

Sunset Ward

Claudia L. Bushman

I SPENT MANY HOURS IN THE SUNSET WARD CHAPEL in San Francisco when I was growing up. It was a handsome building, unlike any other ever built in the Church. Firmly planted on a hillside corner in San Francisco's Sunset district, the three-story white stucco building with Spanish accents was the largest building in a neighborhood of high, narrow townhouses. The red tile roof made a striking contrast to the smooth, white walls. Dominating the whole structure, a square bell tower (with no bell) rose over the entrance. The round arch above the front door was echoed in the tower and in fan lights above the tall chapel windows. The white building seemed to glitter in the damp sunlight just as the walls of the Kirtland Temple must have sparkled from the ground-up china used to construct them.

To me the building had that same kind of mystique; like the Kirtland Temple, it was a terribly ambitious structure built with the pennies of poor Saints, the dreams of visionaries, and the blood of my father who was then the bishop. The church was just three blocks from my girlhood home, and I can still recall memorable childhood moments in those sacred rooms and secret places.

The large chapel with tall windows on both side walls was bright and elegant. Our congregation was attractive and always dressed up for church. I remember Easter Sundays particularly, when the chapel was full of flowers and beautiful women with pretty hats. My three sisters and I joined in this fully and for Easter always dressed in something new, from top to toe and from the skin out.

On the pulpit, the four standard works were set in special inlaid boxes. When giving two-and-a-half-minute talks, my sisters and I loved to impress the congregation by referring to a scripture, pulling out one of these volumes, and

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Sunset Ward Chapel at Time of Dedication in 1941.

leafing through to places we had marked in advance. Behind the pulpit was a large picture of Christ in Gethsemane on which we could focus our attention during the sacrament while the organ played contemplative reveries. For the many conferences we had, we needed more chapel seating space. The back wall separating the chapel from the recreation hall would rise mechanically, groaning out a “Lost Chord” — or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

The cultural hall, or recreation room, with its beautiful hardwood floor, was the site of many formal dances. Unsullied by basketball hoops, which were forbidden during my father’s tenure, the room had a large, velvet-curtained stage, where we enjoyed many plays and my mother’s annual summer musicals, “In Gay Havana,” “Meet Arizona,” “H. M. S. Pinafore,” “The Gondoliers,” and others. Wonder of wonders, our cultural hall even boasted a projection booth so we could watch films on a screen set up on the stage. I remember seeing dozens of films on how to deal with incendiary bombs during those tense years of World War II. (West coast residents were always expecting to be bombed by the Japanese.) The projection booth was an enclosed room set high above the varnished floor and reachable only by a steel ladder attached to the wall. Going up there was like climbing to the high diving board and was absolutely forbidden. Still, we did it from time to time.

The building was tall. The chapel and recreation hall were on the second level and stood two stories high themselves. The offices of the mighty were even higher. The bishop’s office was on a landing above the chapel; the stake

president's was up another narrow staircase beyond that, just below the bell-less belfry. That spacious office with its plush carpeting and imposing desk seemed near the angels indeed. But the real wonder of the uppermost office, in the early forties when TV was still in the distant future, was the console radio with remote tuning.

As impressive as anything was the ladies' room, which, besides the requisite plumbing fixtures, had a dressing room right out of an art deco nightclub. Little stools allowed twenty ladies to sit before a wrap-around counter to see to their makeup in mirrors that stretched around the room. An immense full-length mirror, maybe six by eight feet, dominated one side wall. No excuse for a showing slip coming out of that room. I can recall dozens of scenes of pretty young girls in taffeta and net ball gowns, pinning on fragrant corsages from the florist boxes with their waxy green paper strewn around.

Another wonder was the Relief Society room. The clever ladies of the ward had somehow procured fifty or so wooden and upholstered armchairs of different styles. These had been redone in various harmonious new fabrics. Cast-off wooden tables had been refinished. Handsome standing lamps made the room look like a large, genteel living room or even the celestial room of an old-fashioned temple. The Relief Society had other treasures as well: a room with a big loom to make rag carpets; quilts on frames; barrels of dried apples and pears. In those days the Relief Society seemed scarcely distinguishable from the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, who held their sacred rituals and planted trees and bronze plaques. One of the plaques remaining on the building grounds is in memory of Louise Yates Robinson, a member of our ward who had served as the seventh president of the Relief Society General Board.

