

# 'BAPTIZED IN FIRE' SOME SAY ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH IS A 'A SYMBOL OF GOD'S GREAT MERCY'

## Canyon City church named for patron saint of architects survives two catastrophic fires

By Sean Hart  
Blue Mountain Eagle

Some folks don't believe in miracles.

For other folks, well, they say all you have to do is open your eyes and believe.

Some say you need to look no further than a little church in the little town of Canyon City.

Built on the ashes of the town's first catastrophic fire in the 1870s, St. Thomas Episcopal Church stood tall through not one but two more blazes that laid waste to almost every other building downtown.

The little church still stands today.

Was it the spring of water near the church? Was it the mercy of the Lord? Or was it just dumb luck?

Well, I guess you can decide.



The aftermath of the 1937 Canyon City fire shows St. Thomas Episcopal Church, in the upper right, still standing while most of the town was reduced to ashes.

### A House of God in the land of gold

It was gold that started it all. During the rush, Canyon City sprouted into a booming town.

It's said the miners preferred saloons to salvation, but that didn't stop the Rev. R.D. Nevi-

us, a learned man and a doctor of divinity. He held his first service at the Good Templar's Hall on May 31, 1874, with a flock of about 15.

It didn't take long for the congregation to muster up \$130 to purchase a parcel of land nestled against the hillside. The Reverend and Bishop Morris laid the cornerstone Sept. 3, 1876.

The Reverend designed the chapel, a mix of Anglican and Gothic architecture with a steep roof and pointed window frames. He finished the interior and built the pews with hand-sawed knotty pine. The stained glass windows were sailed around the Horn to The Dalles and hauled in by wagon from there if they didn't cross the country on the Oregon Trail.

The Reverend held the first service July 15, 1877. The Bishop consecrated the church and set it aside as a House of God on June 20, 1879 — a hair shy of two decades before the rest of the town would go up in flames.

### 'Baptized in fire'

It was November of 1898 when the second fire tore through Canyon City, the first time since the church was erected.

Hard to say how it got lit, but there sure were suspicious circumstances.

It started in the room of a traveling performer, they say, just about an hour after he sang "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" in the town's New York Theatre.

They rounded him up for tri-



St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Canyon City, date unknown.

Contributed photo/Grant County Historical Museum



St. Thomas Episcopal Church, taken 2016.

The Eagle/Lindsay Bullock

burned through the night. They laid extra hoses to try to save the historic buildings like the church and the former home of Joaquin Miller.

When the smoke cleared, an apartment and 15 businesses had been turned to ash. A store next to the church was completely destroyed, but the church escaped with little more than some scorched paint and its walls blackened by smoke.

Maybe it was the firemen and the bucket brigade that saved it. Certainly can't discount their effort.

Maybe it was the spring of cool water spouting up from the back of the church they use for baptisms that kept the flames at bay.

Or maybe God himself reached down his hand to spare this little house of worship in a canyon prone to burning.

I guess we may never know, at least not till it's our turn to meet our maker.

But I know where I'm going if Canyon City is set ablaze again.

And I'll be praying.

EO Media Group writer  
Renee Struthers contributed to this report.

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## BRIEFS FROM THE PAST

**Aug. 27, 1964**  
**Barbers raise haircut prices**

Three of John Day's barber shops have announced that the price of haircuts for both men and children will go up when the shops re-open after the Labor Day weekend.

New prices will be \$1.75 for men and \$1.50 for children. Each is an increase of 25 cents over the current price which has been in effect since 1955.

By making the price increase effective Sept. 8 the barbers are making it possible for all students and teachers to go back to school with fresh haircuts obtained at a lower price.

**April 27, 1951**  
**Grant County exceeds Red Cross mark**

Residents of Grant County contributed \$3,140.87 in the 1951 American Red Cross drive. This figure was \$714.87 more than the assigned quota, \$2,426.

Considerable credit is due to Mr. Muzzy and Mrs. Lois Lee, John Day, Grant County chapter chairman, for the efficient manner in which the drive was conducted. The campaign opened March 1st and exceeded the quota before scheduled closing date for the drive.

Grant County's quota in the 1950 campaign was \$2,300. The 1951 quota was substantially higher than any quota ever assigned to the county.

**Jan. 19, 1951**  
**Sawing resumed at John Day mill**

Nearly 200 workmen at the Blue Mountain Mills' sawmill

ing at a local hotel, sounded the alarm when he saw smoke billowing out of the attic of the old wooden building at about 7:30 p.m. on April 19, 1937.

Folks as far away as Seneca, some 25 miles to the south, could see the flames as the downtown went up in smoke. The spectacle drew hundreds, and they were quickly put to work passing buckets of water to try to douse the blaze.

Firemen from all the surrounding towns and the Forest Service came to help as the fire

**May 22, 1958**  
**Pool slated for opening**

Final arrangements for the opening of the John Day swim-

ming pool were discussed at the special city council meeting Tuesday night. Swimmers should be allowed in the pool between June 1 and 6, with all efforts being directed toward opening by the former date.

Lynn Pryse of John Day has been named pool manager and will be assisted by several John Day residents who will serve as cashiers and pool helpers.

Pool will be opened from 1 to 9 p.m. every day. Admission charges at the pool were set at 25 cents for students and 50 cents for adults. Advance sale of coupon booklets has been planned. Booklets will contain 25 coupons for \$5.00 with one coupon needed for student pool admission and two for adult admission.

Wading pool admission will be free for children accompanied by their parents, and no child will be admitted to the wading pool unless they are accompanied by a responsible adult.

Present at the Tuesday meeting was Jack Kalenowski, city superintendent from Prineville, who told council members of some of the problems encountered in that city's municipal pool program, and of the way in which they were solved.

**Oct. 23, 1942**

**Get deer with bare hands**

Van Nuys, California — While polishing their guns preparatory to a deer hunting trip, three hunters looked out the window of their house and there in the yard was a large buck. The hunters, Robert Kempley, H. C. Mathers and Tom Enriquez gave chase, cornered the buck in an adjoining yard and captured it alive.

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