

Walking down NW Glisan Street at 17th offers few hints about the intriguing past of the Mission Theater. The building's straightforward, brick construction and fortress-like entryway make it appear more like an armory than a theater. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Mission was not originally built as a theater or playhouse, but as a church. For over 40 years it was the religious and social center of Portland's humble and devout Swedish Mission Covenant congregation. Later, the space served as a very busy labor meeting hall. The remarkable transformation from church to union hall, and from union hall to Oregon's first theater pub is a colorful story that stretches back more than a century.

This building, now listed in the National Register of Historic Places, was dedicated by the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church of Portland on February 18, 1912. The Swedish Mission constructed it to replace a more traditional wood-framed church that had stood here for a decade before. The congregation—at the time numbering more than 200—had outgrown the limited space of the old wooden church and desired a larger, more accommodating structure. The new tabernacle, today's Mission Theater, was intentionally styled as a commercial space. Designed by a few of the parish members, it was felt that a utilitarian plan would



had grown steadily and quickly since its beginnings. Formed in 1887 by a half-dozen Swedish immigrants, the church group outgrew their rented downtown meeting spaces almost immediately. By 1891 they were searching for a suitable place of their own, and they purchased the lot at NW 17th and Glisan. Later that same year, the Swedish Mission constructed their original wooden church.

The supreme activity of the church was missionary work, a responsibility reserved for only those who felt a special calling. Over the years, missions were sponsored all over the world, most notably in the Alaskan Yukon, Africa and China.

For 41 years, the Swedish Tabernacle played a pivotal role in the lives of many Swedish-Americans throughout Portland, and the church was the pride and joy of their community. Sundays were elaborate affairs: Sunday school, morning services, choir, food in the basement and an evening evangelistic service. The services, given in Swedish until the 1940s, typically attracted 500 to 700 people.

But the Mission was much more than just a place for Sunday gatherings. Everyday life and socializing was encouraged as a way to provide a sense of fellowship and belonging. Periodically, young members traveled to the county poor farm (now McMenamins Edgefield) to present programs for the less fortunate. The Tabitha Ladies Society organized social services and supported missionaries abroad. The Covenant Women's Society and the Young People's Society were very active in the community. Church-sponsored baseball games and sit-down dinners always brought large crowds. Music was a vital component of the Swedish Church, and the most popular social activity was the teenage choir. It was this combination of religious tradition and community cohesiveness that made the Swedish Tabernacle such a special place for its members.

Given the strong devotion to their church work and indeed their church, why did the congregation abandon their spiritual center in 1954? This time the neighborhood was the issue rather than space. The area had become more industrial, parking was next to impossible and concern developed for the safety of women and children who walked to the church alone. For their new site, the Church chose a spot at NE 45th and E.



(Courtesy First Covenant)

The Swedish Mission's original church at 17th & Glisan.

make the church more marketable should they continue to grow and find a need to vacate.

Indeed, the Mission Covenant of Portland

1830

Minister George Scot inspires religious revival throughout Sweden

First Mission Church is built

1891

1887 Group of Swedish immigrants form the Swedish Mission of Portland

1912 New Mission Church is built

Longshoremen move into building

1954

1971 Local 8 participates in the longest coastwide strike in U.S. history

Longshoremen move out of the Mission

1982

1986 Heart Acting Company performs in the Mission

1987

McMenamins opens Oregon's first theater/pub, the Mission Theater

Burnside where they continue to worship today.

The new tenants at 17th and Glisan were dockworkers, a spirited but less pious group than the church members. The transfer from evangelical church to longshoreman meeting hall brought some jarring adjustments: religious symbols were pulled down, pews and pulpit removed, the floor overlaid with linoleum. To be sure, the old Tabernacle was suddenly introduced to words and notions never before uttered within its walls. Still, there were some things that remained very much the same. Like its previous occupants, the union workers brought a strong sense of community and activism to the hall.



During the Longshoremen's occupancy, the building was busier than ever before, used for union business, regular meetings and conducting daily hiring. Local No. 8 held monthly meetings every second Wednesday of the month. The union suspended all work on the waterfront

on these nights to allow every Longshoreman the chance to attend. Hiring took place at the hall twice a day, once for the day shift and again for the night, and scores of union members congregated here to view the hiring board and wait for their new assignments.

The building was particularly significant during the 1971 Longshoremen's strike. The coast-wide strike was the longest and arguably the most successful dock strike in U.S. history, and, for local No. 8, this place was at the core of its success. During the strike the main floor became a clearinghouse of information, directing workers where to picket and keeping them updated on the daily progress of negotiations. The basement was used to store and distribute dry foods to the many striking workers. It was during this turbulent time that the controversial president and founder of the Union, Harry Bridges, and the vice president, Bill Chester, came here to the hall to speak with the workers.

In 1982, Local No. 8 moved out of the old church building, after which the place became a storage warehouse called the Columbia River Building. Late in 1986 or early '87, a local acting

troupe called the Heart Theater reintroduced art and entertainment to the place (this time with no religious associations). While this noble endeavor fell short of its mark, closing its doors after only about a year, the notion proved a great one and paved the way for its next incarnation.

In June 1987, McMenamins debuted its Mission Theater and Pub, an establishment that preached the merits of watching movies and drinking beer. Despite its inspired calling, the Mission Theater was far from an instant success. The film festivals that were intended to carry the venue—the Bogart Extravaganza, for example—were busts. Nobody came. So the concept was retooled and the Mission began showing second-run movies for cheap. "Cheap" struck a chord with some and the Mission, once again, began to fill with people.

The Mission now embodies all of its previous forms. The blurring of the secular and the sacred is a recurring theme throughout its history, and in the fall of 2003 a community church began holding their Sunday services here. The theater recalls the art of the short-lived acting company and the pub evokes the longshoremen's pastimes. The building also houses McMenamins' company headquarters and functions as a hiring hall of sorts.

Although McMenamins' spirited message is quite different from the Mission's original occupants, we encourage you to spend time at the beautifully preserved church and reconnect with the spirit that resides within.



The Swedish Mission, C. 1950.