The baptismal font was in a dark room with no windows. An electric light shining through a stained glass window brought the room to life and revealed the image of a crowned nymph with streaming hair standing on a sphere, her arms outstretched and yearning, her gown falling from one shoulder. This figure prompted strange mystical longings in my heart. Unfortunately, this exotic font was seldom used.

What good times we had! Every Tuesday evening after MIA we danced to records like "Take the A Train" and "String of Pearls." "Let's Take the Long Way Home" was always the last dance. Lots of young servicemen and working people lived near, and my constant hope that someone new and exciting would turn up was often realized. Everyone danced, stirred up occasionally with mixers. On Sundays my mother would often say, "Now girls, we have a particularly good dinner today. You may each invite home a guest." We always brought boys home, and after dinner and dishes, spent the afternoon in Golden Gate Park or at some cultural event.

In the early days, our family often spent Saturday afternoons cleaning up the chapel because ward money was still too tight to pay someone to clean. My sisters and I grimly vacuumed and swept as required. We sometimes counted pennies for deposits, and stuffing tithing envelopes with slips was another one of our regular chores. And quite strangely, we prepared the sacrament both morning and evening. Our ward was short of teachers, and we were

available. We filled the fetching glass cups and put them in the trays, and afterwards, we cleaned and polished them again. We saved the leftover sacrament bread to feed to the birds. It seems to me that we tended to those duties for some time before a missionary returned and called the ward to repentance for this flagrant violation of custom. Now my sons won't even allow me to help fold a sacrament cloth.

At the back of the little room where we prepared the sacrament, a little staircase, added after the original construction, led down to the office below. This was my father's inspiration so that important visitors could be spirited up to the stand and whisked away again without mixing with the crowd. This was nice for visiting General Authorities and for people appearing as guest artists on the various musical concerts presented in the chapel. My mother also kept the choir music in the little room at the head of the stairs. She exulted and agonized over the ward choir for many years, a tradition I keep up now in my own ward many years later and many miles away.

Everyone considered Sunset a transient ward because of the many medical and dental students and military people who came and soon left. Housing was too expensive to encourage long stays for young families. Growing families moved across the bay to the north or down the peninsula in search of sunshine and room to play. Still, a steady core of faithful San Franciscans stayed on and attended meetings there. They served as extended family to the children of the ward, congratulating us on talks and new dresses, interested in all our activities, proud of our accomplishments. Now adults, we become children again when we return and are enveloped in all that warmth. I wish every child could feel that encouragement and concern.

II

They don't build chapels like that anymore. There was no Church Building Committee then, and the Presiding Bishopric ran the building program. A ward would apply for permission to build a new chapel, and a representative of the Presiding Bishopric's Office would come out, look around, and approve the construction. The local bishop was put in charge of the entire operation and wrote checks personally for every item and service.

The Sunset Branch had been organized on 30 January 1927, joining the already existing San Francisco and Mission branches in the city. The Sunset Branch originally met at the Parnassus Masonic Hall at Ninth and Judah Street. The branch boundaries were Oak Street, Golden Gate Park, Market-Diamond, and Alemany streets. Sunset Branch became a ward on 27 July 1927 when the San Francisco Stake was organized. San Francisco Stake encompassed an area from Santa Rosa south to San Jose and had four city wards and three wards "down the peninsula." At that time, the only Church-owned building was a remodeled structure for the San Francisco Ward. Carl Kjar was sustained in 1927 as the first bishop of the 282-member Sunset Ward. Three other bishops served while the ward met at the Masonic hall: Stephen H. Winter, Charles White, and Serge Lauper.

Local leaders, headed by Stake President Stephen H. Winter and Sister Jacquetta Quealey, a generous member, envisioned a landmark chapel that would be suitable headquarters for the Church on the West Coast. They called in a nonmember architect, Walter Clifford, outlined their ideas, and asked for a plan for the extravagant building they had in mind. The first two plans cost too much and had to be abandoned. They liked the third plan, still an extremely ambitious project. But the land at 22nd Avenue and Lawton Street had been purchased with just such a lofty goal in mind.

