



September 2011

Volume 42, Number 3

A RIVER RAN THROUGH IT: THE GREAT RENTON FLOOD OF 1911

By Tom Monahan

Introduction

This November marks the 100th anniversary of Renton's Great Flood of 1911, in which Renton's three rivers—the Black, the Cedar, and the Duwamish—all overran their banks. We thought we would commemorate the event by reprint Tom Monahan's excellent article which reminds us of the power of water run amok.

Hell's Bells

In the early morning hours of Sunday, 11 November 1911, around 8:30 a.m. Renton residents were awakened by the ringing of church bells. This was typical for Sunday, except that on that day, church attendance had nothing to do with the ringing. Instead, the bells heralded a potentially lethal situation—announcing a day of terror for Rentonians living in the lower parts of the city.

At that time, a reservoir was held back by a dam located 28 miles up the Cedar River, and it appeared to be failing. The reservoir held eleven square miles of water. Although Renton's citizens had experienced wet seasons before, the dam had always held and was considered safe. Rentonians living on the low-lying farms near to the current location of Southcenter Mall were accustomed to having the ground get saturated with rainwater, causing minor flooding in basements. No one, however, was prepared for the swiftness with which the great flood of 1911 arose. That year, November was heralded by a heavy snowfall, followed by unseasonably warm "Chinook" wind. This problem was compounded by heavy rainfall, all of which brought an overwhelming amount of water to Renton's three nearest rivers and Lake Washington.



Two boys walk home from school on a muddy plank sidewalk along a flooded South 2nd. Renton High School is in the distance on the right. (#41.9785)

Buildups on the Cedar, Black, and Duwamish rivers began to inundate the area where Renton Center now resides. At the high water mark, and for a long period after, a person could easily travel from Renton to Kent via rowboat. The reality of this began to make some people nervous.

Masthead Photo: Panoramic view of the Cedar River flood of November 1911 from Renton Hill. The Houser Way railroad bridge is on the right. (#1967.005.0640)

Continued on page 4



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Renton History Museum
235 Mill Avenue South
Renton, WA 98057
Phone: 425-255-2330
FAX: 425-255-1570

www.rentonhistorymuseum.org

Hours:

Tuesday - Saturday 10:00am - 4:00pm

**Admission: \$3 for adults
\$1 for children**

Always free to members and to the general public on the first Wednesday and third Saturday of the month.

Board Meetings: Please call the museum for time and location.



President's Message

By Sandra Meyer, President



Hello, Summer—goodbye, Summer... I'm just hoping for an extended summer lasting well into October. I have several interesting things to tell you this month and a thing I learned about Renton's athletic past.

We had a lovely Annual Member's Meeting in June. We had a great turnout of members, an auction pulled together by the Fundraising Committee and Museum staff, and good food prepared by volunteers Councilmember Don Persson and Trustee

Larry Sleeth. Every year the Renton Historical Society presents the George W. and Annie Lewis Custer Award to an individual or group that has made an outstanding contribution to the documentation, preservation, interpretation, and/or education about Renton's heritage. This year the award was given to the student editorial staff of Renton High School's ARROW Magazine. Editor Olivia Fry and teacher Derek Smith accepted the award, with most of the magazine's staff—32 reporters, photographers, and designers—in attendance.

In late June, we celebrated the passage of ESSB 5834, the bill that continues funding 4Culture, the King County funding agency whose grants help support many of our programs or exhibits. State legislators, city officials, 4Culture staff, and representatives of Renton cultural organizations came to the event, and we all thanked them for their efforts to ensure that arts and heritage can continue to make our lives richer. We are so grateful for this vote of confidence from the legislature.



Renton River Days, including the most ethnically diverse parade I've seen to date, was really exceptional this year. The Museum was open and free for passersby. We handed out Museum information including a flyer about our annual fundraiser coming up on October 26th at the Renton Senior Center. John Keister will be entertaining, and we will have good food, an auction, and fun for all.

Vicki Utterstrom and I attended the combined picnics of Talbot Hill, Victoria Park, Winspur and Victoria Hill. We learned something new there. One of the residents, Dale Hoover, asked us if Museum staff had ever done a newsletter article on the Renton Cowboys, a fast-pitch amateur team that played baseball between 1949 and 1957. They played all over the Northwest and had a huge fan following, even winning a championship. If you have any information or photos of this team, please contact the Museum so we can record their history.

I hope each of you are happy and well this time of year and always.

