

President William McKinley:

Mourned by the Nation and by St. Helena

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President William McKinley died on September 14, 1901, felled by an assassin at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. He was nearly 60 years old.

The wounds should not have been life threatening but had not been thoroughly cleaned, and precautions against infection were handled negligently, even by 1901 standards. He was buried in his hometown of Canton, Ohio, on September 19. Funeral services were also held all over the country, including in St. Helena.

The city council appointed a committee, chaired by Owen Wade, to organize the memorial service. The townspeople resolved to erect a memorial to the president at the new elementary school (Adams and Oak Streets). School children and adults contributed to the fund.

One year after the president's funeral, a crowd gathered to witness the unveiling of a statue carved by the well-known sculptor Robert Aitken of San Francisco. (Aitken also sculpted McKinley monuments for San Francisco's Union Square and McKinley School in Berkeley.) The opening hymn sung by school children was the president's favorite: "Nearer My God to Thee." Presbyterian Rev. James Mitchell offered a fervent opening prayer. Dr. F. D. Watkins gave the public address; in



reviewing the events of President McKinley's life and death, he said, "The children could have no better daily reminder than this monument, which will suggest to them the words and deeds of McKinley."

After the address, Alena Johnson sang "In His Steps." Catholic priest Patrick Blake gave a brief address, talking mostly to the children about McKinley's excellent example. Linda Bell said in part: "This [monument] is a

tribute to the memory of one of America's greatest and best loved dead. May it endure for all time to inspire those who may look upon it." Then Mary Steves and Alice Anderson removed the flag covering the monument to loud applause from the audience. After one more speech, the proceeding closed with the singing of "America" and a benediction by Rev. A. H. Needham.

The monument is a life-sized bust of the president made of bronze. The bust rests on a pedestal of granite obtained near the city of Raymond in Madera County. On the back of the pedestal (later the front) is a bronze plate bearing the inscription "Dedicated to William McKinley by the Citizens of St. Helena, Cal. 1902."

Today the memorial to President McKinley still stands at St. Helena Elementary School. The monument is showing signs of wear, given that 113 years have passed since the dedication. Dr. Mary Lou Wilson, Superintendent of Schools, has promised that when the renovations to the Adams Street entrance to the school are completed, the statue will be refurbished.