foot log and later by foot-bridge. The owners of pack trains in those days often did not patronize livery stables, but camped along Mill Creek when in town, and this warehouse was very handy for their loading. This trade was mostly wholesale, and it is not to be inferred by anyone that the chief clerk of that firm, who is now one of the honored members of this church and who has already related so vividly how he used to deal out Chili beans and Chili peaches and bacon and coffee as a balanced ration for miners, and purchased lard weighing nine and a half pounds to the can, had anything to do with retailing any of those "wet goods."

It has been already said that Mr. Chamberlain had a keen mind and was a scholarly and ready speaker and fearless in his denunciation of wrong as he saw it; and there was plenty of that to be seen here. He began to preach as soon as he arrived in June, 1864, at the Methodist Church and elsewhere as he could until the completion of his building, and from then in his own "little church around the corner." His was a new voice in Walla Walla and his example a new method of religious influence. The school opened an entrance into some families through the children and the investment of his own funds in the building attracted others, and his personal work with hammer and saw and paint brush attracted the

notice of still others, and these activities with such scholarly ability and orthodox preaching often filled his little church from the very beginning. The business men of the street without regard to religious sentiment went to listen to him, gamblers and bar-keepers at times occupied the front benches and took their own denunciations with a smiling face and without resentment, and whether his able preaching was responsible for it or not, it is a historic fact that beginning with 1865-6 the city of Walla Walla began to clean up. The merchants got together and voted to close their stores on Sundays, at least the front doors, the law and order people of the valley determined that horse and cattle thieving should cease and vigilance committees were formed which did a quiet but effective work, and while it is certain that Mr. Chamberlain did not believe in lawless methods of punishment it is also an admitted fact in the family that the youngest charter member of this church was active in some of the work of that vigilance committee, though probably not in the more prominent acts which took place under the limb of a certain cottonwood tree along Second street south of the city. The church standing across Mill Creek, which for a time could only be reached by a foot-bridge, was in very fact THE church in Walla Walla. It was the proper thing in Walla Walla for several years to attend "Chamberlain's Church," and his sermons were not uncommonly the topic of discussion during the week. In reply to some critic in the East who was attracting considerable attention at the time, he delivered a series of sermons upon Moses and the prophets of Israel which are well remembered by those who listened to him. The writer of this paper, in connection with two others acting as a committee of pulpit supply in the emergency in the Spring of 1887, invited Mr. Chamberlain to occupy his old pulpit for several Sabbaths, and out of abundant caution the suggestion was put forth that the new comers would like very much to hear those sermons upon Moses and the prophets. He accepted the invitation and the powerful depiction of the lawgiver as a dispenser of strict justice but yet of justice tempered with mercy still remain in the memory.

Mr. Chamberlain's popularity and influence in the pulpit obtained for about six years, and until he began a series of sermons attacking secret societies in general and free masonry in particular. Among the relics in the rooms of the Oregon Historical Society at Portland is a gold headed cane bearing the name of Amory Holbrook, one of the leading attorneys in that city during the fifties, and presented to him in recognition of his defence of free masonry against the attacks of P. B. Chamberlain. These sermons had been delivered in Portland and had resulted in the division of the church there but in spite of that experience they were delivered here. The defence here fell to an active lawyer and politician named N. T. Caton and more than ever were Mr. Chamberlain's discourses a subject



for heated discussion around the stoves in stores and offices in Walla Walla. These led to estrangements which seriously affected the life of this church and many of its strong supporters then withdrew and organized the Episcopal church and the Cumberland Presbyterian church. That was in the year 1872 and in the fall of that year he tendered his resignation, which was accepted, but he was asked to continue to fill the pulpit and did so until the year 1879, when the church was closed. There is little that occurred during those years which it would be profitable to mention now. The church remained closed until the coming of Rev. N. F. Cobleigh in 1882. As far as membership indicates progress the growth of this church during the pastorate of P. B. Chamberlain was both slow and small. At the service of organization fifty years ago only seven persons comprised the list of charter members. Those seven were Mr. Chamberlain and his wife, Rev. Cushing Eells and his wife and son, and J. W. McKee and his wife. The last named was a man beyond middle life who was here for a few years in charge of the general merchandise store of Mr. J. C. Isaacs; he had been connected with the Congregational churches at San Francisco and at Portland. All of these persons were devout Christians and individually had very little need of a church organization; but no others were found to join them. During the remainder of the year 1865 only four more persons were received into membership; during the year 1866 only five; during 1867 only six; during 1868 five, during 1869 three, during 1870 three; and so on. During the entire fifteen years of Mr. Chamberlain's ministry only sixteen members were taken into the church by profession of their faith in God, and at the close of his ministry the names of about twenty remained on the roll. Those were, to be sure, days of congregations rather than communicants, but his influence was of another sort. He set people to thinking about God, and was universally respected by those who knew him as a man who carried his beliefs to a great length but himself honestly lived up to those beliefs. He practiced what he preached, and he would do so if living today.

It is not to be assumed from this narrative that the organization of this church or the personal influence of its founder was the only or entire cause of the vigilante movement in this valley, or that the City of Walla Walla immediately thereafter became a highly moral community without saloons, gambling devices or other evils. The latter is still "a consummation devoutly to be wished." But there were many people here then of excellent character whose moral or religious instincts were strong but who partook of their frontier environment, and who needed to be stimulated to assert themselves. And the clear, fearless and forcible preaching of Rev. P. B. Chamberlain, who was of Puritan stock, was born and educated in New England, and had come far from what would seem to have been his nat-

ural sphere of activity, in this the First Congregational Church in the State of Washington as well as in the City of Walla Walla, contributed much to that end and to the solid foundations of the commercial, educational and religious life of this city today.

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