Renton Museum Report

By Elizabeth P. Stewart, Director

The Museum is opening our second Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibit



this month, *Journey Stories*, thanks to the Museum on Main Street program and Humanities Washington. *Journey Stories* draws on the Smithsonian's extraordinary collection of maps, photos, oral histories, objects, and research to explore Americans' history of mobility. There are only a handful of us who can claim to be First Americans, so all our families have stories of picking up and leaving everything behind to start over in a new town, a new state, or a new country. *Journey Stories* brings those tales together in one exhibit that looks at

traveling as a central theme in our nation's history.

When we applied to host this exhibit, we saw it as a perfect fit for Renton, a crossroads of river and lake travel going back to the Duwamish, and later a center of railroad, highway, and air travel. Renton's economy got its start from the coal that fed the great steamships leaving from Seattle and San Francisco. Later, manufacturing of trains, planes, and trucks at Pacific Car & Foundry, Boeing, and Kenworth made Americans' enjoyment of travel possible.

But Renton's journey stories are not only about transportation technology. Our companion exhibit, *Boomtown!*, examines the experiences of thousands of wartime workers who migrated to Renton in the 1940s to make the city their new home. Renton's World War II population explosion fundamentally changed the city as residents and new immigrants came together at work, school, church, and home. We hope you will see something of your family's experience in the *Boomtown!* exhibit.

A side note for you to consider while you're enjoying *Journey Stories* and *Boomtown!*: These exhibits are made possible by Museum on Main Street (MoMS), a program funded by Congress that brings heritage education to small and rural communities whose residents might otherwise never have a chance to visit the Smithsonian. MoMS works with state humanities councils like Humanities Washington to make such high-quality educational programs possible. When you hear about budget debates in Congress or the State House, think about how impoverished your world would be if the only way you could take advantage of the Smithsonian was to fly there! Or if the only way your children could hear a storyteller or learn about Native American objects firsthand was to write a check for hundreds of dollars yourself!

The *Journey Stories* and *Boomtown!* exhibits serve as a reminder that by sharing our stories of immigration and assimilation, we become stronger communities, and that has invaluable worth—or should have—to all of us.

Journey Stories and *Boomtown!* will be on display at the Renton History Museum from Sept. 6 through Oct. 15.

Liz Stewart

UPCOMING EVENTS

Thursday, September 8
5:00 – 7:00 p.m.

Journey Stories exhibit opening

Saturday, September 15
Last day for *Journey Stories*

Wednesday, October 26
5:30 – 9:00 p.m.
Benefit Dinner and Auction
Renton Senior Activity Center

Wednesday, November 2
5:00 – 7:00 p.m.
Bigfoot is Probably Real
exhibit opening

Friday, December 23 through
Monday, January 2
Museum is closed for
the holidays.

"A River Ran Through It" continued from page 1

As the danger increased, disaster plans were put into place. Word quickly spread that if the dam couldn't hold, a siren at the Renton Coal Mine, affectionately called "Calamity Jane," would sound, and church bells would ring. Several people with binoculars were stationed on the brow of the hill above the Denny-Renton brick plant. Their job was to signal sentries at the first sign of trouble. The sentries, who were posted in positions on the roof of the railroad depot, would in turn notify the different groups in charge of ringing the bells in the city. The coal mine siren would be blown at intervals of one-half hour if the dam was still holding. If the dam appeared to be failing, a constant thirty-minute blast would be sounded. Johnny Bevan, a coal miner, handled siren duty all afternoon, giving the appropriate signals as ordered by Mine Superintendent Lew Jones.¹



Dave Morrison Jr. stands in front of the family home at North First and Pelly in North Renton. (#1966.047.0636)

Run to the Hills

Contemporary accounts describe panicked residents abandoning their homes in tears, fully expecting to give up everything to the raging waters. One resident recalled a group of men who were moving a piano when the first whistle blew. At that point "they just dropped it and ran. I don't remember now what happened to that piano."²

The Seattle Post-Intelligencer reported that there were "stampeding horses, barely held in control by their struggling drivers, sons carrying their old mothers on their shoulders, women with bundles on their heads dragging their children behind, while baggage-laden fathers followed."³ Couriers came down through the valley on horseback with the speed of the wind and shouted in shrieking voices, "Run to the hills, the dam is about to break! Run for your lives!"⁴

Grievously unconvinced of the danger, many ignored the sirens and went back to sleep. Day Marshal Joseph Edwards and Night Marshal Jack Stewart "worked heroically all night long to warn all that they could reach."⁵ Since telephones were just beginning to be used, a door-to-door search was conducted by the marshals, to make sure everyone got to higher ground.

