

## SMALL TOWN

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John Day snuggles at the base of Canyon Mountain, sheltered by forests, watered by the meandering river. John Day is a small town, with many of the characteristics associated with small towns-- the quick hello in the post office, the chat and "how are you doing" in the supermarket, the hurried wave at the stop light. These are the people whose kids play Little League, swim on the swim team, take turns being Rodeo Queen. These people will criticize a neighbor's clutter, then bring a broom to help clean up.

But the thing that sets John Day apart is not its benevolence nor its setting. It is the church on Main Street.

The story of the church echoes the story of the town, its beginnings in the discovery of gold in 1862. While neighboring Canyon City built a society based on the gold strikes, John Day was the wrong side of the tracks, the shantytown that harbored those unwelcome in the tonier Canyon City. By the turn of the century John Day was just gaining respectability. And at the turn of the century the growing congregation of the Christian Advent Church, looking for a place to build a church building, settled on John Day's developing city. It was part of John Day's new self-esteem, a step on the road to acceptability.

Designed by Rev. Hope in the carpenter-gothic style with gingerbread he himself carved by hand, the church stood proudly "uptown". Its bell was heard through the town when it rang on a Sabbath morning and its tall steeple was a handsome symbol in the still-pioneer town. But the congregation dwindled and after a number of years the church stood empty. Not neglected, exactly, as some of the remaining families from the congregation kept an eye on it, but unused, and some how saddened there on its muddy corner.

Then not one, but two congregations wanted to use the church. The newly-formed Baptist Church and the Seventh Day Adventist Church shared the building amicably for a number of years. The bell again called the faithful, and the steeple was again a proud symbol on John Day's Main Street. Eventually the Baptists moved across the street and it became a Seventh Day Adventist Church.

Things went well until the Adventists, having outgrown the building, built a larger building elsewhere and the church again became vacant. And suddenly available, for what had been, a hundred years ago, an unused highway junction was now prime business property. There were rumors of tearing the old church down, rumors fed by the effects of aging on the old structure. Who wanted it? Was it worth saving?

At this point John Day began to demonstrate its difference from other small towns. It would have been easy to plead tough economic times, other priorities, the monumental task of buying and restoring. But a small group formed; the community began to be interested, then involved. Many people had family or personal ties to one or the other of

the congregations that had used the church. Many people with no direct ties suddenly found they liked having the church there as they passed. A retired school teacher canvassed local businesses, a housewife researched history. Money was donated; grants were found.

Within a few years a full scale restoration was underway. By necessity the exterior came first—some of the boards were so weathered that, holding them up to the light you could see through them. A local mill donated lumber, which then was specially milled to match the original boards. A contractor was found who cared enough to recarve the old gingerbread by hand, as it had been done a century before.

The contractor erected scaffolding to access the steeple, parts of which needed to be re-shingled with specially cut shingles, hand laid in the old pattern. But they found they needed to use heat to remove the old paint, and in the process bird's nests inside the steeple caught fire. The community gathered anxiously on the side walks and street to watch. Was it all going to be for nothing? But with the scaffolding already in place, the volunteer fire men quickly had the blaze under control. As the smoke cleared you could hear the collective sigh from the onlookers.

Inside, a dropped ceiling was removed, revealing the soaring structure of the original. A local hardware store searched for wall paper to match the first paper, buried under layers of paper and paint. The old pulpit was found and restored. Finally it was finished. People gathered to celebrate, to exchange stories and sing the old hymns.

The old church still stands proudly on Main Street, its bell still heard above traffic sounds and its steeple, newly painted, a symbol that here is a town that cares about its past and honors its heritage. Enter its doors and see the sanctuary as it was a century ago. Listen carefully and you can hear, echoing down the years, fragments of a long-forgotten hymn.

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