

Oral History Digitization Project

Pioneer of Firsts

Oral history of Mary Bassen Sedlacek

Date recorded: 1977 or 1978

Background: Mary Sedlacek Bassen was born in 1887 in Pennsylvania. Her family moved to the area around 1900 and to Renton in 1901. The first masses of St. Anthony's Catholic Church were held in the Sedlacek home. Once St. Anthony's built a church, Mary and her husband Edward were the first couple to be married in it; they were married January 1, 1908.

Mary was a member of the first class that graduated from High School in Renton in 1904. The High School was set up in Central School by George Conklin. This graduating class is often forgotten; most recognize 1912 as the first graduating class from Renton High School because that was the first class to finish after the high school building was constructed.

This oral history of Mary Bassen also contains commentary from her daughter Edna Pierce. The focus of the interview is the early history of St. Anthony's Catholic Church. Mary remembered that the first masses were held at her parent's house. Even after the church was built, Mary's family was heavily involved:

Mary: Mother was always washing her linens for the altar, I know. She would pleat them so nicely so they had to be just so. She did that for years after I was gone from Renton.

Interviewer: I can remember the beautiful flowers that she had.

Edna: She kept the church supplied for a long time.

Mary: There was a father that came there; I don't know whether he was German or what he was, but anyway...so many people objected for different kinds of flowers being...colors mixed up. Father said God made flowers of all colors so it was alright to put them on the altar.

After graduating from the first ever high school class in Renton, Mary became a teacher. She taught in nearby May Valley before she got married.

Mary: I graduated from 1904 and then I was away teaching at that time. I never did go to Normal School. All I had to do was pass the examination to teach. I went to temporary Normal at Broadway High School in Seattle. And that's where we took the exams too...1st grade, 2nd grade, or 3rd grade. I taught at May Creek. There was a little log school house there and I taught there. I remember that I had all classes, all grades. They were all pretty good kids. Excepting one time when they played a joke on me for Halloween. They took some...I don't know if they were skunks or what...put them in a box but they wheeled them up. I had to open the door, see, and build the fire for the school. They had this wagon or some kind of a cart with this box of skunks or something like that. And I had to pull it away to get into the building.

The oral history mentions that Mary was honored by the Old Timers' as being the only surviving member from the first graduating class in Renton. This was a very nice gesture, but she wasn't the only one still alive. At least one other class member outlived Mary: Florence Tonkin Custer. (Mary passed away in February 1982 and Florence Custer died in August 1982.) I wonder how the Old Timers' overlooked Florence; she lived in the area her whole life.



1st high school graduating class in Renton, 1904.
Mary Sedlacek Bassen is in the front row, center.
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