By about 2:10 a.m., a long line of struggling, terrified refugees tramped along the streets leading up Renton Hill. The real crisis didn't come until 8:30 a.m., and by that time, a significant number of individuals who had heeded the first false alarm had decided that the dam wasn't about to break after all. Some had even come down from the safety of the hills and returned to their homes, assuming that what little water damage they had received in the initial deluge was to be the worst of the day.



Jack Stewart, Renton's Night Marshal, and his daytime partner Joseph Edwards were responsible for helping evacuate Renton residents to higher ground in 1911. (#1989.062.1656)

Bridge Over Troubled Water

Things went rapidly from bad to worse. Adventurous citizens decided to view the rapidly swelling torrents from Renton's many bridges. Even the bravest didn't stay long, however, as the bridges quickly clogged with driftwood, logs and debris. Although the County Road Bridge appeared to be in danger of collapse from the massive log jam beneath it, the bridge survived the disaster intact.⁶ In fact, most of that bridge's damage occurred when officials dynamited the obstruction. Ironically, the explosives nearly finished the job that the logs and debris had started.



Men assess how to repair the Bronson Way Bridge (then known as the County Bridge) after the flood had receded. (#41.5374)

Once free, some of these logs raced down river, destroying electric light poles in their path and plunging the city into the pitch black of night. On top of wading through rising frigid waters, Renton's citizens now got to do it in near total darkness. A small army of electricians worked bravely through the night and well into the next day repairing the damage. Their work was extremely dangerous since the new lines had to be swung across the raging waters with nothing to light the work area. Add live high voltage power lines to the mix, while standing waist-deep in floodwater, and the extent of those men's courage becomes clear.⁷

In this terrible situation, the entire city seemed to come together to help each other make it through the growing disaster. Mayor Joe Wood and Doctors Adolph Bronson and Charles Dixon ignored the danger to themselves. The three men used their automobiles to transport dozens of refugees out of harm's way. After witnessing an unidentified Italian man carry his sick wife from the corner of Wells and Fourth all the way up Renton Hill during the first alarm, Jack Martin decided to lend a helping hand as well. During the final alarm he drove back down into the danger area and conveyed the woman over to the Reverend W. W. Edmondson's Presbyterian Church on Renton Hill where she was given a hot drink and plenty of food.⁸ The church remained open all night for the relief of the growing crowd of frightened refugees.

The day marshal's son also showed great bravery. The younger Edwards boy harnessed up his team of horses to his wagon, and began the task of transporting people from the flood ravaged north end for as long as he could get them to come. On his final trip out of the disaster area, he reportedly carried a wagonload of five women with him, all in a dead faint from fear and exhaustion. The rising water eventually made it impossible for him to urge his team of horses back into the murky, newborn lake to look for more survivors.

Here Comes the Sun

To those people caught in the worst flood in Renton's history, it must have seemed like their nightmare would never come to an end. Thankfully, the floodwaters ceased to rise later that night, and began to slowly to ebb over the next few days. The dam that so many residents feared would completely collapse, destroying the city, held together. It was damaged and the top-most timbers had given way, but a catastrophic collapse was fortunately averted.

Flood-weary residents, who came down from the safety of Renton Hill, returned to find their cellars filled with dirt and debris. Instead of being able to sit down and relax, they faced the daunting challenge of setting right all that the cataclysm had disrupted. In addition to private homes, businesses and even city streets had to be cleared of dirt and wreckage before life in Renton could return to some semblance of normality.

One survivor remembered "looking down into the churning river in our basement, and seeing everything that was loose floating up near the ceiling. What a frightening experience that was and what a mess to clean up when the waters receded."⁹

Miraculously, no lives were lost during the ordeal, and most of the injuries sustained were relatively minor.