Jacquetta Quealey was a Salt Lake McCune. Her mother was an ardent church worker, her father a successful mining engineer. Married to Jay Quealey who had coal mining interests in Wyoming, she was devoted to the Church and was prominent in San Francisco society. Sister Quealey considered a beautiful Latter-day Saint chapel essential for San Francisco.

On 8 November 1937, Serge J. Lauper was called to be bishop of the Sunset Ward by President Winter. Lauper was fairly new in town and recently released as bishop of the Dimond Ward in Oakland, across the bay. When the stake presidency called him as bishop, they told him that his first important assignment would be to build a new chapel. He agreed on the condition that Claude T. Lindsay, a young man who was a former missionary acquaintance and already a prominent builder in the area, be called as his first counselor. Lindsay took the assignment and served as a no-fee contractor for the building.

Construction began in 1938. The original plan was for members to work on the building at night and on Saturdays. Some were in the construction business and very capable. Lindsay met with various skilled labor unions and obtained their permission to use nonunion, volunteer labor. But the second night of work, members of the labor council representing various unskilled labor unions appeared and picketed, demanding that the work be shut down. It was one of the ward members, a strong member of the railroad union, who objected to the use of nonunion labor to build the chapel and reported the situation to the union. After that, in work-hungry, Depression-poor San Francisco, the job was done almost entirely by union labor.

At that time, the Church paid 60 percent of the cost of a stake building. The remaining 40 percent was shared by the wards of the stake with the home ward paying 40 percent of the 40 percent. Even this percentage was very hard to raise. People were contributing fifty cents or so at a time when they could spare it. The Great Depression was still not over, and no one had very much money. For long stretches, there was only enough money to have one union worker at the building site. Sister Quealey told the bishop to come to her whenever he really needed money. She bailed out the building a number of times and eventually contributed more than all the rest of the stake put together. The building cost about \$100,000.

When the work was underway, Bishop Lauper sent his first request for funds to Salt Lake City and received the shocking word that the building had never been approved. Somewhat after the fact, the paper work was done, the calls were made, and the Presiding Bishopric's Office accepted the Sunset Ward building plan as a *fait accompli*.

Modifications continued even during construction. Claude Lindsay pointed out that the plans did not provide for a scout room and that the large sandy rise on the lot could be excavated less expensively than contouring the footings to the hillside. When that part of the lot was leveled, there was space to add a scout room. Then he donated hundreds of board feet of knotty pine, which he was going to burn in his mill, and used it to panel the scout room walls. It was a perfect setting for small social gatherings and scouting activities of all kinds. The room, which was like a great big family room, never existed on any plans.

Local members contributed their artistic talents to the building. Anna Musser Stevenson was commissioned to design a bas-relief to be placed over the front door. She suggested several themes, and the committee chose Joseph Smith in prayer. Her design of the kneeling figure was adapted to a cast-stone semi-sphere about four feet high. The contours were tinted in pastels, and the scripture, "If any of ye lack wisdom, let him ask of God" was added beneath the figure. She also designed a deseret beehive and a seagull that became part of an outside wall.

J. Cyril Johnson procured some valuable tile from the William Randolph Hearst estate in San Simeon and used it in the baptismal font. The baptistry also contained the already-mentioned stained, leaded glass window, a gift of Sister Quealey in honor of her mother. The window was commissioned in Italy and had been installed in the McCune house in Salt Lake City. Sister Quealey particularly requested that one of her mother's possessions be placed in the building. Bishop Lauper looked over her many works of art and chose the stained glass window. He suggested that it be hung in the baptistry, the most sacred room in the building. Sister Quealey also contributed the grand piano in the chapel, the remote control radio, and many of the beautiful chairs in the Relief Society room.

Ernest Semereau, a German immigrant convert, offered to do a charcoal drawing in lieu of a contribution. To repay kindnesses extended to him, he offered a picture crafted in a process he had learned as a child — filling the surface of a canvas with charcoal and selectively erasing small areas. After much consideration, he decided to copy Kaufman's picture of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. He completed the work, about six by seven feet, in 1943, and it was then framed and hung in the front of the chapel, behind the pulpit.

