

Welcome to McMenamins Chapel Pub, a tremendous neighborhood gathering spot with a long history of celebrating life, art and community.

When the building was constructed in the fall of 1932, the press lauded it as “an architectural gem that ranks as one of Portland’s finest.” This was no exaggeration. Prosperous neighborhood funeral directors Clarence and Bertha Wilson had spent the substantial sum of \$40,000 (positively exorbitant by Depression-era standards) to secure the very best builders, craftsmen and materials available to erect this marvel of brick, terra cotta, plaster and ironwork, fashioned in the Italian-Romanesque design. More than just a beautiful showpiece, the so-named Wilson-Chambers Mortuary quickly earned a well-respected place in the community.

In the late ‘30s, new proprietors added a set of chimes to the building’s many features. The addition prompted a change in business name to the Little Chapel of the Chimes as well as the offering of organ and chimes concerts and wedding ceremonies. The Little Chapel of the Chimes continued as one of the city’s finest funeral homes until late in 2005, when its

McMENAMINS CHAPEL PUB



corporate owners decided to consolidate operations and close this venerable property.

McMenamins jumped at the opportunity to acquire the building, not just for its architectural merits but also its location in the heart of Portland’s historic Piedmont neighborhood, home of Jefferson High School, Portland Community College’s Cascade Campus, the North Portland library and the Peninsula Park rose garden. In 2006, McMenamins renovated the venerable funeral home, an inductee of that year to the National Register of Historical Places, as both a restaurant and new location for its company headquarters.

History, art and craftsmanship is in abundance in the renovated space, with original work mixing with new additions. The first-noticed piece is usually the tugboat-shaped bar that anchors what originally was the funeral home’s chapel. Certainly not original, the bar does mimic the room’s beautiful mahogany wood construction.



O.B. Dawson, creator of the Chapel’s impressive ironwork. U of O Special Collections.

Of particular note is the fluid and delicate wrought ironwork crafted by O. B. Dawson. The preeminent craftsman of ornamental iron in Oregon if not the Northwest during the 1930s and ‘40s, Dawson was truly a Renaissance Man, who was also a professionally trained opera singer. Today, he is best known for overseeing all the original ironwork done for Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood. Within the Chapel Pub, the gates in the central room and the andirons and fire screen in the fireplace room showcase his creative and sophisticated talent.



1932 ad for the funeral home’s opening. U of O Special Collections.

New light fixtures were crafted specifically for the Chapel Pub by the Wolfgang Forge of Vernonia, Oregon, together with the design input of Jim McDonald of Hippo Hardware in Portland. These pieces borrowed some design elements from Dawson's originals.

The pub's central chandelier and wall sconces are the only light fixtures original to the building. Interestingly, they were fabricated in 1932 by Fred Baker, who like Dawson, went on to do work for Timberline Lodge's initial construction. The Maas chimes that prompted the funeral home's name change to the Little Chapel of the Chimes, are visible on the wall at the front of the central pub area. The chimes were installed around 1939 and were refurbished as part of McMenamins' renovation. They are played as a component of the old vaudeville theater organ that sits in a separate adjoining room.



An ad from 1941 promotes the public concerts held at the Chapel. Ellsworth Purdy

The 1925 Robert Morton organ was previously the centerpiece of the Strand Theatre in Seaside, Oregon. With the rise of Talkies and the demise of vaudeville, the organ was removed from Seaside to include in the 1932 construction of this building. Here, the organ became an attractive part of funeral services, and beginning in the early '40s, wedding ceremonies. Organist Richard Walker recalls his most unusual request for a



The Wickman-Neill wedding party at the Little Chapel of the Chimes, 1946. Neill family photo.

funeral service here was "Pop Goes the Weasel."

As a sidelight, starting as early as 1933, the funeral home presented public organ concerts, broadcasting over local radio programs and eventually into the neighborhood via a large PA system installed on the rooftop. One of the earliest organists was Helen Ernst, who was the first organist for what is now McMenamins Bagdad Theater in Southeast Portland.

Contributing mightily to the property's celebration of life, art and community is a gallery of paintings and historic photos. Artists Olivia Behm, Kolieha Bush, Lyle Hehn, Jennifer Joyce, Dawn Phelps McConnell, and Scott Young, painted the creative wall borders and ornamentation as well as a series of panels that illustrate the history of the property and the surrounding neighborhood. Chapters in the fascinating life of iron craftsman O. B. Dawson hang alongside scenes from the Dunlap and Neill weddings, and neighborhood icons Jimmy "Bang Bang" Walker and the Jefferson High School dancers.

Take time to explore and enjoy all the images conjured up in the artwork and photos. Throughout, you'll find a special atmosphere here, one that launches conversations about the past and future. Jump in and join the ongoing festival of life, art and community, already in progress.