Born To Run (A Water District)

The first thing that the citizens of Renton decided to do after the flood was to tackle the problem of the rivers. The first meeting of Waterway District No. 2 was held in December 1911, in the office of local lawyer Paul Houser. Lee Monohan, J. C. Marlowe, and Thomas Dobson were named commissioners of the project, and Dr. Charles Dixon and Paul Houser sponsored the digging of a new channel. By the summer of 1912, the Water District Commissioner reported that an 80 foot-long channel had been dug through the city. This construction effectively ended the threat of major flooding to the downtown areas of Renton. The Waterway District remained until July 1956, when it ceased to exist as a legal entity.¹⁰

Epilogue

Traveling through Renton today, it is hard to imagine how the flood could have happened. Today, the Cedar River travels down through the city in a well-constructed channel, with a beautiful trail running along its banks. The Black River, which also contributed to the great flood of 1911, is no more. It ceased to exist around 1916, when work on the lake caused the water level to decrease and cut off the river's source. This eliminated a large part of the former threat from flooding. While there is no longer any need to seriously fear that the entire city of Renton will be flooded again, we would do well to learn



Northern Pacific Railroad bridge over the Cedar River at Burnett Avenue. These men are considering how to clear the piles of debris left behind by the flood. (#1966.047.0638)

¹ Renton News Record

² Ibid.

³ Seattle Post Intelligencer, 12 November 1911

⁴ Renton News Record, 5 September 1937

⁵ Renton Herald, 24 November 1911

⁶ We assume this refers to the Bronson Street Bridge. It has been referred to as the County Bridge in photos.

⁷ Renton Herald, 24 November 1911

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview with Mrs. Dail Butler Laughery, Renton Historical Quarterly, August 1973

¹⁰ Ibid

From the Collections Department: New Donation Tells Story of WWII Nurse's Aides

By: Sarah Samson



The population surged in Renton during World War II as war workers streamed in to take their places on the assembly lines of Boeing and Pacific Car and Foundry. New federally-funded housing developments sprang up around town, and the City looked to increase the services and amenities it offered in order to accommodate a much larger population.

Bronson Memorial Hospital was one institution that quickly became overwhelmed by the mass immigration. The little hospital located on the corner of Main and 2nd gave way to a 100-bed

“wagon-wheel” shaped building on Rainier Avenue where McLendon Hardware currently stands.¹ The Federal Works Administration provided \$700,000 to build the new state-of-the-art hospital.²

Soon after the grand opening, the Renton Chronicle began running articles asking for women volunteers to become nurse's aides. The group was part of the Red Cross and existed in order to make the shortage of registered nurses less dire.³ The volunteers waded through eighty hours of training before they were able to enter the hospital as full nurse's aides.⁴ Of the initial class of twelve, nine women graduated and were “capped” in a formal ceremony at the hospital.⁵ The graduates included: Dorothy Custer, Polly Delaurenti, Angeline Girias, Nina Hansen, Mary Highton, Lila Morris, Marijean Sloan, Ethel Telban, and Isabel Wallace.

In August, Dorothy Custer's granddaughter Rose Custer donated her nurse's aide uniform. The uniforms consisted of “pale blue pinafores with white blouses and blue and white caps.”⁶ Dorothy's white blouse was probably repurposed after her tenure as a nurse's aide, but her pinafore and cap survived; both are now part of the Renton History Museum's permanent collection. The uniform will be featured on exhibit from September 6-October 14 in *Boomtown!*, an exhibition illustrating the stories of Renton's population boom during WWII.

Like many women called into wartime service, Dorothy Custer still found time in her busy life to volunteer. She gained her nurse's aide certification all while parenting three young boys, working part-time, and going through a divorce.



Pinafore & cap: Dorothy Custer's nurse's aid pinafore (RHM# 2011.033.001) and cap (RHM# 2011.033.002)

Dorothy Custer, ca 1943 (RHM# 2000.127.8407)



¹“New Hospital Opens,” Renton Chronicle, 19 Apr 1945, pg. 1.

²“Feud Over Renton Hospital Settled,” Renton Chronicle, 16 Nov 1944, pg. 1.

³“9 Nurse's Aids Will Get Caps,” Renton Chronicle, 19 Jul 1945, pg. 1.

⁴“Nurses Aids Needed; New Class Opens,” Renton Chronicle, 14 Jun 1945, pg. 1.

⁵“Hospital Caps Nurses Aids,” Renton Chronicle, 9 Aug 1945, pg. 1.

⁶“Nurses Aids Needed; New Class Opens,” Renton Chronicle, 14 Jun 1945, pg. 1

Volunteer Report

By Dorota Rahn, Volunteer and Education Coordinator



Dear volunteers and members of the Renton Historical Society,

The museum's Education Department was quite busy this year. Museum docents brought a new understanding of the Coast Salish culture and the Duwamish tribe to 4th grade students and teachers in seven elementary schools. The curriculum was funded by grants from 4Culture and Sam's Club. The Museum covers the operational costs.

