



Lannie Hurst saved The Old Church and part of Portland, too

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By **David Stabler, The Oregonian**



Oregonian file photo/1967

She was Shirley Temple before there was a Shirley Temple.

All dimples and toe shoes, 4-year-old Frances Lanier "Lannie" Hurst made Depression-era audiences smile when she sang and danced in San Antonio, Texas. Oh, how she loved it, especially when people gave her nickels.

"I thought I was the wealthiest little girl in the world," she told "Ourtown" years later.

Born in 1925, three years before Temple, Hurst never stopped loving the limelight. Bold and effervescent, she went on to perform in radio, television, theater, choral, dance, opera and story-telling, in addition to raising four children.

"Mom was not your traditional Mom," said John Hurst, the youngest of her children. "She wasn't as nurturing as one would typically see, but she instilled in us a quest for learning and a sense that life has adventure."

One of her adventures, maybe her greatest, was saving Portland's oldest standing church from the wrecking ball.

We may take the fine **Old Church** for granted today, but in the 1960s, the leaky, flaking, moldy building came this close to succumbing to the fever of urban renewal that paved over buildings and put up parking lots and high-rises.

"Few fundraising campaigns of any sort ever captured the imagination and support of Portlanders as completely as

did the drive to save The Old Church..." declared the Oregon Journal in selecting Hurst as one of 10 "Women of Accomplishment" in 1969.

"I believe a city should be a delight," she told the Journal. "Portland can be this way and should be."

But here's a shock. Portland wasn't always so pretty and people didn't line up to encourage Hurst.

"Portland was a different place back then," she said. "It was an old maid."

When the Baptists hung a "for sale" sign on the church in 1967, Hurst recalled a story from her childhood in San Antonio. Some enterprising businessmen wanted to tear down The Alamo and build a garage because the site was valuable property. But one woman said no. As the story goes, she threw herself across the door, arms outflung and declared "I won't let you do this!"

Said Hurst, "I don't think I exactly saw myself going that far, but I did say a silent 'no' to myself when they were talking about tearing the building down."

Hurst had no experience in restoration or architecture. Married to a pediatrician, Peter Hurst, she acknowledged she didn't know what she was doing, but quickly found herself center stage again, cast as the savior of The Old Church.

Meetings were held, word spread and Hurst was soon urging, talking and cajoling people into giving money. She began with the Beautification Society, which put up a \$100 option on the 1882 building. The Old Church Society Inc., charged with buying and restoring the building for public use, formed with Hurst as its leader.

"I couldn't tell them what to do because I didn't know what I was doing," she told The Oregonian in 1993.



Oregonian file photo/1948

So they learned together. On one fine day, 35 members of the Painting and Decorating Contractors union painted the church. Steeplejacks polished the copper cupola. Mayor Terry Schrunk sent a check from his hospital bed. Two future mayors, Connie McCready and Neil Goldschmidt, painted.

The asking price was \$111,000, but Hurst got it for \$99,000, and raised an additional \$55,000 for restoration.

"We did it on our own," Hurst marveled. Paraphrasing Mark Twain, she said, "With enthusiasm and ignorance, success is bound to be yours."

In 2003, Hurst and the Old Church Society received the Architectural Heritage Award from the Bosco-Milligan Foundation. The annual award recognizes those who preserve historic buildings and help the public understand the importance of historic preservation.

"She was the power behind the whole operation," said Bill Lawrence, a former vice president of the Old Church Society, Inc. "I'd call her a bulldog, not to her face, but to someone else. She doesn't let go until the job is done. Every successful institution has got to have that kind of leadership."

No surprise that her favorite quote from Goethe was "Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

"Mom was very opinionated, but it was never with malice," John Hurst says. "She may have thrown a few proverbial elbows, but she was always a good-spirited person."

Today, four decades later, architect Warren H. Williams' Old Church, once criticized for being built "much too far out in the country," hosts concerts, weddings, lectures and other civic events. The 300-seat interior is a Victorian blend of Gothic, classical, Renaissance and Baroque styles with vaulted ceilings and hand-carved pews of fir and oak. Jewel-colored stained-glass windows bathe the sanctuary in light and a beautifully restored Hook and Hastings pipe organ sits dramatically at the back of the stage.

"How many weddings have taken place there?" John Hurst asks. "Thousands? Think of the great memories that church has provided from weddings. One person can make a difference. That's pretty powerful for a kid."

Hurst played other roles in Portland, too. Audiences will remember her as Amanda in "The Glass Menagerie," Martha in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and as Auntie Mame with groups such as Portland Civic Theater and Lake Oswego Community Theatre, now

Frances Lanier Hurst

Born: May 20, 1925, El Paso, Texas

Died: Oct. 26, 2010, Portland

Education: Bachelor of Arts, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas; Master of Arts in library science, University of Oregon

Children's librarian: Multnomah County Library

Theater activities: Portland Civic Theater, Lake Oswego Community Theatre, now Lakewood Theatre Company

Historic preservation: In 1967, she created the Friends of the Old Church to save the carpenter gothic structure from demolition. In 1969, she received the Oregon

Lakewood Theatre Company.

"I was raised as a Southern belle, which helped greatly in many plays," she told The Oregonian in 2000. "You can't play Amanda in 'Glass Menagerie' if you don't understand the Southern belle. Gertrude Lawrence was embarrassing in the film."

Beyond performing, Hurst devoted herself to the arts as a board member and patron, and served for several years as a children's librarian at the Multnomah County Library. When Peter Hurst retired in 1987, they lived in Pago Pago, the capital of American Samoa, where Lannie Hurst got a "peachy job" as storyteller and drama consultant in the school district.

Throughout, she kept her enthusiasm. "I delight in my age," she said at 64. "I delighted in every age I have lived. Each has its sense of marvelous treasures."

Hurst's memorial service was held Nov. 6 at a location she knew well: The Old Church.

-- **David Stabler**

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Journal's "Woman of Accomplishment" award.

Husband: Peter L. Hurst, pediatrician, deceased

Survivors: four children: Keith Andrew Hurst, Spokane; Ralph Gregory Hurst, Vashon, Wash.; Hillary Hurst, Bend; John Eric Hurst, Palo Alto, Calif., eight grandchildren, three great-great grandchildren

Memorial service: Has been held. Cards may be sent to Lannie Hurst Memorial, S. W. Terwilliger Blvd., No. 1026, Portland, OR 97201. Donations to Friends of the Library.