

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS, I: SHELDON JACKSON

by Tom Cox

In this, the centennial year of the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello, it is worth taking a moment or two to reflect on our church's roots, for we are the heirs of the work of giants who preceded us in the Northwest. Not the least of these was Sheldon Jackson, as we acknowledge through the Jackson Room in our church building. Still, most of us have little knowledge of who Sheldon Jackson was or what he did.

Educated at Union College and Princeton Theological Seminary, Jackson was ordained by the Presbytery of Albany, New York, and, after working with the Choctaw Indians and in Minnesota, was appointed by the Board of Home Missions in 1870 as superintendent of the Rocky Mountain District. Here, in spite of a short stature and weak eyes, he displayed administrative ingenuity and incredible energy as he criss-crossed his giant parish advancing the Presbyterian cause. For a decade he edited the *Rocky Mountain Presbyterian*, one of the finest sources extant on the region's religious and social history.

In 1877, traveling beyond the bounds of his assigned area, he visited Alaska and established a mission school at Wrangell. Working through his friend John Eaton, he subsequently obtained federal funds for Alaska's mission schools. In 1885, Jackson was named general agent of education for Alaska and left the Rocky Mountain district for good. In Alaska, he wielded considerable influence, helping John Brady, a former Presbyterian minister, to become the first non-carpetbag governor of the territory. The influence of Jackson and the Presbyterian hierarchy in Alaska was immense. Central to this was a concern for the natives and for home rule for Alaskans, concerns that have caused historian Ted Hinckley to laud Jackson as one of the great positive forces in Alaska's early history.

While Jackson's most noted accomplishments may have been in Alaska, his work in the sprawling Rocky Mountain district was also immense. Small wonder that we of Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church have named a room in his honor.