Brother Semereau's picture has come up against considerable opposition during its history, perhaps because of the "graven images" prohibition. Many Church officials urged that this picture be taken down. Bishop Lauper fought hard to keep it. He once asked President McKay his opinion of the picture. President McKay said he loved it, and Bishop Lauper considered this special permission to keep the picture in the chapel.

Many years later the picture was taken down and moved to the Lauper home. Then it was taken to the Oakland Temple to be hung there, but temple authorities put it in storage and planned to throw it out. Leon Collet, a former member of the Sunset Ward, rescued it and took it to his home. When Robert Larson became bishop in 1978, he retrieved the picture and hung it once again

in Sunset Ward. It can now be found in the front lobby, exiled from the chapel, but still very much part of the building.

While the chapel plans were being made, President Winter went to the three Thatcher sisters, Josephine Danford, Harriet Poland, and Luna Hansen, and suggested that they donate a pipe organ as a memorial to their mother, Hannah Morrison Thatcher. Porter Danford, a nonmember businessman, managed their fund-raising campaign. The sisters wrote and phoned friends worldwide to collect enough money to purchase the organ. A small bronze plaque still testifies to their contribution.

The organ was delivered long before the building was ready, and while it was waiting for installation, some vandals broke into the case and smashed some of the pipes. Bishop Lauper was devastated. Construction had slowed to a crawl because members had so little money. The bishop needed \$5,000 to continue work, and when the organ was damaged he was very discouraged.

One morning Bishop Lauper called his office and said he would be gone for a few days on a personal matter. He hopped aboard a train, arrived in Salt Lake City at 6 A.M. the next morning, and went immediately to the Presiding Bishops' Office, then located in a small building just north of the Hotel Utah. He had no appointment, but when the office opened, he went in and demanded to see Bishop LeGrand Richards.

The secretary discouraged Bishop Lauper, saying that Richards had several other appointments, but Lauper's voice was loud enough that the Presiding



Sunset Ward Chapel under Construction in 1939.

Bishop soon came into the hall to see what was going on. He ushered Lauper into his office and listened patiently as the visitor complained about the building system. Lauper listed his many miseries in trying to erect the chapel with no money and precious little help. Any corporate business enterprise would have provided engineers, architects, and services of every kind, rather than dumping the project on the local manager. The construction had dragged on because there was no money. Lauper thought there should be some centralized committee overseeing the program to make sure work continued and was done properly. (He had had a previous experience in Oakland, California, where faulty portions of a chapel had to be redone entirely.)

After this tirade, Bishop Richards, in a kindly manner and with great patience, suggested that the two take a walk. They crossed over to Temple Square and stopped on the east side of the temple. Bishop Richards pointed to the Salt Lake Temple and to the little log house nearby. He asked whether his visitor knew how long it had taken to build the temple. He then asked where the Saints had lived while they were building it. Lauper impatiently admitted that he knew the building took forty years and that the people had lived in shacks during the early years of construction.

“Everything you have said about the building is true,” Richards said. “We could build chapels faster, and we could build them better. But we’re not building chapels, we’re building men. You go back and work with your people. If it takes longer, that’s all right. We won’t complain. Your people will love the building, and you will love it.” These words proved to be prophetic, and Bishop Lauper regretted that he never had occasion to remind Bishop Richards of the exchange and how much his words had come to mean to the bishop and the congregation.

Back in the office, Richards called for the plans and looked them over. He said the Church would continue to cooperate in every way, but he volunteered no additional funds. Lauper feared he would have to go back home empty-handed.

Before leaving Salt Lake City, Lauper approached Brother Price, the head Church architect, and asked his advice for securing additional funds. Brother Price asked Lauper to come back the next day, after Price had had time to review the original building plans. The next day, Price suggested that Lauper request funds for landscaping and for another entrance and stairway. The additional requests added up to almost \$5,000. When Bishop Richards considered the request, he approved the additions and a check to pay for them. Bishop Lauper returned to San Francisco a hero.

By November 1940, the building had progressed far enough that meetings could be held there, although the walls were unfinished. The congregation moved in early to save the rent paid to the Masonic hall and the taxes charged on an unfinished building. Once a church building was occupied, it was no longer taxed. The cultural hall was not completed at all — work on that was scheduled far in the future.

