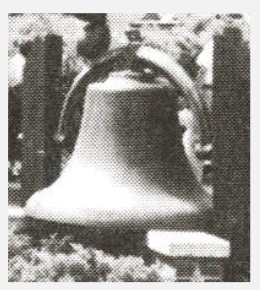


# The Last Pioneer Witness

By Gayle N. Collins



The old church bell, cracked and permanently silenced, has stood as witness to the courage and spiritual faith of the Flathead Valley since 1892. It is the first church bell in the Flathead Valley and currently resides at 540 South Main, Kalispell.

Preceding the arrival of the bell, the Rev. George McVey Fisher preached the valley's first sermon in the little Ashley schoolhouse on September 12, 1886. In 1887 Rev. Fisher presented petitions to the Presbytery of Montana from the communities of Ashley and Selish asking to have a missionary sent. Upon the communities having pledged to support a Presbyterian church, the Presbytery recommended Rev. Fisher be commissioned by the Board of Home Missions for the Flathead valley. He organized the Presbyterian Society of Ashley on June 2, 1889 which later became the First Presbyterian Church of Kalispell when the town of Kalispell was organized in May 1891. The First Presbyterian Church was established September 13, 1891 by the Rev. George McVey Fisher with 17 members, five of whom were members of the original Ashley church.

The congregation erected its first church building at Second Avenue East and Third Street in 1892. The pioneer church bell was purchased in September 1892 and shipped from Cincinnati, Ohio by rail on the Great Northern. It was mounted in the steeple of the church and faithfully called the community to services for four years. In May 1896 the bell cracked which rendered its resounding call mute.

Ground was broken in 1925 for a new church building on Main Street. The old bell was removed from its aerie in the steeple on February 4, 1926 and moved to the site of the new church. Its fate would be determined at some future time. The congregation used its new chapel for the first time on Easter Sunday 1926. The bell stood watch from its placement on the ground near the entrance. Through expansions and renovations in the 1950s and 1990s, the bell continued its silent lookout. In 1966, however, it was given a permanent setting in celebration of the church's 75th anniversary and dedicated in memory of the Christian Pioneers.

This year marks the 125th anniversary of the First Presbyterian Church of Kalispell and the old church bell stands at the ready to continue its silent testimony to the pioneer spirit still found throughout the Flathead Valley's faith community. The congregation of First Presbyterian invites one and all to participate in its celebration. Upcoming activities are a Wednesday ice cream social in August and Harvest Dinner in September.

As First Presbyterian celebrates its heritage, it recognizes the faithful guidance and leadership of its ministers. Pastors of the pioneer First Presbyterian Church and their years of service are: Rev. George McVey Fisher 1886-1900, Rev. John E. Day 1900-1901, Rev. Alexander Pringle 1901-1906, Rev. W. J. Spire 1907-1909, Rev. Thomas Alden Stancliffe 1909-1915, Rev. Leo Lucian Totten 1915-1919, Rev. Birdsey Scott Bates 1919-1930, Rev. George William Barnum 1930-1932, Rev. Harold C. Stark 1932-1940, Rev. Thomas B. W. Allen 1940-1943, Rev. Russell James Prentice 1945-1948, Rev. Mervyn Elroy Moss 1949-1950, Rev. George Leonard VanLeuven, Jr. 1951-1956, Rev. Jerry Taylor (ass't pastor) 1956-1957, Rev. Samuel McMaster Kerr 1956-1959, Rev. Harold Mayo Daniel (ass't pastor) 1958-1959, Rev. James Woodrow Teener (interim pastor) 1959-1963, Rev. Robert Newman Davis, Jr. 1963-1967, Rev. Gerald S. Noel (ass't pastor) 1965-1967, Rev. Odin A. Baugh (pastor emeritus) 1968-1984, Rev. W. Bruce McQueen (ass't pastor) 1974-1975, Rev. Mark S. Smith (ass't pastor) 1979-1983, Rev. Bruce Cunningham (interim pastor) 1984-1985, Rev. Barry P. Dawson 1985-1989, Rev. Sean P. Dillon (assoc. pastor) 1986-1988, Rev. Charles F. Kriner (interim pastor) 1989-1990, Rev. Lawrence R. Gaylord 1990-1997, Rev. Bruce Cameron (interim pastor) 1997-1998, Rev. Glenn A. Burfeind 1998-present, Rev. Chad M. Jones (assoc. pastor) 2009-2011, and Rev. Miriam Mauritzen (assoc. pastor) 2011-present.