Students spend three, four, or five class periods analyzing Native American-made objects to discover for themselves how the environment shaped Coast Salish life and culture. At the end of the project students had a wonderful opportunity to listen to the Coast Salish stories told by Roger Fernandes, a local Native American artist and storyteller. We were able to offer his program thanks to a grant from the Muckleshoot Charity Fund.

Bringing the curriculum to schools is an exhausting but rewarding experience. Seven docents served 54 hours and ended up introducing 700 students to Coast Salish life. Those seven docents definitely deserve personal recognition. Nancy Fairman and Carol Hawkins spent hours running workshops and explaining the intricacies of Native American culture in the Puget Sound; Ila Hemm and Frank Sutter also helped tremendously. We were also lucky to have a group of young docents--Karianna Derr, José Perez, and Eric Rowe--who were involved equally with more experienced museum volunteers. They did an excellent job and showed a high level of commitment and responsibility.

Many volunteers were also engaged in preparations for and during Renton River Days. This summer has been relatively cold but Renton River Days weekend was again one of the warmest this year, a welcome change that allowed people to enjoy the festival. Volunteers at the museum booth were very busy. They helped hundreds of children to make raven and eagle head pieces and decorate them with very colorful Coast Salish designs. Some children stayed busy making shell and bead necklaces. (Photo courtesy of Jenny Manny, Renton Patch.)



Thanks to the following museum and museum booth volunteers we were able to run our operation very smoothly. They were (in alphabetical order):

Janet Christiansen, Steve Denison, Karianna Derr, Nancy Fairman, Carol Hawkins, Ila Hemm, Ernest Lees, Maureen Ndeani, Shayla Otake, José Perez, Shirley Phinney, Eric Rove, Daniel Sallen, Juliet Santos, Andrea Simpson, Steven Thomas, and Alice Vdolek.

The Renton Historical Society Board of Trustees also joined the effort, talking to community members and helping children with hands-on activities as well. Their names are: Susie Bressan, Ruth Capriles, Lay Chan, Theresa Clymer, Phyllis Hunt, Alexis Madison, Shasta McKinley, Anne Melton, Sandra Meyer, Andy Sparks, and Rachel Vdolek. Helping with logistics were Bob Hunt, Tom Monahan, and Wil Samson.

THANKS EVERYBODY FOR YOUR SUPPORT OF THE MUSEUM AND MUSEUM STAFF!!!



SAVE THE DATE - ANNUAL DINNER AND AUCTION
OCTOBER 26, 2011

Join Emcee John Keister at the Renton Senior Activity Center on Wednesday, October 26, 2011 from 5:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Tickets are \$40 per person. Join us to Celebrate Renton's Past and Promising Future and to Support the Renton History Museum!

Call 425-255-2330 for event information or tickets or to purchase on-line go to <http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/173461>.

Join the Renton Historical Society Today!

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Obituaries Collected



denotes former Society Life Member

denotes former Society member



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- Robert "Bob" Armstrong
- Daniel Arnone
- Alfred F. Bailey
- Edith Busato Ballestrasse 
- Margaret "Peggy" Bardarson
- Michael Baze
- Werner "Vernon" Bergquist
- Frances L. Corbin, D.C.
- Janet McCartney Coulon
- Frances Creager
- Rolf Dragseth
-  Albert L. Duncalf
- Frank W. Fisher
- Bonita Butler Fleming
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- Shirley Hertz Fulcher 
- Lois Swanson Gannon
- Julia Harding Goodwin
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- Chester E. Hawes
- Myrna Jorgenson
- Brenda Hovland Knorr 
- Edie Mae Lawyer
- Gloria Lewis
- Terry L. Marconi
- Keene McPherson
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- Mildred Moline
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- The Bistro Box
- Partial cost of food for the "Appreciation" Reception



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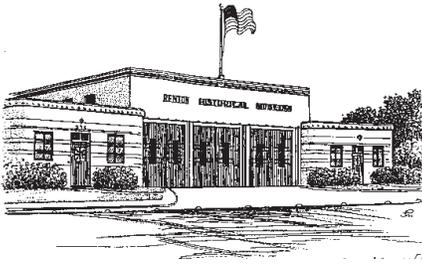
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In Hindsight...



Little cowboys return to Sartori School, sometime in the 1930s. (#2009.056.006)