One evening at a bishopric meeting, the MIA leaders, who organized social events for the young people, told the bishopric that they needed the cultural

hall finished for a New Year's dance three weeks hence. This would be the biggest ward social event of the year. The MIA had already hired an orchestra.

Bishop Lauper rose in wrath against this impossible request. Not only was there very little time, but the ward had no money for the flooring. The MIA leaders went on their way somewhat chastened. Claude Lindsay quietly came forward after the meeting and said that perhaps he could do something. He arranged for hundreds of square feet of hardwood and brought in thirty-one men from several jobs to lay the flooring, which was completed in a day and a half. No bill for this labor was ever forwarded. The first dance, on a beautiful hardwood floor that is still used today, took place as scheduled.

The chapel originally had plush theatre seats that folded up when not in use. These seats had never been used before in an LDS church, although they are used in the temples. Maynard Peterson, a ward member, heard that a theatre at the World's Fair at Treasure Island had gone bankrupt after thirty days in operation and that they would sell their seats for twenty-five cents on the dollar. The Church Building Committee never approved these seats, but they gave faithful and comfortable service for over forty years.

Stake President Stephen H. Winter, who had been trained as a cabinet-maker, built the unique pulpit. The top surface had four recessed wells for the standard works and one for an electric clock to keep speakers on time. All visiting speakers remarked on the unusual arrangement of the clock and scriptures. Many years later, when those scriptures wore out and could not be replaced with any of the same size, Bishop Robert Larsen built a new pulpit top with recessed spaces for the current-sized scriptures.

Some ambitious aspects of the plans were never realized. The bells for the tower were never installed, and an elevator was sacrificed to keep costs down. However, many imaginative features were completed, and even some extras, such as the scout room.

The building was dedicated on 15 June 1941 during stake conference. When the building was completed, Sister Quealey and the new stake president, Howard McDonald, were anxious for an event suitable in every way to this grand building. McDonald wrote to Salt Lake City requesting the best speaker among the Brethren. Rudger Clawson, the president of the Quorum of the Twelve and a very sweet, mild-mannered man, saw this request and said that since the ward had asked for the best man available, he would go himself.

The building has seen a lot of use since that day. Forty-three General Authorities have spoken from the pulpit, among them the last six presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, and Ezra Taft Benson. Seven members of the Council of the Twelve and many assistants, seventies, and members of the Presiding Bishopric have also stood there. Brother Clawson, in his dedicatory talk, prayed that faith would be renewed and saddened hearts would be blessed. He hoped that the building would be a haven for those who were discouraged.

Not everyone loves Sunset Ward. One General Authority said it looked like a big white barn to him.

On 14 June 1981, all former members of the Sunset Ward were invited to come to a fortieth anniversary commemorative service. Elder David B. Haight, a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles and a one-time member of the stake, came to preside over the reunion services.

The commemoration was held just in time. Soon after that, the Sunset Ward began to feel the influence of the Church Building Committee, which had been created in response to the frustrations of inexperienced bishops left to construct chapels on their own. Bishop Lauper's wish had been granted, and the Church Building Committee took responsibility for bringing the building up to date. The Church had decided to build buildings and let other operations build men and women.

An architect surveyed the existing building, compared available space with mandated changes, and drew up new plans. For one year the ward met elsewhere, while at a cost of approximately \$1,330,000 a new Sunset Ward was created within the existing shell. On 26 March 1988, the renovated Sunset Ward was rededicated by Stake President Jeremiah I. Alip.

III

The building still looks the same on the outside. Zoning restrictions forbid extensive exterior modifications on buildings with no parking space. For the fortieth anniversary of the ward, the police had closed off the street for two blocks, which were solidly packed with cars.

Handsome new windows with black frames have been installed, but the openings are just the same size. The old overgrown landscaping has been pulled out and fresh new shrubs and lawn put in. The stucco has been painted a warm beige color.

Although the beehive and the seagull still grace the wall, Joseph Smith has been removed from the building because "that sort of thing is not done anymore," according to the building superintendent. Instead, the semi-sphere has been replaced with glass, which brings light to the interior. The Joseph Smith sculpture is now in the collection of the Museum of Church History and Art in Salt Lake City.

