

THE EAST SIDE DOOR IS OPENED

by Tom Cox

On Thursday, July 23, 1904, a group of Presbyterians commenced holding gospel meetings in a large tent erected at the corner of Fifth and Center streets. With this, they took the first tentative steps toward establishing the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello.

The action had been long in coming, and events might easily have taken a different course. In spite of all the earlier work by Presbyterian missionaries in the Northwest, the denomination was the last of the mainline Protestant churches to commence work in Pocatello. Even the Congregationalists — whom the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had directed toward Hawaii and the Pacific, while Presbyterians were given the Rocky Mountain-Pacific Northwest region — had come to the Gate City some years before, establishing themselves in 1888 on the so-called west side, the section of town lying west of the railroad tracks that bisected the community. This was hardly a breach of faith with their Presbyterian fellow-Calvinists. The division established by the ABCFM was hardly in place before it began to break down. Elkanah Walker and Cushing Eells, dispatched in 1838 to reinforce Marcus Whitman and Henry Spalding, were Congregational not Presbyterian ministers; and, in any case, by the 1880s, Idaho, now American territory, fell under the Board of Home Missions, not the ABCFM. Recognizing the commonalities of their denominations, most west-side Presbyterians attended the First Congregational Church. They must have felt at home, not only did they share a common Calvinist heritage, but also the minister of the Congregational church was an ordained Presbyterian.

There were good reasons why the Congregational church sank its roots into the west-side. Most of the population and businesses were there. East of the tracks was another matter. Charles W. Luck, minister of the Congregational church, depicted the east-side of the late nineteenth century in the most negative terms: “the moral influences are extremely bad. The cheap restaurants, the saloon, brothels, and whatever else ministers to the vices and passions of a western railroad town are there.” Yet in the midst of this, he went on, many children were growing up, their parents indifferent to religion. Luck and his congregation could not turn their backs and soon opened “a Sunday school in a shack” (an unpainted frame building bearing the faded words “French Chop House”). Attendance quickly outgrew the little building, yet the church could afford nothing better. Then the superintendent of the Sunday school, freshly ordained, left for a church of his own in Challis. In 1891, after six months of struggle, the Congregational Sunday school closed its doors, “the expense being greater than the church could afford or the success warrant” — an unusual conclusion considering that the Sunday school had outgrown its facilities.

Rev. Luck and the Congregationalists did not give up easily. They were soon taking steps to establish an east-side Second Congregational Church. But a searing depression struck in 1893, the worst the nation had ever experienced, and the Pullman railroad strike followed soon after. Pocatello’s railroad-dependent economy was devastated. Many left to find work elsewhere. There would be no Second Congregational Church; simply keeping the original church alive was more than challenge enough. Minnie Howard, historian of the First Congregational Church, looked back with regret: “What a difference it would have made if Mr. Luck’s dream of an east-

side church had been successful!” By 1928 when Howard wrote, the Second Congregational Church was but “a dear dead dream.”

But out of the death of that dream came opportunity. The needs of the east side remained, indeed, after the return of prosperity in 1897 the area grew rapidly. The door of opportunity was open, and 100 years ago the founders of the First Presbyterian Church gladly marched through it.