

BY PAUL DORPAT



COURTESY OF LAWTON GOWEY

When its first ornate section was built in 1883, the Occidental Hotel was perhaps the principal architectural sign of Seattle's ascendancy as the most populated community in Washington Territory. With its 1887 additions, the hotel covered the entire flatiron block between Second, Yesler and James. Destroyed by the Great Fire of June 5, 1889, the Occidental was replaced by the Seattle Hotel. A small section of its dismal replacement, the "Sinking Ship Garage," appears in the contemporary photograph right of center between the Pioneer Building and the trees of Pioneer Square.

The Hideous Remains

EXACTLY 115 years ago this morning on June 6, 1889, Seattle awoke to these ruins and 30-plus blocks more. The Occidental Hotel's three-story monoliths — perhaps the grandest wreckage — held above the still-smoking district like illustrations for the purple prose of that morning's Seattle Daily Press.

"The forked tongues of a pierce pitiless holocaust have licked up with greedy rapacity the business portion of Seattle . . . It was a catastrophe sudden and terrific. Besides the smoking tomb-like ruins of a few standing walls . . . people are left living to endure with sheer despair . . . blackness, gloom, bereavement, suffering, poverty, the hideous remains of a feast of fire."

Predictably, the city's photographers were soon making sidewalk sales of scenes like this one. If the best of these ruins had been allowed to stand, it would have become both romantic and revered, but it was not. The Occidental's "towers" were blown up on the evening of the 8th. (Most likely it was either on the 7th or 8th that this record of their silhouette was captured, for the district was still generally hot and smoldering on the sixth.)

The fire started about 2:30 in the afternoon of June 5 at the southwest corner of Front Street



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(First Avenue) and Madison. It took a little less than four hours to reach and jump James Street and ignite the north wall of the hotel. In another dozen minutes the fire passed through the distinguished landmark and jumped Yesler Way to spread through the firetrap frame structures between Yesler and the tideflats that were then still south of King Street. P

Paul Dorpat's and Genevieve McCoy's award-winning illustrated Washington state history, "Building Washington," is available for \$50 from Tartu Publications, P.O. Box 85208, Seattle, WA 98145; 206-547-7678.