The chapel itself used to be white with red-trimmed seats. Now the colors are California golds and greens, the colors of sunburnt hills and sand and pines. The first impression is heavy and quiet because of the beautiful dark oak paneling. The pulpit area is separated from the congregation by a short wall of this oak. Twelve people can sit on the stand with the organ on one side and the grand piano on the other and at least fifty choir seats in two rows behind them. The wall behind the stand curves both vertically and horizontally to accommodate the organ pipes and the air ducts. This wall is formed by narrow vertical oak laths, visually unifying the wall and giving a tambour effect. The theatre seats are gone, and the dark oak pews are upholstered in pine-green; a lighter green carpet covers the floor. The five tall windows and their arched fanlights above brighten the room through billowing, gauzy curtains. Six heavy octagonal chandeliers, about four feet high, hang over the congregation, and three hang over the pulpit area. Four brass wall fixtures add light to the room.

The congregation reflects the rich cultural and racial makeup of the area. A Chinese-speaking ward meets downstairs at the same time as the English-speaking ward above. Each ward has its own staff, but the two share Primary classes.

Basketball standards have been added to the cultural hall, and the stage and projection booth have disappeared. Only a flimsy, folding platform, which can be locked up in a closet, remains for programs. Green composition panels protect the plaster walls from errant basketballs. The kitchen is completely new, but city ordinances forbid anything more than simply warming things up there.

Three items remain of the original building: the hardwood floor in the recreation hall, the chandelier in the foyer, and the pipe organ. (There was talk about replacing this handsome organ with a new electronic model, but the older voices prevailed.) Semereau's charcoal drawing of Christ hangs in the lobby. The elevator that was too expensive during the original construction now allows the many senior citizens of the ward to ascend to the chapel without climbing steps.

The long hallways are lined with dark, oak door frames set in walls of caramel-colored textured plaster. There are enough classrooms for two full wards to meet at once. The scout room and other large spaces have been sacrificed to make space for more classrooms. One small classroom is used for storage.

The baptismal font has disappeared entirely, replaced by the library. The bathrooms, made accessible to the handicapped, are clean and new but have no dressing room for primping. A partial bathroom is located near the Relief Society room, which is now just a double classroom with the divider open. The room has attractive plastic stacking chairs upholstered in dark green.

The general effect is lovely. It is as if we were seeing an old building when it was new and fresh, but more luxurious than it ever was originally. The interior smells like a new building. The Church Building Committee has taken this veteran and given it a new life.

The benefits of change, of course, do not come without costs. Once a local ward was completely responsible for creating a building. Now the ward has very little to say about it. Once the Saints had to sacrifice to have a place to worship, and their building reflected their local abilities and interests. Now we have beautiful buildings, managed through a general program, which rise and are reborn with little effort and sacrifice from us. Once we had to learn everything on the job. Now we have experts who know better than we do. Both stages have been played out in this one building.

The history of the Sunset Ward illustrates a significant development in Church procedure. The decisions made reveal further changes. What does it say about the Church that this chapel has basketball standards but no stage? The cultural life of the ward with its three-act plays, musicals, and variety shows is no more. I hate to see that go. And what about this rich, conservative chapel interior, devoid of Christian symbols? This could be the auditorium of a prosperous business: it says nothing about Christianity and nothing about

Mormonism. Have we moved from our tumultuous beginnings, past conventional Christian standards, to a new barren elegance? Why was Joseph Smith banished from the building despite local protest? I wish we could develop acceptable visual symbols that represent our faith and our history. Our temples are topped with angels sounding trumpets, but our chapels have no such imagery. Many have stylized steeples, but these are borrowed from other traditions and seem to be shrinking into half-hearted gestures. Something unique should identify the buildings we use most often.

We must congratulate the architect and the Church Building Committee for their loving restoration of the Sunset Ward and for fitting all the necessary components into the space provided. I was more impressed by the resurrection than I intended to be, even though I remain nostalgic for the old building and the accomplishment that it represents.



President David O. and Sister Emma R. McKay and the Sunset Ward Congregation in 1956.